

2021 – The Year Ends in Style (Despite It All)

. . . Well, we're making an effort at least! The latter half of the year has otherwise been plagued by a number of disappointments, most significantly the cancellation of Opera Australia's long-awaited Brisbane *Ring*. Of course, this *Ring* had been postponed once already, at the end of last year. A few months ago, the situation had still been looking hopeful, with the Tasman 'travel bubble' up and running and Covid infection rates in Australia encouragingly low, but from June on things deteriorated rapidly, in view of the major Covid outbreak in Sydney in particular, and with Queensland and Brisbane cut off from neighbouring states. The *Ring* was set to kick off at Brisbane's Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) in late October, but by mid-August it was already clear that 80 percent of ticket holders would be unable to travel to Brisbane at all, not to mention the performers and crew. On 19 August, Opera Australia reluctantly issued a press release announcing the cancellation of the Brisbane *Ring* for the second time, adding that attempts would again be made to reschedule it. For the time being, however, WSNZ members who originally made their reservations three long years ago have had their deposits refunded, as it is currently still unclear when the event might ever take place.

This all coincided with the latest snap Level 4 lockdown throughout New Zealand, and so a number of our regional events have also fallen by the wayside. In a few other cases, specific events have been subject to rescheduling – see the 2021 programme overleaf for details. One major new event is Auckland's *Ring* Mini-Festival, to be presented by Heath Lees over two weekends in late November / early December, having grown out of preparatory talks that Heath had been planning to give for travellers to Brisbane. Note that non-Aucklanders are also welcome to attend (Covid alert levels

permitting) – should you be interested, please register your interest with Heath directly. Additionally, there will of course be the usual Christmas functions.

Meanwhile, this will also be the final national newsletter issue for this year – there has been a strong desire amongst the regional branches to prepare local newsletters for November again, as in recent years, so you can look forward to receiving a local issue in a few weeks' time. On the back page of this issue, John Davidson has also contributed a highly original article comparing and contrasting aspects of Wagner and Aotearoa's own James K. Baxter – we hope you enjoy it!

WSNZ Grant Awarded to Pianist Abhinath Berry



Pianist Abhinath Berry performed major works by Liszt, Wagner–Liszt and Tausig – illuminating the close symbiosis of Liszt and his star pupil Tausig with Wagner – in a series of well-attended concerts that were presented earlier this year to the four national Wagner Societies, alongside pianist Terence Dennis, Blair Professor at the University of Otago and current National President of the Wagner Society of New Zealand.

In gratitude and recognition of these performances and in the fostering of his career training in this area, the Committee of the Wagner Society of NZ has awarded him a special grant, which he has received with immense gratitude. Currently in his third year of study, Abhinath continues his Lisztian crusade, performing this month the Liszt *Dante–Sonata* for a concert to celebrate the 700th anniversary of Dante's birth. Additionally, at the end of September, he was nominated both as the recipient of the Outstanding Achievement to Arts and Culture Award, and for a University Gold from the University of Otago Students Association. As a composer, one of Abhinath's works has been selected for the Todd Young Composers workshop of the NZ Symphony Orchestra. Abhinath looks forward to playing for the NZ Wagner Societies again soon, and will be specialising in piano performance and composition in his Honours course in 2022. There is more Liszt on the way!

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair (who notes that the international scene remains rather quiet):

- Melbourne Opera will continue their planned *Ring* cycle in February 2022 with *Die Walküre*. NZ dramatic soprano Kirstin Sharpin will sing Brünnhilde.
- Europe's first Samoan Arts Collective, GAFA, plan to present Wagner's *Ring* cycle as concerts with movement incorporating Samoan elements into the Nordic narrative. The concerts are planned for October/November this year in London.

New Members

It is with great pleasure that we extend a warm Wagnerian welcome to:

Andrew McKenzie.....Dunedin

WSNZ – 2021 Programme October to December

NB: All events may be subject to change at short notice, in accordance with sudden changes to Covid-19 Alert Levels

Auckland

Venue: St Heliers Community Centre, 100 St Heliers Bay Road

Weekends of 27/28 November and 4/5 December:



All sessions (to be held at the **St Heliers Community Centre**) will be starting at **2:30 p.m.** with a 50-minute introduction from **Heath Lees**:

Saturday, 27 November, 2.30 p.m. – 6.30 p.m.: Das Rheingold

Sunday, 28 November, 2.30 p.m. – 9.30 p.m.: Die Walküre

Saturday, 4 December, 2.30 p.m. – 9.30 p.m.: Siegfried

Sunday, 5 December, 2.30 p.m. – 9.30 p.m.: Götterdämmerung

Eating and Drinking:

For *Rheingold*, no meal will be required. For *Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, there will be two intervals of 30 minutes each and the meals will all be BYO. Water, tea, coffee and biscuits will be supplied at the venue, and on 5 December (*Götterdämmerung*) there will be celebratory wine and Christmas cake as well.

Cost:

\$15 per event to cover the venue hire. Please bring cash on the day.

'Foreigners':

Any WSNZ members from a non-Auckland centre who would like to make the trip north will be very welcome. Please send an e-mail to handelees@xtra.co.nz to register interest.

Wellington

NB: Please note the different venues as indicated individually below

Sunday, 17 October, at 3:00 p.m.

(NB: may well need to be postponed until next year – TBA)

Venue: Te Auaha Theatre, NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street

A special screening of two documentaries showcasing two leading Australasian performers with a strong Wagnerian connection: *Five Faces of McIntyre*, about Sir Donald McIntyre (film also featuring Dame Malvina Major, Timothy Hawley and others – historic TVNZ production from 1979), and *Simone Young: To Hamburg from Downunder* (film originally produced for North German television, from 2008).

Sunday, 28 November at 5:00 p.m.

Venue: Paul and Carol Stigley's home in Khandallah

End-of-year function – more information to follow.

Christchurch

Venue: The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester St

November (rescheduled from September – further details TBA)

Terence Dennis talk: *Wagner on Wagner*, a presentation of Wagner's concepts of opera as defined in his polemic *Opera and Drama*.

Sunday, 28 November

Christmas function – further details TBA.

Dunedin

All venues will be publicised locally.

Sunday, 28 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: Carrington Hall, Linton Lounge & Dining Room

Christmas luncheon and concert, which will feature the Violin Concerto of Siegfried Wagner, played by **Nick Pittar**, violin, with **Terence Dennis**, piano.

Did you know . . .

. . . that the first attempt at an English Wagnerian music drama based on national myth, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, composed in Germany in 1877–78 by Englishman Frederick Corder (1852–1932), was lost because the score was supposedly destroyed by his daughter?

. . . or that it wasn't the fictional impresario 'Max Detweiler' (in a certain musical and 1960s blockbuster movie), or even the (real-life) Austrian musical family's conductor and priest, Dr Franz Wasner, but the celebrated 'Golden Age' German dramatic soprano and Wagner singer, Lotte Lehmann, who first gave Maria von Trapp the idea that she and her famous singing family should take the crucial decision to go professional? Lehmann was in Salzburg in August 1936, searching for a villa to let, and, as she approached the Trapp villa, she heard the family singing in the garden. She was so impressed that she exclaimed that the children had 'gold in their throats', and insisted they should participate in the Salzburg Festival contest for group singing the very next evening. They went on to win first prize in the festival, and the rest is history (culminating in the phenomenal success of the 1965 film, *The Sound of Music*, for 20th Century Fox!). Lehmann, meanwhile, really did 'climb ev'ry mountain' with her sheer unexcelled Sieglinde in the legendary 1935 recording of Act 1 of *Die Walküre*, conducted by Bruno Walter, in Vienna: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mcl9XgzhkPo



Lotte Lehmann (1888–1976) as Elisabeth in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (undated)
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

The 2021 Bayreuth Festival – a Brief Roundup

After having been shut down completely last year, as the Covid pandemic raged, this year's Bayreuth Festival – which also marked the 70th anniversary of the Festival's reopening after World War II as 'New Bayreuth' in 1951, under the auspices of the Wagner grandsons Wieland and Wolfgang – bravely soldiered on, under difficult conditions.



Very strict health protection measures were in place, with attendees required to present additional detailed documentation to show that they had been vaccinated, or had recovered fully from a prior Covid infection, or had otherwise been having daily PCR or antigen tests. Following additional registration procedures on the day of a performance, they were then given a coloured wrist bracelet to

wear for the full duration of their attendance. The audience in the Festival Theatre auditorium was limited to about 900 persons, with mask use mandatory for the entire performance. Meanwhile, the Festival Orchestra in the pit was present with a full complement, but the choir sang remotely and were broadcast into the auditorium from the choir rehearsal hall, some 300 metres away. In the choir hall itself (which has featured prominently in documentaries such as Stephen Fry's *Wagner and Me* and Werner Herzog's *The Transformation of the World into Music*), the singers were all isolated in separate Perspex cubicles (see below) to prevent potential viral spread by aerosols. For the actual performances, the singers also had to wear headphones to hear the orchestra in the theatre pit, while extras onstage merely mimed the words.



There was also no red carpet at the premiere this year, although spectators still turned up to catch a glimpse of the celebrities as they arrived at the Festival Theatre. As ever, these included German Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, with her husband, Joachim Sauer. Accordingly, an unofficial motto of this year's Festival was 'Mit Maske und Merkel' ('With mask and Merkel'). All in all, a case of 'New Bayreuth' indeed!

A total of 25 performances were given, including the premiere of a new production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, the existing productions of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Tannhäuser* from 2017 and 2019, respectively, and, unusually for Bayreuth, concert-only performances of *Die Walküre* and *Parsifal* (conducted by Christian Thielemann) along with two

other concert programmes conducted by Andris Nelsons. For the first time, programme booklets were made available online in digital form and in a new look, for both the works themselves and the 'Diskurs Bayreuth – Ring 20.21' supporting events.

There had already been some personnel shuffles in the runup to the premiere; at least the Festival's head, Katharina Wagner, had been able to return to her post in September last year, following a very serious illness over a period of weeks that might well have proven fatal. Meanwhile, just days before the Festival premiere, Austrian bass, Günther Groissböck, announced that he was withdrawing from his role as Wotan in *Die Walküre* on the grounds he could no longer deliver his best, owing to the ongoing Covid-related disruptions. He was replaced just in time by the Polish bass-baritone, Tomasz Konieczny. Other individual substitutions included Martin Gantner and Bo Skovhus, on different days, for Johannes Martin Kränzle (who was ill) as Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger* and, for one concert performance of *Die Walküre*, the highly experienced Frank Castorf *Ring* veteran, Catherine Foster, substituted as Brünnhilde for the Swedish soprano, Iréne Theorin, who also had to withdraw on health grounds.

As we have mentioned in the past, the new production of *Der fliegende Holländer* featured the first female conductor in the Festival's history, Oksana Lyniv, from the Ukraine. She acquitted herself very well, delivering an atmospheric interpretation that maintained tension throughout, while highlighting the bleakness and turbulence of the score. The director was Dmitri Tcherniakov, whose former credits include a memorable *Parsifal* at the Berlin State Opera (conducted by Daniel Barenboim). As is often the case with *Holländer* these days, Tcherniakov presented no ship or ocean; instead, there was a contemporary setting with 'psychologically damaged' characters acting out a passionate tale of intrigue and revenge, with an extra back story involving a young Daland and the Dutchman's mother (!) – inventive, but not necessarily for traditionalists. The sets and costumes were very well received, however, and, among the singers, Asmik Grigorian (with bleached blonde hair) garnered especially high praise for her extraordinarily vivid and detailed embodiment of Senta. The complete performance can currently be viewed here (German subtitles only): www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8dtRIFVmDw



Asmik Grigorian ('Senta's Ballad', see from 1:01:15 in the above link) in Dmitri Tcherniakov's new *Holländer* production (Photos: Bayreuther Festspiele)

'James K. Baxter and Richard Wagner: A Cultural and Social Comparison'

– by John Davidson



Photo: A portrait of James Keir Baxter. Ref: 1/2-058011-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22684456

What connections, one might ask, could possibly exist between a nineteenth-century German composer of operas and a twentieth-century New Zealand poet who was apparently tone deaf into the bargain? Might not one just as uselessly essay a comparison between Denis Glover and Giuseppe Verdi? In fact, closer scrutiny reveals that the comparison is far from arbitrary and is well worth exploring. Here, we can only consider their shared appreciation of classical mythology in general and Greek tragedy in particular. For a full discussion, contact John.Davidson@vuw.co.nz.

Quite apart from their poetry, both Baxter and Wagner also wrote a large amount of prose in the form of stories, parables, essays/lectures, reviews, 'meditations', notebook jottings, and so on (Baxter also wrote plays, of course). Wagner published extensively about his ideas on music and drama, while Baxter produced a series of lectures on his beliefs about poetry from New Zealand and elsewhere. There are also many private letters written and received by both.

With regard to autobiography, Wagner is most famous for his *Mein Leben (My Life)*, a massive work of 786 pages in the first complete English translation, which covers only the period up to 1864. The equivalent for Baxter is modest. Apart from brief comments scattered throughout his published writings, and meditations on day-to-day life at Jerusalem, his contribution consists mainly of material found in lectures written in 1966 when he was Robert Burns Fellow at the University of Otago.

In connection with his debt to the culture of ancient Greece, Wagner describes in *Mein Leben* how stories from Greek mythology seized his imagination, as Nordic/Germanic

stories did later. Baxter notes that he read books of Norse and Greek myth as a child. Both Wagner and Baxter also aspired to learn the ancient Greek language, but both failed dismally (though Wagner could at least manage a little with a crib and knew the Greek alphabet)! The mythical content of Greek literature, however, made a lasting impression on them both. Baxter's poetry and prose is crammed with allusions to Greek myths and mythical figures. References to Greek myths and culture are similarly scattered throughout Wagner's writings.

The figure who most brings Wagner and Baxter together, however, is that of the archetypal wanderer Odysseus. It is no accident that Curt von Westernhagen, one of Wagner's biographers, gives the title *Odyssey* to the 24th chapter of his work. He begins the chapter by quoting words from the opening line of Homer's *Odyssey* about the man 'who roamed the wide world', words with which Wagner signed a letter of 7 January 1862 from Paris to Hans von Bülow. Von Westernhagen adds that they would make a good motto for the years 1861 to 1864, but they could equally well apply to most of Wagner's life. It is well known how Wagner travelled all over Europe, to escape from creditors, avoid capture for revolutionary activities, promote his works, and so on.

Baxter's life journey was similarly characterised by restlessness and frequent changes of scene, mainly in New Zealand, but at times abroad. He actually identified himself with Odysseus. Like Wagner, he always managed to write prolifically, often in adverse situations, including dire poverty. He was never a revolutionary as such, but was prominent in protests against the Vietnam War, for example.

In connection with ancient Greece in general, the closest connection between the two can be found in their shared admiration for Athenian tragedy. Wagner often waxed lyrical about Aeschylus in particular, but he went much further. He aimed to recreate Greek tragedy, not as a slavish copy, but as a new Germanic manifestation of the spirit of the ancient past that would strip away what he felt to be superficial accretions in opera as it had developed by the nineteenth century. For the design and construction of his own theatre at Bayreuth, it was to the form of the Athenian theatre that he turned. Athenian drama had been performed for citizens in the context of a festival of the god Dionysus, and it was a festival that was created at Bayreuth. Ironically, it was not to be hordes of the 'common people' who would make Bayreuth what it was, but emperors, kings, princes and aristocrats.

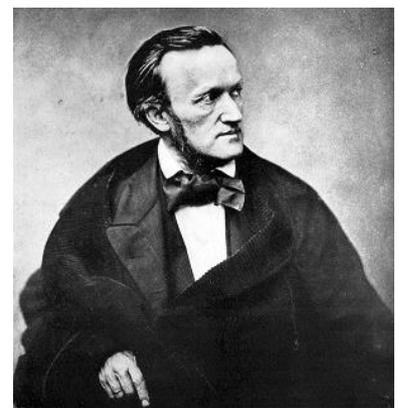
It is the Aeschylean trilogy the *Oresteia* that has most influenced the structure and

thought of Wagner's *Ring*. Both Wagner's own autobiographical material and external sources make it clear how attached he was to the three connected Greek plays. The name of Aeschylus was on his lips on the day before his death.

Sophocles was also a factor during Wagner's career, but he had a low opinion of Euripides, who he believed had ruined the tragic genre by over-intellectualising it. When we turn to Baxter, we find that Sophocles was most influential, with the other two not far behind. Baxter's most important period as a dramatist came after his return to Dunedin in 1966. Rosalie and Patric Carey had founded the intimate Globe Theatre, a venue almost tailor-made for Baxter. Between 1967 and 1969, he wrote and had performed there a series of plays in which he was able to dramatise his personal and societal concerns.

Though rarely performed now, Baxter's plays in their time represented a new and invigorating development in New Zealand theatre, as Wagner, at an entirely different level, had taken the musical and operatic world of nineteenth-century Europe by storm. Unlike Wagner, Baxter wrote for a small and intimate audience but, like Wagner, it was to Greek theatre that he soon turned for his models.

Four plays were actually based on specific Greek models. The two most successful of these were the Sophoclean-inspired *The Sore-footed Man* of 1967 and *The Temptations of Oedipus*, which was produced in 1969. The two plays mentioned preserved the original Greek setting, a technique not used by Wagner who would work Greek tragic elements into northern European mythical or medieval settings. Baxter's primarily middle-class and 'intellectual' audience tended to dislike his plays because the social and cultural criticism made them feel uncomfortable. They kept coming, though, and unpopularity never led to the kind of fiasco experienced by Wagner when members of the Jockey Club in Paris ruined the presentation of *Tannhäuser* in 1861.



Richard Wagner, Paris, 1861
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)