

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER



Photo by Robert Catto
www.catto.co.nz

It is now a week since the last notes of *Parsifal* soared into the roof of the Michael Flower Centre and, with the music still ringing in my ears, thoughts of just what a wonderful event it turned out to be, keep flooding the mind.

This was no ordinary performance. It was extraordinary! The casting was absolutely brilliant not just because they were all New Zealand singers. What has really got to me is that it was achieved in such a short space of time and without any money! We were promised a semi-staged performance. What we were given was very close to being a fully staged production. There is nothing particularly special about over-delivering but when you realise that, on top of virtually no budget for staging, there was only a short rehearsal period outside the theatre (2-13 March) and even less in the theatre, the achievement becomes amazing. The time frame for rehearsals in the Michael Fowler Centre was dictated by the James McMillan concert which took place on the Saturday before *Parsifal's* opening. The platform in the MFC was erected on the Monday and Tuesday and the dress rehearsal took place on the Wednesday. This minimum time scale would

have placed enormous pressure on singers, production cast and crew.

In truth it shouldn't have worked, but it did! Why? Because of great team-work! The driving force behind the whole venture was Donald McIntyre, but what made this production special was that everyone shared his vision and gave their all to see it come through. The curtain calls after the first performance told it all. The hugs, the sheer delight of their success radiated out. I would guess some of it was sheer relief! But they pulled it off.

This feeling would have been echoed by NZSO Chief Executive, Peter Walls. He had the task of controlling the purse strings, and was no doubt hoping that the orchestra hadn't bitten off more than it could chew. It should also be pointed out that, though *Parsifal* came under the auspices of the International Festival, the NZSO organised and executed the entire production.

So stand up Peter Walls and all the staff at the NZSO. Stand up Anthony Negus and the players of the NZSO. Stand up Michael Fulcher and the magnificent chorus. Stand up Bernd Benthak, Tolis Papazoglou and the rest of the production team. Stand up

Patrick Power, Roger Wilson, Jenny Wollerman, Linden Loader, Stephen Chambers, Paul Chappory, Madeleine Pierard, Janey MacKenzie, Morag Atchison and Annabelle Cheetham. Those of you who are established singers thank you for being prepared to take on minor roles and those of you at the start of your careers, well done. You contributed to two wonderful performances.

Stand up Simon O'Neill, Margaret Medlyn, Paul Whelan, Martin Snell and Grant Dickson. If you had been representing New Zealand at the Commonwealth Games you would have all come home with gold medals. It's high time that you received the same sort of support as our athletes.

Last but not least, stand up Donald McIntyre. You have done so much to promote the works of Richard Wagner and, more importantly, you have shown that we have singers who can perform his works. Your encouragement has given these singers an opportunity to sing the roles and for us to hear them. Thank you for your inspiration.

Parsifal, Wellington 2006 will go down as an important landmark in the history of New Zealand Culture.

Christopher Brodrick (Editor)

Parsifal Reviews

We offer two reviews of the Wellington *Parsifal* first, one by John Pattinson, lecturer, conductor and reviewer and the second by Sylvia Dixon, Art History teacher and *Parsifal* virgin!

“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”

Robert Louis Stevenson

The notion of travel is never far from my mind when contemplating *Parsifal*. After all, here we have a character whose life is spent travelling through both time and space. Peter Bassett's highly readable book is entitled Wagner's *Parsifal – The Journey of a Soul*. In my own travels, like many others I've visited Montserrat, near Barcelona, which claims to be the original Montselvat of Wagner's setting. Above all, *Parsifal*, because of its immense artistic scale and inescapably religious overtones, assumes the status of a place of pilgrimage, drawing the faithful from all parts of the world. It's a safe bet that among the crowds who flocked to the recent Wellington production were a good many who'd earlier attended the 2001 Adelaide performance. Unlike *The Lord of the Rings* it's highly unlikely that *Parsifal* will appear “in a theatre near you”, as the film trailers are fond of saying. In short, we have to make the effort and go to it. Of course, effort consists of more than just getting there. Anyone planning to go on this musical “hadji” will have prepared themselves, in varying degrees, whether it be simply reading a synopsis, listening to recordings, watching videos or DVDs, attending lecture courses, reading widely or what have you. The main thing, as I constantly try to achieve in my own opera lectures, is to attain a state of heightened expectation when approaching any musical experience, especially one on this scale. Only then can we be gratified to have our expectations met, surprised at them

Recital Success

Margaret Medlyn and Heath Lees' recital *Parsifal* Through the eyes of Kundry proved to be a huge artistic and financial success. First performed in Wellington prior to Christmas, Margaret and Heath moved to Christchurch and then Auckland in February. Good audiences in all of the centres resulted in a healthy surplus on the venture. The Committee decided at its meeting in January to equally share any profit between Margaret and the Society. So as a result of the good turnout we have been able to send Margaret a top up to bring her fee to a more realistic professional level. Another pleasing aspect from the society's point of view was the large number of non-members who attended. Let's hope that through our recital and the NZSO *Parsifal* we will see an influx of new members. Thanks to Margaret and Heath for devising and presenting such an interesting recital and thanks also to the Society members who organised the recitals in each of the centres.

being exceeded, or even piqued at having them withheld.

Apart from sneakily snatching a rare opportunity to restore a much ill-used adverb to its proper usage, this is precisely what I mean by “travelling hopefully”. With memories of that momentous 1997 *Das Rheingold* concert performance still fresh in my mind, I approached the Wellington Festival *Parsifal* with mixed feelings of hope and trepidation. How would they deal with all those transformation scenes, how would they cope with those vast, milling choruses of knights and flower maidens, how would *Parsifal* catch the Spear in mid-flight, how would it all end – happily ever after or with dead bodies all over the place? Above all, how would the singers fare against the full might of an augmented NZSO in full cry?

The Michael Fowler Centre aint no Bayreuth, but then it makes no such pretensions. Abandoning any semblance of proscenium arch, it really works rather well for this kind of semi-staged production. The main platform was occupied by the orchestra, the ladies' section of the chorus were in the choir stalls (generally concealed behind two large screens on which surtitles & other lighting effects could be projected), and the men were in the galleries on either side of the orchestra. The action took place on an elevated platform midway between orchestra and chorus. For the most part, entrances & exits lost any element of surprise, as characters were faced with a longish trek to & from public entrance-doors way up in ‘the gods’. But this was no great loss & one quickly adjusted to it. Freed from the burden of having to act or move, the chorus were able to just stand and deliver. And what a superb sound they made! Amazingly resonant, yet beautifully blended, I was at first a little suspicious that there may be some electronic “enhancement” at work – an

Wagner Society AGM

The AGM is to be held on Sunday, 21 May 2006 at the School of Music, 6 Symonds Street, Auckland starting at 7.30pm.

So far nominations have been received for the following:

President: Heath Lees
Vice President & Liaison/PR Officer: Chris Brodrick
Secretary: Liz Lees
Treasurer: Anne Doggett
Membership Secretary: George Risk
Committee members: (4 members)

Neil Jenkins,
Juliet Rowe,
Ken Tomkins

Nominations, so far, are one committee member short. If anyone is interested in coming on to the committee please ring Liz and she will send you out a nomination form. Phone. 09-528-1184 or email: handelees@xtra.co.nz.

Further nominations can also be made from the floor of the Meeting.



unworthy thought which was indignantly dispelled in the course of a first interval chat with chorus-master Michael Fulcher. Despite not having to wear costumes, great attention had obviously been given to the visual impact of the black-clad chorus, even down to matching belt-buckles for the men. (With one exception: That man there, you in the front row basses with non-standard short sleeves: report to your CO immediately!) Virtually invisible when not involved, the chorus impressed with the sheer discipline of their standing & sitting, neat little book-lights clicking on or off in perfect unison.

This degree of attention to detail characterised much of the performance but, in all conscience, I can't say the same of the costuming. All right, I know it's supposed to be a concert performance, and that the music should speak for itself, etc., but if you're going to have any costume at all, then at least make it consistent. Clearly director Bernd Benthak was going for a militaristic flavour for the Grail fraternity, from Amfortas right down to his Pages. Why then dress Gurnemantz so casually in slacks and open-necked shirt looking for all the world as if he'd turned up under the impression that this was just another rehearsal, or that he was just dropping by to do a spot of gardening? Wagner's Gurnemantz is described as “elderly but vigorous” in Act 1; in his next appearance, Act 3 he's become “a very old man, clad as a

New Members

A big welcome to:-

Mr G FinucaneAuckland
Ms G LoweryWellington
Mrs J RogersChristchurch
Mr G & Mrs M Stuart.....Christchurch
Prof Dr P & U Schwerdtfeger.....Auckland
Mr A L WalkerWellington
Mr P EastwoodWellington
Ms H BracefieldNthn. Ireland
Mr M DennisAuckland
David RitchieChristchurch



Photo by Robert Catto
www.catto.co.nz

hermit and only in the tunic of the Knights of the Grail". On both occasions identically garbed, it's perhaps not surprising that Sir Donald McIntyre displayed little hint of the ageing process we are supposed to imagine. Why also have the First and Second Knights appearing with their hands stuck in the pockets of their grubby raincoats? Or was this meant to suggest a decaying society? Kundry (Margaret Medlyn) fared better once her totally inappropriate "Desperate Housewives" outfit in Act 1 had been replaced by some particularly stunning seduction gear in Act 2. This was shed in favour of more penitential drabbery for her virtually mute, yet no less eloquent performance in Act 3.

But these are mere details in the context of such a profound, essentially musical and spiritual experience. One had only to close one's eyes and any such irritations disappeared. Why not, you may ask, simply listen to a CD? My reply would be that there is nothing, absolutely nothing to compare with the sense of being actually present at the unfolding of a great enterprise. Somehow one instinctively knew that this was a truly magnificent performance that would live in the memory.

Taking the peerless NZSO as its foundation, under the experienced direction of Anthony Negus, the performance inexorably grew in stature. When the first voice you hear is Sir Donald McIntyre on top vocal form, and in a role he clearly relishes, the bar for subsequent performers is immediately set at record-breaking heights. Not a problem, however, for Margaret Medlyn who, since her remarkable debut in the 2001 Adelaide production is rapidly making the role of Kundry her own. The prodigious vocal and dramatic demands of this part are not for the faint-hearted. Kundry is rarely off-stage, and in Act 3, despite having only two words and four notes to sing, plays a vital part in the events leading up to the final dénouement.

For some reason, all modern Parsifals and Siegfrieds seem to share the same dress-up box, ending up wearing ill-fitting baggy shorts, long hair and a stoop. Simon O'Neill lost no time in establishing his complete command of the role, giving it the thoughtful, carefully gauged development required of this "Journey of a Soul". It was thrilling to hear his vocal gears shift up a notch from lyric to heldentenor at the moment of Kundry's kiss (but then, whose wouldn't...?) At the same time, even his posture and entire demeanour seemed transformed. Equally important, I believe, is the necessity to observe Wagner's note at the close of Act 1: "*Parsifal, on hearing Amfortas's loud cry of agony, had made a violent movement towards his heart, which he clutched convulsively for a long time.*" I'm glad that, contrary to most productions I've seen, Simon O'Neill complied with this instruction. For me, this is the first real moment of engagement between Parsifal and Amfortas, when their destinies become locked together – the beginning of mitleid, no less. Without this, Act 2 becomes pointless.

Almost in spite of his rich, firm baritone voice, Paul Whelan made a convincing Amfortas, weak and ailing, wracked with guilt and remorse, yet capable of great flights of vocal and dramatic passion, notably in his dialogue with Titirel during the Liebesmahl.

His final demise brought a sense of relief, which is as it should be.

Both Titirel (Grant Dickson) and Klingsor (Martin Snell) occupied elevated, central stage positions, skilfully using the hard wall of the auditorium behind them to project their respective sonorous tones to thrilling effect. Each was exotically costumed, Klingsor flourishing his immense flowing cloak to reveal a sleeping Kundry. Martin Snell's account of this all-too-brief role was both musically satisfying and dramatically electrifying. His face-painting was a work of art in its own right. Little wonder that in his post mortem reappearance (in evening-dress) for the final "curtain" calls he seems to have been disinclined to remove it! Although I watched closely, I still failed to see how the spear-throwing trick was accomplished. We saw Klingsor drop his spear, yet simultaneously another appeared in Parsifal's hand...Obviously simple, but oh, so effective!

Act 2 could claim to be a winner on many counts, but the sure-fire clincher was the Flower Maidens scene. No wonder Wagner succumbed to temptation just one more time before tottering into his death-bed. For this scene, (men being superfluous), the ladies chorus moved into full view, on either side of the orchestra, while the six gossamer-clad principal Flower Maidens cavorted centre-stage. This complex choral texture is a tour de force which the Wellington chorus despatched with a stylish languor belying the needle-sharp accuracy of their singing. The six solo maidens (Madeleine Pierard, Jenny Wollerman, Janey Mackenzie, Morag Aitchison, Linden Loader and Annabelle Cheetham) were simply irresistible – a formidable team of experienced and talented singers, already well-established in the NZ musical firmament.

Francis Bacon once wrote: "*Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience.*" Whichever camp my fellow-travellers fall into, the 2006 Wellington *Parsifal* is one experience none of us will forget in a hurry.

- John Pattinson

PROGRAMMES AROUND NEW ZEALAND FOR 2006

AUCKLAND

Sun 16 April, 7.30pm
Sun 21 May, 7.30pm
Sun 16 July, 7.30pm
Sun 10 Sept, 4pm
Sun 26 Nov, 7.30pm

WELLINGTON

Sun 21 May, 2.30pm
Sun 6 Aug, 4pm
Sun 8 Oct, 4pm

CHRISTCHURCH

Fri 21 April, 7.30pm
Fri 19 May, 7.30pm
Fri 21 July, 7.30pm
Fri 18 Aug, 7.30pm
Fri 20 Oct, 7.30pm
Sun 3 Dec 6.30pm

At Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street

Wagner and France: A Tale of Two Cultures (Heath Lees)
Wagner's birthday: AGM, and DVD of *Die Walküre* Act 1 (either the Bayreuth or Amsterdam version)
Wagner and the Visual Arts (Chris Brodrick)
Tristan und Isolde. Complete performance with dinner during intervals
Christmas Extras: Requests, round-ups and a few surprises

At Massey Museum Theatre, Buckle Street (except 21/05)

At Rex Benson's, 46 Garden Road, Northland Tribute to Birgit Nilsson (Les Austin)
Wagner and the Visual Arts (Chris Brodrick)
Bach and Wagner: Two Great Composers Separated by a Common Musical Language? (Heath Lees)

At Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury (except 19/5 & 3/12)

The Ring and the Life-cycle of an Audience (Heath Lees) followed by a DVD of *The Making of the Adelaide Ring*
Venue to be announced Wagner's Birthday. Pot Luck Dinner.
The Flying Dutchman, Act 1, introduced by John Pattinson
Thy Flying Dutchman, Acts 2 and 3.
Wagner and the Visual Arts (Chris Brodrick)

At John and Ann Pattinson's home, 37b Highland Place, Avonhead. Christmas BBQ

Parsifal Review Part II

As a *Parsifal* virgin, I had trained for the Wellington performance with two lectures by John Patinson at Canterbury University, a glance or two at Domingo's docopera on DVD and half an ear on some version or other playing in the background while I ate my dinner. So I knew the plot and was familiar with some of the philosophical compost the work has generated. But what I wasn't prepared for was the way the music slipped into my soul and squeezed it breathless near the end of that numinous first act.

Unfortunately there were some things I didn't understand – mental distractions from the shimmering music: so if purity was about celibacy, and sex was what was separating Amfortas from redemption, then how come Titorel was a knight of the holy grail, unless Amfortas was an immaculate conception? And what about Kundry? Her schizophrenic role, reflecting her servitude to various men, was truly disturbing. She was a much more consist-



Peter Bassett (left), Bernd Bentaak (2nd left) with some of our Australian relations including Marion (3rd left) and Jim (right) Frost from Adelaide.

Parsifal Reception

The Wellington Branch of the Society put on a reception on Saturday 18 March for those Wagner Society members who were in the capital for *Parsifal*. Around 65 members attended, including a large group of our cousins from across the Tasman. Also in attendance was *Parsifal* producer Bernd Bentaak, conductor Anthony Negus, and Elric Hooper, Roger Wilson and Peter Bassett who had all taken part in the *Parsifal* seminar earlier in the day. It was a great opportunity to talk with the guests and to catch up with friends from New Zealand and Australia.

For those who attended both seminars and the reception some fascinating bits of information came to the fore. Bernd Bentaak used to listen to *Parsifal* on the radio every Good Friday while back in Britain Anthony Negus used to (and still does) play the whole of *Parsifal* on the piano – on Good Friday. Both were at Bayreuth at the same time in the 1960's, but met for the first time in Wellington. Then one of our Australian visitors divulged that at the age of five he was able to play *Parsifal* – on the mouth organ!

Thanks to Les Holborow and his committee for organising the event.

ently compassionate creature than all of the sickeningly self-centred knights, except perhaps Gurnemanz. And what about the apparently contradictory, Theosophical-style redemption/reincarnation ideas? Was the redeemer redeemed at the end *Parsifal* himself?

I found myself increasingly appreciating the staging. I was relieved that Bernd Bentaak did not kill Amfortas and Kundry at the end as is common practice. Amfortas' invitations to the knights to kill him were convincing as feverish ravings to an empty stage. And I was also pleased to see that *Parsifal* was already exhibiting the chest pains of empathy at the end of Act I.

I loved the implied forest projected onto the screens but wanted some Romanesque or Gothic arches on there too for the inside scenes. Something projected up to aid the transition from the forest to the chapel would also have helped those of us who were new to the opera. The spear slight-of-hand was very convincing and the length of fabric on the stairs was inventive. It took a while to stop being distracted by the entries and exits of the singers beyond the screens, but I loved the use Gurnemanz made of them at the very beginning of Act III when he peered around one to locate a groaning Kundry. And then the interaction at the top of the stairs with Kundry's head flopping backwards as she came around, was so human.

For me, the minimal set perfectly balanced the beauty of the music. And I was particularly delighted that what I had imagined would be a stand-in-the-middle-and-sing production had singers who were able to act their roles so humanely.

Margaret Medlyn was my personal favourite because she threw herself into the demanding role of Kundry. When she looked into the audience for *Parsifal* instead of focussing on the dead swan like everyone else, I realised that she was worth keeping an eye on. At the end of the opera, while everyone else focused on the raised chalice shedding red light into the audience, Kundry looked out at us, acknowledging our presence in the event. Bentaak was allowing Wagner to say that we, as perfect fools like *Parsifal* and Kundry, could also be a part of this transformation. No-one should be dismissed as beyond redemption because of their past or their stupidity. And what a wonderful way to say it!

- Sylvia Dixon



Anthony Negus raises his glass

Wagner around the world in 2006

It used to be said, 'Join the Navy and see the world'. These days you could achieve the same end result without the fear of being sea sick and spending months patrolling the North Atlantic or Southern Ocean, by following Wagner!

In the next 12 months the web site operabase.com reports that there will be 342 performances of 116 productions of Wagner's operas. They will be performed in 20 countries ranging from Australia to the UK.

So here is a quick run down. Full productions of the *Ring* will be performed in St Petersburg (June), Toronto (Sept), Bayreuth (Jul and Aug), Baden-Baden (Jul), Dresden (Jun) and Copenhagen (May). *Tristan and Isolde* can be heard in Perth (Nov), San Francisco (Oct), Vienna (Apr), Bayreuth (Aug), Freiburg (Jul), Leipzig (Jun), Munich (Jul), and Rome (Nov).

If you'd prefer to chose the country to visit and then the opera you can have:- Hungary: *Parsifal* and *Meistersinger* in Budapest (Apr – Jun), Latvia: *The Flying Dutchman* in Riga and Portugal: *Das Rheingold* in Lisbon. The more exotic locations would have to be Cagliari, Sardinia, where you will be able to experience *Die Walküre*, Bergen, in Norway with *Das Rheingold* and a Texas *Lohengrin* in Dallas (the theme tune had a definite Wagnerian ring about it!)

Finally if you're one of those who follows singers, you can hear. Paul Whelan and Wendy Dawn Thompson sing the Night Watchman and Magdalena in the *Die Meistersinger* which is being staged at this year's Edinburgh Festival, Martin Snell sings the Steersman in *Tristan and Isolde* at Bayreuth and Sarah Castle sings Flosshilde in Covent Garden's *Götterdämmerung*

For more information go to www.operabase.com. One piece of advice. Book early! We Wagner lovers have voracious appetites for his operas. This was demonstrated at the end of March when all 1650 seats to the Kirov Opera's *Ring*, which is to be presented at Cardiff's Millennium Centre in November-December this year, sold out in 4 hours!!! Tickets have apparently gone to fans as far away as Russia itself, the USA, the Middle East and France with the cheapest seats being 80 pounds (\$NZ225) going up to 750 pounds (\$NZ2,100).



JR Lohengrin??