

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

CATCHING ADELAIDE'S RING-FEVER AGAIN

It's hard to believe that six years ago, in 1998, with the echoes of the incredibly successful Adelaide "Ring" just dying away, the idea of another "Ring" — an all-Australian one this time — was already forming, with November 2004 as its target opening.

Now, with only three months to go, all performances are virtually sold out, and the excitement notches up with every passing week. Official stories of generous sponsors, great rehearsals and creative chemistry rub shoulders with unofficial rumours of blow-out budgets, over-ambitious designs and unsolved logistic problems, including of course the usual catering nightmares.

Over here in New Zealand it's difficult to keep an ear to the ground, but last month, the Friends of NBR New Zealand Opera hosted a fund-raising concert in Auckland, which included a number of singers who had just come back from rehearsals for the Adelaide "Ring".

Displaying their wares in advance, these singers performed parts of the roles they will play in Adelaide. If the quality of their performances is anything to go by, the huge success of the Adelaide "Ring" must be a foregone conclusion.



Ring Setting: Adelaide's Festival Centre by Night

Biggest hit of the evening was certainly Richard Greager, who will play the part of Mime, and who admitted in a recent *Listener* interview that he was now finding himself enormously attracted to "character tenor" roles. The way Richard oiled and whined his way through the part of Siegfried's fork-tongued foster-father, it looked as though he might well make the list of South Australian "star-discoveries" in November.

Another NZ singer, Zan McKendree-Wright, was also there. At Adelaide, Zan is sponsored by the WSNZ, and she will appear as a Rhinemaiden and a Valkyrie, and is also the "cover" for Fricka, Wotan's brow-beating wife. It was a Fricka of golden tones and flashing character that Zan presented to the delighted audience.

Australian bass-baritone David Hibbard raised the roof with a powerful voice that sounded exactly right for a huge dragon, even an expiring one, as Hibbard's "Fafner" excerpt from *Siegfried* portrayed.

And American-born Tim Du Fore was a commanding Donner — commanding even the thunder and lightning to spring into action at his bidding, during the close of *Das Rheingold*.

After the music, the singers were asked questions about their background, and of course about Adelaide. All of them were officially tight-lipped, but it was clear they were impressed by the production, and the rumours we'd heard of "real" fire and "real" water were apparently real enough. They seemed to confirm the stories that have been slipping out of Adelaide, to do with stunning theatrical effects, great voices, and a setting that is neither historical nor modern, but, in the director's own word, "universal".

More than a hundred WSNZ members are going to Adelaide in November. All the indications are that they're going to find this "Ring" experience even better than the 1998 one.

Can't wait.

PROGRAMMES FOR THE REST OF 2004

AUCKLAND At Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street.
Sunday, 12 September, 4pm *Götterdämmerung*. Bayreuth Festival/Boulez/Chereau.
Sunday, 28 November, 7.30pm Gala Excerpts and Selected Requests.

WELLINGTON At Massey University Theatre, Buckle Street (except 28 November).
Sunday, 15 August, 2pm *Siegfried*. Bayreuth Festival/Barenboim/Kupfer.
Sunday, 17 October, 2pm *Götterdämmerung*. Bayreuth Festival/Boulez/Chereau.
Sunday, 28 November, 7pm Christmas Get-together at Rex Benson's house, 46 Garden Road, Northland.

CHRISTCHURCH At Gloria & Garth Streat's, 20 Pentre Terrace, Cashmere (except 5 December).
Friday, 20 August, 7.30pm "More Light on The Ring's Leitmotifs" (Heath Lees)
Friday, 1 October, 6pm *Das Rheingold*: DVD viewing with an 'ethnic' meal included.
Sunday, 5 December, 6pm Christmas BBQ (Venue TBC).

THE DUTCHMAN HAS SET SAIL FROM SYDNEY . . .

Earlier this year, Hugo Rusbridge sent us this review of Opera Australia's *Der Fliegende Holländer*



Having seen *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Wellington in 1990, and *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Der Ring* in Berlin in 2002, I was delighted to have the opportunity last February to see *Der Fliegende Holländer* at the Opera Theatre of the Sydney Opera House.

I had always presumed that the only real way to see Wagner was to go to the German heartland, and that productions in this part of the world would be, at best, not quite in the same street.

But this production by Opera Australia upset that presumption. It was brilliant. The most important single factor leading me to prefer it to the performances I saw at the Staatsoper in Berlin was the stage management. It was fairly simple, but also impressive and emotionally powerful.

The Sydney stage production avoided the pitfalls of, on the one hand, trying hard to save money and ending up with a stage so stark and bleak that the producers might as well have done it as a concert performance, and on the other hand gimmicky productions, such as the Harry Kupfer productions in Berlin, with lots of flashing neon lights, inclined tunnels, giant fans looking like aeronautical engine components, and singers performing from the tops of ladders.

In the Sydney production, Stage Manager Crissie Higgins gave us a simple set, built as the interior of a ship, complete with its wooden ribs. The set could be raised or lowered, to allow the space underneath it to be used as an ordinary room, such as for the scenes at Daland's home, including the spinning room used by Senta and her fellow spinners.

Superb lighting accentuated the contrast between the ghostly crew of the Dutch ship, who had been sailing the seas for centuries, and the mortal human Norwegians. This was most

effective in the Sailors Chorus near the end of Act III, where the festive Norwegians and the ghostly Dutch crewmen were visible simultaneously on two different levels, but illuminated very differently.

Brilliant staging, innovative but simple, and emotionally powerful, was reinforced by a very strong cast, dressed in plain, simple authentic period costumes. Daniel Sumegi made a powerful Daland, both as a singer and as an actor. Lisa Gas-teen had wonderful range and power as Senta, always in total control of her role. Andrew Brunsdon and Jay Hunter Morris were very impressive and competent in the important supporting roles of the Steersman and Erik, respectively.

The title role posed a problem for the producers when Jonathan Summers suddenly went back to the UK "for family reasons" (not further specified.) Into the breach stepped the young Australian singer Warwick Fyfe. Although not long out of formal training (he held a Bayreuth Bursary in the year 2000) Fyfe has a very impressive CV. He mastered the role at short notice, and made a highly competent Dutchman. His need to concentrate on learning the singing role may have limited his ability to develop equally the acting side of the character of the Dutchman, but this was doubtless a rational allocation of priorities under the circumstances.

The Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra was pleasant to listen to, although they sometimes seemed to lack continuity and dramatic depth, despite being under the direction of the well-known German conductor George Alexander Albrecht. These limitations may have detracted somewhat from enjoyment of the full potential of the leitmotifs which the young Wagner was already developing as a key element of this early work.

The friend who accompanied me to Sydney is new to Wagner, but she loved *Der Fliegende Holländer* as much as I did. If Opera Australia presents *Parsifal* or *Tristan und Isolde*, we will be back to Sydney on the next available flight.

. . . AND WOTAN HAS COME OUT OF RETIREMENT IN ENGLAND

Sir Donald McIntyre has been stunning audiences and critics in a new, "slimmed-down" *Ring*

"His magnificent bass-baritone voice still came ringing out and his authority, experience and sense of drama held us. Wotan's great narration to his daughter Brünnhilde was a deeply moving event, one I shall never forget."

So summing up Donald McIntyre's performance in last month's *Ring* at the Longborough Festival, the *Sunday Express* critic joined all others in pronouncing yet another triumph in the 70-year-old New Zealander's long and brilliant operatic career.

What had enticed the legendary Wotan out of retirement was the jewel-like Summer Festival at Longborough, a small village nestling in England's Cotswold Hills, with a large mansion called Banks Fee House.

Next door, an equally large chicken-shed, now converted into a well-equipped opera-theatre, with 480 seats for the fortunate who can get tickets.

This year's masterstroke was to keep the cycle to a four-night affair, but to slim each night down with skilful editing — but "keeping all the best bits" — and make each performance run out at less than two-and-a-half hours, plus one long interval mid-way. The orchestra is reduced to 24 players and only 20 singers are required.

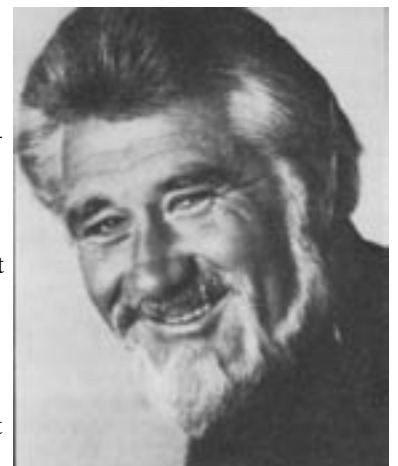


Banks Fee House at Longborough. Behind the Palladian frontage is the chicken-shed-cum-opera-house.

It's a format that has shed some of the traditional load off Wotan's shoulders, and let McIntyre shine brightly as he blithely re-possesses the role that made him famous. In the 27 July issue, the *Sunday Express* critic went on to say "Sir Donald's Wotan has been one of his greatest roles and he performed it in the first *Ring* cycle I ever saw, at Covent Garden in 1970.

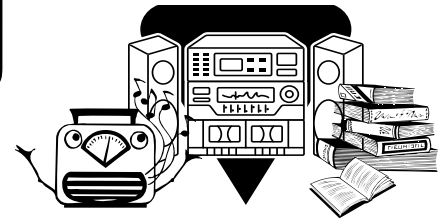
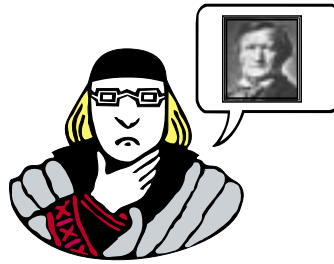
Now, thirty-four years later, I have had the privilege of seeing him sing it again at Longborough in a moving and unforgettable experience." Roderic Dunnett, critic of *The Independent*, added his own words of praise during the rehearsals. "The voice is all there," he said, with some wonder, ". . . and the excitement's aglow as Wotan imitates Brünnhilde's flight, then guards her like a tiger. His every joint supple as he moves, you sense the exact meaning. He is wholly in control."

Sir Donald's career seems suitably god-like, even immortal.



Preparing the Self for a “Ring” Cycle

In the first of two articles, Chris Brodrick looks towards Adelaide and thinks of *Ring* learner-drivers who are navigating towards their first cycle.



As November draws closer and we brace ourselves for the indulgence of a week with Wagner, I thought it might be a good idea to pass on a few tips for those members who will be experiencing *The Ring* for the first time. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is probably ‘the’ highest cultural peak that any of us is likely to climb and, like Mount Everest, it requires a great deal of respect.

To really enjoy Wagner’s operas and in particular *The Ring*, it is important that you undertake some preparatory groundwork before you attend the performance. This should be started as early as possible. My first encounter with *The Ring* was 27 years ago and though I probably know the work quite well, I still feel there’s more to find out! Even though it might seem an enormous task rest assured that any study you put in prior to November will be of benefit!

Where do you start? Begin at the beginning, with the story. Find a synopsis for each of the operas and get a feel for the plot and its characters. With an understanding of the story outline you should now procure a copy of the libretto with translation. The most useful I’ve found is *Richard Wagner – Der Ring des Nibelungen A Companion* by Rudolf Sabor. This is a five-volume translation (German on left-hand page and English on the right) with commentary, and includes the story, details of the characters and the musical themes and how they link to the text. Furthermore, Sabor provides extensive notes aligned to the text that relate to stage directions or pertinent facts to help you gain a deeper understanding of what is going on. Don’t be put off by the book’s size. Each volume is the size of an average paperback and is stacked with really useful information. One of the daunting tasks about *The Ring* is trying to remember the names of particular leitmotifs. Sabor’s book links each theme with the text so as to make the book the perfect companion when listening to the music.

The Sabor *Companion to The Ring* should be available in Public Libraries and, if you are lucky, in some ‘good’

bookshops. Amazon.co.uk has copies in stock although Amazon.com was indicating at the time of writing that it was out of stock. If you find it difficult to find Sabor’s book try and find the four English National Opera guides for *The Ring* operas. They include Andrew Porter’s critically acclaimed translations that he produced back in the 1970’s. Unfortunately these can be difficult to find unless your local library can come up with them.

If you think you’d like something closer to home, the Dramaturg and Artistic administrator for the 2004 Adelaide Ring, Peter Bassett, has written *The Nibelungs’ Ring* a book that provides a commentary on each of *The Ring’s* constituent operas and a complete prose version of the text. He also gives examples of the musical themes. Having not seen this book I’m unable to say how detailed it is but Bassett is a renowned Wagner authority so I’m sure he will have provided plenty of information.

With a translation in hand, it’s time, as the song says, to “Listen to the music” – preferably over and over and over again!

There are a number of recordings of *The Ring*, although you will probably find the Solti set the most easily obtainable. It is a wonderful recording with some great singers! For variety try the Chandos – English National Opera set conducted by Reginald Goodall. Recorded live in the 1970’s it has the ‘study’ advantage of being sung in English (Andrew Porter’s translation). Though be prepared for Goodall’s slow tempi. *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*) stretches to 5 CDs.

With sixteen hours of music ahead of you I’d caution you to do a bit of planning and not to simply plough straight in. My suggestion is that you listen to one act of each opera per night (divide *Rheingold* in 2 by breaking it as Wotan and Loge descend into Nibelheim) and you will then have 11 nights listening. Give yourself the odd night off (a bit of Bach or Gregorian

chant to freshen the palate) and you can complete *The Ring* once every fortnight. To listen to each opera six times before November you will need to start your listening programme mid-August. Are you beginning to see the scale?

An alternative to CDs would be DVDs or Videos. There are at least four productions to view: the famous Chereau *Ring* with Donald McIntyre, the Otto Schenk New York Metropolitan production and the new Stuttgart production are all on DVD while the Barenboim/Kupfer Bayreuth production is available on video. Personally I favour CD over DVD or video when studying as it’s the music you want to get to know. It’s extremely hard to study the music when you are visually distracted by something on stage that you don’t understand. It’s easier without the pictures.

Some centres are holding courses on *The Ring*. In Christchurch, John Pattinson will give a series of lectures as part of the University of Canterbury Continuing Education programme on Saturdays, 9, 16, 23 and 30 October, all days from 10am to 5pm.

Heath Lees is currently presenting a CCE course in Auckland, *Round and Round The Ring*. Both these lecture series complement our society’s own activities from now until November.

Further afield, a symposium on *The Ring* is to be held in Melbourne on 12-14 November that includes papers to be given by Heath Lees, John Deathridge and Hans Vaget. Finally there will be a number of talks to be given in Adelaide, including Peter Bassett’s Talks at 10.30am each performance day, the Psycho-Analysts’ conference *Engaging with the Ring* on 18 November and *Days With the Wagner Society* on 21 November.

In general though, the more work you can put into *The Ring* prior to going to Adelaide, the more you will enjoy the experience. Happy studying!

In the next article: *What to Expect in Adelaide*.

PARSIFLACK AND PERSIFLAGE

Heath Lees reports on this year's round of Bayreuth Bellowing

Well we warned you. Oh yes, *we* knew. In the WSNZ Newsletter of February this year, we bravely alerted you to Wolfgang Wagner's choice of a new director for this year's Bayreuth *Parsifal* — the "bad boy" of German theatre Christoph Schlingensief.

This 43-year-old director, best known for casting *Hamlet* with neo-Nazi skin-heads who have never acted before, has a stated opinion of opera that might be described as a raspberry, and a musical taste that has been linked to the Whoop-ee cushion.

In February, Schlingensief was proclaiming "no scandal", but since then it's all become explosive, especially in the month before Bayreuth's opening.

On 8 July came a press report about disputes with Wolfgang Wagner that had the firebrand director storming off the stage. Only days before the festival's curtain-up, the *Parsifal* tenor Endrik Wottrich described himself as "appalled" by the production, which he described as "an abomination", and refused to return to Bayreuth next year.

The tabloid press muscled in, with the *Bild* newspaper throwing the first hysterical punch in the headline "Scandal production has bunnies fornicating on stage". You could hear Wagnerians gulping. Could this be true?

Schlingensief himself was not at all encouraging. "A lot of people are not going to like what they see," he told an interviewer. "The last act, in particular, is going to be very hard for traditionalists to swallow".



"Bad-Boy" Schlingensief

Angered by Wottrich's earlier comments, Schlingensief responded by publicly calling his lead tenor "rascist". In the next day's press, Wottrich retorted by labelling his director a "rascist Nazi". Schlingensief then schlingend off at Wolfgang Wagner, for not providing enough money for video technology. Most fans were content to wait for the opening and avoid the sideshow.

After the premier, Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* summed up the feeling in his review, posted on 2nd August. As opera, he said, it was "god-awful", and he suggested sick-bags for the video projection over the Grail scene, showing "two dead rabbits, their rotting bodies intertwined . . . We then saw a sped-up film of one rabbit decomposing, its body frothing as the maggots did their work". Any redeeming features in all this? Yes, apparently Boulez' much-awaited return to Bayreuth gives inspiration to *Parsifal's* music, despite all the stage hoo-ha. Oh and there's also Ruth Elkin's story in the Berlin press of Katharina Wagner riding into Bayreuth, Valkyrie-like, dictating terms to Schlingensief, and looking like the Wagner heir to take over from Wolfgang in the future. Katharina is the daughter of Wolfgang's second marriage, and her musical taste, it seems, includes Madonna, Michael Jackson and Puccini (who's that last one?) And an interesting final footnote has a rival *Parsifal* being mounted almost at the same time as Bayreuth's, but westward, in the beautiful, somewhat sleepy town of Baden-Baden, with conductor Kent Nagano, and Waltraud Meier as Kundry — the same Waltraud Meier who was expelled from Bayreuth a year ago. Is Bayreuth going to the dogs while Baden-Baden's star rises? Can things get worse? Doesn't it all make for fabulous publicity though? And is that perhaps the only reason for it all?

Lisa Gasteen "A performer of Enormous Force and Conviction"

Adelaide's Brünnhilde, Lisa Gasteen, has been collecting rave reviews in recent trips to America.

Musical America described her with a voice "that can soar over a huge orchestra without effort", and *Andante Magazine* finished its glowing review with "Her voice rode thrillingly over the extra-large orchestra. This is a performer of enormous force and conviction."

After Adelaide, Gasteen goes on to sing Brünnhilde at the NY Met, the Vienna State Opera, and in 2007, Bayreuth itself.

The *Valhalla* photo above, of Gasteen in rehearsal at Adelaide, is by Peter Holderness, who has been documenting rehearsals and is set to take a whole gallery of photographs of the opening cycle, for a unique collection. Let's hope the current attempts for sponsorship for this photographic kaleidoscope bear fruit. What a performance record that will be!



NEW MEMBERS: A BIG WELCOME TO:

Mr & Mrs P & L Carpenter Auckland
Mrs J Judson Auckland
Mr G Morris Wellington
Mr P Preston Christchurch
Mr M Sinclair Auckland

Götterdämmerung Performances

Auckland: Sunday, 12 September, 4pm.

Auckland members will find a booking form enclosed for this meeting. As usual, we are arranging a buffet meal at the Copthorne Hotel, Anzac Avenue. Dinner places are limited, so if you intend coming to the Copthorne, please fill out the form and send it back to PO Box 202, with your cheque by 27 August. (Details on the form.) Otherwise, you can BYO or go out & about during the first interval (75 minutes). Tea, coffee & biscuits will be available during both the first & second intervals.

Wellington: Sunday, 17 October, 2pm

Wellington members will find a booking form enclosed for the performance on 17 October. Please fill this out and return it with your cheque to George Risk. Details of his address, cost, etc., are on the form.

For any questions about the meeting, please phone George on 476-6394.

NZ OPERA SOCIETY

Auckland Branch

September 8 *Macbeth* 7.30pm

Duncan McGhie Theatre, ACE. Enquiries Ph.369-5946.