

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre



NEWSLETTER

Ring Review

“Ladies and Gentlemen. We would like to inform you that this afternoon’s performance of *Das Rheingold* opens with a complete blackout.” And so it was. As the 2000 members of the audience settled back in their seats, every light in the theatre was dimmed and out of the void came the low E flat. Our journey was underway!

Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* which opened at Adelaide’s Festival Theatre on 16 November was a journey within a journey for the 102 members of the New Zealand Wagner Society who made the trip to be part of the first Australasian production of this mammoth work. In 1998, the State Opera of South Australia imported Pierre Strosser’s production of the Ring from the Chatelet Theatre in Paris. After the loss of the Australian Grand Prix to Melbourne, the State Government wanted to find an international event that would bring high spending tourists to Adelaide. The Ring was chosen as its audience is effectively locked into the city for 8 days.

The Strosser Ring was the first full production of the Ring in Australia. Although the production was sparse, and in most people’s eyes minimalist, the success of that production, and that of *Parsifal* in 2001, laid the foundations for the 2004 Ring.

So we sat in the dark with music and lighting slowly rising as we witnessed creation. A vast curtain of water filled the proscenium arch, out of which the three Rhine maidens appeared, to tease Alberich. This scene was magnificent: well sung, well directed, very sexy and very down to earth. As Roger Covell wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald, “There is nothing dwarfish nor contorted in this Alberich’s stance, manner or vocal timbre. The black malevolence of his



Photo; Sue Alder©

Alberich (John Wegner) and Flosshilde (Zan McKendree-Wright) frolick! Zan’s performances were sponsored by the WSONZ

voice rings out with primary force and consistency, matching his lank, black hair and his costume of unrelieved black leather.” From comments made after the performance it would seem that most of the female members of the audience could not understand why the Rhine maidens had not succumbed to Alberich’s rugged looks!

In a subsequent radio interview, director Elke Neidhardt told how the production team had rented a house in the Blue Mountains for a week to discuss their approach to the production. At the end of the week they had only managed to work through *Rheingold* Scene One! In hindsight this scene set the tone for the whole cycle in terms of singing, acting and above all humour which Neidhardt brings out at every opportunity. This was not going to be a traditional production, nor a deconstructionalist production favoured by many European directors. Neidhardt presented an all Australian production demonstrating a wonderful clarity in story telling without any hint of cultural cringe.

“*Das Rheingold*....was an extraordinary triumph that will take its place most honourably in the international annals of Wagnerian production,” wrote Roger Covell. In the Adelaide Advertiser Ewart Shaw had similar thoughts: “Musically compelling and theatrically impressive, director Elke Neidhardt has given us a straight-to-the-point vision of the story.” In the Age, John Slavin sounded a warning. “Wegner (Alberich) with his great, dark baritone quite simply steals this production. Bröcheler’s Wotan is too louche, too withdrawn from proceedings, to bring out the more troubled character of the god. There is a danger, therefore, of the whole enterprise overbalancing in favour of demonic energy like a Wagnerian Don Giovanni. For Bröcheler, all lies still before him.”

The next day proved to be an extraordinary occasion in which Bröcheler answered his critics. We witnessed human drama beautifully told and the most daring display of direction that we are likely to see in an opera house.



Die Walküre Act 3 - The name says it all

Photo: Sue Alder©

Act 1 of Die Walküre opens with Wotan planting the sword in a small circular pond and creating Hunding's hut by producing telescopic poles from the stage floor with his spear. This cage in the middle of the vast stage acts as a perfect home for Hunding and Sieglinde's sad marriage but when Siegmund and Sieglinde's love blossoms in Winterstürme, the cage retracts back into the floor. Wotan draws a bright green curtain across the back of the stage which the twins are now able to use freely and, in one stunning but simple moment, Sieglinde runs, child-like, running her finger along the green curtain causing it to ripple.

There was none of the usual intensity drop in Act 2. The confrontations of Wotan and Fricka and Wotan and Brünnhilde came to life by being treated as typical human situations. Niedhardt was unafraid of confronting us with a god who uses violence to reinforce his will. The last scene between Siegmund and Brünnhilde was another highpoint. The opening of Act 3 raised the 'bar' even higher. Before the famous Ride of Valkyries begins, a lone Valkyrie makes her way to the back where she beats on the wall. As the lights come up the music starts, and we begin to see that she is trying to gain entry to a bar – Wunder Bar. Other Valkyries enter. Calls are heard from the Dress Circle where two Valkyries cavort with the audience. The whole effect produced some very unwagnerian applause then laughter. With an audience now well swept up in the drama the rest of the act flew. Brünnhilde's rock, surrounded by real fire, was simple but effective and the scene of farewell was almost unbearably moving.

When the curtain fell the audience raised the roof with their ovation. This was echoed by the critics. Ewart Shaw wrote, "This is, without reservation, the most astounding night of theatre the

Festival Centre has ever witnessed. It is probably without parallel in Australian opera history for its courage and audacity." John Slavin was reassessing: "This production is memorable for more than its over-the-top sets. It is wonderfully sung by the entire cast. Skelton and Riedel interpret their love music with a tenderness that almost physically hurts. It is also a pleasure to report that John Bröcheler, who was so dampened in Das Rheingold, comes spectacularly into his own. ...But Bröcheler is a singer who can act. He constructs a complex portrait of a creator who is stripped of his power to arbitrate independently so that by the end of the opera he has shrunk to a broken old man." Roger Covell was quite sure of the production's stature: "At this point of the first cycle it is already possible to declare that this is a Ring that deserves to travel. I hope that the director, Elke Neidhardt, and her scenic colleagues will be besieged by invitations from international houses to restage or further develop this brilliant event." And later in the same piece "Gasteen's annunciation of death to the doomed Siegmund (and the defiant nobility of his response) and her father-and-daughter farewell with Wotan were moving beyond words."

But as they say you can't please everyone. Expatriate Australian artist Jeffrey Smart (83) who returned to his home town for the Ring was not amused at the Wunder Bar. He was quoted in the Age as saying "It's a fairytale, their (the Valkyries) job is a holy one, to take the dead heroes from battle and take them to Valhalla. So what do you get instead? A lot of flossies and floozies and tarts and they jazz up the Valkyrie song."

The Ring is such a massive undertaking it is not surprising things can go wrong. When we reached the theatre for Siegfried we found out that Timothy Mussard was suffering a strained vocal ligament

and the understudy, Gary Rideout, would be singing the title role. And so he did, although it was touch and go at the end and best described by John Slavin: "Initially Rideout walks a fine line between Siegfried's brutishness and romantic irresponsibility. He has a sweet-toned upper register and his scenes with Mime are quite fine in their contrasts, particularly in the forging of the sword where Siegfried must articulate his notes against the broad flow of the orchestra ... But a trap as deadly as Fafner lies in wait for any young singer attempting Siegfried. From charming youthfulness to heroic insouciance he must keep something in reserve for act three, the emotionally and vocally draining awakening of Brünnhilde (Lisa Gasteen).

Quite simply, by the time he arrives there Rideout is vocally exhausted. He performs valiantly on a set that offers no succour for either singer, but nothing can disguise the tatters of his tessitura. What is quite moving about this scene is Gasteen's support of her partner. Unchallenged vocally by him she softens her delivery. Not since Birgit Nilsson have we heard singing so steady and accurate but she has a beauty of tone Nilsson never quite possessed.

If the love duet is deeply disappointing, what replaces it is astonishing, an inexplicable beauty. The quality of tenderness."

There was a less enthusiastic mood at the end of Siegfried but at the same time a feeling that it would pick up again for Götterdämmerung. We were not disappointed although there was an audible intake of breath when an



Die Walküre Act 1 - Hunding's Hut

Photo: Sue Alder©

announcement was made that Lisa Gasteen had recently sprained her ankle and her movement would be limited. Once the opera was underway this was quickly forgotten as she sang magnificently. Siegfried reverted to Timothy Mussard who was obviously nursing his strained vocal chords.

Act 1 which runs a few minutes over 2 hours simply flew. Act 2 began with a stunning scene between Alberich and Hagen, and continued with a stirring chorus of vassals and a dramatic vengeance scene. In Act 3 Lisa Gasteen sang the Immolation scene with power and emotion. Her exit into the fire was brilliant in its simplicity – she literally walked into the flames.

At the end Neidhardt borrows a touch from Harry Kupfer. As the Redemption theme soars Erda is revealed planting a new Ash Tree. There is hope. The applause at the end was loud and strong and reportedly lasted 20 minutes.

The Age commented: “In contrast to earlier operas, particularly *Die Walküre*, this last chapter in the epic is a visually unspectacular production in which the dramatic and philosophical issues come clearly to the fore.

This puts enormous pressure on the performers since nothing much distracts from the music-making. Some fare better than others. What wonderful playing we have heard from the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra under Asher Fisch. The orchestra, as much as any character, is one of the major triumphs of this production.

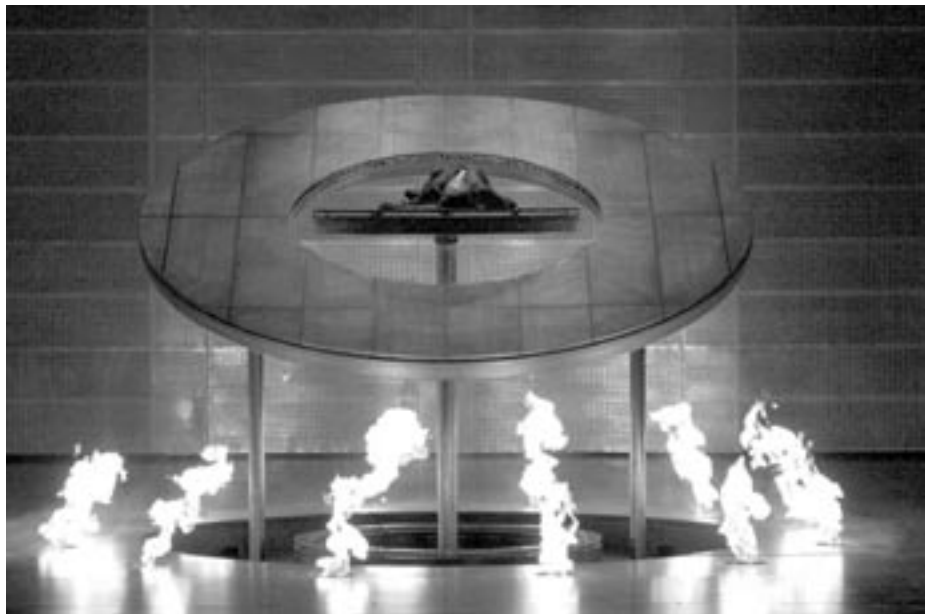
Alas, there is a flaw in the achievement. It is the depiction of Siegfried. Mussard has a pleasant enough tenor, although it is reedy in the upper register, but he nurses strained vocal chords throughout the role.

If there is an outstanding figure in this last opera, it is Gasteen’s extraordinary Brünnhilde. From fury to melting lover to a vengeful deity her vocal mastery never falters. We had the privilege of hearing a great artist.”

Writing on the cycle as a whole, Roger Covell: “The whole cycle has amounted to one of the finest occasions in the history of Australian music, opera and theatre.”

Graham Strahle: “Her (Elke Neidhardt) Ring is essentially a play with actors, and it comes across with a freshness and clarity that is truly remarkable.

Wagner idolised Shakespeare, and while he drew into the Ring a profusion of heroic, moral, fairytale and philosophical themes, he wanted it foremost to be an approachable, festive piece of stage drama. Neidhardt makes it so by giving the work a theatricality that tells the story



Brünnhilde's Rock

Photo: Sue Alder©

simply and draws the audience in with imaginative, powerful and sometimes extremely funny touches.

The result is that, rather than being mystified, unmoved or merely bored by Wagner’s super-abundantly complicated world of human and cosmic characters, even newcomers would have been entirely swept up by this production. You find yourself under an enormous spell.”

John Slavin: “Wagner provokes more passionate responses than any other artist that I can think of. He is often depicted as boring and long-winded. Yet, what struck you was the absorbed attention of the audience. We were neither repelled nor bored, but, for long periods, hypnotised by the refinement and intensity of the drama. The exorbitant length of Wagner’s works plunges his audience into the depths of the subconscious where key fantasies are

presented in contest.

Neidhardt’s approach is to tell the mythic story as simply and directly as she can. I was constantly struck, not by the extravagance of the \$15.3 million budget, but by how often she and designer Michael Scott-Mitchell stripped the vast stage of its props and let the singers sing. The effect, similar in many striking ways to the Chatelet Ring of 1998 in Adelaide, is to create a cosmic timelessness as though history has been abandoned.

...This Ring will be remembered as an important step forwards for opera in this country for the daring of the undertaking and for its music-making.”

All in all this has been a tremendous production and we have been privileged to experience it. To single out individuals for special mention seems unfair as the feeling was of a real team effort from everyone involved. It is interesting to note that of the forty two singers with roles only four were imports. The rest were made up of Australians and New Zealanders. But despite this team effort we have to recognise Elke Neidhardt and her brilliant design team, Asher Fisch and the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra who as in 1998 played their hearts out. Lisa Gasteen who, with this production under her belt, will, I predict, go on and be the star of Covent Garden’s Ring production next year. Finally our own Liz Lees whose hard work on our behalf meant that we could make this wondrous journey.

Christopher Brodrick

Acknowledgements:- theoperacritic.com, Adelaide Advertiser, The Australian, The Age and Sydney Morning Herald and Sue Adler for the production photos



Photo: Sue Alder©

Götterdämmerung Act 1 - A Norn

Around the Ring

There were plenty of events in support of the Adelaide Ring to keep one occupied when you weren't in the theatre. On the mornings of the operas, members of the society were treated to lectures on that night's opera by Heath Lees and John Pattinson. These invaluable talks set the scene for the performance to come and provided newcomers and old with dramatic and musical signposts.

On Thursday 18 November some members of the group attended a seminar presented by the Australian Psychoanalytical Society: Engaging with the Ring. Helen Chambers will report on this fascinating day in the next newsletter.

There were things to see and hear. In the theatre there was an exhibition of photographs on Hebert von Karajan. At the Town Hall 'The Language of the Stage' showed photographs and a few stage models of Bayreuth productions from 1876 to 1989. Back in the Theatre they had set up an audio experience of Great Wagner Voices of the Past. At the Art Gallery of South Australia 'Wagner's Ring – An Artistic Vision' exhibited articles, set designs and models to do with the Ring plus some of Stephen Curtis' costume designs for the 2004 Ring.

Asher Fisch accompanied Liane Keegan, Kate Ladner, Joanna Cole, Stuart Skelton, Jonathan Summers and Duccio Dal Monte in a recital of music with links to Wagner. This well crafted programme ranged from Mahler to Lehar via Bellini, Verdi and Strauss.

The cream of all the supporting events was the 'Day with the Wagner Society of South Australia.' What a treat we had. From Justice Jane Mathews' brilliant paper on 'Women and Loss in the Ring', to a performance of the Siegfried Idyll played by the University of Adelaide's Elder Chamber Orchestra, the whole day was a lovely experience. As an example of the wonderful spirit of this production, four members of the orchestra gave up some time off to come and take part in a panel discussion about playing in a Ring. This turned out to be a fascinating discussion. We were told how Jeffery Tate, the conductor of the 1998 Adelaide Ring, had taught the orchestra the work note by note and that Asher Fisch on the other hand looked for sound rather than note perfection. Principal cellist Janis Laurs in describing the production as down to earth, backed this up with the story of Lisa Gasteen sitting down next to Asher Fisch after a particularly difficult rehearsal and saying "Lets have a beer!"



Götterdämmerung Act 3 - Brünnhilde (Lisa Garsteen)

But this was not all we had during the day Alexander Hanysz played a Liszt transcription from the Meistersinger, Bill Gillespie the artistic director for the 1998 Ring told us the story behind that production, we had a panel discussion that included Hunding (Richard Green), and Heath gave another of his masterful papers. 'Wagner's Ring and the Life Cycle of an Audience.' This was one of a number of papers our president gave in Australia prior to and during the Ring. Once again he bowled over the Aussies so don't be surprised to see him called up for the Black Caps.

We all left our day out buzzing. It had truly been magical, informative and entertaining. Many thanks to our Australian cousins for putting on a tremendous show.

The Ring >8

While Heath was in Adelaide he was never far from the action. He gave papers, he gave interviews, appeared on panels and worked on a special programme for Concert FM Called 'Ring Groupies.' Before you get the wrong idea these are not fanatical Wagnerites who hang around the stage door but people who are drawn by the Ring's power to attend productions all over the world. For one groupie Adelaide was his 70th Ring while for others a month will be taken off work to see three cycles of the same production. Heath will find out what it is about the operas that attracts people. Our own multiple Ringers, Ron and Margaret Saunders, are to feature in the programme. It will be broadcast on Thursday 16 December at 7.00pm in Concert FM's Appointment slot.

Unforeseen problem halts Ring

With the complexity involved in a production of Der Ring des Nibelungen, production staff plan for the inevitable hiccup. Lisa Gasteen twisted her ankle while walking in the park and, while she could sing, we will never know how much her movement was restricted. In the 2001 Ring in Seattle, Alan Woodrow ruptured an achilles tendon days out from his first performance of Siegfried and, while he sang the role from the wings in the first cycle, he was replaced for the remainder of the season. The great Birgit Nilsson made her New York Met debut as Isolde, but the occasion was overshadowed by her Tristan. To be more correct Tristans, as for each Act she sang with a new one. So Timothy Mussard's vocal problem was not unexpected. The role of Siegfried in Siegfried is a killer on the voice and requires great vocal stamina. But what about the unforeseen problem? It was some comments after Das Rheingold that got me thinking about the following, fictitious report!

"The performance of Richard Wagner's opera Das Rheingold that opened the South Australia Opera season of the Ring, was brought to a complete standstill soon after the start when the Rhine maidens decided that the dwarf Alberich, (John Wegner) was such a gorgeous, testosterone fuelled male that they each in turn succumbed to his charms. Alberich, having found what he was after, was not interested in forsaking love. But without the forsaking of love, the gold cannot be won. Without the gold, no ring can be made and without the ring the Ring Cycle becomes.....pointless!

Unfortunately, not even the persuasive help of the female members of the New Zealand Wagner Society could turn the Rhine daughters from their decision as, to a woman, they agreed that Alberich was far too sexy to reject!!!

The problem for production staff was Wotan still had a contract with the giants so Friea ends up as a hausfrau and the gods die of old age. Hardly the dramatic ending that Wagner had in mind."

Ring Christchurch!

Heath and Liz Lees will be overseas for the next eight months on sabbatical leave, so the WSONZ newsletter will be edited by Chris Brodrick. Any contributions from members will be most welcome. You can contact Chris at cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz or Ph. (03) 343 0353. In the meantime we wish our President and Secretary a wonderful time away and to all of us who are staying at home - Happy Christmas and New Year!