

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER



WSNZ Moves Into its Tenth Year

On the 22 May this year, the Wagner Society of New Zealand will be ten years old. A whole decade has passed since 44 people met in Auckland following a visit from Sir Donald McIntyre, and signed the submission to create an Incorporated Society.

During the evening, soprano Michelle Staff sang Senta's ballad from *The Flying Dutchman* and Heath Lees acted as steersman at the piano. A discussion was held on the likely shape of the year's activities, and everyone left with a feeling that something new and interesting was taking place.

Since then, the WSNZ has become a fixture of musical interest in the country. Centres in Wellington and Christchurch have opened and grown, with their own regular programmes. The last ten years have seen more than 200 meetings across the three centres, 50 newsletters, half a dozen overseas Wagner-trips, and for about 50 members, there has been the opportunity to use the Society's tickets to Bayreuth performances. At a rough guess, a total of about 600 hours of Wagner's music has been presented, listened to, and discussed.

Outside the society, many people know about us, thanks to the enthusiasm of members who are constantly inviting their friends to join, and thanks also to our recent website, where information and the current newsletter is always available globally. New Zealand orchestras regularly programme Wagner's music, and our presence at Australian Wagner events is enjoyably expected by our trans-Tasman colleagues.

The huge success of Adelaide's *Rings* — the second one adding to our birthday celebrations in November this year — and *Parsifal* with our own Margaret Medlyn as Kundry, have all helped make our presence felt, and back home, have created a body of interest in the amazing if baffling figure of Wagner, and a huge growth in the informed appreciation of his works.

When the WSNZ was set up, the unofficial aim was to try to dispel the old saw that Wagner's music was "too heavy" for most people, and wouldn't stand too much exposure. Today we can take pride in knowing that the only single-composer musical society in New Zealand has flourished for ten years now, and is beginning its next decade with every trumpet sounding.

ROUND AND ROUND THE RING . . .

THIS YEAR, ALL THE WSNZ CENTRES ARE GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT *THE RING*

WELLINGTON PROGRAMME

All the *Ring* meetings will be in the Massey University Theatrette, Buckle Street.

Venues and times for the May and December meetings will be announced in due course.

Sun 15 Feb 6 pm

"The Ring — an Overview of Absolutely Everything" presented by Heath Lees

Sun 18 April 6 pm

Das Rheingold.
Metropolitan Opera/Levine.
Production Otto Schenk.

Sun 23 May

Double-birthday celebrations:
Richard Wagner's and the WSNZ's

Sun 20 Jun 2 pm

Die Walküre.
Stuttgart Staatsoper/Zagrosek
Production Christoph Nel.

Sun 15 Aug 2 pm

Siegfried
Bayreuth Festival/Barenboim
Production Harry Kupfer

Sun 17 Oct 2 pm

Götterdämmerung
Bayreuth Festival/Boulez
Production Patrice Chéreau

Sun 5 Dec

Christmas Get-Together Meeting
(Details to follow)

AUCKLAND PROGRAMME

All meetings are in the Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street, and the 4pm times relate to the evenings with meals during the intervals.

Sun 29 Feb 7.30pm

Das Rheingold.
Metropolitan Opera/Levine.
Production Otto Schenk.

Sun 18 Apr 4pm

Die Walküre.
Stuttgart Staatsoper/Zagrosek
Production Christoph Nel.

Sat 22 May 7.30pm

AGM and Birthday Celebrations with a presentation and performance of Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*

Sun 18 Jul 4pm

Siegfried
Bayreuth Festival/Barenboim
Production Harry Kupfer

Sun 12 Sep 4pm

Götterdämmerung
Bayreuth Festival/Boulez
Production Patrice Chéreau

Sun 28 Nov 7.30pm

Final Meeting for 2004
Gala Excerpts and Selected Requests

CHRISTCHURCH PROGRAMME

Apart from the Christmas BBQ, all meetings this year are on **Fridays** at 7.30pm, and will normally be held at Gloria and Garth Streat's home, 20 Pentre Terrace, Cashmere

13 Feb "Tannhauser's Women" presented by Jenny Lee.

26 Mar "Sing Faster — The Stagehand's *Ring*" introduced by John Pattinson.

21 May Pot Luck dinner to celebrate two birthdays — Richard Wagner's and the WSNZ's (venue to be decided).

9 Jul Videos of Michael Portillo and Howard Goodall on "The Ring Cycle" introduced by Chris Brodrick.

20 Aug "More Light on the "Ring's" Leitmotives" presented by Heath Lees.

1 Oct DVD viewing of a Wagner *Ring* opera with an "ethnic" meal in the interval.

5 Dec Christmas BBQ — date to be confirmed and venue to be decided.

The Wagner-New Zealand Foundation

The WSNZ has set up a legally constituted entity called the "Wagner-New Zealand Foundation". The purpose of this Foundation is to seek and receive funds for the enabling of New-Zealand based, Wagner-related activities.

These could take the form of scholarships and prizes for promising Wagner singers of New Zealand origin, financial contributions towards the New Zealand visits of Wagner scholars or artists, and other projects that the Trustees consider suitable to the Foundation's primary purpose.

Contributions to the Foundation are eligible for tax concessions by the donor, and the committee of the WSNZ has requested that the Newsletter publicise the existence of the Foundation early this year, in view of the close of the tax year at the end of March.

All contributions to the Wagner New Zealand Foundation will be welcomed, acknowledged and duly received.

Do consider this worthy means of helping to further the aims for which the WSNZ was initially incorporated.

Verdi's *Lohengrin*? It Looks As Good As The Real Thing

During a visit to catch up with family in China, Christchurch member Sid Kennedy visited Wuhan, a city on the Yangtze River. It's the place where they make orchestral tam-tams and Chinese gongs.

Sid went off to the local CD shop to pick up a few DVD opera recordings for his collection, and was stunned to see the DVD on the right.

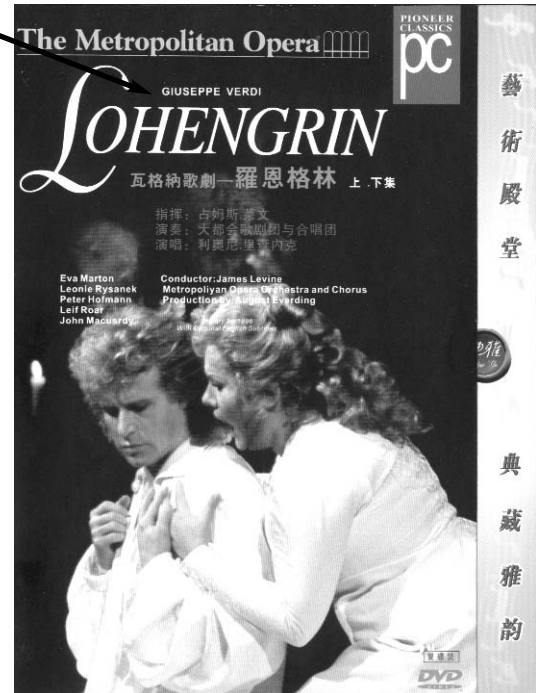
Up above the title *Lohengrin* was a very famous composer of Italian operas who goes by the name of Giuseppe Verdi. Wagner and Verdi were both born in 1813, but some would say the similarity ends there. True, Verdi was very impressed by *Lohengrin*, and when he composed *Aida* he included a number of features that he had learned from Wagner's 1850 opera, such as the

luminous string writing, and a more continuous kind of operatic melody. But no, the real composer of *Lohengrin* remains Richard Wagner you'll be happy to know, and Sid, having finally got over his astonishment, decided he would buy the DVD since, as he says in his accompanying note to the WSNZ Newsletter, "no one would believe me if I did not have the cover, to prove that Wagner was a plagiarist."

At the moment, Sid's DVD player is waiting to be wired up, so he has not yet verified if the tape he bought really is the *Lohengrin* we know and love by RW himself.

Wouldn't it be interesting if it turned out actually to be something by Verdi?

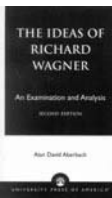
The Force of Destiny perhaps? .



MORE THAN THE GENERAL IDEA

BOOK REVIEW

"The Ideas of Richard Wagner" (Second Edition), by Alan David Aberbach.
Published by the University Press of America, Inc., Lanham and Oxford, 2003. 452 pages
Reviewed by Heath Lees



Exactly twenty years ago, Alan David Aberbach's book *The Ideas of Richard Wagner* first appeared.

If the title hadn't been so arresting you would probably have put it down at first sight, since its appearance seemed designed to put readers off.

Set throughout in a very plain Courier-like typeface, it was completely bereft of italics and had occasional bold type that was difficult to distinguish; footnotes were crammed into the bottom of every page, reference numbers ran into the lines above, and the index was, to put it kindly, spartan.

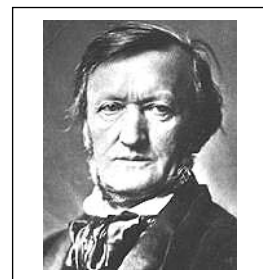
But underneath the awkward, thesis-like presentation, the material was absolutely fascinating. As the author himself admitted, half-amazed, in the preface to the first edition, there had been a huge number of books written about Wagner's life and music since the composer's death, yet there was not one full-length study devoted to the growth and shape of his ideas.

Mind you, Aberbach immediately puts his finger on why this was so. "Wagner was concerned with history, politics, society, religion, economics, literature, philosophy, aesthetics and psychology, as well as music." Who would be brave enough to tackle such a range? Don't forget, Wagner often changed his mind rapidly, sometimes completely, (witness the on-off-again conversion to vegetarianism), while a number of his ideas, such as the essential brotherhood of man, were in head-on collision with others, such as his violent anti-Semitism.

Thankfully, Aberbach proved brave enough to take on this huge challenge, and his 1984 book was rich and rewarding for us all. This new edition has tidied everything up and bestowed a neat and professional look that gives his "examination and analysis" the kind of presentation it has always deserved. There's revision, yes, but there's

considerable expansion too, with the author seizing the opportunity to delve into the operas themselves, re-tell their stories and re-present their "ideas" — those issues and conflicts that throw light on Wagner's mind and his fundamental beliefs. Of course *The Ring* gets the fullest treatment, not just on account of its length, but because its gigantic course reveals the whole range of Wagner's ideas.

Aberbach's access to two further decades of sources and versions of sources, especially letters, leads to new and welcome insights into Wagner's mind, and into the concerns that pre-occupied his age (and ours). They make the material and message of Wagner music-dramas infinitely clearer to the average reader, especially in the context of politics and religion, the two areas where Aberbach appears at his most impressive.



**Wagner
as
Man
of
Ideas**

They also reveal a number of fascinating and bizarre side-lights. Did you know Wagner once talked of emigrating to America and having *The Ring* performed "on the banks of the Mississippi"? An especially sympathetic section, appearing almost unchanged in the new edition, covers the invaluable contribution of the Jews with whom Wagner came into contact. They include Hermann Levi, the conductor of *Parsifal*, Karl Tausig the young piano-prodigy who became "almost a son" to Wagner, Angelo Neumann, singer and impresario who did so much to spread Wagner's work abroad, and Samuel Lehrs whose deeply transforming influence on the young Wagner was described by the composer as "the most beautiful friendship of my life". Wisely, Aberbach doesn't even try to understand the perplexing and unbridgeable gulf between Wagner's Jewish friends and his anti-Semitic vitriol.

Omissions of the first edition are put right in the second. Particularly important, especially in a book about Wagner's ideas, is the case of Schopenhauer, who nearly escaped mention in the earlier edition. Not only is this amply compensated for in the new version, but Aberbach also adds other influences on Wagner's thoughts that need attention, in particular Hafiz, a mystical Persian poet, and Eckhart, "the father of German mysticism" — insights which greatly improve the new edition.

There is, alas, a major drawback, which, ironically, seems to have resulted from an attempt to draw all the disparate elements more obviously together. The whole material is set on only three "stages" — political, religious, and artistic — but it's hard not to feel that the small, final stage ("the artistic") is very much a rag-bag of what has failed to fit into the first two.

Here, Aberbach's earlier edition was better, since his outline and illustration of Wagner's ideas was more linear, more historical. You got the distinct and very helpful impression that the development of Wagner's ideas was running in parallel with the course of his life, from his first youthful mish-

mash of *Die Feen* to the religious (and social) epiphany of *Parsifal*, a horizon that spanned eight manageable chapters and a conclusion. In the second edition, the first two of the three "stages" are just too large for comfort, and at times make for pretty heavy going.

In addition, the "artistic stage" must necessarily include a discussion about Wagner's ideas on words and music, which leads into a huge field — some would say a minefield — where Aberbach's stated rubric of "Examination and Analysis" just doesn't fit. Matters such as leitmotifs, key-changes, the animation of the language, the role of the orchestra etc., are all introduced only at the end, and lightly passed over — a shame, since Wagner's poetic and musical ideas for the theatre are fascinating, and complex, and the most talked-about aspect of his thought.

Still, Aberbach's primary purpose remains that of exposing the political and religious context of Wagner's life and music, and this he does with great skill and a feeling for the composer's words and how to place them best during the evolution of the book.



The philosopher Nietzsche made some contribution to Wagner's ideas — but only for a while

The fact that the small third part doesn't work well shouldn't put people off. This book is a fascinating and highly comprehensive treatment of a very wide range of Wagner's ideas, and its approach will capture the serious Wagner scholar as much as it will captivate the most passionate opera-lover.

Heath Lees

WAGNER-WATCH

ROUND-UPS, NOTICES, AND ITEMS OF WAGNERIAN INTEREST

Hans Hotter, (1909-2003)

It was sad to read last year that the famous Wagner singer Hans Hotter had died in his beloved city of Munich on 6 December, about a month before his 95th birthday.



Hotter sang his first Wotan in Munich in 1937 and after his post-war debut in London, he became the finest Wotan of his generation and a superb Hans Sachs, dominating the Bayreuth scene for twelve years until 1964. He was a great favourite at the New York Met, where he sang ten Wagner roles over four seasons.

Hotter retired (officially) in 1972, but continued in smaller roles and cameo parts for another twenty years. Many recordings form his legacy to us now, and his majestic yet marvellously expressive approach to Wagner is always thrilling.

Wolfgang Wagner's choice of Christoph Schlingensief (pictured) to direct Bayreuth's new *Parsifal* this year has caused a stir.

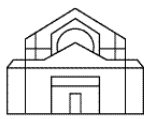


As well as his inspired directing for stage and film, Schlingensief has an irrepressible record of public activism on behalf of Germany's unemployed. His frequent comments and public pranks against many of the country's sacred cows have put the wind up devoted Wagnerians who know of Schlingensief's reputation for surprises.

Last December, he wrote an article in the *Berliner Morgenpost* that was designed to soothe worried Wagnerians. His main message was proclaimed in capital letters: "THERE WILL BE NO SCANDAL" he trumpeted.

We'll see. Boulez is in the pit, so the musical side is in safe hands.

Bayreuth Tickets



Due to a last-minute change, two members are unable to take up their Bayreuth Ticket allocations (7 operas, 20-28 August).

Anyone in the Society who is able and eager to go should phone Liz Lees as soon as possible, on (09)-528-1184

New Members

A really warm welcome to:-

- Mr J Bates, Auckland
- Ms V Breen, Wellington
- Ms G Goodison, Auckland
- Mr S McDonald, Auckland
- Mrs E Sharrock, Auckland



Kiwi soprano extraordinary Margaret Medlyn (pictured on the right as Kundry in Adelaide's *Parsifal* in 2001) harvested many superlatives at the end of last year for her performance in the title-role of Strauss' *Salome*.



Brian Coghlan, President of the Wagner Society of South Australia, took himself off to Melbourne early in December to see her performance, and was delighted — "truly great" he said.

Brian was also a member of the post-performance supper circle and found our diva absolutely charming. Reminds us of the great time many of the WSNZ had when Margaret agreed to meet with us the day after her debut as Kundry, (another triumph) and provided us with a most memorable morning.

New Zealand Opera Society Auckland Branch

March 10: AGM and DVD: *Orphée aux enfers* from Lyon Opera, featuring Natalie Dessaye
In the Duncan McGhie Theatre, ACE, 7.30 pm
Information: ph (09) 575 5051

Wolfgang Wagner — an Appreciation

Only two of these superb books remain from the fourteen we received from the Wagner Society of Hawaii. Be quick if you still want to buy one! Phone Liz, at (09)-528-1184.