

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre



NEWSLETTER

2007 – another full year for WSNZ

2007 promises to be another full year for members of the Wagner Society of New Zealand, culminating in our visit to Sydney in October for the Australian Opera production of *Tannhäuser*.

While a number of the events in this year's programme will revolve around *Tannhäuser*, such as Heath Lees' *Tannhäuser*, *the French and Mallarmé*, there will also be variety. We are delighted to be able to present Aidan Lang, Director of NZ Opera, who will talk about his production of *the Ring* at the Amazonas Festival. Productions of *the Ring* pose an enormous challenge for established opera houses, let alone one in the middle

of the Amazon jungle. Aidan will discuss the way he and his designer approached the particular challenges associated with a remote geographical location and how they incorporated some of these into the final production.

Although Wellington's programme still has to be finalised, they will start the year in fine fashion with a recital by Margaret Medlyn and Bruce Greenfield. Margaret, who has recently returned from a study trip to Europe, (see her report on page 4) will also feature in another Wellington concert in July when the NZSO presents an all Wagner programme.

Heath Lees will also be busy, presenting talks on *Bach and Wagner* in Christchurch and Auckland, *Wagner and Liszt* in Wellington, as well as the previously mentioned *Tannhäuser* talk which will double as a launch for his book on Wagner and Mallarmé.

In Christchurch Chris Brodrick will unleash technology once more and present a talk about *Wagner at the Movies*. Be prepared for a wide range of work from Lang's *Siegfried* to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now!* as well as plenty of well known and not so well known films along the way.

All in all 2007 should be another exciting year!

Auckland

Sunday, 25 February 7.30 pm

Aidan Lang, – Director of NZ Opera:
'The Ring in the Rainforest'

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.

Sunday, 15 April 7.30 pm

Heath Lees: 'Bach and Wagner: two
great composers separated by a common
language?'

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.

Sunday, 20 May 7.30pm

AGM & *Tannhäuser*, Act 1.

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.

Sunday, 15 July 7.30 pm

Heath Lees: '*Tannhäuser*, the French and
Mallarmé' — a look ahead to the Sydney
performance plus the launch of Heath
Lees' new book.

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.

Sunday, 9 September 7.30pm

Tannhäuser: Acts 2 & 3.

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.

Sunday, 2 December 7.30 pm

Christmas round-up

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.

Wellington

The programme will include:-

Sunday, 22 April 4.00 pm

Concert Recital by Margaret Medlyn
(soprano) and Bruce Greenfield (piano)

Venue: St Andrews on the Terrace,
30 The Terrace, Wellington.

Sunday, 3 June 4.00 pm

Heath Lees: 'Wagner and Liszt'

Venue: Massey University Theatre, Buckle St



Margaret Medlyn

Christchurch

Friday, 16 February 7.30pm

Heath Lees: 'Bach and Wagner: two
great composers separated by a common
language?'

Venue: A6 lecture theatre, Canterbury University.

Friday, 30 March 7.30pm

Aidan Lang, – Director of NZ Opera:
'The Ring in the Rainforest'

Venue: A6 lecture theatre, Canterbury University.

Friday, 18 May 7.30pm

Mid-Winter pot luck dinner and BYO to
celebrate Wagner's birthday (22 May 1813).

Venue: To be confirmed

Friday, 3 August 7.30pm

Chris Brodrick: 'Wagner at the Movies'

Venue: A6 lecture theatre, Canterbury University.

Friday, 14 September 7.30pm

Heath Lees: 'Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, the
French, and Mallarmé' – A Guided Tour
Around a New Book & a look ahead to
the Sydney performance

Venue: A6 lecture theatre, Canterbury University.

Sunday, 14 October 5.00pm

(NOTE Different day & time)

Tannhäuser on DVD

A catered meal between Acts 1 & 2.

Venue: To be confirmed

Sunday, 4 December 6.00pm

Christmas Barbecue.

Venue: Sid Kennedy's home, 70 Perry St, Papanui.

Aidan Lang Background

Aidan Lang, was born in Kingston on Thames and studied English and Drama at Birmingham University. His career in opera spans 23 years in a variety of roles – as a freelance international opera stage director and for 15 years continuously in senior artistic positions with notable international opera companies and festivals.

At the beginning of his career during the 1980's he worked as a Staff Producer with Opera 80, Glyndebourne and Welsh National Opera.

From 1990-1999 he was Principal Associate Director at Glyndebourne Festival Opera and Director of Productions for Glyndebourne Touring Opera. Running parallel to these two positions, he was appointed the inaugural Artistic Director of Opera Zuid, a newly created touring company based in Maastricht, The Netherlands.

In 2000 he was appointed Artistic Director of the Buxton Festival.

As a freelance opera stage director he has worked for Glyndebourne Festival Opera, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Opera North, Vancouver Opera, l'Opéra de Lyon and Welsh National Opera.

Between 2000 and 2005 he travelled between the UK and Brazil to build up opera by opera, the first full-length Brazilian production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which was successfully premiered in its entirety at the Teatro Amazonas in Manaus in May 2005.

He is currently General Director of NBR New Zealand Opera.



Aidan Lang presents *The Rainforest Ring*

Wagner Concerts in 2007

On Friday 7 September at 6.30pm the NZSO will perform a special one-off all Wagner concert in Wellington conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin and featuring Margaret Medlyn. *Die Meistersinger* Prelude will open the programme and be followed by *Lohengrin* Prelude Act 1, the Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde*, plus overtures from *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*. The evening will conclude with the Immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung*. Auckland WSNZ member Michael Vidulich wrote to the NZSO soon after the programme had been released to point out how sorry he and all the other members of the Society, outside Wellington, were that this concert wasn't being taken further afield. Peter Walls, Chief Executive of the orchestra, responded by offering members of the Society who travel to Wellington for the performance an upgrade to Premium seats if they purchase A reserve tickets. Premium seats include an invitation to the interval and post concert receptions. In addition a pre-concert talk will be given by Peter Bassett at 5.45pm which will be open to all comers.

NZSO Wagner Concert
Friday 7 September 6.30pm
Michael Fowler Centre

In the Garden City, the Christchurch Symphony will further the cause of Wagner education by presenting *The Ring* in a family concert – Witches and Wizards! They will not be performing the whole Tetralogy but Robert Johnson's "amazing arrangement" that "condenses 15 hours of incredible opera down to just 30 minutes – perfect for kids. It will be accompanied by the award-winning Channel 4 animated film that brings to life Wagner's famous tunes like *The Ride of the Valkyries*".

Robert Johnson may be well known to readers already from his involvement with the Auckland Philharmonia as their librarian or presenting *Pressing On* for Radio New Zealand Concert. Alan Platt who, along with Max Stewart, made the award winning film (European TV Union's Best Educational Programme (music)) are both members of the WSNZ.

Christchurch Symphony
Witches and Wizards
Saturday 14 July 6pm,
Christchurch Town Hall.



Homely Thoughts from Abroad

According to Wikipedia, the free internet encyclopedia, there are 37,000 members and 136 Wagner Societies worldwide. Heath Lees reports on presenting talks to two northern hemisphere Societies.

You would think that the experience of speaking to two European Wagner Societies in quick succession would throw up lots of new and different aspects, especially since one of these societies was in the far north, namely Edinburgh (The Wagner Society of Scotland) and the other was near the South of France (magnificently entitled "le Cercle Richard Wagner de Toulouse midi-Pyrénées).

In fact, the thing that struck me forcibly — and it was comfortably reassuring — was that things there are just like things here in New Zealand. There's the same anxiety over whether the venue is open and ready, whether there's another concert or meeting that will make a big hole in your numbers, whether the microphone will work . . .

But the main impression was of the warm welcome that Wagner Society people give, and the keen interest they take as audience-members. The Edinburgh people were quick to laugh at the jokes (no dour Scots there) and even quicker to understand the finer points of Mallarmé's language. On the other hand, the French audience was (thankfully) happy not to laugh at the unintentional jokes my workaday French must have included, and even though Mallarmé was THEIR poet they were delighted to have another point of view, and to see it linked up to Wagner in a new way.

At each venue, I began by offering the good wishes of everyone in the WSNZ. They were immediately and warmly returned by the Presidents and Vice-Presidents who spoke, and I promised faithfully to pass these on to everyone in our Society. I also invited any of them who might be "passing through"(!) New Zealand to come to any of our meetings, and left details of all three centres.

Similarly there's a warm invitation from them to any visiting member from our society. Liz has information on all the Wagner Societies the world over, and if you're holidaying or on business in foreign parts it's always worth trying to find out if there's a WS meeting going on, and dropping in. You'd find a very warm welcome.



The International Association of Wagner Societies

New members

A very warm welcome is extended to:
Kate Macgregor, Tauranga
Colleen Norton-Keesing, Wellington

Nina Stems the flow!

Wellington member John Davidson reports on Bayreuth's new production of *Tristan und Isolde*.

The highlight of this year's *Tristan und Isolde* at Bayreuth was the stellar performance of Nina Stemme. She sang magnificently, matched by wonderful acting.

In Act 1 she was fiery, knocking over the ship's deck chairs, which faithful Brangäne duly picked up (another standout performance from Petra Lang). When Tristan finally turned up for his 'interview', she was teasing and coquettish. In Act 2 she was passionate - as far as the production would allow and the Liebestod was divine. A truly memorable performance.

Robert Dean Smith couldn't match her as Tristan. He sang beautifully but was a very wooden actor, not helped by the direction.

John Wegner was impressive as Kurwenal and the Korean, King Mark, Kwangchoul Youn was dark-toned yet sympathetic. In this high-class company, New Zealander Martin Snell more than held his own as the Steersman.

Christoph Marthaler's production went from good to bad. I thought Act 1 worked excellently. We were clearly on the deck of a ship (deck chairs abounded) and Isolde and Brangäne were warmly and sensibly dressed for travel. Tristan's gear was a bit odd. He wore normal trousers and a jacket that was the same colour as the old Air NZ cabin crew uniform. It remained fully buttoned up. Meanwhile, while Kurwenal strode round in a kilt, to no apparent purpose, Tristan was static. The ritual of the love potion went off well and both parties looked suitably dazed.

Things started to unravel in Act 2. We were clearly indoors rather than in the garden. Isolde who was dressed in a yellow/mustard 1960s suit, looked dowdy. Brangäne wore a vivid green top and a brown skirt. Tristan still had his buttoned up Air NZ gear.

Christoph Marthaler's idea seemed to be that this love was unattainable and therefore the lovers had little contact with each other apart from a couple of routine clinches. They were singing passionately but without any chemistry. At one point they did get together. Tristan lay down looking extremely awkward and uncomfortable and Isolde stroked his arm. His response was nil. However, at one point he did stick out his arm or leg (I forget which) straight. This may have been intended to replicate an erection. If so, it was the 'STIFFEST' erection, so to speak, of all time - sorry, I couldn't resist that. The only spark came from Isolde who took off a glove with her teeth and Tristan tugged at it while it was still in her mouth. BUT, for most of the act they were nowhere near each other.

The arrival of King Mark was an anticlimax - he'd been spying on them



Nina Stemme as Isolde

with binoculars through the door. In his overcoat and glasses he looked very like a Chinese Communist party official in Winter. Kurwenal collapsed a couple of times and otherwise stood looking at the wall. Tristan got hold of Melot's hand holding the sword and pushed it into himself.

The climax in Act 3 was bizarre! Tristan was on an adjustable hospital bed when Isolde wandered in, wearing an anorak. She didn't get anywhere near Tristan before he died and didn't seem especially interested. Mark, Melot and Brangäne then wandered in together. Melot wasn't killed. Kurwenal did his fainting act and, apart from the prone Tristan, all the characters one by one simply took up positions round the room facing the wall. Brangäne excepted, they could all have been standing at urinals. Isolde delivered a stunning Liebestod and then got into Tristan's empty bed and pulled the sheet over her head.

Standing ovation for a wonderful performance by Nina Stemme, but with another director it could have been the Isolde of the century.



Ban on Love

Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot*, will be presented by the Glimmerglass Opera in 2008 in what the company claims will be the first staged production of the work in North America.

While Wagner's 10 mature operas are presented regularly throughout the world, his first three operas are rarely staged. *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*), his first completed work, was finished in 1833 but was not staged until after his death in 1883. *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Ban on Love*), the second opera he composed, premiered in 1836 and was inspired by Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and the third, *Rienzi*, was first performed in Dresden in 1842.

Glimmerglass Opera run a summer festival in Cooperstown, New York State, USA each year. The tentative schedule has *Das Liebesverbot* opening on July 19, 2008, with performances running through until Aug. 23. No casting has been announced.

Horse Power?

I suppose it had to happen! After all in our Western world the use of horses for travel has just about gone. Even those who work the land now use those quad bikes! So why shouldn't any self respecting daughter of Wotan forgo her horse in favour of this BIG beast - the Honda Valkyrie. The 1520cc 6 cylinder 300kg monster was recently spotted on a visit to Akaroa where it was available to take you for a Ride on a Valkyrie!



The WSNZ Scholarship

Margaret Medlyn reports on her recent study trip to Europe

Firstly let, me say how proud, excited and humbled I was in being named the inaugural WSNZ Scholarship recipient.

It is an honour for me to receive such recognition from the Wagner Society members, and I was determined to put the award to the best possible use. The money has supported me in learning one of Wagner's truly monumental roles – a task that has taken nearly six months of dedicated memorising, coaching, rehearsal and revision. Isolde, one of Wagner's great heroines, deserves nothing less!

News of the Scholarship was timely – coming just before a request from Welsh National Opera (on the recommendation of New Zealand Festival of the Arts *Parsifal* conductor Antony Negas) to understudy the role for their November/December 2006 production. The Scholarship helped pay for the travel to Europe from New Zealand, and paid for travel, accommodation, living costs and fees for top Wagner coaches in both the UK and in Germany.

My first email was to Thom Christoph, who is on the staff at the SemperOper in Dresden. I first worked with Thom when I was preparing for my *Salome* debut three years ago, as he was recommended as THE Strauss and Wagner expert in Germany. The experience made me determined to take up any opportunity to work with him again. Thom replied immediately, very keen to work on any Wagner that I wanted.

Thom is a man of immense musical experience. Half American, half German, he trained as a singer until he realised he could put his brilliant pianistic skills to better use than his voice would ever be put. He has worked in Germany for 36 years, initially in Munich at the Bayerische Staatsoper, and is steeped in the performance practices of both Strauss and Wagner. He is also a fantastic linguist – fluent, I think, in five languages. To top it all off, while being a hard taskmaster, he is a genuinely nice guy.

Repetiteurs at this level are consummate multi-taskers – they know the opera so well that they can sing everyone else's part while they are playing for you and conduct you if necessary and keep an ear out for your mistakes or things that could be sung better!!!

In my first lot of sessions with Thom, we went through the entire Isolde score twice, working two to three hours a day for eight consecutive days. Unfortunately when I returned to Thom the second time I had caught a cold but I did manage to

have a couple of sessions with him on the Immolation Scene. He had told me before we started that, with my voice, I would find the Immolation Scene easy after the Liebestod. I found this difficult to believe – this scene is traditionally held as one of the biggest sings in the book. But to my delight I found that he was right, once again!

Part of my reason for working with Thom was to ensure I had a good German input – it is, after all, their art that is being performed. English Wagnerians have a certain style of performance that sometimes does not sit well with their German counterparts. For example, Thom categorically disagreed with the English use of portamenti in various places, damning it as stylistically incorrect (of course, I duly reported that back to the English!!). There are also issues – Mark Wigglesworth, conductor of the WNO production, was using a new critical edition of *Tristan and Isolde* which contains changes to several pitches, not all of which Thom thought were improvements.

This kind of intensive work with one of the world's top coaches is expensive. First you have to get there, pay for a hotel and living costs, and of course pay them – all usually out of one's own pocket. I reiterate how grateful I am to have had the Wagner Society's support to do this.

The other coach I worked with was Lionel Friend, a well known Wagner authority, and the coach who had taught me Kundry. On my arrival in England, and before going to Wales, I spent two whole days with Lionel. These were immense sessions going through the emotional and musical structure of *Tristan and Isolde*, with me singing as much as I could. This was a wonderful platform on which to build my approach to the role.

I went back to Lionel later in my time in England to read and work through the *Siegfried* Brünnhilde, as a start of my exploration of that role. Sir Donald McIntyre had been talking about the role with me and feels that I should start my Brünnhilde journey with *Siegfried*.

I also did some detailed vocal technique work with Paul Farrington (my colleague at the New Zealand Opera School in Wanganui) specifically on the technical differences between singing Wagner and then going back to Italian repertoire.

Studying a role intensively as I have done gave me a huge amount of material to process and experiment with over the next year. Past experience is that once I have done this, an engagement for this role appears!

Thank you very much, WSNZ, for the chance to immerse myself in this wonderful role.

An evening in front of the Telly?

The Christchurch branch of the Society has built up a collection of donated videos and DVDs that can be borrowed by members.

Videos

Siegfried

Bayreuther Festspiele, conducted by Barenboim and directed by Kupfer, with Siegfried Jerusalem, Graham Clark, John Tomlinson, Gunter von Kannen, Philip Kang and Anne Evans.

Parsifal

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus conducted by James Levine, directed by Otto Schenk, with Bernd Weikl, Kurt Moll, Siegfried Jerusalem and Waltraud Meier.

Two Videos of historic recordings

Arturo Toscanini with the NBC Symphony Orchestra playing music from *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan & Isolde*, and the *Ring Cycle*.

DVDs

Tannhäuser

Metropolitan Opera and Chorus conducted by James Levine, produced by Otto Schenk, with Tatiana Troyanos, Richard Cassilly, Eva Martin, Bernd Weikl, John Macurdy

Lohengrin

Metropolitan Opera and Chorus conducted by James Levine, produced by August Everding, with Eva Marton, Leonie Rysanek, Peter Hofmann, Leif Roar, John Macurdy

Lohengrin

Vienna State Opera and Chorus conducted by Claudio Abbado, directed by Wolfgang Weber, with Plácido Domingo, Robert Lloyd, Cheryl Studer, Hartmut Welker, Dunja Vejzovic, Georg Tichy.

Die Walküre

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by James Levine, produced by Otto Schenk, with Hildegard Behrens, Jessye Norman, Christa Ludwig, Gary Lakes, James Morris, Kurt Moll.

Two DVDs of historic recordings

Arturo Toscanini with the NBC Symphony Orchestra playing music from *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan & Isolde*, and the *Ring Cycle*.

A big thank you to Chris Brodrick, Sid Kennedy and Gloria Streat for donating these recordings.

If you want to borrow any of these recordings, please contact Gloria Streat, ph (03) 332 3242, e-mail: gstreat@xtra.co.nz and she will post them out to you.