

# WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

## NEWSLETTER

### Ring of Confidence is difficult to attain

#### Lars von Trier withdraws from 2006 Ring

The news that Lars von Trier, the Danish film-maker of *Breaking the Waves*, *Dogville* and *The Idiots*, has withdrawn from directing the 2006 Ring at Bayreuth has stunned the opera world, with Munich's Daily newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* describing it as "the greatest disappointment in the history of opera this decade." In its story the Guardian newspaper quoted a statement issued by the Bayreuth festival that "the sudden resignation by von Trier stemmed from his conviction that the *Ring* would clearly exceed his powers, and that therefore he would not be able to fulfil his ambitions of his own high standards and the special standards of the Bayreuth festival."

Plans for von Trier's cycle were already well advanced. According to the Bayreuth festival, von Trier had worked "meticulously and successfully for more than two years on tests and detailed manuscripts for lights and staging." It was not easy, it said, to "get to terms with the dawning truth that a realisation was beyond his reach."

The commissioning of von Trier caused a sensation when it was announced in 2001. Despite his love of the composer and saying that to film Wagner would be the "ultimate goal of my life," he has no professional opera or even theatre experience.

In the *New York Times*, a former Director of the Lincoln Centre, John Rockwell points out that von Trier seems to have an affinity with Wagner and the "Romantic ideal of redemption of a hero by the sacrificial love of a woman. In their different ways, the heroines of Mr von Trier's films, *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville*, all suffer horribly for the presumed betterment of mankind."



Lars von Trier - Agence France-Presse - Getty Images

He writes that "lovers of the Metropolitan Opera's dowdy, middle brow *Ring* will no doubt regard his withdrawal as a triumph in their holy war against Eurotrash. But maybe it is a defeat instead. Wagnerians all over the world were counting on something extraordinary at Bayreuth in 2006."

But as in the *Ring* and the world of Wagner there was far more to the appointment of von Trier than what appeared on the surface. In recent years Wolfgang Wagner has been under enormous pressure to hand over the reigns of Bayreuth to the younger generation who saw the festival as requiring fresh blood. The appointment of an acclaimed film director for the *Ring* and that of a number of other 'high-profile' artists, such as Pierre Boulez returning to conduct *Parsifal* this year, was clear evidence that Wolfgang Wagner was still very much in control. His appointment of film director Patrice Chereau for the 1976 Centenary *Ring* had been one of his major artistic achievements. Unfortunately for Wolfgang this time it's back-fired and he now has to find a replacement with only two years lead time.

#### ENO Ring

Cross the Channel and we can catch a glimpse of why von Trier may have made his decision. English National Opera are currently producing their *Ring*. This is a huge undertaking for a company that has been, and still is, in serious financial trouble. But if an opera company is to be taken seriously, the *Ring* is a prerequisite and in ENO's case the last time the *Ring* appeared on their billboards was back in the 1970's with Goodall, Hunter, Bailey, and Remedios.

The direction for ENO's production has been entrusted to Phyllida Lloyd, who is best known for her worldwide hit *Mamma Mia*. She has experience in television, film, theatre and opera including a number of productions with Opera North.

Her *Rheingold* received mixed reviews which ranged from the bland "*The Rheingold* marks normal service in the sumptuously refurbished Coliseum" in the *Guardian*, to "Who would ever have thought that Wagner could look and sound so dull in the opera house?" in the *Financial Times* and "Frankly, this often naff staging looks like a furniture warehouse event" in the *Independent*.

It was for *The Valkyrie* that the shouting really began. Antony Holden in the *Observer*: "Phyllida Lloyd appears to have thought almost too much about Wagner's mythic blockbuster and its multi-layered resonances. After two of its four episodes, when one might expect to see some overall shape or vision emerging, her disparate ideas keep coming so thick and fast that each scene seems to be set in a different opera. Determined to cut Wagner's epic down to size, Lloyd began by bringing his gods down to earth, installing them in a DIY flat. Now she seems to have fastened on a narrowly feminist perspective on Wotan's attitude to women, not least



Neil Libbert

### The Valkyries (kite flying?) in ENO's *The Valkyrie*

his daughters. The orchestral prelude is preceded (and ruined) by a deafening female shriek, presumably Sieglinde reliving childhood abuse at the hands of Wotan, who is soon rolling around on the floor with another of his daughters, Brünnhilde."

The *Guardian* found it all "darkly depressing;" the singing ranging from "excruciatingly out of tune" to "thoroughly decent," the production "a muddle of contemporary imagery;" the final scene "utterly crass."

But the most heartfelt review came in the *Daily Telegraph*. Written by Richard Dorment it was headed "If only I had a rotten tomato."

"When the curtain finally fell, I did something I've never done in a lifetime of opera going – joined in booing the director Phyllida Lloyd when she came on stage to take her bow."

"The sound came out involuntarily, an expression of pure hatred directed at a person who had so wantonly done violence to a beloved work of art. Had I a rotten tomato to hand, it would have given me great pleasure to throw it."

"When I bought my ticket, I hadn't reckoned on the monstrous ego of Lloyd and the power she would have to diminish even a work of art as sublime as *The Valkyrie*."

"I'm not thinking of mild absurdities such as dressing Sieglinde as a Muslim woman apparently married to a member of the Michigan Militia. That sort of thing is irritating, but it doesn't really distort the text because it could be said to suggest serious marital incompatibility. What got my goat were the things Lloyd added to the plot that either changed the story or interfered with our ability to hear the music."

"Unforgivably, the scene Lloyd wrecked was 'Wotan's Farewell', the most beautiful music in the whole of the *Ring*. At the very moment when Wotan takes leave of his

beloved daughter, white-jacketed medical interns strip Brünnhilde to her underwear and wrestle her on to a hospital gurney. Then, as Wotan sings words that are almost unbearably poignant, Brünnhilde begins to struggle like a hellcat."

"It's like a scene in some 1950s B-movie about tough women behind bars. By the time Brünnhilde had been led to the rock and threatened with gang rape by at least 20 men whose appearance in the story is entirely the director's invention, I was so angry and frustrated that tears welled up in my eyes. Lloyd doesn't just owe me £65 for my ticket; she owes me five hours of my life back."

"You might think that I am a traditionalist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am usually open to art that makes me see familiar things in new ways. But what I can't forgive is when contemporary artists, directors, or curators boost their egos by imposing their shallow ideas on infinitely greater works of art."

### **Adelaide Ring hits \$15million**

To produce a *Ring* cycle that is true to Wagner, costs a great deal of money. While some companies merely suggest the special effects, Adelaide is taking a more literal approach. The *New Zealand Herald* recently reported that "For *The Rheingold*, for instance, a real waterfall - built by the local water treatment company - will cascade down the full width of the stage, with the water collected in a trough and pumped 27m back up to the top of the theatre."

"For the second opera, *The Valkyrie*, a special gas supply had to be piped into the theatre to create a ferocious ring of fire within which Brünnhilde is cast into a magic sleep for defying the gods and preserving fragments of a magic sword for use by the soon-to-be born hero Siegfried."

"The third opera, *Siegfried*, features an amazing dragon, whose claw is so big it takes seven stagehands to operate." But all

this comes at a price. Originally budgeted at \$11 million the cost has reached \$15 million and is apparently still climbing. The *Herald* pointed out that "It had recently become clear to to State Opera South Australia, that a backstage crew of 75 would be required to change sets between the first two operas." This is one of the reasons for the early start of *Rheingold*.

The *Adelaide Advertiser* reports the general director of State Opera South Australia, Stephen Phillips as "still hopeful of winning back its budget blow out by selling the production. The Hong Kong Festival, Los Angeles Opera and Opera Australia have flagged interest in the production." Los Angeles is interested because its plans to stage its own *Ring* were shelved after a cost blow out."

Who knows. They may even receive a call from Bayreuth if Wolfgang Wagner can't find a way out of his fix!

- **Christopher Brodrick, guest editor for this this edition of the newsletter**



## **More on the Ring**

### **Siegfried in Auckland Sunday, 18 July**

Auckland members who have booked for the performance of Siegfried will find their tickets enclosed. If you would like to come to the performance and haven't booked, please contact Liz (528-1184). There are still places left for BYO bookings, but dinner bookings at this stage are just about full.

### **Adelaide Ring Newsletter**

Members going to Adelaide will find Issue 3 of the Adelaide Ring Newsletter enclosed. Also included is an updated version of the Adelaide Ring calendar so that double-bookings can be avoided. There's plenty to keep up with in Adelaide during The Ring, as those of us who went there in 1998 were soon to discover! This year looks even more packed, so look it all over, and be prepared!

### **Round and round the Ring**

Members going to Adelaide for the Ring will have already received a Continuing Education flyer on the Ring with their recent invoice. WSNZ President Heath Lees is presenting this course at the University of Auckland from 21 July to 18 August. All members are welcome to attend and will find a flyer enclosed with the newsletter.

## Birthday News

The tenth anniversary of the founding of the Wagner Society of New Zealand and the master's 191st birthday were celebrated at the end of May.

A group of Wagner-well-wishers and birthday-markers assembled at Rex Benson's home in Wellington. There were speeches, comments, memories and toasts. Founder-members were duly congratulated for having made it through ten years, and the super-expensive scrolls and badges were handed out.

After the meeting, John Morrison, one of the recipients, remarked that it was not right somehow since the founder-members had done nothing, but had received "ten years of pleasure of 'getting' rather than giving! What a ten years they have been," he continued, "Bayreuth, the Met, Australia, Berlin and another Australian venture about to take place."

Auckland's party also went with a swing, despite the 'business' of an AGM at the start. But all went smoothly and, at the end, a long line of founder-members came out to be presented with their scrolls, badges, thanks and good wishes.

Soon the main 'concert' item took place — a splendid performance by Glense Blake of Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*, those sultry, enraptured songs that prefigure much of *Tristan*, and form partial sketches for the final tableau of the music-drama.

A gathering of around 25 members attended the Christchurch celebration. With glasses primed, a toast was made in honour of the Master before a certificate was presented to one of the branch's founding members, Prof John Ritchie, who went on to give a short talk on the real origins of our Society. Back in the late sixties a group of like-minded people including the Ritchies and the Manns, gathered on Friday nights to watch the Forsyth Saga and to listen to the Solti recording of the *Ring*. John paid special tribute to his late wife, Anita, who he said was the real Wagner fanatic, and credited her with converting a young Scottish academic, Heath, who had arrived at Canterbury University armed with a large collection of tapes, none of which included any music of Wagner. Anita, according to John, became determined to educate the new immigrant which she



Wellington founder-members John Morrison and Lindis Taylor being given their scrolls and handshake by Les Holborow.



Glense and Heath take a bow at the end of the *Wesendonck Lieder*, in Auckland.

did with spectacular success. We all owe Anita a great deal of thanks. Without the inspirational leadership of Heath and Anita's daughter, Liz, the Society would not be where it is today, into its second decade.

Founding Members to receive scrolls were:- Margaret & Paul Bass, Gordon Bloomfield, David & Elizabeth Bone, Don & Janet Christian, Geoff Coop, John Eaglen, Ann Gray, John & Pam Hall, Barry Hartley, Robin & Audrey Haslam, Ann Hiskens, Neil Jenkins, Heath & Liz Lees, John & Elise Lello, Angela Lindsay, Barry & Mary Littlewood, Patricia Llewellyn, Morag Macdonald, Eileen Malim, Sue Marshall, Patricia McCormick, John Morrison, Ramesh Nayar, Margaret Neilson, Jeanette Nicholson, Colin Nicholson, Mary & Maurice Norton, Vincent Orange, Ria Pronk, Eileen Rishworth, John Ritchie, Wallace Ryan, Margaret & Ron Saunders, Bob, Lynda Scott, Philip Speary, Philip Spencer, Lindis Taylor, Margaret Thomas, Bob Urban, Tamas & Catherine Vesmas, James Wallace, Clive Worsnop.

### Snippet

A concert performance of *Tristan and Isolde* will form part of the Queensland Music Festival in Brisbane next year. Lisa Garsteen will sing *Isolde* and John Treleaven, *Tristan*. Richard Mills conducts the Australian Youth Orchestra. 30 July 2005 at 5pm



John Ritchie gives Christchurch members the 'real' story.



No Birthday party is complete without a cake!

### A Decade of Wagner in NZ

- 1994 Founding of the Wagner Society of NZ.
- 1996 WSNZ runs contest for its own Logo. Birthday Gift of 28 Bayreuth tickets. Concert of Wagner paraphrases by pianist Stephen Mickisch.
- 1997 Wellington centre offers programmes for the first time. NZSO Concert performance of *Rheingold*.
- 1998 The Adelaide Ring.
- 1999 Christchurch centre offers programmes for the first time. NZSO Wagner concert with Alessandra Marc. WSNZ group (35) attends concert performance of *Siegfried* in Sydney.
- 2000 The New York *Ring*. Javier Nicolas/President Wagner Society of Barcelona visits all three NZ centres.
- 2001 March, Society membership tops 300. Group visit to *Parsifal* in Adelaide. Professor Hans Vaget's visit to all three NZ centres: Wagnerian Self-Fashioning: *Rienzi* and the case of Adolf Hitler.
- 2002 Group visit to the Kupfer *Ring* in Berlin. Rodney Macann/Rosie Barnes "Wagner Nights" (Auckland/Christchurch).
- 2003 NZSO Wagner Concert/Nadine Secunde & Christopher Doig. Sir Donald visits Auckland and Wellington.
- 2004 The Adelaide *Ring*: First-ever Australian production as a cycle.

### Warm Welcome to New Members

Mr & Mrs M & G Blake, Auckland  
Mrs M Milner, Auckland  
Ms H Nobes, Auckland  
Mr & Mrs J & C Pinner, Wairarapa  
Mr J Tinkler, Waiuku  
Ms B Webster, Auckland

## President's Report

Ladies and Gentlemen, I don't need to mention that as of tonight, the Wagner Society of New Zealand becomes ten years old, which gives me the chance to report and reflect on not just the past year, but the past decade.

The year first. This year our three branches had a total of twenty-five meetings, and we printed, published and circulated, in all, 2,850 Newsletters in eight editions. These newsletters are also published on the internet.

Our existence is having an effect in this part of the world. Adelaide regularly involves us in their Ring preparations and presentations, and we have many links with other Australian Wagner Societies and beyond.

Closer to home, the effect has been visible too. The NZSO and the Auckland Philharmonia now offer a Wagner programme every year if they can, and this year's programme, with Nadine Secunde and Christopher Doig, saw more than half the WSNZ membership up and down the country at the concerts. The Auckland Philharmonia began its flagship Auckland series with lots of Wagner in its Wagner-Brahms curtain-raiser.

For the rest of the year, Auckland meetings had a presentation comparing five different Tristans, a brilliant performance of many pages of The Mastersingers from Rosie Barnes, a visit from Adelaide's forthcoming Hunding Richard Green, a welcome return from our Patron Sir Donald McIntyre, and in the middle of the year, a DVD of The Mastersingers, using, for the first time, our large screen and new set-up, which have proved such a boon. A small group of about 14 went to Sydney for a short weekend of The Mastersingers and came back on the last flight, as they say, tired but happy, and Adelaide's Ring plans have encouraged us into our current series of

four different "Ring" operas, punctuated by dinner courses.

The Wellington centre has followed a similar programme, with eight meetings, an NZSO outing, and a visit from Jenny Lee, talking on "Wagner's Women". Financial circumstances mean that the Wellington meetings can have only the larger showings in the Massey Theatre, and other gatherings take place in willingly-given house-concert formats, for which we owe the unstinting hosts much thanks. Wellington also did a great job of helping and hosting people and events during the time of Sir Donald McIntyre's reception of the Arts Icon award at a lunch in his honour in Government House, and they also attended a barbeque to celebrate 50 years of Wellington's German Embassy.

Garth and Gloria Streat in Christchurch make their fine home available for the Society's South Island meetings. Christchurch members also went to the NZSO Wagner concert, did a Mastersingers session, had Jenny Lee, this time with a woman's perspective on Tannhäuser, digested two Wagner films, one on The Golden Ring, and the other on the San Francisco stagehands' Sing Faster film.

Again, we had the good fortune of being allocated a placement of ten really good seats at Bayreuth for the approaching festival.

The Wagner-New Zealand Foundation has now been officially established, and the committee has periodically been discussing how best to have it run. Its job will be to steward the profits and donations harvested by the Wagner Society during the years, and to be available as a tax-deductible focus for endowments and donations. We hope to have just a small Trust Board of 3 or 4 people drawn initially from the Wagner Society, and the committee has

already prevailed upon me to be a member, which I hope will be agreeable to all. We have approached a couple of other people, and will I think, in a few weeks, be able to announce the formation of a Foundation Board. This is an exciting advance and a new level to all our activity.

The Wagner Society couldn't keep going without its members supporting everything it aims to do. In particular though, thanks are due to Gloria and Garth Streat in Christchurch, Helen Chambers and George Risk in Wellington and a number of other willing organisers. We owe heartfelt thanks. At present, for obvious logistical reasons, the main bulk of the committee is in Auckland, but it's been a huge step forward to have George Risk in Wellington, and now a highly efficient Membership Secretary. Getting a member in Wellington to be a full and active part of the committee was a great breakthrough, and in this age of e-mails and weekend phone specials on the phone, it's proving to be a marvellous way of breaking down any suggestions of Auckland-dominance, just because history happened to start things in this city. We have also succeeded in having a Christchurch member, Chris Brodrick, come on board to help with the Newsletter, and it bodes well for us having a real national network pulling together in the one society. Our current, tireless committee members and office-bearers have all agreed to be re-elected, and Anne Doggett, a meticulous but co-opted Treasurer has agreed to stand for election, to replace Bob Scott, who has done so much in the role over the last couple of years.

By way of benediction — or is it apotheosis? — we have included a list of highlights to remember from ten very full and hugely enjoyable years. We look forward to the next ten years with relish.

- Heath Lees

## New Zealand Wagner Society 2004 programmes

### Auckland:

Music Theatre, School of Music,  
6 Symonds Street

**Sun 18 July 4pm** (meal during interval)  
*Siegfried*: Bayreuth Festival/Barenboim/  
Kupfer

**Sun 12 Sept 4pm** (meal during interval)  
*Götterdämmerung*: Bayreuth Festival/  
Boulez/Chereau

**Sun 28 November 7.30pm**  
*Final Meeting for 2004*: Gala Excerpts  
and Selected requests

### Wellington:

Massey University Theatre,  
Buckle Street

**Sun 15 August 2pm**  
*Siegfried*: Bayreuth festival/Barenboim/  
Kupfer

**Sun 17 October 2pm**  
*Götterdämmerung*: Bayreuth Festival/  
Boulez/Chereau

**Sun 5 December**  
**Christmas Get-Together meeting**  
(Details to follow)

### Christchurch:

Gloria & Garth Streat's  
20 Pentre Terrace, Cashmere

**Fri 9 July 7.30pm**  
*Two Videos on the Ring*

**Fri 20 August 7.30pm**  
*"More Light on the Ring's Leitmotives"*:  
presented by Heath Lees

**Fri 1 October 6.00pm**  
*Das Rheingold*: DVD viewing with an  
'ethnic' meal included

**Sun 5 December**  
**Christmas BBQ**: Date to be confirmed  
and venue decided