

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

THE NEW ZEALAND PARSIFAL IS COMING!

Yes, the rumours were true. Just a week ago, the New Zealand International Arts Festival released the news that they will partner the NZSO in bringing to the 2006 Festival a full-length, semi-staged version of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*.

The good news doesn't stop there. For the two performances during the Festival period (24 February – 19 March), the line-up for *Parsifal* will form itself into a cast that is absolutely, one-hundred-per-cent New Zealand. All the names are included over the page, but the "tight five" of this drama's major roles are to be sung by some of the country's best-known singers.

First is NZArts Icon and WSNZ Patron Sir Donald McIntyre, who will sing the part of Gurnemanz, a role that many people think has some of Wagner's best-ever music. And it'll be marvellous to hear Margaret Medlyn as the demonic Kundry, the role she sang so superbly in Adelaide's *Parsifal* in 2001.



Sir Donald McIntyre, Patron of the Wagner Society of New Zealand, will sing the role of Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*.

Parsifal himself will be sung by Simon O'Neill, the New Zealand tenor who is becoming increasingly noticed as a Wagner singer, and recently understudied Domingo in *Die Walküre* at New York's Metropolitan Opera House..

Another rising Kiwi star is Paul Whelan, who will sing Amfortas. Martin Snell (the

Steersman in this year's Bayreuth *Flying Dutchman*) will take a break from his busy European engagements to become the evil Klingsor.

There are sixteen named parts in *Parsifal*, and a glance at the cast-list over the page will reveal some of the best of this country's emerging and established singers.

It's clear that this *Parsifal* — a "sacred stage festival-play" Wagner called it — will be not just a show-piece for the NZ Festival of the Arts, but also a Festival of the best voices around in New Zealand today.

Needless to say, the WSNZ is already making plans for a big involvement in the activities surrounding such an exciting project. More news of our own contributions will appear in the next newsletter.

What exciting times we antipodean Wagnerians live in!



PROGRAMMES FOR THE SECOND HALF OF 2005

AUCKLAND At Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street.

Sunday, 11 September, 4 pm Complete *Parsifal*, with dinner during the intervals. See bookings info, p.4.

Sunday, 27 November, 7.30 pm Heath Lees: 'Wagner's *Ring* and the Life-Cycle of an Audience.'

WELLINGTON At Massey University Theatrette, Buckle Street (except 27 November).

Sunday, 24 July, 4 pm Heath Lees: '*Tristan & Isolde*: Music's Love Affair with Ideas.'

Sunday 16 October, 7 pm Les Holborow: 'Is There a Consistent Philosophy Underlying *Tristan* and *Parsifal*?'

Sunday, 27 November Christmas Party/Get-together; details to follow..

CHRISTCHURCH At Lecture Theatre A6, Arts Lecture Theatre Block (across from School of Music entrance).

Friday, 12 August 7.30pmHeath Lees: 'A Kaleidoscope of Tristans' followed by Act I of the Met production.

Friday, 23 September 7.30pmActs 2 & 3 of *Tristan & Isolde*.

Friday, 4 November 7.30pm.....John Pattinson: 'The Importance of Being Erda'.

Sunday, 4 December 6 pm..... Christmas Barbecue. Venue- Tony and Jonet Ward's, 949 Shands Road.

In Act 1 of Wagner's *Parsifal*, Gurnemanz greets Parsifal's wide-eyed question "Who is the Grail?" with caution and uncertainty. "That is difficult to answer," he says.

Absolutely. If Dan Brown's recent best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* has proved anything to our age, it is that the story of a Holy Grail still holds its fascination for millions of people, yet its significance remains, as always, totally hidden.

In 1882, Wagner's opera set off on its path of making the Grail legend known again for his age (and ours). As a Prelude to the performance of *Parsifal* in Wellington next March, here, for Wagner-lovers (and Dan Brown readers) is a slightly adapted version of the internet's excellent wikipedia article on the Grail. (You can find it at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grail_legend.)

Origins

The origins of the Grail are found in early Celtic tales involving a hero/traveller who finds himself within an "other world", one that is on a magical plane parallel to ours. Usually, the transition from one world to another is described subtly, such as an unnoticeable and gradual change in the scenery. The role of the Grail in such stories was simply as a magical platter or dish which signifies the mystical nature of the other world. Sometimes the Grail was said to generate a never-ending supply of food, sometimes it could raise the dead. Sometimes it would decide who the next king should be, since only a true sovereign could hold it.

On the other hand, some scholars believe the Grail began as a purely Christian symbol. Joseph Goering of the University of Toronto has identified sources for Grail imagery in 12th-century wall paintings from churches in the Catalan Pyrenees that present unique iconic images of the Virgin Mary holding a bowl that radiates tongues of fire, images that predate the first literary account by Chrétien de Troyes. Goering argues that they were the original inspiration for the Grail legend.

The Grail and the Fisher King

The tale of the Fisher King involves a king who is lame in one leg (a euphemism for impotency) which in turn causes the land to become barren (infertile). The hero (Gawain in the earlier tales with Percival or Galahad in the later retellings) encounters the Fisher King and is invited to a feast. The Grail is again presented as a platter of plenty, but a series of mystical relics is also attached to it, relics that include a spear that drips blood, and a broken sword. The purpose of the relics is to incite the hero to question them and thus, through some unknown means, break the enchantment of the infirm king and the

barren land. In most versions, though, the hero invariably fails to do this. The story of the Fisher King and the Grail was later incorporated into the myths surrounding King Arthur, and eventually evolved into an explicit "quest" for the Grail.

The Spreading of Grail Ideas

Various notions of the Holy Grail are currently very widespread in Western Society, having been popularised through medieval and modern works about King Arthur and his knights.

The stories of the Grail are totally absent from Eastern Orthodox teachings and are not a part of the culture and myths of those countries. This is even more true of the Arthurian myths, which were not well known (until the present day Hollywood re-tellings) east of Germany.

The notions of the Grail, its importance, and prominence should be regarded as a set of ideas that are essentially local and particular, being linked with Catholic or formerly Catholic locales, Celtic mythology, and Anglo-French medieval storytelling. Today's wide distribution of these ideas is due to the huge influence of the pop culture of countries where the Grail Myth was prominent in the Middle Ages.

The word *grail*, as it is earliest spelled, appears to be an Old French adaption of the Latin *gradalis*, meaning a dish brought to the table in different stages of a meal. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, after the cycle of Grail romances was well established, late medieval writers came up with a false etymology for *sangreal* an alternate name for "Holy Grail". In Old French, *san grial* means "Holy Grail" and *sang rial* means "royal blood"; later writers enjoyed playing on this pun.

Some insist the Holy Grail, even if historical, should be considered separate from the Holy Chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper. However, confusion between the two has been the historical practice.

The Grail in Literature

Chrétien de Troyes

The Grail is first featured in *Perceval, le Conte del Graal* (*Perceval, the Story of the Grail*) by Chrétien de Troyes, who claims he was working from a source book given to him by his patron, Count Philip of Flanders. In this incomplete poem, dated sometime between 1180 and 1191, the object has not yet acquired the implications of holiness it would have in later works.

While dining in the magical abode of the Fisher King, Perceval witnesses a wondrous procession in which youths carry magnificent objects from one chamber to another, passing before him at each course of the meal. First comes a young man carrying a bleeding

lance, then two boys carrying candelabras. Finally, a beautiful young girl emerges bearing an elaborately decorated *grail*, or "grail".

Chrétien refers to his object not as "The Grail" but as "un graal", showing the word was used, in its earliest literary context, as a common noun. For Chrétien the *grail* was a wide, somewhat deep dish or bowl, interesting because it contained not a large fish, as the audience may have expected for such a container, but a single Mass wafer which provided sustenance for the Fisher King's crippled father.

Perceval, who had been warned against talking too much, remains silent through all of this, and wakes up the next morning alone. He later learns that if he had asked the appropriate questions about what he saw, he would have healed his maimed host, much to his honour.

Robert de Boron

Though Chrétien's account is the earliest and most influential of all Grail texts, it was in the work of Robert de Boron that the Grail truly became the "Holy Grail" and assumed the form most familiar to modern readers, and to those who know Wagner's version. In the verse romance *Joseph d'Arimathe*, composed between 1191 and 1202, Robert tells the story of Joseph of Arimathea acquiring the chalice of the Last Supper to collect Christ's blood upon His removal from the cross. Joseph is thrown in prison where Christ visits him and explains the mysteries of the blessed cup. Upon his release Joseph gathers his in-laws and other followers and travels to the West, and founds a dynasty of Grail keepers that eventually includes Perceval.



The Fate of the Grail

A number of knights undertook the quest for the Grail, in tales that were attached to the legends of King Arthur. Some of these tales tell of knights who succeeded, like Percival or the virginal Galahad; others tell of knights who failed to achieve the grail because of their tragic flaws, like Lancelot.

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's tale, the Grail was kept safe at the castle of Munsalvaesche (mons salvationis) or Montsalvat, entrusted to Titirel, the first Grail-King. Some, not least the monks of Montserrat, have identified the castle with the real sanctuary of Montserrat in Catalonia.

Belief in the Grail, and interest in its potential whereabouts, has never ceased. Ownership has been attributed to various groups (including the Knights Templar). There are cups claimed to be the Grail in several churches like the Valencia cathedral. The emerald chalice at Genoa, which was

obtained during the crusades at Aleppo at great cost, has been less championed as the Holy Grail since an accident on the road while it was being returned from Paris after the fall of Napoleon revealed that the “emerald” was only green glass. Other stories claim that the Grail is buried beneath Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland, or is to be found deep in the spring at Glastonbury Tor.

Four medieval relics

During the Middle Ages, four major contenders for the position of Holy Grail stood out.

The first of these provided the earliest record of a chalice from the Last Supper, and was of a two-handled silver chalice, kept in a reliquary in a chapel near Jerusalem between the basilica of Golgotha and the Martyrium. This Grail appears only in the account of Arculf, a 7th-century Anglo-Saxon pilgrim who saw it, and through an opening of the perforated lid of the reliquary where it reposed, touched it with his own hand which he had kissed. All the people of the city flocked to the place with great veneration. Arculf also tells that he saw the Holy Lance in the porch of the basilica of Constantine.

Next in importance is a reference in the late 13th century to a copy of the Grail being at Constantinople. This occurs in the German romance, the Younger Titurel: “A second costly dish, very noble and very precious, was fashioned to duplicate this one. In holiness it has no flaw. Men of Constantinople assayed it in their land, [finding] it richer in adornment, they accounted it the true grâl.” This Grail was said to have been looted from the church of the Bucoleon during the Fourth Crusade and sent from Constantinople to Troyes by Garnier de Trainel, then bishop of Troyes, in 1204. It was recorded there in 1610, but it disappeared at the time of the French Revolution.

Third in order of importance is one of two Grail vessels surviving today, and located in Genoa cathedral. The hexagonal Genoese vessel is known as the *sacro catino*, the holy basin. Traditionally said to be carved from emerald, it is in fact a green Egyptian glass dish, about eighteen inches (37 cm) across. It was the one sent to Paris after Napoleon’s conquest of Italy, and was broken, which identified the emerald as glass. Its origin is uncertain; according to one writer it was found in the mosque at Caesarea in 1101: “a vase of brilliant green shaped like a bowl.” The Genoese, believing it was of emerald, accepted it in lieu of a large sum of money.

Fourth in our list is the other Grail vessel surviving today, the *santo cáliz*, an agate cup in the cathedral of Valencia. It has been set in a medieval mounting and given a foot made of an inverted cup of chalcedony. There is an Arabic inscription. The earliest secure reference to the chalice is in 1399, when it was given by the monastery of San Juan de la Peña to King Martin I of Aragon in exchange for a gold cup. By the end of the century, this chalice had acquired a pre-history that claimed that St Peter had brought it to Rome.

Modern re-tellings

The combination of hushed reverence



and overheated chromatic harmonies of Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* fatally inflated the Holy Grail theme, but it brought the old medieval tale back into wider public attention. The high seriousness of the subject was also captured in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s painting, (shown here) in which William Morris’s beautiful wife (at the time the painter’s mistress) holds the Grail like a champagne glass that she is about to

make ring with a snap of her long finger.

The Grail had become over-ripe, and the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) mercilessly sent up every one of its pseudo-Arthurian posturings (remember the holy hand grenade?)

Yet the Grail had turned up in movies before, first in Fritz Lang’s haunting silent version, simply called *Parsifal*. In *The Light of Faith* (1922), Lon Chaney attempted to steal it — with the best possible motives of course. *The Silver Chalice*, a novel about the Grail by Thomas B. Costain, was made into a very forgettable 1954 movie (in which Paul Newman first appeared).

Lancelot of the Lake (1974) is French director Robert Bresson’s gritty retelling. *Excalibur* is a more traditional sex-in-armor representation of an Arthurian tale, in which the Grail is little more than a prop.

Even more recently, *The Fisher King* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* place the quest in modern settings, the one faintly camp, the other with a good dose of self-parody.

Science fiction has taken the Quest into interstellar space, figuratively in Samuel R. Delany’s 1968 novel *Nova*, and literally in the 1994 episode “Grail” of the television series *Babylon 5*. In the third (1994) series of the cult Japanese series *Sailor Moon* the characters search for an item called the Holy Grail so that a person known only as “The Messiah” can save the world from an apocalypse called “The Silence”.

For the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, who assert that their research ultimately reveals that Jesus may not have died on the cross, but lived to marry Mary Magdalene and father children, the Grail is a mere sideshow.

The Da Vinci Code

At last we get to Dan Brown, whose fabulously successful novel *The Da Vinci Code* is also based on the idea that the real Grail is not a cup but the earthly remains of Mary Magdalene (again cast as Jesus’ wife), plus

a set of ancient documents telling the “true” story of Jesus, his teachings and descendants. In Brown’s novel, it is hinted that the Grail was indeed buried beneath Rosslyn Chapel, but in recent decades its guardians had it re-located to a secret chamber embedded in the floor beneath the Inverted Pyramid in front of the Louvre Museum. This location has never been mentioned in real Grail lore, yet the public hysteria over Brown’s Grail meant that the museum recently roped off the area, to dissuade visitors from trying to get into the supposedly hidden chamber.

Gurnemanz was right then, to counter Parsifal’s question “Who is the Grail?” with “That is difficult to answer”. As the centuries have shown, the answer is certainly difficult, yet it has given rise to one of the most fascinating and complicated speculations that the Western world has ever known.

Two suggestions for further reading:-

Roger Sherman Loomis (ed.). *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*; a collaborative history. 1959, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Goering, 2005. *The Virgin and the Grail : Origins of a Legend* (Yale UP).

And Now For Something Completely Different . . .

Here’s a blogger’s version of the plot (is that the word?) of the classic 1975 *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Pull up a chair, put your tongue firmly in your cheek, and read:

The movie starts out with Arthur, King of the Britons, looking for knights to sit with him at Camelot. He finds many knights including Sir Galahad the pure, Sir Lancelot the brave, the quiet Sir Bedevere, and Sir Robin the Not-Quite-So-Brave-as-Sir Lancelot. They do not travel on horses, but pretend they do, and have their servants bang coconuts to make the sound of horse’s hooves.



Passing breezily through certain events in history (witch trials, the black plague) they find Camelot, but after a quick song and dance they decide that they do not want to go there. While walking away, God (who seems to be grumpy) comes to them from a cloud and tells them to find the Holy Grail. They agree and begin their search.

Suddenly everything shifts towards Chaucer’s world. While the intrepid knights search for the Grail, the knight’s tales appear, explaining why they have the name they have.

Throughout their search (pilgrimage?) they meet interesting people along the way. Most of the characters die; some through a killer rabbit (which they eventually defeat with the holy hand grenade), others from not answering a question correctly from the bridge of Death, or in some other way. In the end, King Arthur and Sir Bedevere are left and find the Castle Arrrrghhh where the Holy Grail is. The End. Silly, really.

FULL CAST-LIST FOR *PARSIFAL*
WELLINGTON, MARCH, 2006

Gurnemanz.....Sir Donald McINTYRE
AmfortasPaul WHELAN
ParsifalSimon O'NEILL
Kundry Margaret MEDLYN
Titurel.....Grant DICKSON
Klingsor..... Martin SNELL
1st Knight.....Patrick POWER
2nd KnightRoger WILSON
3rd Squire.....Stephen CHAMBERS
4th Squire.....Paul CHAPPORY

Flower Maidens include:
Morag ATCHISON, Annabelle CHEETHAM,
Linden LOADER, Janey MACKENZIE,
Madeleine PIERARD, Jenny WOLLERMAN

Creative Team:
Director Bernd BENTHAAK
Conductor.....Anthony NEGUS
Designer Tollis PAPAZAGLOU
Repetiteur..... Rosie BARNES

Parsifal Screening in Auckland,
Music Theatre • School of Music • 6 Symonds Street
Sunday, 11 September, at 4pm

(During the 75-minute first interval, there will be either Buffet Dinner at the Cophthorne Hotel or BYO at the Music Theatre. Tea, coffee & biscuits will be available during both intervals.)

Members who have already booked for *Parsifal* will find tickets enclosed with this Newsletter. The numbers for the buffet dinner unfortunately have to be limited to 90 because of the size of the room at the Cophthorne Hotel. However, the good news is that there's plenty of room in the Music Theatre because of the new screen. But if you do need to be fed rather than BYO, be sure to get your form in as soon as you can.

For further information about *Parsifal*:
Phone/email Liz – 528-1184/handelees@xtra.co.nz

In addition, our thanks to Neil Jenkins who has sent in this information about the performance we will be watching:

PARSIFAL — A Sacred Stage Festival Play in Three Acts by Richard Wagner (1813-1883)
A new 2004 production from the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, in co-production with English National Opera, San Francisco Opera and Lyric Opera Chicago

Director: Nikolaus Lehnhoff
Conductor: Kent Nagano
Set Raimund Bauer
Costumes Andrea Schmidt-Futterer
Lighting Duane Schuler
Choreography Denni Sayers

CAST

Amfortas Thomas Hampson
Titurel Bjarni Thor Kristinsson
Gurnemanz Matti Salminen
Parsifal Christopher Ventris
Klingsor Tom Fox
Kundry Waltraud Meier

First Knight Johannes Eidloth
Second Knight Taras Konoshchenko
First Squire Nina Amon
Second Squire Katharina Rikus
Third Squire Thomas Stückemann
Fourth Squire Marco Vassalli
A Voice from Heaven Katharina Rikus

Flower Maidens include :
Nina Amon, Abbie Furmanky, Emma Gardner,
Alexandra Lubchansky, Katharina Rikus, Andrea Stadel

**NEW MEMBERS:
A BIG WELCOME TO:**

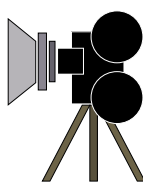
Ms & Mrs T & S Bishop.....Napier
Ms J GreenChristchurch
Mr & Mrs M & U Griffin..... Wellington
Drs A & K-H Lehmann Wangaruru
Mr M LoversidgeChristchurch
Mr H Morgans.....Lower Hutt
Mr & Mrs Z & A Potgieter.....Christchurch
Mr & Mrs G & C ReedKapiti
Mr & Mrs A & C Roberts Wellington
Ms D Smith..... Auckland



NZ OPERA SOCIETY

Wellington Branch
DVD Screenings at 7 pm
August 18 *Feodora* (Giordano)
September 22 *Thais* (Massenet)
Enquiries Ph. (04)-237-4176

Auckland Branch
DVD Screenings at 7.30pm
August 10 *Manon* (Massenet)
September 14 *The Return of Ulysses* (Monteverdi)
Enquiries Ph. (09)-575-5051
Duncan McGhie Theatre, ACE.



Opera Through the Camera

Auckland members might like to know that there will be a five-week CCE course run by the University of Auckland on Mondays, starting this Monday, 25 July, at 7.30pm, in the Music Theatre at the School of Music. The course lecturer is WSNZ President Heath Lees, and the operas to be studied include *Orfeo* (Monteverdi); *The Magic Flute* (Mozart); *La Traviata* (Verdi); *Tannhäuser* (Wagner); *Peter Grimes* (Britten).
For information and enrolment, phone (09)-373-7599 ext 87831 / 87832.

