

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

President's Report 2004/5

Looking back on the year of April 2004 to March 2005, I realise that our constant concern was *The Ring*. Of course this was not surprising considering that, one way or another, we had been gradually building up to the Adelaide *Ring Cycles* over a period of nearly three years.

The Adelaide performance dates of November/December fitted our year of meetings ideally, and both Wellington and Auckland opted for a series of "dinner" meetings with the complete showing of all four operas amply spaced out over the year. I was able to introduce a number of these *Ring* events in both centres, and did a complete evening's introduction with excerpts in Wellington, at the start of the year. Both centres were able to see a different version of each opera, but the weeks in between helped to cover over any sense of "fracture" that might have been felt. Indeed, part of the learning experience came from the added lights of all four different productions (New York Met, Bayreuth (Kupfer), Stuttgart, and Bayreuth (Chéreau). The Christchurch Centre got to *The Ring* later in the year, but held extra meetings, to make up for lost time. Like Wellington and Auckland, Christchurch people found that even those who weren't going to Adelaide became caught up in the rhythm of the year's preparation.

After all this preparation, the Adelaide *Ring* performances were richly enjoyed for their innovative staging, excellent singing (yes, with some reservations, but that's normal) and great orchestral playing. The WSNZ had more than 100 members in its group, everyone enjoyed it fully, and some of us got a chance to contribute to the wider activities that flowed out of the performances and associated events. All in all, a huge success and a marvellous 10 days.



This is not the President!

As in 1998, Adelaide's *Ring* programme kept not just the society's interest going, but also its numbers. Forty new members joined the society, which more than replaced those who left for various reasons, and the total membership stood, at the end of the year, at a new high of nearly 360. This is a good moment to thank George Risk, Membership Secretary, who is as generous with his time as he is meticulous with his record-keeping. There cannot be a Society better accounted for in its numbers than ours, and George's marvellous input must be warmly applauded.

A highlight of the year came in the celebration of our tenth birthday, which of course was beautifully orchestrated so that it also celebrated Wagner's birthday (192nd, a little longer than our 10th!) Founders-members up and down the country all received a certificate, and the three centres drank a toast to the next ten years — and more.

Once again we were fortunate enough to receive 10 tickets for the complete Bayreuth cycle, and 10 lucky members will be setting off for their pilgrimage in the best traditions.

We will be thinking of them, however enviously! Perhaps I should turn my thanks at this point towards Anne Doggett, our treasurer, who doesn't just work hard to keep the books right for us, but also masterminded the whole Bayreuth ticket exercise this year. Anne's skill in keeping the big picture in front while deftly tying up every loose end that appears is marvellous, and we are very lucky to have her.

For 2005, our first meetings have so far followed more of a "normal" pattern, of lectures, presentations, and extended showings, some of them including a documentary on Wagner singer Waltraud Meier, both the Tony Palmer videos on Wagner's life, and Christchurch was treated, at the start of the year to a "*Ring*" reflection by Adelaide's Loge, Chris Doig. In Wellington, Les Holborow offered a fascinating evening around the ideas and motivations of *Tristan*. We are so lucky to have members who can and will put so much time and effort into presentations for us to enjoy. In terms of written presentation, a big thank you goes to Christchurch's Chris Brodrick, who has singlehandedly produced the last 4 of our 7 newsletters this year, (including this one) and done a fabulous job. Chris has agreed to share in the production of future newsletters, and the committee has co-opted him to its ranks.

During the six-month absence overseas by president and secretary, the committee members have been great, and all work has been done. Warm thanks go to Juliet Rowe who has diligently kept the "Wagner mailroom" going, and will be a great addition to the "full" committee. Juliet's husband Peter has acted as the Society's solicitor, and is the Chair of the Wagner-NZ foundation. His advice — and passionate Wagnerism! — is a great support for all. Lesley Kendall has spent a lot of her time (when she is not doing all the paperwork

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for meetings) in liaising with everyone up and down the country over meetings and newsletters, and has organised all the mail-outs too. Big thanks to Lesley, for another year of unstinting support and procedural advice. To Vice-president Ken Tomkins, to Wellington's co-ordinator Helen Chambers, (who has recently handed over the reins to a meetings sub-committee), to Garth and Gloria Streat who do so much for Christchurch Wagnerians, to Robert Johnstone, Neil Jenkins and all the others who help in so many ways, a great big thank-you.

With a few adjustments, this lovely, active committee is prepared to be elected en bloc for next year, (as Liz and I are for Secretary and President too), so it all looks as though we could be ready for another great Wagner year in 2005/6. I personally am looking forward to it with great excitement. Thanks to all the members for their continuous interest, passion and support. I can't resist closing with the observation that Liz and I have attended a few Wagner Societies in other countries recently. We shouldn't say it too loudly, but really, we have one of the best. In the words of a different sort of opera master "Of that there is no manner of doubt . . . etc."

Heath Lees, President

AGM Report

The change of venue and wet weather had an impact on the numbers attending the AGM this year. George Risk (Membership Officer) and his wife, Julia, joined us and it was good to have them present. The committee elected for 2005/2006 is:

President	<i>Heath Lees</i>
Vice President	<i>Ken Tomkins</i>
Secretary	<i>Liz Lees</i>
Treasurer	<i>Anne Doggett</i>
Liaison & PR Officer	<i>Chris Brodrick</i>
Committee:	<i>Neil Jenkins, Lesley Kendall, George Risk, Juliet Rowe</i>

The Notice of Motion to change the wording of 2. Objects A, Clause i was finally agreed as:

To further the knowledge and appreciation of the musical works of Richard Wagner and the understanding of his life.

At the conclusion of the AGM members enjoyed the DVD profile of the life of Waltraud Meier. However, a minute or so before it finished, everyone was rudely jolted back to the present by the sounding of an alarm and the need to exit the theatre promptly. After about 15 minutes the alarm was deactivated and we returned to the theatre to conclude the evening with supper and an informal chat.

In **Wellington**, just over 20 members gathered at the house of Rex Benson on 22 May to hear Leslie Austin, President of the NZ Opera Society, introduce the DVD on the career of Waltraud Meier. Leslie also played some historic footage of Waltraud singing the curse scene from *Tristan* at the Metropolitan Opera Gala to celebrate 25 years of service by James Levine. The DVD shows Waltraud to be a very articulate and particularly thoughtful person with an ability to express her views about the works she performs in an illuminating way. The range of her voice and her dramatic ability were also effectively demonstrated. The evening concluded with a toast to Wagner and a substantial supper provided by members.

The **Christchurch** branch of the NZ Wagner Society celebrated the 192nd anniversary of Richard Wagner's birth in fine style on Friday May 20 (two days early), at the home of Cynthia Hawes and Andy Buchanan. We toasted the fact that it may well have been the very first celebration for Wagner's birthday in 2005 in the world. During the evening we intended watching a DVD, kindly donated by one of our members Sid Kennedy, of Wagner music conducted by Toscanini, but I'm afraid that Crusaders game against the Hurricanes won the day!! (and they won the match)

Programme changes

Changes have been made to both the Auckland and Christchurch programmes. On Sunday 17 July, Heath Lees will introduce an evening of excerpts from recently released DVDs including the new *Parsifal* which comes with an hour long documentary that will be screened in the second half of the evening. On Sunday 11 September *Parsifal* will be shown in full.

In Wellington there has also been a change: please note that the meeting previously announced for September will now take place on 16 October when Les Holborow will present a topic, yet to be announced

Regional Organisers

The *Wagner Society of New Zealand* has an Auckland-based committee, but there is considerable work that goes on in both Wellington and Christchurch.

In **Wellington** the committee comprises:-

Chair:	Prof Les Holborow
Secretary:	George Risk
Committee:	John Morrison, Tibby Warmington, and Ann Mallinson.

While in **Christchurch**, Gloria Streat does a sterling job helped by a small group - namely Garth Streat, Jenny Lee, Cynthia Hawes, John Pattinson and Chris Brodrick.

New members

A warm welcome to new members of the Society:-

Gerald McCormack,	<i>Auckland</i>
Richard and Penny Corballis,	<i>Wellington</i>
Carol and Paul Stigley,	<i>Wellington</i>
plus rather belatedly and with apologies	
Anthony Preston	<i>Christchurch</i>



2005 Programme

Auckland

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

Sunday, 17 July 7.30 pm

Excerpts from some recent Wagner DVDs, introduced by Heath Lees, plus a new documentary on *Parsifal*.

Sunday, 11 September, 4pm.

'Parsifal', with dinner during the intervals. Auckland members see enclosed form for bookings.

Sunday, 27 November 7.30 pm

Heath Lees: 'Wagner's Ring and the Life-Cycle of an Audience.'

Wellington

Venue: Massey University Theatre, Buckle St, except where indicated:

Date Change: please note that the 25 September meeting has been changed to 16 October.

Sunday, 24 July 4pm

Heath Lees: '*Tristan & Isolde*: Music's Love Affair with Ideas.'

Sunday 16 October (time to be advised)

Les Holborow: Topic to be announced.

Sunday, 27 November (time and venue to be advised)

Christmas Party

Christchurch

Please note change of venue:

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

Friday, 12 August 7.30pm

Heath Lees: 'A Kaleidoscope of Tristans' followed by Act I of the Met production.

Friday, 23 September 7.30pm

Acts 2 & 3 of *Tristan & Isolde*

Friday, 4 November 7.30pm

Presentation by John Pattinson.

Sunday, 4 December 6.00pm

Christmas Barbecue.

Venue- Tony and Janet Ward's, Shands Road

London Calling

Juliet Rowe gives us an account of Wagner productions she saw in London.

During a brief visit to London in February/March we were lucky enough to catch performances of *Die Walküre* at Covent Garden, and ENO's *Twilight of the Gods* at the Coliseum. Interestingly, both received very mixed reviews; on balance more criticism than praise, directed mainly at the liberties taken by the respective directors, in particular Phyllida Lloyd in *Götterdämmerung*. ("...the reinvention of the Ring as a cross between TV soap opera and West End musical...") There were many moments in both operas when we wondered what was the purpose or even relevance of the staging. For example: in *Twilight*... the departure of Siegfried on his Rhine Journey was reminiscent of *Oklahoma*, set in a log cabin with Siegfried in a cowboy suit, flourishing a lasso to represent Grane, and Brünnhilde in barn dance attire. We then switch to a modern hospital laboratory where Hagen administers medication to Gunther and Gutrune! The Immolation scene was the most startling – Brünnhilde straps on a suicide jacket, detonates it and disappears, taking everyone else with her, leaving only a black void.

The ENO orchestra conducted by Paul Daniel was superb. Kathleen Broderick was a tiny, powerful and very convincing Brünnhilde. As is so often the case, she outshone Siegfried, who was otherwise perfectly adequate. Hagen was outstanding - very sinister and menacing and so were his knights, who arrived bearing nuclear warheads and wearing chemical-proof space suits. Musically, it was a wonderful experience.

There was more coherence in *Die Walküre* (directed by Keith Warner) but the depiction of the Valkyries as muddy, dirty hags was puzzling, as was the appearance of a huge off-white wall, which Wotan kept pushing backwards and forwards. Warner also took liberties by having Wotan kiss Brünnhilde very passionately during his farewell. However, the quality of the performances by singers and orchestra more than made up for the directorial infelicities. Bryn Terfel was superb. His farewell to Brünnhilde was almost unbearably moving in its tenderness and sorrow. Lisa Gasteen was excellent as was Katerina Daleyman as Sieglinde, and Stephen Milling as Hunding. Siegmund (Jorma Silvasti) had a lovely tone, but lacked power in the vital climaxes. Rosalind Plowright was outstanding as Fricka – a most commanding voice and presence. And the orchestra conducted by Antonio Pappano was simply glorious.

Despite not having the big names, the overall effect of the ENO production was certainly comparable to that of the Royal Opera, and at £78 for the best seats nearly £100 cheaper!

It's all a question of taste!

Since the beginning of time the arts have offered up challenges, sometimes technical, sometimes thoughtful and very often both. Opera in particular has witnessed some thought provoking productions over the years. Every now and again the fine line between the brilliant and the banal is crossed leaving some in a state of shock and others excited. Back in the 1960s, Peter Hall directed a Covent Garden production of Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*. In the Golden Calf scene, according to Georg Solti who conducted the performances, "everyone was covered with blood, and some local strippers had been hired to play naked virgins." While this generated a huge amount of publicity and a highlight for those listening to a very difficult score, the Garden's own General Director, Sir David Webster, found the scene so disagreeable that he retreated out of the auditorium to the safety of the Crush Bar.

Moving the short distance from the Garden to English National Opera and it was two productions by the Spanish director Calixto Bieito that caused a stir. The first was a *Don Giovanni* in which the Don threw a used condom on the ground and featured scenes that included drugs and oral sex.

Are we now verging on the area of bad taste or is this a more accurate portrayal of Don Juan than we are traditionally shown?

This production of Twilight of the Gods was really very silly indeed, but also trite, one-dimensional, incoherent and offensive.
A blogger on crookedtimber.org

Bieito's next production *A Masked Ball* went even further. At the rehearsals one singer walked out saying he was unable to perform the act of sodomy asked for by the director and when the curtain finally went up, the audience was faced with 14 men sitting on lavatories! Of course both productions brought heaps of publicity although, funnily enough, failed to attract audiences. Did the direction add anything to the productions or was this an effort to gain publicity?

The latest saga of good/bad taste also comes from ENO, director Phyllida Lloyd and Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*. As we all know, at the end of *The Ring*, Brünnhilde, in an act of redemption, rides her horse Grane into Siegfried's funeral pyre and, by doing so, brings the world of Wotan to an end. Those of us who have witnessed productions of *The Ring* know what an important moment this is, both dramatically and musically. In both Kupfer and Neidhardt's productions the return of *The Ring* sees the start of a new order with the planting of a new World Ash Tree. With Wagner's inspiring music 'ringing' in our ears we leave the theatre filled with hope! Exactly as Wagner intended.



ENO's Brünnhilde, Kathleen Broderick about to bring the house down.

Photo credit: Neil Libbert

So what is it that is upsetting so many about Phyllida Lloyd's ending? Brünnhilde as a suicide bomber!

In the Observer, Vanessa Thorpe comments "Clad in a modern jacket packed with explosives, the betrayed lover of Siegfried, played by Kathleen Broderick (no relation Ed), obliterated the rest of the cast by detonating herself in the dramatic 'immolation scene' that ends the opera." She then quotes Lloyd, "It is hard to be more sensational than Wagner," she said. "This is already one of the most sensational pieces of theatre ever conceived. There is something inevitable about the bombing because there are so many terrible things that take place in the story."

But hang on a moment! Brünnhilde's actions are surely motivated by love. To commit 'a terrible thing' such as a suicide

bombing is surely an act of hate! Brünnhilde, if you like, is in control of her actions and knows exactly what

she is doing – bringing about the downfall of a corrupt society and returning the gold to its guardians, the Rhinemaidens. A suicide bomber's action is one of indiscriminate killing which is surely the opposite of what Wagner intended. But then Brünnhilde does commit suicide and she also brings about the end of the Gods. So it could be argued that her actions are akin to a suicide bomber! But that depends on your point of view. We in the West look at the indiscriminate killings in the Middle East with repugnance and regard these brainwashed individuals as murderers! But how are they seen from a Palestinian or Iraqi point of view? Heroes! Martyrs to the cause!

So what should we make of all this? Has Ms Lloyd presented us with something to 'think' about or has she succumbed to bad taste? Personally, I still find it hard to equate her interpretation with some of the most powerful and uplifting music ever written. To my Western attitude indiscriminate killing will always be an act of hate but *The Ring* will be about the triumph of love.

Christopher Brodrick

Die Weltsche Act 3

The final instalment of Vincent Orange's Ring prequel.

In Act III, Wotan turns to the lower elements - of water and earth, giving us an opportunity for a first and very long look at those three Rhinemaidens, lightly clad and wriggling about most fetchingly. They will tell us how they got their gold and what the young devils did to help them. Back on dry land, Wotan must deal with giants, humans and dwarves. Invigorating battle action here. Lots of dead persons, Valkyries capering about, with or without horses, picking out a strapping lad here, dumping a fat slob there, herding up a few service-worthy maidens from somewhere else. Dwarves hacking into giants at one side of the stage, Wotan and his troops practising for the end of the world at the other; lots of healthy noise, everyone in the audience wide awake.

This is the moment when we meet our heroine, Brünnhilde. Wotan's favourite. Sudden dramatic freeze. Pause. Thrilling rumble music. Suddenly she is there. Immortally young, impervious to cold, clothing would be wasted on such a gorgeous creature. Bags of brass. She tops the horrendous row easily, informing us that she alone is the daughter of Erda, the earth goddess, and though Wotan fathered the Valkyries, their mothers were all and sundry, whoever happened to catch his eye at nightfall.

Thus far, we have heard little first-rate soprano singing, and the stage is hers for a really long dramatic, impassioned solo (one that makes her effort at the end of *Götterdämmerung* seem like a brief, genteel farewell). At an appropriate moment, Erda rises slowly from a trap door centre-stage, emerging dramatically out of a cloud of dry ice, accompanied by the three old biddies. Erda then tells those of us who have nodded off from time to time about the poor old ash tree. The wound caused by Wotan has begun to fester; the tree is withering, the spring is drying up.

Erda foresees that one of these days Wotan will send his soldiers to chop down the tree, make it into a pile of logs, and stack them round Valhalla. Enter said soldiers from the rear, doing just this at some length in close harmony. They and the women sing their hearts out until Loge appears in a blaze of fire. One day, he tells us, he will get fed up with spin doctoring for Wotan and intends to take great pleasure in setting the logs on fire to destroy Valhalla.

Stage goes dark. Silence. Duet for Erda and Loge, alone. Happy that Wotan is getting his comeuppance, but regretting that it had to be, and planning to get together after Valhalla disappears into the Rhine in a gorgeous cloud of steam, they will start a new and better world. Erda does a slow strip into something less than a full suit of clothes. Loge slavers around, cunningly indicating that apart from enjoying Erda, he intends to be the next ruler of the

world. End of Act III in a blaze of glory. Storms of applause. Everyone in the audience eager to come back tomorrow night for the start of *The Rhinegold*. Better still, everyone nicely up to speed with the plot and the characters.

Thank you Vincent, now all we need is some music! Any takers?

Baden-Baden Parsifal



Waltraud Meier spreads her wings as Kundry

Auckland members will have the chance to see the Baden-Baden production of *Parsifal* on DVD at their meeting on Sunday 11 September. Directed by Nikolaus Lehnhoff and conducted by Kent Ngano the production has received praise from the critics. On www.musicweb-international.com, Anne Ozorio wrote

'Musically, this production is superb. Visually it is excellent. And the filming itself reaches the level of high art, a further plain of creative insight. It would please Wagner most, though, that this version is a true Gesamtkunstwerk, because it ties in all elements possible, and, moreover, deals lucidly with the philosophic ideas that fundamentally underpin Wagner's concepts.'

In the Gramophone, BH wrote *'Nikolaus Lehnhoffs eschews any hint of religious trappings, and there is no physical Grail. The Grail seems to be more the concept of inspired leadership, a sense of direction in a confused world.'*

Waltraud Meier could hardly be bettered as Kundry, as dramatically effective, while silent, in the final act as she is thrilling in the second. Christopher Ventris is an unstrained Parsifal who gains authority as he grows. Matti Salminen adds touches of humour to Gurnemanz, adding warmth to a deeply felt humanity.'

Catering for Auckland's Parsifal Sunday, 11 September, 4pm

For members going to *Parsifal* in Auckland tea & coffee will be provided between Acts. We are also arranging a buffet meal at the Cophorne Hotel, between Acts 1 and 2. There will be soup & rolls, plus main courses and a glass of wine or juice. Total cost is \$35.

For catering purposes it would be good if all Auckland members going to *Parsifal* could fill out the form and send it with a cheque to:

**The Secretary, WSNZ
PO Box 202, Auckland**

Next Newsletter

The next newsletter will be out by the end of July, and will include some really exciting news of a big Wagner event to be held in New Zealand early next year.

Tristan Brisbane bound

For those looking for a mid-winter break how about Brisbane? What's more, on Saturday 30 July there will be a concert performance of *Tristan & Isolde* that forms part of the Queensland Music Festival. This one night only performance features Lisa Gasteen and John Treleaven as the lovers with Bruce Martin, Barry Ryan, Bernadette Cullen, and David Wakeham. The Australian Youth Orchestra is conducted by Richard Mills.

Tickets are on sale by going to www.queenslandmusicfestival.com.au or by ringing Quix on Brisbane 136 246.

On the subject of travel: good wishes to members who are making a right turn as they leave New Zealand and are heading to Seattle for *The Ring*. Those of us who saw this Stephen Wadsworth production in 2001 know that you are in for a treat. This is Wagner by the book. No deconstructionist ideas, no vamp valkyries and no Wunder bar! Instead you will see special effects normally reserved for film, sets that look real and fire that makes Adelaide's six pots look like camp stoves!

The 3 cycles of the Seattle *Ring* take place from 7 - 30 August and star Jane Eaglen (Brünnhilde), Alan Woodrow (Siegfried) and Greer Grimsley (Wotan). Although the cycles have been sold out for over a year, tickets are available by searching the net!

New Director for Bayreuth Ring

A report from the Wagner Society of Scotland brings news that Wolfgang Wagner has found a replacement director for the 2006 Bayreuth *Ring*. Tankred Dorst, a highly acclaimed German theatre director, dramatist and writer will now be taking over. Like Lars von Trier who pulled out as *The Ring* director a year ago, Dorst has never before produced an opera, but he is one of Germany's leading playwrights and has enjoyed critical acclaim as both a writer and even a librettist. It is interesting to note that Dorst's most successful work, *Merlin*, is of Wagnerian proportions lasting between six and eight hours in performance. *Merlin*, based upon the wizard of epic medieval saga, demonstrates an ability to deal with mythic and epic subject matter in an unconventional yet highly relevant way.

Although Dorst will be eighty when his production of *The Ring* premieres at next year's festival he will doubtless bring a fresh perspective to the cycle, coming as he does from outside the world of contemporary operatic production. Working alongside Dorst will be his wife, Ursula Ehler, Frank Philipp Schössmann (set designer), Bernd Skodzig (costumes) and Christian Thielemann conducts. Meanwhile The Wagner Society of New South Wales reports that there was a rumour going around Adelaide at the end of last year that Lisa Gasteen had been invited to sing Brünnhilde at the 2006 Bayreuth Festival.