

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre



NEWS LETTER

Twelve Years On . . . President's Report Sees a Society in Great Shape

*The President's Report, read at the
AGM in May*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Here we are facing our twelfth AGM, another year elapsed, another year older.

For your President and Secretary, last year sped by especially fast. No doubt this had a lot to do with the fact that they were overseas for six months of the period. We missed the last AGM, but Vice-President Ken Tomkins very kindly read out my President's Report, the elections were impeccably conducted, the correct rituals of birthday cake and toasts were done, and everyone had a good time. Similarly, in Wellington and Christchurch, the birthday events were duly observed.

It was great to see how things went on so smoothly during our absence, and when we came back in mid-January of this year, we were able to pick up again with great ease. This was certainly not the case the last time we had been on leave, some ten years earlier, when things were a

bit rocky to return to; it shows how much the Society has grown and how well our systems are in place now.

Last year's AGM reflected on the huge influence that the Adelaide Ring had exercised over that year of activities, but this year the huge influence has certainly been that of the Festival performance of *Parsifal* in Wellington. As well as screened performances of the opera in all of our centres, there were the "live" performances that Margaret Medlyn and I gave first in Wellington in December, and then again in February in both Christchurch and Auckland. It was really great to see so many come out for this. Full houses and a great reception just about everywhere we went.

For once it was a chance to show *Parsifal* through different eyes, the eyes of Kundry, whose role is complex in the Wagner pantheon, and who is therefore often ignored on a stageful of big males with big problems and big voices

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Wagner and the Visual Arts



*Arthur Rackham's "Paintings.
for "The Ring" will Feature in
"Wagner and the Visual Arts"*

UPCOMING PROGRAMMES

AUCKLAND

Sunday 16 July, 7.30pm
Sunday 10 September, 4pm
Sunday 26 November, 7.30pm

At Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street

Wagner and the Visual Arts (Chris Brodrick)
Tristan und Isolde. Complete performance with dinner during intervals
Christmas Extras: Requests, Round-ups and a few Surprises

WELLINGTON

Sunday 6 August, 4pm
Sunday 8 October, 4pm

At Massey Museum Theatre, Buckle Street

Wagner and the Visual Arts (Chris Brodrick)
At Massey Museum Theatre, Buckle Street
Bach and Wagner: Two Great Composers Separated by a Common Musical Language? (Heath Lees)

CHRISTCHURCH

Friday 21 July, 7.30pm
Friday 18 August, 7.30pm
Friday 20 October, 7.30pm
Sunday 3 December, 6.30pm

At Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury (except 3/12)

The Flying Dutchman, Act 1, introduced by John Pattinson
Thy Flying Dutchman, Acts 2 and 3.
Wagner and the Visual Arts (Chris Brodrick)
Christmas BBQ at John and Ann Pattinson's home, 37b Highland Place, Avonhead.

President's Report for 2005-6

(continued from Page 1)

Not only did we manage to do something different over that introduction to *Parsifal*, we even made a small profit, and that doesn't happen often in the arts.

Parsifal itself was in March, and to put it in two words, it was simply fantastic. Our Patron Sir Donald McIntyre was hugely impressive in everything he did, both on and off the stage, making the 100% Kiwi effort such a success.

But then he had lots of great people to show off as well: Simon O'Neill, who was given a substantial Award from the NZ Arts Foundation last year and is making huge waves in the Wagner world nowadays. Paul Whelan, with a rich and finely nuanced baritone voice, Margaret Medlyn in a role she made her own in Adelaide, the NZSO in spectacular form. . . a Wagner event done right here in New Zealand, and one to be proud of.

A month before the performance, again in Wellington, the Wagner Society had joined forces with the Opera Society and I gave an extended session of "introduction" to *Parsifal* in mid-February, to a very full house. The Wagner Society people in Wellington did a great job in support of the Festival event, and hosted a highly successful reception after the seminar sessions on the day between the two performances, giving us all a great profile, and in fact helping to attract a number of new members. A triumph all round.

The flow of members is always something to report on at this time, and by the end of this year, ie by 1 March, we broke through and easily passed the 400 mark. Overall, the number of new members we received during the year totalled 52. Just a few years ago, that would have been like adding a whole new Centre in one year. Membership renewal is excellent so far for this year, and we haven't yet sent out reminders (but we will!).

Including the *Parsifal* seminar, twenty meetings took place in all three centres, with *Tristan*, the *Ring* and (surprise surprise) more *Parsifal* on the programmes. I myself gave two different talks on *Tristan*, one to Wellington and one to Christchurch, both in July, and we are very lucky indeed that others of our number are willing to prepare and present Wagner material. This includes Les Holborow, who looked at *Tristan* through the eyes of the philosophers, and in Christchurch John Pattinson, who won "Title of the Year" award with a great presentation on "The Importance of Being Erda", and in February, with Christopher Doig, led a session of reporting and feedback on the Adelaide Ring. Thanks to these brave and highly appreciated presenters, we manage to have each centre thriving on varied fare and different faces over the year, which is much appreciated by all.

Our Newsletter keeps going. Nowadays there's so much interest in Wagner world-wide that there's rarely any shortage of material. Still, someone has to collect, edit, create and then compile the whole thing every time. For the first time we've had a joint editor this year, in the shape of Chris Brodrick in Christchurch who is an enormously well informed Wagnerian, in addition to having a

professional life in publishing — what a combination!. It has been a godsend to us all that Chris has been prepared to share the newsletter work, to the extent of doing every alternate issue. Chris will be doing presentations around the country this year on "Wagner and the Fine Arts" and who knows, we may find the newsletter becoming not just informative, but arty as well in the near future! When we started out as a Wagner Society, we had about four newsletters a year. In the 2005 year just gone, including an extra Festival issue, we produced a grand — indeed a record — total of nine. Even with these extra commitments, as our excellent Treasurer will soon tell you, we have kept ourselves not just afloat financially, but bouyant. Despite rising prices, transport costs, and some hikes in venue hire here and there, this result is very good.

Good results are due to good people, and believe me we have some of the best. Les Holloway and his dedicated group in Wellington, Tibby, John, Rex and George, have been doing a marvellous job in running and growing the centre there, and Gloria and Garth Streat in Christchurch are real Pillars of the South for us, ably supported in matters of venue, by Tony and Jonet Ward, and by Cynthia Hawes and Andy Buchanan. There's George Risk who has now made more than 100 membership reports to us since taking on the membership secretary job. He keeps track of us all meticulously, and we couldn't do without him. Anne Doggett

is a fantastic treasurer and manages to keep pace with Wellington and Christchurch just as scrupulously as she does for Auckland. The fact that the Society has grown to nearly double the total when she first took on the job has fazed her not a bit.

Alas, we lost our minute secretary Lesley Kendall during the year — a matter of great regret since on so many things she was not just an adviser but an authority. All is not lost however, since Lesley has gone to Dunedin, and the chances of a Wagner Society centre in that fair southern city are now increasingly rosy. I want to thank them all on your behalf, and to include in that thanks Ken Tomkins, our indefatigable Vice-President, who proposes now to step down in favour of a nomination for Chris Brodrick. Subject to the elections though, Ken will remain on the committee; he's too valuable and too supportive for us to let him go from the committee completely. Warmest thanks too, go to Juliet Rowe who has stepped in and is soldiering on brilliantly as minute secretary, and to the O'Hara's, husband and wife, Elaine doing the video and DVD lending, and Bob, who regularly supplies the Auckland centre with glasses when wine is on the menu.

Lastly there's Liz who always hates this bit, but is a dream to work with . . . Liz has two men in her life: Wagner and me (thankfully it's not always in that order). To all these people, wives, officers, helpers, members, Vagnerian Volk all, may I say on your behalf for yet another successful year, thanks very much.



John Pattinson talk was entitled "The Importance of Being Erda". Here's Erda, from Fauntin-Latour's imagination.

New Zealand's Parsifal — What the Critics Said



Photo: Robert Catto
www.catto.co.nz

The Flower Maidens try to lead Parsifal astray. On the right, Kundry is about to show them how it's done.

THE DOMINION (Lindis Taylor)

Here, even without full staging, is a performance that is not just superb from every critical point of view, but is in turn rapturous, moving, thrilling and plain entertaining - all four and half hours of it. A real landmark in New Zealand's musical development.

It would be hard to imagine a better-cast Parsifal anywhere . . .

The orchestral score is one of the glories of Western music and no other NZ orchestra could have matched the subtlety and beauty that the NZSO produces. Conductor Anthony Negus clearly won the respect and confidence of the orchestra, chorus and principals, who were never troubled by the big orchestra in front of them.

THE LISTENER (Peter Shaw)

Martin Snell's powerful Klingsor made a vivid impression - small wonder that this year he, too, joins the ranks of those New Zealand singers invited to perform at Bayreuth.

Paul Whelan must surely be destined for a distinguished career as a Wagner singer. As Amfortas, he was searingly intense both vocally and physically, making unexpected use of his height and long limbs to convey the character's suffering.

Simon O'Neill's gloriously ringing voice, perhaps more Italianate in timbre than heldentenor-like, provided a highly distinctive colour.

As Kundry, Margaret Medlyn was perfectly cast, the role suiting both her voice and considerable histrionic ability. It was good to be reminded of Grant Dickson's burnished tones in the small but important role of Titurel and to both see and hear in young Stephen Chambers from Dunedin a fine artist in the making.

The direction by Bernd Benthak of what turned out to be much more than the semi-staged production advertised stayed close to Wagner's stage directions, coping extremely well with the limitations of a small acting platform rather than a full stage. The work's processional elements were of necessity curtailed, but such was the beauty of the choral singing, the orchestral playing by the NZSO and Anthony Negus's expert pacing - never dragging - that one simply did not notice.

THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD (William Dart)

Parsifal has the reputation of being a demanding and dramatically static piece, yet director Bernd Benthak makes the most of a small stage above the orchestra.

Margaret Medlyn's Kundry and Martin Snell's Klingsor are quite a team and Snell exudes evil in stature and voice. Medlyn relishes playing the vamp, with a limitless repertoire of shrieks and laughs, and yet her later attempts to seduce Parsifal are unerring in their musicality.

A word, too, for Paul Whelan's Amfortas, whose first great outpouring, although occasionally submerged by orchestral waves, is intensely moving.

But there are a few niggles. The NZSO is too prominent visually. What extra magic might have been added if Wagner's orchestral sounds could have wafted up from places unseen.

And minor roles are unevenly sung.

The Opera Critic

(Michael Sinclair)

Donald McIntyre makes a welcome return to New Zealand to sing Gurnemanz and even at 71 shows that he is still the master in this repertoire . . . He brings humility and vocal finesse to the benevolent knight.

In Simon O'Neill New Zealand has a world class Parsifal. It is hard to believe that he was singing the role for the first time, as his performance is already accomplished. He possesses a true Heldentenor voice, with a rich, warm baritone quality in the lower registers combined with a clarion, ringing top . . . This auspicious debut is surely the beginning of an illustrious career in this repertoire.

Margaret Medlyn's Kundry is truly world class. The role sits ideally for her voice and her commanding stage presence and acting abilities combine to bring the multi faceted Kundry to life. Her scenes with Parsifal in Act II were a tour de force, moving from seductress to venom spitting charlatan with spine chilling authority.

Paul Whelan's expressively sung Amfortas showed that Wagner singing can and should be much more than sheer volume of sound. He brought a lieder-like quality to his portrayal, placing particular emphasis on the text. . .

Rounding out the principal artists, Martin Snell brought his experience from Bayreuth giving an incisive performance of Klingsor and Grant Dixon was a strong voiced Titurel.

Bernd Benthak's production makes no particular statement about the work, but allows the story to be told simply and honestly. . . the costumes are similarly low key in concept . . . But it is the music that is at the heart of Parsifal and this was a performance that shone in this respect. The performance received a well-deserved standing ovation, with warm applause for Donald McIntyre making what is likely to be his last performance on stage in his home country. A glittering evening and an important landmark in the history of opera performance in New Zealand.

Parsifal seen from across the Tasman

*A number of Australian Wagner Society friends came to Wellington.
From Adelaide (where they know about putting on Wagner) here is
Ian Hodgson's review, taken from the SA Wagner Society's Newsletter*

"BRAVO, BRAVO, every bit as good as Bayreuth – in some respects even better"!

Similar comments to this from those who claim to know were liberally bandied about. This all-New Zealand cast, orchestra, soloists and choir certainly surprised me and surpassed my expectations. This was a semi-staged opera — more correctly mini-staged, as the large orchestra took up the whole of the big stage with the principals being elevated to a tiny stage a few metres above and to the back. It was odd to see three trombones and a bass tuba also squeezed in to the right of the limited raised area. From my view this was a distraction.

Wagner could never have imagined that his Opus Maximus would ever be performed in far away New Zealand—the more so knowing his wish to selfishly retain *Parsifal* solely in Bayreuth. "My work should never be desecrated by contact with any profane stage"!

The star of the show, the man who inspired the project, was the legendary McIntyre. Sir Donald's portrayal of Gurnemanz, (a role of Herculean proportions) was astonishing. This septuagenarian shows no signs of slowing down and his voice, so deep and pure, still retains its resonance and impact.

Of the many McIntyre memorable passages—Gurnemanz's dressing down of Parsifal, the heartless callous youth who shot down the elegant swan flying off to seek its mate—a very moving sequence as the guileless fools' lack of compassion is so eloquently emphasized. Sir Don's monologue accompanying the Good Friday Music as the elderly Knight and the redeemed Parsifal prepare to make their way to the Hall of the Grail—and of course others too numerous to mention.

Another stand-out performance was Margaret Medlyn's Kundry. Remembering Margret in Adelaide's 2001 *Parsifal*, it was a delight once again to see this artist in a role she must now surely call her own. She managed all Kundry's multiple guises with consummate ease. From the wild woman (who mocked Christ on the way to the Cross), then to Klingsor's chief seductress (how can we forget Medlyn's red gown and "Marilyn Monroe" blonde hair in Adelaide?) and then finally to the pious Kundry redeemed by the Grail's new Saviour. Her screams, her superb acting and powerful singing were of the highest order as she mournfully sought to seek salvation throughout eternity.

Paul Whelan, a magnificent bass-baritone and protégé of Master McIntyre was an impressive Amfortas. His commanding stature and stage appearance, heroic—not so his acting. For someone suffering intractable pain from his spear wound he did not appear appropriately uncomfortable with his disability. His singing however was outstanding in reflecting palpable pathos. His operatic future must be assured.

Simon O'Neill as Parsifal was the complete heldentenor who maintained perfect pitch throughout the exhausting endless stretches and was very easy to listen to. His rather stilted poses and his lumberjack check shirt rather detracted from his credibility but his singing was absolutely superb.

For someone testicularly challenged, Klingsor, (Martin Snell) seemed remarkably virile as well as virulent. With his commanding bass voice he spat out his lines with venomous zeal—a most convincing psychopath!

The Flower Maidens enjoyed their lilting melody (Wagner's "pop-song") as they in turn tried competitively to win over the gullible Parsifal. They were graceful, tuneful and very easy on the eye.

The most riveting scene in the whole drama was Kundry's abortive attempt to seduce the handsome young man in Klingsor's garden. Margaret Medlyn's acting was incredibly sustained and her frustration at being rejected by the about to be redeemed Parsifal was most convincing. The list of fine performers goes on and on—Grant Dickson, another fine bass was very commanding as the elderly Titirel—then there were the knights, squires, voices from above and the well trained choruses placed either side and to the rear of the stage.

The experienced Director, Bernd Benthak, took an enormous risk with his unconventional staging with the tiny space for the soloists, the eye-level surtitles and the prominence of the orchestra up-front and very visible. To me the balance of the music and voices was acceptable and Benthak's concept a great success.

Anthony Negus, an experienced Wagnerian conductor, held the large orchestral resources together with great discipline and his players responded splendidly. The richness and sonorities of Wagner's score were realised to the full—one example being the descending booming brass depicting the collapse of Klingsor's castle.

New Members:

A big welcome to:

Dr R Baskerville, Wellington
Mr G Mouat, Wellington
Mrs C Depree, Christchurch
Mrs. G McCormick, Christchurch
Mr B Thomas, Lower Hutt
Mrs B Tyler, Lower Hutt



NZ OPERA SOCIETY DVD SHOWINGS (AUCKLAND)

14 June, 7.00pm:
Der Rosenkavalier (Strauss)
12 July, 7.30pm:
L'Amour de Loin (Saariaho)

In the Raye Freedman Theatre, Epsom Girls' Grammar School

WELLINGTON

13 June, 7.30pm
Death in Venice (Britten)
13 July, 7.30pm:

Coronation of Poppea (Monteverdi)
National Library Auditorium

The Ring on the Amazon

A couple of weeks ago the *New York Times* carried a story by Larry Rohter of the whole *Ring* in Manaus, Brazil, in the heart of the world's biggest rain forest. It took place in the sumptuous opera house that the local rubber barons once built to entertain themselves.

Two complete stagings of the cycle finished on May 19, the first time the work had been produced and performed in Brazil.

It was low-budget and low-tech. In fact, you could get in for \$20 a ticket. Despite the limitations, the mostly Brazilian cast and crew showed creativity and a flair for improvisation that dazzled visitors.

There were special challenges in a town where daily downpours flood the streets and singers sweltered under heavy costumes.

The opera house is one of the most famous in the world, sporting some large chandeliers from France, marble from Italy and wrought iron staircases from Britain.



The Teatro Amazonas, a luxurious opera house in deepest Brazil

Aidan Lang, now in charge of NBR New Zealand Opera was the director. He summed it all up in one comment: "To be able to do a Ring cycle here for an audience that has never seen one is absolutely extraordinary.

"It's the ultimate gig in the ultimate place."