

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

WAGNER STEALS THE SHOW IN AUCKLAND

No doubt about it — Wagner's the man to give an Orchestra a flying start to the year. At least that's what the Auckland Philharmonia thinks, having programmed some large excerpts of Wagner at the opening of their 2004 series a few weeks ago. A year ago, one of their most successful programmes brought Wagner and Brahms together. Now they had combined Brahms' First Symphony in the first half, with Wagner and Richard Strauss in the second, and the Town Hall was completely booked out in advance.

Part of the draw was the soloist, Angela Brown, who has a memorably big and creamy voice which had been heard to fabulous effect in the orchestra's Puccini concert last year. After an exhilarating *Tannhäuser* overture, she stepped onto the stage and was instantly greeted by a rapturous welcome.

Obviously gratified at the reception, Brown sang out her thanks in a fabulous *Dich, teure Halle* and her final, thrilling top notes were clear as a bell.

The two Richard Strauss excerpts, one from *Die Ägyptische Helena* and the other from *Ariadne auf Naxos* were not so

gripping, though of course they are hugely difficult — almost impossible — to sing, and the orchestral parts are enormously complicated. Had they been given too little rehearsal time perhaps?

No matter. The *Prelude and Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde* was sure and solid again, and the conductor Zuccarini paced it all beautifully, even creating a softly expressive "join" between *Prelude* and *Liebestod* — a part that always sounds awkwardly apologetic, given that the whole opera is supposed to take place within the gap.

Towards the end, the orchestra was too loud, and it was amazing to discover that even Angela Brown's voice could be drowned out. But the concert finished with a spine-tingling B-major chord that drifted upwards dreamily, accompanying *Isolde* gently towards heaven.

Nice to hear Wagner getting ever more exposure in New Zealand, and great to see the delighted reaction from the audience. One thing's certain: the old myth that Wagner's music is "too heavy" for general audiences is thankfully dead and buried.



Angela Brown — a "big and creamy voice"

Programmes for 2004

AUCKLAND

Sunday, 18 April
Saturday, 22 May

4pm
7.30pm

Die Walküre.
AGM, and Birthday Celebrations:
Wagner's and Ours!

Sunday, 18 July
Sunday, 12 September
Sunday, 28 November

4pm
4pm
7.30pm

Siegfried
Götterdämmerung
Gala Excerpts and Requests.

WELLINGTON

Sunday, 18 April
Sunday, 23 May

6pm
3pm

Das Rheingold
*Double Birthday Party at Rex Benson's
home, 46 Garden Rd., Northland.

Sunday, 20 June
Sunday, 15 August
Sunday, 17 October
Sunday, 5 December

2pm
2pm
2pm

Die Walküre
Siegfried
Götterdämmerung
Christmas Get-Together, details tbc.

CHRISTCHURCH

Friday, 26 March
Friday, 21 May
Friday, 9 July
Friday, 20 August
Friday, 1 October
Sunday, 5 December

7.30pm
7.30pm
7.30pm
7.30pm
7.30pm
7.30pm

At the Streets' home, 20 Pentre Terr, Cashmere

The Stagehands' Ring
Birthday Pot-Luck Dinner. Venue tbc.
Two Video Views of "The Ring"
The Ring's Leitmotives (Heath Lees).
DVD of a Wagner "Ring" opera
Christmas BBQ (Venue and time tbc).

CHRISTCHURCH, 13 FEBRUARY

JENNY LEE: "TANNHÄUSER, A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE"

JOHN RITCHIE was drawn to Christchurch's opening meeting by more than just a family connection

The Morality play which was Richard Wagner's personal life became, as we know, the basis of many of the stories underlying his assortment of music drama heroes. There was at least a smidgeon of his DNA in the Dutchman, Lohengrin, Tristan and Siegmund. In the light of such a background, Jenny Lee's foray into Tannhäuser, from a woman's perspective, was predictably feminist.

Tripartite in form the presentation allowed us to hear several excerpts from the 1982 New York Met production of Tannhäuser followed by the bulk of the speaker's remarks and finally three further extended passages.

Jenny's summation of the "not particularly interesting or plausible story" was that

"ego-centred, self-seeking men who use and abuse women are not unusual". Their solutions call for self-knowledge rather than redemption through religion. She finds the women in the Tannhäuser plot "one-dimensional disasters" sorely "in need of a feminist pep talk". And placing all this alongside Wagner's own early emotional life she was able convincingly to prove that the master "still had a lot more to learn about life and love".

Declaring a paternal interest in the event I can report that, as a mere male, I might have expected to scoff at some of the claims made but the fact is I found myself in agreement with Jenny's overall thrust. Richard Wagner betrayed an immature sexual outlook through most of his life and while such revealed immaturity is not uncommon,

especially among creative artists, his attempt to justify and possibly to sublimate his own urgencies, if not urges, surely found unconvincing expression in the stories and situations he devised. His intention, if not his rationale, was clear.

Jenny brought this to the fore and cross-references to the later music dramas served to enhance her claims.

But, as she made clear in conclusion, we forgive Wagner his dramatic, literary and historical inconsistencies in the light of the marvellously logical conviction and magical orchestral and vocal sound in which we bathe. (Let's face it, how many opera plots parade complete conviction or, for that matter, logic?) Jenny got the Christchurch WSNZ Centre off to a rollicking start in 2004.

And what a boon the DVD recordings are!

WELLINGTON, 15 FEBRUARY

HEATH LEES: "THE RING – AN OVERVIEW OF ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING"

LES HOLBOROW offered this impression of Wellington's First Meeting of the Year

Members of the Wellington Centre and their guests assembled at the Massey Theatre to hear Heath Lees present an introduction to and review of *The Ring*.

Many of those present were going to Adelaide in November, some for a second time. Three and a half hours later we all emerged full of admiration for Heath's ability to cover so much in a manner that was both entertaining and enlightening.

The facilities at this venue assisted Heath to achieve a welcome diversity in his presentation. Initially he lectured

with musical illustrations on the piano, then he used excerpts from famous productions, and some attractive documentary and analytical programmes about Wagner, to convey information and take the story forward.

Even Heath's own singing voice was an asset — he must have been practising so that he could communicate in the manner of the great conductors, emphasising key motifs and rhythmic figures.

It was particularly interesting to see the juxtaposition of very different productions of the cycle, with the Chereau version used most frequently to underline the humanity of the key characters. Singers such as our own Donald McIntyre and

Gwyneth Jones were shown at the peak of their careers, and some of the older material reminded us just how much is gained, as well as lost, in many of the more recent innovations.

The very different messages left by the traditional and the Chereau endings to *Götterdämmerung* were particularly thought-provoking. The recent controversial Bayreuth *Lohengrin*, is clearly in a tradition which refuses to read Wagner as achieving reconciliation or catharsis on a cosmic level.

We all left feeling that Heath had prepared us not just with information, but by developing some of the stamina and thoughtfulness required to get the most from our forthcoming Adelaide opportunity.

AUCKLAND, 29 FEBRUARY

RHEINGOLD – A VERY QUICK INTRO AND THE COMPLETE SHOWING

HEATH LEES reviews Auckland's first meeting where he introduced the complete *Rheingold*

It was good to see nearly 90 people at the first meeting for 2004, a year in which *The Ring* is exercising us all, and the first all-Australian *Ring* approaches fast in Adelaide.

Like Wellington, Auckland has opted to go through all the *Ring* operas in order, and arrangements have been made, during the *Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* evenings, to repeat the successful interval meal arrangements with the nearby Copthorne Hotel.

So the 29th February meeting was given over entirely to a showing of the Met *Rheingold* and I had been asked to introduce this in a matter of about twelve

minutes. Two weeks earlier, I had been in Wellington, and there the introduction to *Rheingold* took three hours! So Auckland got a short version, and the examples were played at twice the speed! Since so much has been written and spoken about *The Ring*, it's sometimes difficult to remember that it is all, in essence, very simple — the rise and fall of a particular civilisation, and the pathway that it clears for another "cycle" to begin. So it's not too hard in five or ten minutes to sketch out the tri-partite universe of Gods up top, human-like brutes in the form of giants in the middle, and the sly, mole-like scavengers, the dwarves, deep in the dark Middle Earth.

Similarly, with a piano, it's fun to run through the themes and hint at all the

fascinating, root-like connections that Wagner was able to create through his genius for music-theatre.

The main event was of course the showing itself, and now that we're blessed with the new screen and projector facilities in our Music Theatre venue, we felt as though we were in Lido-like luxury. It certainly let us appreciate the splendour of the sung performances, even if the literal presentation of Mr Schenk made the whole thing seem at times a bit too stolid.

This has whetted the appetite for our next, more avant-garde "Walküre" on 18 April. For us all, it's another opportunity to live through the most unique music-theatre works ever composed, and for those of us going to Adelaide, it's part of the exciting count-down.

Not The First New Zealand Wagner Society??!

A Story Just as Interesting a Decade Later

When the first WSNZ Newsletter appeared a whole ten years ago, it carried a story which has remained our most interesting story to date.

It was written by Virginia Grodd, who lived in Nelson for a while, and did some research into the life and influence of one of Wagner's friends, conductors and editors, Michael Balling.

In 1893, ten years after Wagner's death, Balling moved to Nelson for a few years and set up what amounted to the first Wagner Society in this country nearly 110 years ago.

Virginia's article gave the Wagner Society of New Zealand a history that it never knew it had, and to mark the 10th year of our Newsletters, we decided to print it again for those who may have missed it the first time around.

When the first meeting of Auckland Wagnerites took place this year, on 22nd May [1994], everyone believed that by forming a recognised, incorporated society, they would now be providing the first major national focus for the keen fascination that Wagner's life and music always excites. After all, New Zealand – like most other countries in the developed world – has been experiencing an exciting renaissance of interest in everything operatic, and Wagnerian music-drama has been part of the trend, and has drawn special interest.

But it might come as a surprise to many to know that the New Zealand Wagner Society is not in fact the first Wagner Society in New Zealand – not by a long chalk, since one was formed almost exactly a century ago, in the house of a Mr A. Crump, in the little suburb of Stoke, near Nelson.

However, it lasted for only three weeks.

The Society was informally set up, on the twelfth anniversary of Wagner's death (13 February, 1883) and consisted of ten people, who had been brought together by the authentic background and spellbinding personality of Michael Balling, one-time friend of Richard and Cosima Wagner, conductor of Wagner music-dramas, editor of Wagner's music, and uncompromising Wagner-worshipper.

Balling (born 1866) came to New Zealand in 1893, after a bout of ill-health. He was charged with conducting the local choral society in Nelson, and generally extending a wide musical influence in the city. Thanks to Balling's background, that influence was unashamedly Wagnerian, and his first concert in Nelson, only three days after his arrival here, included a piano solo Fantasia on themes from *Die Walküre*.

The Nelson School of Music was founded by Balling, and the concerts he conducted there and in the town were received with enormous enthusiasm. He

taught everything – harmony, score-reading, piano, every orchestral instrument available in the town – and Wagner, whose works he preached and pounded incessantly.

At the first (perhaps the only) meeting of this Wagner Society, as we are told from the diary of Frederick Gibbs, headmaster of the local Central School, Balling spoke, with all the reverence of a prayer meeting, of Wagner's influence and death. Later, musical extracts from all the main music-dramas were performed, and further readings were given, from Wagner's autobiography *My Life*, and from a letter from Wagner which one of the company had been sent some years before.

Apparently, the Society broke up when Balling discovered that one of the members of that original group had discussed its activities with an 'unbeliever', who made the mistake of sending up the seriousness of the venture in Balling's company. No-one made fun of Wagner or Wagnerism when Balling was around. The Society was summarily cancelled, Gibbs tells us, by the 24th March – a mere 39 days after its inception.

So perhaps Balling's First Wagner Society of 1895 doesn't rate highly enough to be considered a proper rival to the new Wagner Society of New Zealand, which has now had a highly successful first year, has attracted nearly 120 people as members, and enjoys having an average of 60 people to its functions so far.

But it does the show a unique Wagner connection with New Zealand which is of much interest, and links our Society up with a background of knowledge and appreciation which, contrary to many people's belief, can go back for a hundred years.



Michael Balling, Wagner's friend, conductor and editor

Wellington's *Das Rheingold* Sunday, 18 April

Wellington members will find a booking form for *Das Rheingold* enclosed. In order to book the venue this year, it's important to have a good idea of the numbers that will be attending so if you are going to come along to *Das Rheingold*, please fill out this form and return it with your membership subscription to George Risk. Details of his address are on the form. For any queries about the meeting please phone George on 476-6394.

Auckland's *Die Walküre* Sunday, 18 April

Auckland members will find a booking form enclosed for the meeting on Sunday, 18 April. For the three longer operas of *The Ring*, we are arranging a meal at the Copthorne Hotel, Anzac Avenue. It worked very well last year and as long as the rain holds it's an ideal leg-stretcher in between the first and second acts. Remember, it's perfectly OK to BYO for these meetings. Lesley, our Minutes Secretary will be in charge of tea & coffee during this first interval and then everyone will have another short break with refreshments between Acts II & III. Logistics demand that everybody who is coming to this meeting needs to fill out the form and send it along with your cheque to Liz at PO Box 202, Auckland. (Please see details on the form.) Footnote: This is the first year with George Risk as Membership Secretary so Auckland members please avoid sending this particular booking form to George as he will have a lot to do with the membership subs and we don't want to frighten him off in his first year! Many thanks.

The picture below is of a very submissive Wagner being kissed by a monumental Muse, whose inspiration looks as though it would be very hard to refuse.



NZ OPERA SOCIETY

Auckland Branch
March 10: AGM and DVD:
Orphée aux enfers

from Lyon Opera, featuring
Natalie Dessaye

In the Duncan McGhie Theatre,
Auckland College of Education, at 7.30 pm
Information: phone (09)-575-5051

IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN!

Yes, dear member, time to renew your subscription for the current Wagner-packed year.



Renewal notices have been sent with this newsletter. Reply immediately, pay your sub straight away, and you won't even notice the pain of parting with money!

NEW MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

This year we have a new Membership Secretary. George Risk from Wellington has kindly offered to do this. Details of his address are on the enclosed membership forms and all members should send their forms directly to him. Please don't hesitate to contact myself or George with any queries about membership.
Liz Lees 09-528-1184
Email: handelees@xtra.co.nz
George Risk 04-476-6394
Email: g.risk@gns.cri.nz

ADELAIDE RING NEWSLETTER

For members going to the Adelaide Ring with the group, you'll find the first edition of an 'Adelaide Newsletter' enclosed. This gives outlines of the sorts of things you can be doing during your stay in Adelaide. We've also included a rough draft of an 'Adelaide Calendar' which we will send again later in the year once all the activities are finalised. This first draft will help you keep track of your own activities and times which you should keep sacred, eg. opera times and lectures on the operas. For members going independently to Adelaide who would like to receive this newsletter, please let Liz Lees know and she will be happy to send you a copy and put you on the mailing list.
Phone (09)-528-1184 or email: handelees@xtra.co.nz

Making Donations

Following last week's notice about the New Zealand-Wagner Foundation, someone asked if there were a form on which to make donations. No, there isn't. People who have donated in the past have simply sent a cheque with a very short covering letter, and all donors are acknowledged unless they wish to remain anonymous. It is a great pleasure to announce that within the last fortnight, the New Zealand-Wagner Foundation has gratefully received an anonymous donation of \$1000.