

# WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWS LETTER



## PREPARING FOR PARSIFAL IN WELLINGTON

*The Wagner Society's patron Sir Donald McIntyre returns to New Zealand as the faithful knight Gurnemanz in Parsifal*

Yes, it's almost upon us. The biggest event in New Zealand's Wagner calendar for years, the NZSO's semi-staged *Parsifal* in Wellington, is about to happen.

In a one-hundred-percent Kiwi cast, Sir Donald McIntyre will sing Gurnemanz, a part he has sung countless times in the course of his long operatic career.

Among the younger singers are Simon O'Neill, whose career is now unstoppably in lift-off mode, Paul Whelan (Amfortas), Jenny Wollerman, Linden Loader, and Madeleine Pierard.

Margaret Medlyn, who recently toured the country's Wagner Society centres (see article on page 2) will play Kundry, a role she delivered with such stunning success in Adelaide in 2001.

WSNZ members will be able to meet many visiting Wagnerians, especially from Australia, as the Wellington folks are planning a reception for all Wagner Society members, home and overseas, to be held on 18 March, the day between the two performances.

The cost is \$15. To help catering, please RSVP to Tibby Warmington (04-476-7826), or e-mail to: elizabeth.warmington@correspondence.school.nz



## PROGRAMMES AROUND NEW ZEALAND FOR 2006

### AUCKLAND

Sunday 16 April, 7.30pm  
Sunday 21 May, 7.30pm  
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 France: A Tale of Two Cultures* (Heath Lees)  
Wagner's birthday: AGM, and DVD of *Die Walküre* Act 1 (Kupfer/Bayreuth)  
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

Saturday 18 March, 3.45pm  
Sunday 21 May, 3.30pm  
Sunday 6 August, 4pm  
Sunday 8 October, 4pm

### At Rutherford House (near Railway Station), 12th Floor

Reception for all Wagner Society members, from home and overseas, who are attending *Parsifal* performances

### At Rex Benson's House, 46 Garden Road, Northland

A Tribute to Birgit Nilsson (Les Austin, with Introduction by Les Holborow)

### 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 April, 7.30pm  
Friday 19 May, 7.30pm  
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 19/5 & 3/12)

*The Ring* and the Life-cycle of an Audience (Heath Lees) followed by a DVD of *The Making of the Adelaide Ring*

Wagner's Birthday. Pot Luck Dinner. (Venue to be announced)

*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.

# PARSIFAL THROUGH THE EYES OF KUNDRY

(As told by Heath Lees,  
through the eyes of the accompanist)

It's difficult to say whose idea it was first. Probably Wellington member John Morrison started it all going when he suggested that the WSNZ had a role it could play in helping to prepare New Zealand audiences for the coming *Parsifal*. From a short lecture with DVD illustrations it progressed to a scenario for a whole evening, and an idea began to hatch in my brain that perhaps we could be the first to concentrate on Kundry, the one female soloist in the work. Kundry often gets overlooked among all those macho males resonating religiously around her, and more important still, she is one of the most difficult yet revealing characters, who comes as the final example of Wagner's developing ideas about women, beauty, sex, aspiration . . . and all the rest. Understand Kundry and you understand most of *Parsifal*.

Then the suggestion was made that since we had one of our ages best Kundrys right here in Margaret Medlyn, maybe she'd like to come in on it for an occasional illustration. Margaret loved the idea, and being Margaret, she could see a few more roles that really brought out what we were trying to do.

I had offered my services as a semi-arthritic, cobweb-shedding pianist who could be persuaded out of retirement for an easy song or two. Suddenly we were doing the fast number from the *Wesendonk Lieder*, two large chunks of Kundry's music (beautifully sung and acted by Margaret — what a *Parsifal* this is going to be), Isolde's half-mad monologue in *Tristan's* Act One, with lots of quick bumps for the pianist, and at the end, the whole sonorous seascape of the *Liebstock* with more than 4000 notes for the pianist in under 7 minutes. How had I got into this?



Margaret Medlyn as Kundry in Adelaide's "Parsifal"

But it was great to do. Oh yes, and the audiences seemed to enjoy it too. About 500 people came to hear in our three centres, from Wellington's 4 December date to the twinned February dates for Christchurch and Auckland. They applauded mightily (thanks very much folks) and took immediately to the mixture of talk, description and vocal performance from a Kundry who was in great form and clearly living and loving every note of the music. They laughed at the jokes, fell silent at the really moving bits, and totally ignored the little glitches at the keyboard (like the moment in Auckland when we zoomed through to the last page of the *Dutchman* excerpt, and discovered at the turn that the page had fallen on the Green Room floor as we entered, and was now profoundly absent!)

It was certainly a different kind of event, and I think it made a good preparation for this amazing work. For Wellington's marvellous audience of nearly 200, it was a rousing ending to the Wagner Society's year. For the combined total of about 300 in Christchurch and Auckland, it was a great start to the new year..

For the pianist, I can tell you it was marvellous working with Margaret, who is such a professional and generous performer, and whose two-hundred-per-cent vocal skills are so richly impressive. How lucky we are to have her in this country!

## From Russia With Love: Another Take on Parsifal

A few weeks ago the Kirov Opera opened its production of "Parsifal" in the Kennedy Centre in Washington DC. This review by the Washington Times critic T. L. Ponick was posted on the internet, and includes a few honest reflections on the production as well as some interesting questions about understanding "Parsifal" in today's world.

The visiting Kirov Opera staged its magnificent but idiosyncratic production of Richard Wagner's final opera, "Parsifal," Tuesday evening, transforming the stage of the Kennedy Center's Opera House into a vast Russian cathedral punctuated with odd iconic echoes of Fritz Lang's classic film "Metropolis."

"Parsifal" is a strange opera, even for Wagner aficionados. Initially billed as a "festival drama," it is, in our sense of the word, anything but. It's essentially a stately retelling of the Easter Triduum pageant of sin, death, resurrection and redemption — loaded with allusions to the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Holy Eucharist — recast when knighthood was in flower.

Throughout the five-plus-hour performance, the composer (who wrote his own libretto) guides us through the tale of the "holy fool" Parsifal . . . a warrior-innocent who seems heaven-sent to redeem the sufferings of Amfortas, king of the knights who guard the Holy Grail and the spear that pierced Christ's

side on Good Friday.

By succumbing to the charms of a woman, Amfortas has lost the spear to the evil wizard Klingsor, whose parting gift is to wound the king with the weapon. The wound, like a grievous sin, will not heal. Only Parsifal proves pure enough to retrieve the spear, vanquish the wizard and bring divine order back to the knights' sacred grove.

"Parsifal" can be confusing for modern audiences not steeped in Christian symbolism. It can be a bit off-putting for women, too, because its story line clearly underlines the early Church's deep misogyny, attributing male virtue primarily to sexual abstinence and portraying women as sinners and seductresses.

Wagnerian opera is a deeply rewarding musical experience for those with the patience to navigate the complex leitmotifs woven into Wagner's greatest works. Nevertheless, the repetitiousness of his poetry and painfully slow pace of storytelling can make for a long evening in an era of cell

phones, video games and instant messaging. The Kirov in this production, under British stage director Tony Palmer, gives us the full monty, as it were, without cuts, making the first act stretch almost to eternity.

Nonetheless, it's worth taking in the full measure of this opera at least once in a lifetime, for there are many musical rewards, particularly in the second act of this production, in which the composer blessedly introduces a large female chorus to the predominantly male proceedings, lightening the mood and the texture.

The sets in this production are gloomily appropriate, although costuming is a bit eccentric. Many male characters are costumed in ratty hanging garments that make them look like Pocahontas in drag. The vampirelike flower-maidens in the second act sport claws straight out of the silent film "Nosferatu." And the villainous Klingsor, whose claws are longer still, seems to have been coiffed by the Bride of Frankenstein's personal hairdresser.

Fortunately, this opera plays to the primary strength of a Russian company — its powerful male voices. As the wise

hermit-knight Gurnemanz, bass Gennady Bezzubenko is a standout, blasting his voice strenuously and authoritatively out over Wagner's considerable orchestral forces (which tend to bury lower voices in the musical fabric).

As Parsifal, tenor Oleg Balashov was nearly as impressive, singing with great conviction and revealing an instrument of considerable suppleness and subtlety. Bass Nikolai Putilin (Klingsor) and baritone Evgeny Nikitin (Amfortas) also were convincing in smaller but important roles.

As the doomed Kundry, the opera's only major female character, soprano Larissa Gogolevskaya flowered in her character's signature appearance in Klingsor's lair. The part is written for a flexible soprano, for it spends a good bit of time in the mezzo registers. This presented Miss Gogolevskaya with little trouble. Her long solo passages provided some of the musical highlights of the evening.

The Kirov Orchestra under Valery Gergiev provided a colorful symphonic backdrop for the singers, including the fine chorus.

## PICTURING WAGNER: A DIFFERENT VIEW

**D**uring this year, Chris Brodrick, Wagner fan, WSNZ committee member, and a man of very wide interests, will be travelling from his hometown of Christchurch to give lecture-presentations on an intriguing and unusual subject: Wagner and the World of the Visual Arts.

Auckland will be host to Chris for its 16 July meeting, Wellington will welcome him on 6 August, and he'll wind up on his home turf in Christchurch on 20 October for the third presentation.

Chris has no doubts about the fascination of the subject. "Of course everyone accepts immediately," he says, "that Wagner had a huge influence on the composers following in his wake. What is less well known

is how much his influence also carried into the visual arts. In these presentations, I'll be looking at a whole range of artists who fell under his spell: doom-laden decadents, illuminating illustrators and anguished abstractionists. People don't realise how many pictures, paintings, drawings and illustrations there are on Wagner and Wagner's world, yet they reveal much that is new about the composer and his music-dramas."

One of the illustrators Chris will draw on is the Victorian artist Arthur Rackham, who was born in 1867 and

worked as a clerk in a very Dickensian world of scrawny servants and blustering bosses. For Wagnerians, his most famous work must be the 64 illustrations he did in 1910-11 for pivotal scenes from



"Donner", by Arthur Rackham

*The Ring* and his mixture of richly textured fairy tale, love story and menacing violence make a unique kind of commentary on the "industrial revolution" aspect of *The Ring*, especially its emphasis on greed, exploitation, and the dream of love as a means of escape to another world.

While working, Rackham signed up in art classes during the little leisure time he had, and by the time he was 25, he was able to leave his dull little office job and become a free-lance reporter/illustrator. A permanent post in a weekly magazine let him diversify into the fast-growing and more lucrative world of book illustration, and soon he began to make a name for himself in the 1890s, mostly through the children's book market. Rackham had a special ability to combine oppression and menace with a kind of fairytale and romance that seemed to breathe through the swirls and crests of his constantly circular lines. The stories he portrayed were often frightening yet irre-

sistible, like all good fairytales should be. Rackham's fame began with his 1905 illustrations for *Rip Van Winkle*, and the publishers, Heinemann's, dignified his 51 paintings by awarding them a special colour-plate collection at the end of the book. There for the first time were all the Rackham hallmarks — nursery-rhyme animals and plants that were half-hidden and half-human; trees that had ancient, wrinkled branches and feet; beautiful young women, sensuous yet pure — all of them cascading around the page through arching pen lines that were softened by delicate water colours. The style turned out to be fabulous for the Wagnerian myths and stories that he illustrated so richly in his *Ring* series. So do yourself a favour. Note the dates when Chris is booked for your centre. You won't want to miss this.



"Brünnhilde", by Arthur Rackham

# Ringing Changes and Changing Rings

Heath Lees wonders if all the Rings out there are going the right way

Once upon a time (1876) *The Ring* was produced as a single cycle in Bayreuth and that's all there was to it. Then Angelo Neumann got permission from Wagner to stage individual operas from the cycle in other towns and countries. Gradually, cities began to realise that staging the individual operas was OK, but to prove that your city had really arrived, a complete *Ring* over a festival period was necessary. Through time, in the US, Seattle came out as a frontrunner, and its reputation for fire and fiery performances was second to none. Other US and European cities had caught the fever too; *Ring* cycle traditions were also popular in South America, and by the 1980s *Rings* were appearing everywhere. In Australia, Adelaide produced the country's first imported, cycle-styled *Ring* in 1998, and followed it up six years later with its own successfully home-grown *Ring*. Now the staging of a *Ring* cycle has become the badge of a modern, developed city, and the well-worn description "The Olympic Games of Opera" brings the same kind of buzz as do all the burgeoning Olympics offshoots that have recently been sprouting in the world of sport. But there's a change going on. Instead of simply mounting *The Ring*, countries and regions are now insisting on changing Wagner's work to reflect their own special region and culture. *The Ring* has become a tool for image-building and the tourist industry.

Now we have, for example, the Mariinsky Opera with its much-admired, and self-styled "Russian" *Ring*, that tries to mould Wagner's huge work to the



*Siegfried, transformed according to "Russian, Caucasian and Scythian folk mythology".*

folk traditions of conductor Gergiev's home patch. "In Ossetia, where I come from," he said in introducing it to the press, "our own folktales parallel the myths that inspired Wagner, so I knew we would be able to find a new visual approach to the *Ring*."

Not to be outdone, Washington National Opera is about to present (25 March) *Das Rheingold*, co-produced with San Francisco Opera, and the first in its "Americanized" version of *The Ring*. Director Francesca Zambello explained "we have coined the term 'American Ring,' and the designers and I are using American history, mythology, iconography and landscape to set the operas."

Apparently Erda is to wear a costume inspired by the American Indian tradition — the kind of "authentic" touch that seems to please Placido Domingo, the company's GM. "Francesca's productions are always beautifully balanced between the intimacy of the characters and the sweep of the epic, and I think that she will use the symbols of America brilliantly," he said.

One month earlier, a chic but sassy American version of *The Ring* appeared from Long Beach Opera in California. In line with the region's traditions, some expensive plastic surgery had been done. The whole *Ring* was reduced to two acts in a single night. Wotan, an elderly victim of its nips and tucks, had little to do in *Die Walküre*; the orchestra numbered 25 players instead of the usual more-than-90, and the feeling of a tightly-paced but somewhat empty TV drama was everywhere.

On the other side of the world, Thailand has now brought Wagner to South-East Asia with a *Ring* that publicly boasts the authentic reflection of the country's power-struggles and daily corruption. It is set in a divine Eastern kingdom that is being dragged down by greed and Western culture. "With its themes of power and political corruption, the opera could have been crafted for modern-day Asia," said the Thai director, Somtow Sucharitkul. "It's all about how the gods become corrupted, so it fits."

If you're beginning to think that maybe the image is not looking so good on the stage after all, you can turn instead to a performance with absolutely no visuals: BBC's Radio 3 programme, which is air-Ring the whole 15 hours of *The Ring* at one sitting on Easter Monday next.

"Without doubt people will sit down and listen to it all the way through," said the station's controller, Roger Wright. "It would be impossible to do this live — singers, musicians and audiences wouldn't have the stamina. But given that this is a linked set of operas with a narrative running through it, this is probably the best way to hear it."

He may be right. If you survive the distance, that is. Certainly, the way things are going, listening to the radio may be the only way to dodge the garish advertising slogans, tourist triggers and commercial hype being built into today's *Rings*, making it less of a great work on its own, and more of a spectacular means to a market-driven end.

Whether we like it or not, a present-day cycle of *The Ring* has become a multi-national business of its own. Funny that, when it began its life in a little North German town, in a temporary theatre that could only seat about 1300 people, and those who came were invited by personal letter.

We've come a long way since then. But has it been in the right direction?



*Covent Garden's recent Valkyrie in their specially designed gear. Tottenham Court Road bag-ladies perhaps?*

## New Members:

### A big welcome to:

Ms C Crampton, Auckland  
Mrs M Dwyer, Auckland  
Mr & Mrs E & J Gregor, Rotorua  
Ms P Fishcher, Wellington  
Ms B Hull, Wellington  
Mrs A MacFarlane, Auckland  
Ms A Pearce, Kapiti Coast



With the close of the tax year on 31 March, you might like to consider making a donation to this fund. On your membership form you'll find a line below the information about the subscription fees. All contributions to the Foundation are welcome, very tax deductible, and are acknowledged and receipted.

## The Wagner-NZ Foundation

Set up a couple of years ago, the Wagner-NZ Foundation is now firmly established. It has its own committee and has been accumulating funds to enable the setting up of New Zealand-based, Wagner-related activities, eg. projects such as scholarships and prizes for promising Wagner singers of New Zealand origin and financial contributions towards the NZ visits of Wagner scholars and artists.

## NZ OPERA SOCIETY DVD SHOWINGS (AUCKLAND)

8 March, 7.30pm:

AGM and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*

12 April, 7.30pm:

*Carmen*

In the Raye Freedman Theatre  
Epsom Girls' Grammar School  
Silver Road, Epsom  
Ph: 625 7225

## Bayreuth Endpiece

Whatever happened to the new *Ring* after Lars von Trier's startling departure a year ago? Hot information from Bayreuth tells us that the 2006 festival will have its brand-new *Ring* directed by German director and playwright Tankred Dorst.

The production stars two US singers, Stephen Gould as Siegfried and Linda Watson as Brünnhilde. Gould was last year's *Tannhäuser*, and Linda Watson made a great impression as Otrud in *Lohengrin*.

Falk Struckmann is Wotan, Endrik Wottrich is Siegmund and Canadian soprano Adrienne Piczonka makes her Bayreuth debut as Sieglinde.

It all opens on July 25 with a gala performance of *The Flying Dutchman*. Ten of our members will be there. Lucky things.