

# WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER



## A WELCOME-BACK-AND-THANK-YOU CONCERT



It's easy to recognise Margaret Medlyn here, pictured backstage at the time of her memorable performance as Kundry during last year's Parsifal in Wellington.

She is caught between Good (Gurnemanz, Donald McIntyre) and Evil (Klingsor, Martin Snell) but looks as though she's quite enjoying it.

Margaret was the first person to be awarded a Scholarship from the NZ Wagner Foundation, which acts as the financial arm of the Wagner Society of New Zealand. She put her funds towards a study trip that focussed on learning particular Wagner roles, and helped towards her lessons with a number of top-ranking singers and coaches, including Gurnemanz

himself, Donald McIntyre, Thom Christoph in Dresden and Lionel Friend in London.

Back now from her travels and re-established in her home city of Wellington, Margaret agreed immediately to the suggestion that she do a concert for the Wagner Society, to include some of the items that have formed her recent study-list, notably the roles of Isolde and Brünnhilde.

Bruce Greenfield, pianist and repetiteur extraordinaire, agreed to be the accompanist, and will also play some of Liszt's well-known Wagner transcriptions for piano.

That date once again? 22 April at 4pm. Booking forms are enclosed for Wellington members. For further details you can contact Membership Secretary George Risk, ph.04-476-6394.

## PROGRAMMES AROUND NEW ZEALAND FOR 2007

### AUCKLAND

Sunday 15 April  
Sunday 20 May  
Sunday 15 July  
Sunday 9 September  
Sunday 2 December

### All Meetings 7.30pm in the Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street

*Bach and Wagner: Two Great Composers Separated by a Common Language?* (Heath Lees)  
Wagner's birthday: AGM, and DVD of first act of *Tannhäuser*  
*Tannhäuser, the French and Mallarmé*. The launch of Heath Lees' new book  
*Tannhäuser, Acts 2 & 3*.  
A special event for Christmas. Watch this space.

### WELLINGTON

Sunday 22 April, 4pm  
  
Sunday 10 June, 4pm  
Sunday 26 August, 4pm  
Sunday 7 October, 4pm

### At the church of St Andrew's on the Terrace

Special Concert by Margaret Medlyn and Bruce Greenfield.

### All at Massey Museum Theatre, Buckle Street

Liszt and Wagner - Heath Lees - (NOTE change of date.)  
*The Ring in the Rainforest*. Aidan Lang, from NBR NZ Opera  
*Tannhäuser, the French and Mallarmé*. An introduction, plus Heath Lees' new book

### CHRISTCHURCH

Friday 30 March, 7.30pm  
Friday 18 May, 7.30pm  
Friday 3 August, 7.30pm  
Friday 14 September, 7.30pm  
Sunday 14 October, 5pm  
Sunday 2 December, 6pm

### At Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury (except 18/5 & 4/12)

*The Ring in the Rainforest*. Aidan Lang, from NBR NZ Opera  
Wagner's Birthday. Pot Luck Dinner. (Venue to be announced)  
*Wagner at the Movies*. (Chris Brodrick)  
*Tannhäuser, the French and Mallarmé*. An introduction, plus Heath Lees' new book  
*Tannhäuser* on DVD. Meal between Acts 1 & 2. (NOTE date and time.)  
Christmas BBQ at Sid Kennedy's home, 70 Perry Street, Papanui.

# RINGS AT EVERYONE'S FINGERTIPS

by Michael Sinclair

If mounting Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is akin to scaling Mount Everest, then it is perhaps surprising that so many opera companies, both large and small, are prepared to risk artistic ridicule and financial embarrassment to bring off this most daring of ventures. Call it the pursuit of artistic glory or just sheer madness, but *The Ring* is everywhere at the moment.

Over the past couple of years there have been more than a dozen stagings of the full cycle from Copenhagen and Toronto, both in brand new opera houses, to the depths of the Amazon rainforest in Aidan Lang's production in Manaus. Vienna farewelled its Adolf Dresen production, while Parisians were treated to Robert Wilson's minimalist staging, described by the *Financial Times* as 'no more than a self-satisfied doodle on an empty page.' Bayreuth tried with its new Tankred Dorst production, but apart from Thielemann's incandescent conducting there was little to cheer about on the Green Hill.

And if there wasn't a *Ring* cycle by an opera company near you, then the chances were that the Kirov Opera and its workaholic conductor Valery Gergiev would be in town to present their touring production. Baden-Baden, Orange County and Cardiff saw the Russian *Ring* in 2006 and a visit to New York is scheduled for July this year. And so it goes on: from Chicago to Munich and eastwards to Beijing, where the Theater Nürnberg presented the work for the first time ever in China as part of the 2005 Beijing Music Festival.

To have seen all these productions would have required a stamina of Wagnerian proportions, not to mention a substantial slice of Alberich's gold to fund the extravagance. But for many, the desire to collect *Rings* is an obsession. It could be the desire to see a perfect *Ring*, but more likely it is the intoxicating effect of Wagner's music and the deep meaning of the story that have turned sane opera goers into groupies.

And it would seem that there is very little chance that they will be cured in the near future. Opera companies are lining up to enlighten us with their new productions. So get out your five-year forward planner and start plotting your course to Nibelheim!

For the faithful a trip to Bayreuth is a must and Tankred Dorst's production will be revived there annually over the next few years. Bayreuth always treats its productions as a 'work in progress' when they are revived, so expect changes to Dorst's rather limp staging. While Thielemann is conducting this will be a *Ring* to savour musically, although the Bayreuth casts no longer reflect the best Wagner singers available.

In October this year The Royal Opera will present three full cycles of its Keith Warner



The finale of *Götterdämmerung* at the Bayreuth Festival (photo: Bayreuther Festspiele GmbH / Jörg Schulze)

*Ring*, a production that has been rolled out over the last three years. Warner's vision has come in for extreme criticism, but as with any cycle the proof of the pudding comes when the full cycle is staged. Of particular note to New Zealanders will be the fact that Simon O'Neill sings Siegmund in the first cycle (a role he shares with Plácido Domingo). Antonio Pappano conducts with a cast that also includes Bryn Terfel (Wotan), Lisa Gasteen (Brünnhilde) and John Treleaven (Siegfried).



Some Very Chic Gods in Washington's *Das Rheingold* (Karin Cooper)

Across the Channel, other European opera houses have *Rings* on their minds. The Hamburg State Opera will launch their new cycle in 2008 and it will have a distinctly down-under feel. Hamburg's Music Director Simone Young will conduct, and the cast includes Lisa Gasteen (Brünnhilde) and Stuart Skelton (Siegfried). Other major roles will be sung by Falk Struckmann (Wotan), following his success in the role at Bayreuth, Christian Franz (Siegfried) and Yvonne Naef (Sieglinde). Claus Guth will direct.

The Vienna State Opera also has a new cycle planned, commencing this year and culminating in three complete cycles in May/June 2009. The production will be directed by Sven-Eric Bechtolf and conducted by Franz Welser-Möst, Zurich's Music Director. Deborah Voigt was to have sung all three Brünnhildes in this production, but has withdrawn from all but the *Siegfried* Brünnhilde. Based on information issued by the company other major roles will be taken by Juha Uusitalo (Wotan), Stephen Gould (Siegfried), Johan Botha (Siegfried) and Nina Stemme (Sieglinde).

Already underway is Simon Rattle's *Ring* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, to be shared with the Salzburg Easter Festival. Following *Das Rheingold* Aix will present *Die Walküre* this year, and full cycles will be given in Aix in 2009 and in Salzburg in 2010. With the Berlin Philharmonic in the pit musical excellence seems assured although Stéphane Braunschweig's production has so far failed to impress the critics with its lofty ideals and minimalist staging.

Across the Atlantic North America seems to be *Ring* crazy as well! Recent *Rings* in Chicago and Toronto will be followed up with productions in Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Seattle, and the Canadian Opera Company also plan to revive their successful production in the next five years, although no dates have yet been set.

Already underway is Francesca Zambello's production for the Washington National Opera, a co-production with the San Francisco Opera. This *Ring* is being dubbed the 'American Ring' with American imagery meeting Wagnerian mythology. Washington has already staged *Das Rheingold*, with *Die Walküre* following this month. Expect the full cycle to be staged in 2009. San Francisco

will mount the production starting with *Das Rheingold* in 2008, and full cycles in either 2011 or 2012.

The mighty Metropolitan Opera is finally dispensing with its aging, Disneyesque Otto Schenk production and will embark on a new

*Ring* in 2010 to be directed by experimental Canadian theatre luminary Robert Lepage. According to Opera News, Lepage has said that his *Ring* will be influenced by a particularly Nordic aesthetic, and will evoke the "dramatic and mythic coast of Iceland, a



Bryn Terfel plays with fire in "*Walküre*"

place where the land shook and spoke back to the early Viking settlers.”

The cycle will feature Deborah Voigt singing her first Brünnhilde in the United States, and will also include Bryn Terfel (Wotan), Ben Heppner (Siegfried) and Jonas Kaufmann (Sigmund). James Levine is scheduled to conduct. The cycle will be rolled out in stages with full cycles planned for 2012 and 2013. Having ditched plans to mount an ultra expensive hi-tech *Ring* with *Star Wars*-style special effects, the Los Angeles Opera now has plans for an Achim Freyer production, which will begin with *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in the 2008/09 season and will culminate with three full cycles in the summer of 2010. Remarkably, Plácido Domingo is cast as Sigmund in this cycle, by which time he will be pushing 70!

If a traditional production is what you are after then the Seattle *Ring* is for you. Stephen Wadsworth's production brings picture-post-card precision to the cycle in a vision that puts



Alan Woodrow as Siegfried in the Seattle Opera production of Siegfried (photo: Rozarii Lynch Photo)

the beauty of Nature at the heart of the work. Seattle plans to revive its production in 2009 and 2013.

Closer to home there is still no word as to whether the Adelaide *Ring* will be revived. Stephen Phillips, General Manager of the State Opera of South Australia, has advised that the decision is in the hands of State and Federal politicians, but has also said that he is aiming for a 2010 revival if the funding can be secured. Let's hope so.

As Valhalla goes up in a puff of smoke for the umpteenth time one thing is for sure: Wagner's tetralogy is as popular now as it ever was. For fans of *The Ring* there is no better time to enjoy this enduring work.

Michael Sinclair will be writing regularly in the WSNZ Newsletter from now on.

He is the editor of *The Opera Critic* ([www.theoperacritic.com](http://www.theoperacritic.com)) and can be contacted at [michael@theoperacritic.com](mailto:michael@theoperacritic.com).

## Frocks, Fetishes and Fantasies. . .

Every so often the Wagner Gossipers re-surface to pin new and old fetishes on Wagner with a knowing wink and an eye for publicity. This time it's an extension of the old one that had him wandering around Bayreuth's empty backstagecorridors, dressed in the Rhinemaidens' costumes.

Now, in the more professional jargon of the age, Wagner has become a cross-dresser. In their first issue, the editors of the new *Wagner Journal* have revealed a previously unknown letter from Wagner to a fashionable Italian clothes shop, where he takes a little too much interest in the textures and lines of the garments.

Requesting "something graceful for evenings at home" he continues: "The bodice will have a high collar, with a lace jabot and ribbons; close-fitting sleeves; the dress trimmed with puffed flounces - of the same satin material - no basque at the front (the dress must be very wide and have a train) but a rich bustle with a bow at the back, like the one at the front) ..."

He concludes: "And so: richness of the material, width, ruches, flounces, bustles, ribbons - all to the good: but none of those basques attached by means of pins etc".

All this, says Barry Millington, co-editor of the *Wagner Journal*, "adds weight to the theory that the composer exhibited the tendencies of a cross-dresser". At the very least, he suggests, it points to an extremely detailed, if not fetishistic, interest in the minutiae of ladies' apparel.

"He obviously had a very pronounced feminine side," says Mr Millington. "There was this whole business with silks and satin underwear: he had to wear silk next to his skin, ostensibly because he suffered from erysipelas" - a painful skin infection.

Wagner's wife Cosima, for whom the items of clothing were "ostensibly" intended, (nudge nudge wink wink) failed to note the arrival of these items in her diary, "fueling speculation that Wagner may in fact have ordered the dresses for himself," according to Stewart Spencer, co-editor of *The Wagner Journal*.

In *The Guardian* of 1 March Arts Correspondent Charlotte Higgins added:

"Mr Millington speculates that Wagner's need for femininity and voluptuousness was not entirely met by his rather manly and organised wife Cosima. In the mid-1870s he had an intense friendship, which may or may not have been consummated as a sexual relationship, with a woman named Judith Gautier, who supplied him with the silks and perfumes with which he so adored to surround himself."

Whatever the truth of all this, Wagner was obviously much concerned with male and female roles; in his major prose work of 1850, *Opera and Drama*, he described music as a woman and the text ("poem") as a man. Many of his heroes and heroines have sexual hang-ups too. Tannhäuser can never reconcile his sexual urges with his thirst for spirituality, and most of the words in Act 2 of *Tristan* are about the man "becoming" the woman while she "becomes" the man.

So when all's said and done there's really nothing new in all this gossip about cross-dressing. But it does help new publications to get noticed, does it not? A question of just dressing it up for a good cause perhaps?



### TOUR OF A LIFETIME

Join Peter Bassett on an exceptional tour 'In the Footsteps of Richard Wagner' from 31 May to 19 June 2007. Destinations include Paris, Luzern, Zurich, Munich, three of King Ludwig's castles, Bayreuth, Dresden, Berlin and Hamburg for performances of *Lohengrin*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Der Rosenkavalier* and concerts by the Munich Philharmonic and the Dresden Staatskapelle. Singers include Waltraud Meier, Ben Heppner, Jan-Hendrik Rootering, Deborah Voigt . . . Conductors include Valery Gergiev, Christian Thielemann, Marc Albrecht and Simone Young, in productions directed by Robert Carson, Wolfgang Wagner, Götz Friedrich and Ruth Berghaus. A couple of places on this very popular tour have become vacant:and are being offered on a first-come first-served basis. Details at [www.renaissancetours.com.au](http://www.renaissancetours.com.au) or phone 00 61 2 9299 5801.

### WAGNER SOCIETY AGM

*The AGM is to be held on Sunday, 20 May, 2007, at the School of Music, 6 Symonds Street, Auckland, at 7.30pm. So far, Committee and Office-Bearer nominations have been received as follows:*

*President..... Heath Lees  
Vice-President/PR..... Chris Brodrick  
Secretary..... Liz Lees  
Treasurer (Nominee).... John Hambling  
(to replace Anne Doggett who is standing down)  
Membership Secretary .....George Risk  
Committee (4 members).....Bob O'Hara  
Juliet Rowe  
Pam Hall*

*A further nomination as Committee Member has been received on behalf of Michael Sinclair.  
If you wish to make a nomination, phone Liz at 09-528-1184 and she will send you a form, or e-mail [handelees@xtra.co.nz](mailto:handelees@xtra.co.nz).  
Nominations can also be made from the floor of the meeting.*

## Verse and Worse

IT HAD TO HAPPEN:

### LIMERICKS ROUND THE RING

If only the Wanderer had challenged Mime to respond in verse, we might have Mimericks instead of Wanderiddles!

Here, courtesy of Chris Brodrick are some of the winning Ring Limericks in a recent BBC contest :

Simon Bower produced four of the best for each opera in turn:

### RHINEGOLD

When swimming along in the Rhine  
With maidens who rarely said "nein",  
A dwarf filled with passion  
A gold ring would fashion,  
And really annoy the Divine.

### WALKÜRE

It's no wonder your heart fills with hate,  
When your wife and her brother do date;  
Still, Wotan didn't oughta  
Abandon his daughter  
On a hillside at regulo eight.

### SIEGFRIED

The eponymous hero, strong-willed,  
Takes the ring from the dragon he killed.  
He follows a bird  
To a tune we've all heard,  
And runs off with his Aunt, Brunnhild.

### GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

When asked the designer said "no,  
I can't make the Rhine overflow,  
Nor make horses to fly  
Across fire-stained sky  
For a five-hour long tale of woe".

And here was our favourite single attempt, from one Martin Clay :

Fifteen hours - unless there's an edit  
And the libretto - if you have read it  
Expansively ranges  
To tell of the dangers  
Of buying Valhalla on credit.

## Composers With A Common Language Problem?

At Auckland's 15 April meeting, Bach and Wagner are Put Together.

Heath Lees adds his own notes here:

Nearly 150 years separates the births of J S Bach and Richard Wagner, yet there is a world of difference in the music they produced.

For nearly 30 years of his life, Bach worked unsung in a little corner of Germany as a town organist; Wagner, for more than 30 years, strode through the domains of art, politics, aesthetics, poetry, philosophy. . . constantly preparing for the world to "discover" him and make him famous throughout Europe and beyond.

Despite the obvious differences, there are also fascinating similarities. Bach's love of drama can be seen not just in his passions and cantatas, but in his

instrumental works too.

Wagner's pursuit of music-drama drove him

in the same direction all his life. Both composers created a new marriage of song plus accompaniment, both discovered a kind of "endless melody" and both found a way of involving not just the body and the spirit in their music, but the mind too.

Come and hear all about it. Two worlds of music; different on the surface, yet the same underneath.



**One of NZ's best-known pianists and accompanists appears with Margaret Medlyn in Wellington on 22 April**

BRUCE GREENFIELD is probably Margaret Medlyn's favourite recital partners. "I was thrilled that Bruce Greenfield was available to accompany me," says Margaret, "and to play the Liszt transcriptions.

"Bruce is truly one of New Zealand music's national treasures," Margaret says. "An exceptional musician, he is also

one of those very rare beasts – a pianist with a great sense of the orchestral qualities of his instrument. Though largely unrecognised, he is a mainstay of operatic events throughout New Zealand, and our opera singers and opera companies would be lost without him."

"The Liszt Wagner transcriptions are rarely heard but wonderful music," says Bruce, "celebrating as they do the best of two great composers".



**Aidan Lang** from NBR New Zealand Opera will go to Christchurch on 30th of this month, to repeat his fascinating talk *The Ring in the Rainforest*. It's about putting on Wagner's enormous cycle in a seemingly impossible environment. "A triumph of vision and adaptability."

### New Members:

A big hello and welcome to:

Lady Annette Cooke  
Mr. Iain Ward

Wellington  
Christchurch

### Membership Forms and The Wagner-NZ Foundation

Members will find their Annual Subscription Renewal Forms enclosed with this newsletter.

With the end of the tax year in sight, it might be good to remind everyone about the Wagner-NZ Foundation, the Wagner Society's "awarding arm". In addition to the Scholarship recently given to Margaret Medlyn, the Foundation has also donated £1000 to the setting up of *The Wagner Journal* (for which we are listed on the inside front page as Gold Ring Circle subscribers).

On your membership renewal form you'll find a line about the Foundation. The Wagner Society annual sub is not large, so do consider making a donation to the worthy Foundation cause.

### DUNEDIN CENTRE?

There are many Wagnerians to be found in the lower South Island, and some of them have been lobbying for a centre in Dunedin. What a good idea! One very well-known Wagnerian is pianist and professor Terence Dennis, who has agreed to take on some of the public profile of a Dunedin Centre when it gets under way.

If you know of interested Wagnerians in the lower half of the South Island do contact them, and get them to ring our Dunedin champion Lesley Kendall at 03-487-8229, or e-mail Liz Lees at [handelees@xtra.co.nz](mailto:handelees@xtra.co.nz).

Watch for more information about the birth of this centre in these columns!

### THE WAGNER JOURNAL

This new journal, an initiative of English scholars/writers Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer, is now up and running; the very first issue went on sale three weeks ago. Overseas subscription rate for three issues (March, July and November) is £52. This may be paid online at: [www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk](http://www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk)

### NZ OPERA SOCIETY

#### DVD SHOWINGS (AUCKLAND)

11 April, 7.30pm, *Samson et Dalila*  
In the Raye Freedman Theatre  
Epsom Girls' Grammar School  
Silver Road, Epsom. Ph: 625 7225

#### WELLINGTON

8 March, *La Gioconda*  
12 April, *Fidelio*  
17 May, *Pagliacci* (with AGM before)  
In National Library Auditorium, 6.30pm  
(Ph: 232-5786)