

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

The WWW of Wagner Societies (Why, When & Where!)

The story last month about the productions of Wagner's early opera, *Die Feen*, uncovered one startling fact. Würzburg, whose population is 132,000, has a Richard Wagner Association numbering 2,600 or 2% of its inhabitants! To put this into perspective, a similar percentage in New Zealand would see us with 80,000 members nationally, and over 20,000 in Auckland! So, how did the Wagner Societies begin?

Wagner had originally planned that Munich would be the focal-point of his music. The city was after all the capital of Bavaria and therefore under the rule of Wagner's patron King Ludwig II. But after being banished from immediate contact with Ludwig II at the end of 1865 for his scandalous relationship with Cosima, and the inadequacy in staging *Das Rheingold* in 1869, Wagner switched his attention from Munich to Nuremberg, which he saw as especially appropriate for the performance of *Die Meistersinger*. However, the idea of Nuremberg was also abandoned when the conductor Hans Richter told Wagner that there was an excellent opera house in Bayreuth. "A pleasant city, situated in Franconia, one of the loveliest corners of Germany – an area of charming towns, architectural gems and forested hills" is the description used by Fredric Spotts in his book 'Bayreuth – A history of the Wagner Festival'. But Wagner's motivation to focus on the city was more political than anything to do with aesthetics. Bayreuth, situated close to the northern frontier of Bavaria, was under the exchequer of Ludwig II and, while there was an estrangement between composer and patron, Wagner still hoped Ludwig would open up the Barbarian Treasury to his advantage. Bayreuth also had historical ties with Prussia and Bismark, from whom Wagner also hoped to gain financial support (a sort of first reserve). Despite a

number of pleas by Wagner to the Iron Chancellor no money was forthcoming. Bismark, incidentally, couldn't stand Wagner. Finally and most importantly, to someone who saw himself at the centre of German art, Bayreuth was geographically placed in the centre of Germany. On 19 April 1871 Richard Wagner and his wife Cosima went to Bayreuth on their way to Berlin and, while they found the town suitable to their needs, in particular for setting up their home, the famous baroque opera house recommended by Richter proved to be technically out of date for the performance of Wagner's



RICHARD WAGNER VERBAND INTERNATIONAL e.V.

operas. While it reputedly had the largest stage in Europe, the auditorium could only seat 100 people. "So we must build—and all the better" was how Cosima recorded the master's reaction.

The city fathers were enthusiastic about the proposal for a Festival theatre, which they believed could raise the town to its former glory. They eventually settled on granting Wagner land on the Green Hill overlooking the town.

With approaches to Ludwig II and Bismark both shunned and the construction of the theatre now under way Wagner faced the age-old problem of money. He devised a financial plan that involved raising smaller sums from a larger group of people. This had another advantage. When States put up money they also tend to interfere, something that Wagner wished to avoid. A large

number of smaller investors would find it much more difficult to threaten his autonomy. Fredric Spotts describes it this way: "And so was born the notion of patron's certificates, purchase of which would guarantee a seat at the forthcoming performance. They were priced at 300 taler (900 marks) and Wagner hoped to sell 1,000 of them, enough to finance the construction and an initial festival. Wagner Societies were established to find patrons. It was an ingenious scheme but far ahead of its time. Fund raising was then utterly unknown—it is still scarcely practised in Germany—and the idea failed to catch on. To most Germans it seemed like dealing in stocks and had the unpleasant connotation of 'selling' culture by hawking 'shares' in Wagner. Only one or two of the innumerable princelings bought certificates and the biggest contributors were not even German: the Sultan of Turkey and the Khedive of Egypt."

In spring 1873 the contractors wanted payment for the work done to date but with only 340 certificates sold and a third of the 300,000 talers required raised, the finances became desperate. The high price of the certificates didn't allow a large group of Wagner's supporters on lower incomes to become involved in the scheme. It was at this point that a Mannheim music publisher, Emil Heckel, came up with a solution. Heckel, who had founded the Mannheim branch of the Wagner Society, suggested that Wagner societies be established throughout Germany, to put on fund raising events. With these funds, the societies could then purchase patronage certificates on behalf of members who could not afford to invest 300 taler. The proposal guaranteed that all Wagner enthusiasts would now have the opportunity to support the building of the theatre and production of the Ring. The

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Wagner Societies cont.

foundation of the societies soon started. It was not long before societies had been established in Leipzig, Vienna, and Berlin. Despite the rapidly growing support, the financial demands of the construction forced Wagner to plead once more to his benefactor. After an initial rejection, King Ludwig II eventually agreed to loan 100,000 talers so that the building could be completed. The terms of the loan were strict. All the money raised from the sale of patron's certificates and half of any fund-raising concerts which Wagner conducted had to go to pay off the loan. Failure to pay back the loan would result in the theatre and its contents becoming the property of the Barvarian Government.

That is how our Society began. A radical idea for its time, like the dimming of the house lights during a performance, that today seems so obvious. Yet radical as the idea may have been, the Wagner Societies over time have been very conservative. When Cosima announced that she was taking over the running of the festival it was met with strong objections from the Wagner Societies who believed she was unqualified. They even sent two emissaries to Bayreuth to register their disapproval. She refused to receive them. In the twenties when directors like Tiejen and Preetorius tried to 'update' productions that had been conceived back in the 1880s they met with strong opposition from the Wagner Societies, who objected to any tampering with stage instructions. On the other hand with money short for the 1924 Bayreuth season, some of the operating costs were met by a loan from the societies.

It is worth noting that the group of societies started up in order to raise funds to build the Festival theatre in Bayreuth have now grown into an International Association that holds an annual congress, made up of 136 national and regional societies with a membership of over 37,000. A quick run through the list shows that the only continent not to have at least one Wagner Society is – Antarctica!

Acknowledgements:-

Hanna Salmi - *Imagined Germany. Richard Wagner's National Utopia. German Life and Civilization, Vol. 29*

Frederic Spotts - *Bayreuth A History of the Wagner Festival*



WSOZ AGM

The AGM is to be held on Sunday, 22 May 2005 at the Auckland College of Education commencing at 7.30 pm

So far nominations have been received for the following:

President *Heath Lees*
Vice President *Ken Tomkins*
Secretary *Liz Lees*
Treasurer *Anne Doggett*
Liaison & PR Officer *Chris Brodrick*
Committee Members: (4 members)
George Risk (Membership), Neil Jenkins, Lesley Kendall.

Further nominations can be made up to, and from the floor of, the Meeting. If there are no more nominations for the committee, there is the power to co-opt.

Notice of Motion:

At the AGM last year, Mary Norton, one of the Auckland members raised the point that the major aim of the Society was considered to be the promotion of the works of Richard Wagner, rather than furthering the knowledge and appreciation of his life. Mary has now put forward the following amendment to the Rules:

2. OBJECTS - A Clause (i)

Current Wording:

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

Suggested Change:

To delete the words 'life and' from the clause.

If passed, the clause would read:

"To further the knowledge and appreciation of the works of Richard Wagner."

New Members

A big welcome to our new members:-

Joan & Marcus Poole, *Wellington*
Gaye Law, *Wellington*
John Meads & Anne Moorhead, *Wellington*
Helen Gaeta, *Auckland*
Margaret Buchanan, *Christchurch*

Membership Renewals and Donations

It is very reassuring that subscription renewals are continuing to flow in. Just over 80 percent of our members have now renewed.

We also give a big 'Thank You' to the many members who have added to their membership cheques, donations to our charitable trust, the Wagner - New Zealand Foundation. A few very generous members have given quite large sums; we thank them most heartily.

It is also very encouraging that so many members have felt able to add just that little bit extra to their subscriptions.

Thanks to all of you !

George Risk (*Membership Secretary*)

2005 Programme

Auckland

Venue- Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street, except where indicated.

Sunday, 22 May 7.30 pm

AGM and DVD of Waltraud Meier.
Venue- Auckland College of Education, Epsom Avenue, Epsom.

Sunday, 17 July 7.30 pm

Some new Wagner DVDs.

Sunday, 11 September (time to be advised)

A complete opera, with dinner during the intervals. Start time will probably be 4pm.

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

Sunday, 22 May 4pm

Wagner's Birthday Meal, DVD on Waltraud Meier and excerpts from the Stuttgart Ring

Venue- Rex Benson's house.

Sunday, 24 July 4pm

Heath Lees: 'Tristan and Isolde: Music's Love-Affair with Ideas.'

Sunday 25 September (time to be advised)

Les Holborow: 'The Philosophers who influenced Wagner in his writing of Tristan and Isolde.'

Sunday, 27 November (time to be advised)

Christmas Party

Venue- (To be advised)

Christchurch

Venue- Ilam Room, Centre for Continuing Education, Canterbury University except where indicated

Friday, 20 May 7.30pm

Wagner's birthday mid-winter pot luck dinner and BYO.

Venue- Cynthia Hawes & Andy Buchanan's, 74 Hackthorne Road, Cashmere

Friday, 12 August 7.30pm

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

Friday, 23 September 7.30pm

Act 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

Big Viola part in Tristan

In the early 20th century it was Picasso and Matisse. It carried on with Dali and by the end it was Hockney. The 21st century has started with Viola. And where, you may ask, is this leading? The answer is stage design. A recent production of Tristan and Isolde in Los Angeles and Paris has seen a collaboration between the American director Peter Sellas, the video artist Bill Viola, the musical director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Esa Pekka Salonen, and the new artistic director of the Paris Opera, Gerard Mortier, under the title 'The Tristan Project'.

The Tristan Project debuted at Los Angeles' Disney Hall home of the LAP in December last year. The three acts of the opera were presented individually in concert form on three consecutive nights. With the singers scattered throughout the auditorium, the scenic aspects of these performances were dominated by an 11 x 6 metre screen that was suspended behind the orchestra onto which Bill Viola's images - water, fire, sunsets, trees and blank-faced people - were projected.

Reaction was mixed. David Mermelstein (u.dailybulletin.com) commented "As to the interplay between Viola's giant projections and the music, opinions will vary. I couldn't effectively absorb both simultaneously. So when you wanted to hear the music, Viola's work was distracting. Yet when a particular eye-catching image emerged - say the watery lovmaking in the second act - Viola's work nearly banished the music from consciousness." While another wrote "It feels like a video to accompany a Fleetwood Mac karaoke track."

Interestingly the LA concerts were being described at the time as 'work in progress' as apart from Viola's video, there were no props or costumes. Fast-forward four months and the Tristan project has now moved to Paris where the production has been repackaged as an opera and performed in one evening. (Some people have concluded that the LA concert version was a way in which to break in the idea and test it before launching the full production on a European audience.)

So with the Tristan Project in Paris and complete with costumes, Ben Hepner and Waltraud Meier as the lovers, the critical reaction warmed up. Tim Ashley



in the Guardian for instance: "Like Nikolaus Lehnhoff at Glyndebourne two years ago, Sellars sets out to explore the metaphysics underpinning the opera's eroticism. His staging lacks Lehnhoff's coherence, though it surpasses it in power. Sellars' collaborator is video artist Bill Viola, whose film, projected on a colossal screen above the singers' heads, serves as both the set and as a commentary on the work's emotional progress. The images are frequently stunning. Flashlights flicker through the forest where the lovers are eventually hunted down. As Tristan raves about the light that has caused him to leave the land of the dead and be reborn to earthly existence, water sluices like amniotic fluid through a vast chasm. There are intermittent irritations, however. Viola aims to parallel Wagner's narrative by depicting a couple undergoing mystic purification rituals, and the images are occasionally over-dominant and too obvious.

In act one, Wagner's music and Waltraud Meier's astonishing performance tell us all we need to know about Isolde's frustration, so the sight of the on-screen couple baring all seems unnecessary. The Liebestod, with Tristan's video counterpart slowly levitating upwards in a haze of bubbles, swivels awkwardly in the direction of sci-fi. Sellars' direction of the protagonists, however, finds him at his best. (He) is also strong on the work's homo eroticism, with Tristan and Franz-Josef Selig's Mark presented as ex-lovers now hopelessly drawn to the same woman.

In the Daily Telegraph Rupert Christiansen: "In a programme note, Viola denies any intention "to illustrate or represent the story directly". Instead, his images are intended to function as "reflections of the spiritual world in the mirror of the material and the temporal." The results are not altogether successful and, inevitably, Viola sometimes

does end up redundantly illustrating what Wagner has already vividly painted. The pitfall of kitsch is not evaded - for example, the elaborate purification ritual which counterpoints Isolde's narration is both banal and distracting, and the kissing couple in the love duet look like fugitives from an ad for super-silky condoms. But elsewhere, when the images are more vague and archetypal, the effect is often sublime. Viola is a magician with power over fire and water. I shall never forget the light which grows from a tiny point to fill the entire auditorium after the drinking of the potion, or the haunted forest at the opening of Act 2, or the transfiguration which accompanies the Liebestod. At moments like these, Wagner's vision of a union-of-all-the-arts, the Gesamtkunstwerk, was newly realised."

The Tristan Project returns to Paris in November when Lisa Gasten will sing the role of Isolde.



Bill Viola was born in 1951 and is widely recognized as one of the leading video artists on the international scene. For over 30 years he has created videotapes, architectural video installations, sound environments, electronic music performances, and works for television broadcast. He lives and works in Long Beach, California.



Born in Pittsburgh in 1957, **Peter Sellars** is an American theater and opera director who is known for his radical updating of the classics. He attended Harvard University where he brought his experience of marionette theatre into a puppet version of the Ring. His productions of three Mozart operas brought him far more notice. He cast Don Giovanni as a drug baron in New York City's Spanish Harlem; set *Così fan tutte* in a seedy diner on Cape Cod; and had Figaro, in *The Marriage of Figaro*, serving a wealthy master in a luxury apartment at New York City's Trump Tower. These controversial productions have brought him both notoriety and acclaim.

Die Weltsche Act 2

Vincent Orange continues his, under the influence, dream of the missing Ring opera.

In Act II, having thus set the scene for an hour or so, we can get down to detail. Let us give our attention to a day or two in Wotan's early life. What with one thing and another, he has lost a whole heap of wisdom and with it control of the world. This he tells us in a long monologue, reminding us of the story so far (as he does from time to time in the rest of the masterpiece) and never hesitating to take a hundred bars where ten would be sufficient. He then makes his way to a great ash tree, fed at the roots by a clear spring.

There he finds three old biddies spinning away and asks if he might have a drink in order to restore his wisdom and recover his old mastery. Cue for them to tell him that he may. But the price will be nine days and nine nights hanging in torment from the great ash tree. It is never easy to acquire wisdom and power.

Cue quartet: Wotan and the three old biddies, followed by a great ballet scene: lots of young devils, male and female, clad in not very much, skipping about most fetchingly, while they string Wotan up, and set him swinging. Henceforth, Wotan will see the external world with his single eye, and understand it, as he asked. He will not see the internal world, and so understand motivations - his own or that of others. Always beware of accepting gifts from immortal spirits: there is sure to be a fishhook in there somewhere.

Cue magnificent solo. Every night, while hanging about, Wotan dreams. He begins to understand the forces that sustain the world: air, fire, water and earth. By the time he is released, however, after nine days and nine nights of excruciating agony, he is somewhat cross. He reaches up and tears a branch from the great ash tree. Mighty moment this. Everything that subsequently happens in the masterpiece springs from this action. Reprise of every leitmotif in the whole work, plus a triumphantly tragic, tragically triumphant new motif: 'a little ripper', as it will come to be known to audiences across the world down the ages to come.

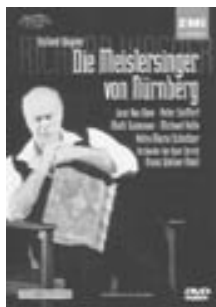
Wotan trims the branch into a spear. On the shaft, in tiny writing, he carves details of treaties made with the four elements. Then he establishes mastery over his own sky people: Fricka, whom he marries, her brothers Donner and Froh, and her sister Freia. They all get much better parts in Act II of this opera than in The Rheingold, especially Freia, who is not only beautiful (and suitably clad in very little) but in



charge of an orchard where the apples are full of viagra. Cue another quartet, helped along by the aforementioned young devils as a chorus, where the fortified apples are picked, eaten, and the effects of eating them excitingly demonstrated. Here there is scope for developing unrestrained variations on the stimulating music and actions suggested by Tannhauser's Venusberg.

Wotan then establishes his rule over Loge, the fire god. Wisdom is all very well in its place, but rulers need a good spin doctor, someone who is smooth and shifty, cunning and corrupt, but with a pleasing appearance of honesty and deep concern for the victims of society and remedying treaty issues. Loge is just the chap for all this. Excellent opportunity here for a nicely contrasted duet. Wotan all grand nobility; deeply moving, profoundly affected by the world's many ills - while Loge crudely reveals the skull beneath the skin. End of Act II.

Another DVD



The DVDs are coming thick and fast. Just released: another Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Hot on the heels of the Metropolitan production, this version is from the same stable as the recent Zurich Tannhauser with conductor Franz Welser-Möst and the Orchestra of Zurich Opera. The production is directed by Nikolaus Lehnhoff, (who is mentioned in the Tristan project story) and stars José Van Dam as Sachs and Peter Seiffert as Walter. Currently the DVD is only available through Amazon.com's American site but expect to see it generally available quite soon.

Royal Opera @ Royal Albert

In last month's newsletter I told the story of the lengths taken to get tickets to 'the' opera event on the London opera calendar - Die Walküre at Covent Garden with Bryn Terfel, Plácido Domingo, Waltraud Meier and Lisa Gasteen. Here's a follow up and what's more a scoop! Well almost!!!!

Sunday 17 April. I undertake my internet rounds of various web site in search of news and gossip for this edition of the Newsletter. Peter Sellars' new production of Tristan & Isolde in Paris produces some potential information but an article about Dame Nelli Melba singing Brünnhilde and Isolde is too.....too....dry!

Trying to think laterally, I thought I'd check out singers' personal web sites. The first call was Waltraud Meier whose DVD has featured in Auckland and Christchurch meetings and will soon be shown in Wellington.

That's interesting, she was born in Würzburg. I wonder if she was one of the 2,600 members of the Wagner Society? Hmmmm let's have a look at her schedule for 2005. She's in Paris at the moment, in May/June she will sing in the Munich Tannhauser before moving to Vienna to sing Kundry in Parsifal. In July she crosses the channel to sing in Covent Garden's Die Walküre - I can't wait for that! But what have we here? 18 July, London, Royal Albert Hall, conductor Antonio Pappano, Wagner, Walküre, Sieglinde. Interesting!!!! Pappano and Meier are both in the Covent Garden production of the same opera that finishes its run on 15 July. Well, well, well. They must be putting on a concert performance in the grand old Albert Hall (seating capacity 5,000 approx). Better check it out!

The Royal Opera web site has no mention of any concert. Plácido Domingo's and Bryn Terfel's sites also reveal nothing.

The Royal Albert Hall's site confirms that there is indeed a concert on that night. But what have we here? The concert on 18 July starts at 5.00pm - Got it! I'll take that as confirmation! It appears that the performance is to be part of the BBC Proms that take place at the RAH each summer! Is this The Royal Opera's way of getting one up on their rivals, English National Opera? Last year in an effort to broaden opera's appeal, ENO took Die Walküre to the Glastonbury Festival, one of the UK's longest running open air rock/jazz festivals.

Sure enough by the end of April the assumption is confirmed: a full concert performance of Die Walküre with Domingo, Terfel, Meier et al!

For those in London on 18 July tickets can be purchased from www.royalalberthall.com. Be quick if you want to go!