

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER



Movies! ... and Wagner and ... and Wagner and ... Movies!

Isn't it interesting that so many of the subjects we present at WSNZ meetings include the word "and"?

Isolde knew the strength of "and" — such a tiny little word, she said, yet it was the bridge upon which language could link her closely with Tristan.

The reason why Wagner keeps having the word "and" associated with him is simply because he was involved with so many people and in so many areas. After his death, his influence became so huge that he has been taken over by a bewildering number of disciples and causes, yes and factions and enemies too.

In the last few months the WSNZ up and down the country have been thinking about Wagner and Bach, Wagner and Liszt, Wagner and the Visual Arts, Wagner and the French,

Wagner and Mallarmé, and even Wagner and the rubber barons of the Amazon! Not bad for the son of a police official who never did well at school, but dreamed only of music and drama.

Well, from the same team that brought you Wagner and the Visual Arts, Chris Brodrick is now bringing you Wagner and the Movies, first screening in Christchurch early in August, and then to go on tour at a Wagner Society near you later in the year. Prepare to be Amazed!

Astonished! Agog! Affected! Alarmed! . . . at the more-than-70 examples Chris has been able to put together. Even he didn't realize how much Wagner has been pillaged over 80 years of film sound-track, and how absolutely fundamental he has been for the way modern film composers try to make music work in film.

Find out more on page 2. . .



PROGRAMMES AROUND NEW ZEALAND FOR 2007

AUCKLAND

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

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 10 June, 4pm

Sunday 26 August, 4pm

Sunday 30 September, 4pm

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 the new book (NOTE date change).

CHRISTCHURCH

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 & 2/12)

Wagner's Birthday. Pot Luck Dinner

at Bert and Noelle Brownlie's home, 66 Clyde Road.

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.

Uncovering Wagner's Soundtracks: "Darling, They're Playing His Tune"

Later this year, Chris Brodrick will present "Wagner at the Movies", an opportunity to see clips from a collection of over 70 films that feature Wagner and/or his music. In this issue, and the next, Chris provides this introduction.

In 1849, when Richard Wagner proposed the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or an artistic effort coordinating all the arts, the motion picture camera was still 30 years in the future, silent films with a narrative structure were a further 20 years away and the first feature film with sound, 'The Jazz Singer', wouldn't be released until 1927.

Yet when you stop to consider it, *Gesamtkunstwerk* is an apt definition of a motion picture bringing together of all the arts disciplines under one artistic direction. Anyone who has sat through the credits at the end of a film will see the large number of disciplines and people involved. It is appropriate then that Wagner's music has



Hollywood composer Max Steiner, godson of Richard Strauss

his Music-dramas, has also been used to great effect by film composers. Who can forget John Williams' 'Jaws' theme that instantly warns of danger by implying the shark's presence

the godson of Richard Strauss, was often credited as the man who invented movie music. His response was "Nonsense. The idea originated with Richard Wagner. If Wagner had lived in this century, he would have been the Number One film composer."

The third area of Wagner's involvement in the movies is the use of his music either by direct quote or by adaptation. In the early days of the cinema the adaptation was common and some old movie scores are an

absolute delight to listen to. You get Tchaikovsky into Wagner and on to Mendelssohn all done to match the action on screen. In a 1930's Flash

"If Wagner had lived in this century, he would have been the Number One film composer."

— Max Steiner

Gordon film there is even a fight scene accompanied by music from the Prelude to 'Parsifal'!

These days it is far more likely that direct quotes of Wagner's music will be used. The 'Wedding March' from Act Three of *Lohengrin* ('Here comes the Bride') would certainly be the most commonly used with just about every film wedding you can think of including it whenever possible. Another enormously popular piece is 'The Ride of the Valkyries' which moved in to mainstream cinema with Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film 'Apocalypse Now!'

And there's much more to come; some you wouldn't believe. But in the meantime here's a question:

Can you name the three most used 'classical' composers in film?

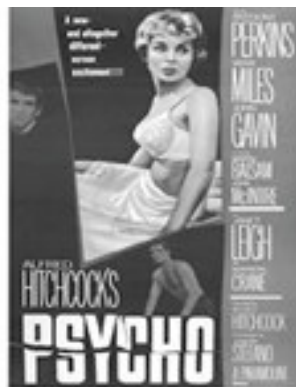
Answer next issue.



Bernard Hermann, *doyen* of all Hollywood film composers

been such a large part of the history of music in film from the early days of silent cinema right through to the present day.

Wagner's influence in the film medium goes a lot deeper. Firstly, music as a psychological tool, which he exploited in



Vivien Leigh in "Psycho" with Hermann's "truly terrifying music"

even when it can't be seen on screen? What about the famous shower scene in Hitchcock's 'Psycho' that is underscored by Bernard Hermann's truly terrifying music

Secondly, film composers like Williams, Hermann and



Mr. Musical Success Himself, John Williams "a nod to the Master"



The Shark in "Jaws" with Williams' biting music to match



Lord of the Rings Composer Howard Shore. Before even starting on these film-scores, he "studied Wagner's structure".

THE MANAUS RING OBSERVED

Aidan Lang, director of The 2005 "Ring" in Manaus, Brazil, recently spoke to Auckland and Christchurch centres about the story of this unique production. He will visit the Wellington centre in August.

At the time, an Australian party went to Manaus to see this Ring, and one of them, Jan Bowen of the NSW Wagner Society, wrote this review on her return. It is reprinted here by permission.

The proverbial pinch test failed miserably. No matter how much self-inflicted pain I administered to my bare arm, I couldn't believe that here I was, on the balcony of an Italianate opera house in the middle of the Amazon jungle, spending the interval break surrounded by flickering candelabra and gleaming silver, and consuming a potentially dangerously concentration-impairing banquet.

The city of Manaus in the remote northwest of Brazil, accessible only by air or a 16,000k river journey, last year staged the first performance of the Ring ever produced in Brazil. As a committed Wagner groupie, I just had to go.

Manaus is situated at the 'meeting of the waters' where the Rio Negro in Venezuela and the Rio Solimões in Peru join together to form the mighty Amazon. Founded in 1669 by Portuguese settlers as a defence against any Spaniards foolhardy enough to venture up the enormous, rapid-infested waterway, and named after the indigenous inhabitants, the Manaós, Manaus was nothing more than a tiny, isolated for more than 200 years until the 1890s rubber boom put it on the map.

For a status-seeking rubber baron, what greater symbol of luxury and culture could there be than an opera house? So one enterprising entrepreneur used his incalculable wealth to build the Teatro Amazonas. Wrought iron staircases were imported from England, crystal chandeliers from France, gilded mirrors from Italy, and stone from Portugal. All had to be transported on barges up the river. The Italian painter Domenico de Angelis did the exquisite ceiling panels, while the outside cupola was covered with 36,000 golden tiles, gleaming from the elevated site for miles around.

The opera house opened with a gala performance on New Year's Eve, 1896, and for a few years, it attracted Europe's leading singers. Even Caruso, it is said, was booked to perform, although he never actually made it.

Then the British smuggled the rubber seeds to Malaysia, scientists developed synthetics, and the Brazilian rubber economy went bust. The building stood rotting in the tropical heat for nearly 90 years.

A decade or so ago, the civic fathers recognised its tourist potential, restored it, and since its re-opening in 1996, have held an annual opera festival unique in the world, including over four years, one Ring opera a year, culminating in the full cycle last year.

Most of us in the tour group wondered how a remote Brazilian town, not small — population 1.8 million — but scungy industrial, where more than half the inhabitants are illiterate, could possibly come up with something even faintly comparably with Bayreuth, Berlin, or for that matter, Adelaide.

Well, it certainly gave them a run for their money, and enjoyment was by no means dependent on the exotic appeal of the location. Director Aidan Lang, veteran of Glyndebourne and Covent Garden, with imaginative effect, adopted an environmental theme appropriate to the threatened jungle surroundings. In *Das Rheingold*, the Rhine daughters cavorted in large, see-through boxes holding DNA molecules. Siegfried had stylised, molecular "trees". In one memorable scene, Erda had to drag herself up a huge spiral ladder, causing the audience to hold its breath in sympathy at the difficulty she must have had in actually singing at the same time. It all seemed unnecessarily taxing until someone pointed out to the less scientifically literate members of the group that the double helix is the basic



The Opera House at Manaus provides a magnificent back-drop for an open-air concert

building-block of DNA.

The interference with Nature theme was a little less successfully dealt with in *Götterdämmerung*, which opened with Gunther bending over an unconscious Gutrune on an operating table. There were some suggestions in the press that he was performing a lobotomy but since he was consistently focused on the other end of her body, some kind of reproductive procedure seemed more likely. The hospital setting fitted rather better with the memory drugs given to Siegfried but it must be said that the full meaning of the metaphor eluded most of us.

By and large though, it was a thought-provoking production that worked well. Few could disagree with the premise that unless our leaders, represented by Wotan and his gods, act more decisively to save the world's natural resources such as rainforests, the crumbling of Valhalla will be as nothing compared with the environmental apocalypse that will occur.

In vocal terms, the Manaus Ring may not have had a Plácido Domingo or a Waltraud Meier — but how many places do? — and American Maria Russo's experienced and passionately realised Brünnhilde was eminently suited to the 700-seat auditorium. Canadian Alan Woodrow drew on his ringing tenor and experience as the reigning Siegfried in many major opera houses, to convey the ambiguities of that character to great effect. Brazilian Licio Bruno's Wotan was a bit short on gravitas for a head god, but was vocally superb with a warm and powerful bass baritone. Stephen Bronk was a sensation as Fasolt, Hunding and Hagen. Then there was Thomas Rolf Truhitte as Siegmund — tall, handsome, ardent, with a magnificent tenor

voice — we Aussies invited him to our shores on the spot.

The Amazon Philharmonic Orchestra consisted of mostly young Eastern European players, lured there by better pay and conditions than they could get at home, and nurtured over the last four years by artistic director Luiz Fernando Malheiro. What the 70-strong band lacked in number they made up for by playing their collective heart out. Although the 40-degree-plus heat and 98 per cent humidity must have caused some severe culture shock. Tickets for the event, by the way, cost \$25 per performance!

Since this was *The Ring*, our artistic pilgrimage was interspersed with sightseeing on the days off. We went gliding up Amazon tributaries in a canoe, mesmerized by monkeys swinging from tree to tree, indigenous kids who invited us to 'pat' a boa constrictor, and a caiman sunning itself precariously on a giant lily pad. We took a trip into the jungle to see exotic flora and fauna, including to our delight, a sloth, high in a tree and living up to its name with exaggeratedly slow gyrations. Hiring a small plane we looked down on fingers of jungle protruding resolutely into the huge expanse of water, and marvelled at the meeting of the two rivers which flow side by side, the Negro black and the Solimões yellow, neither conceding blending rights to the other for miles. Even the mighty Rhine is still only one river!

Wagner lived to see his Ring cycle performed during only one festival at Bayreuth, in 1876. How would he have felt if he had known that, more than a hundred years and several hundred performances later, Ring-groupies from Australia would be beating a path to the Amazon jungle to see his work performed yet again?

Margaret Medlyn and Bruce Greenfield — A Wagner Concert

St Andrew's on the Terrace, Wellington, 22 April

Reviewed by Wellington member, Lindis Taylor

New Zealand's best Wagner soprano, Margaret Medlyn, gave her Wellington audience the chance to hear her in the repertoire that our professional companies are unlikely to tackle, at least in the near future.

After the diverting introduction by Heath Lees, the recital opened, appropriately, with an instrumental work: Liszt's transcription entitled simply, *Walhall* (Der Ring des Nibelungen), G 449 (the Grove catalogue), which is the closing scene of *Das Rheingold*, expressing the ecstatic, if ironic, pride of Wotan as the gods enter their new castle.

Margaret opened with Sieglinde's 'Du bist der Lenz', her outpouring of love after Siegmund's 'Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond' in *Die Walküre*. This was something of a warm-up phase, passionate as it was, and it led fruitfully to her intelligent and sensuous performance of the *Wesendonck Lieder* which come chronologically between the composition of *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*, from which her next excerpt came.

Brünnhilde's 'Zu neuen Taten' comes at that moment in the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung* where the audience anguishes over her credulous acceptance of her immature lover's departure, virtually during the honeymoon, to pursue foolish, chivalric adventures. Medlyn's passionate interpretation made us forgive her blindness.

The second half also began with Greenfield playing Wagner-via-Liszt: the fiendish transcription of the *Liebestod* (G 447). It helped in the aural bewitching that Bruce Greenfield's piano accompaniments brought about, as the piano came to seem a very adequate substitute for an orchestra. He remarked, interestingly,

that the playing of Liszt's piano transcription of the *Liebestod*, which naturally incorporates the vocal part, presents difficulties when a few minutes later he plays the bare piano reduction of the orchestral accompaniment.



Margaret sang most of the major episodes from each of the three acts of *Tristan und Isolde*: the long *Narration and Curse* from Act I, 'Wie lengt er sicher den Kiel...'; leading to 'O blinde Augen...'. There followed *Isolde's* determined refusal to heed *Brangäne's* caution immediately before the great love scene. Finally she sang the *Liebestod*, from the moment when *Tristan* dies.

In an unadorned church, with no help even from atmospheric lighting, these great, hugely taxing episodes, performed with such whole-hearted commitment by both soprano and pianist, was a feat that deserved a proper setting, with a large audience and reviews in the daily press.

Such will arise in Wellington on 7 September however when the NZSO will provide her with a platform to sing the *Liebestod* and the *Immolation* scene from *Götterdämmerung*. One might ask, nevertheless, is that all they can manage for a public that gets less live Wagner than any other western country? – or increasing numbers of Asian countries.

And what a classy programme booklet, with full texts, the gift of Roger Joyce!

NEW MEMBERS:

A big Wagnerian
Hello and Welcome
to the following people who
have recently joined the
Wagner Society of
New Zealand:



Mrs Diana Bridge Wellington
Mr Nick Bridge Wellington
Ms Annabelle Cheetham Wellington
Ms Margaret Casey Auckland
Mrs Elizabeth Christmas Wellington
Dr Ivan Connell Auckland
Mr Warick Dunn Wellington
Mr Paul Fielder Auckland
Mr Stephen Fitzgerald Auckland
Ms Judith Geare Wellington
Dr John Grigor Auckland
Ms Deborah Keating Wellington
Ms Fiona Luey Wellington
Ms Bett-Lorraine McIlroy Auckland
Ms Kate MacGregor Tauranga
Ms Marilyn Scott Wellington
Mrs Valerie Turner Auckland
Ms Frances Wilson Auckland

A REMINDER

For Wellington members. Heath Lees will be doing a presentation on **Wagner and Liszt**. The two composers were very different – almost contradictory – as musicians yet could almost not have existed without each other. Liszt actually died at Bayreuth, a place he loved.

To Wagner, Liszt was a banker, a poseur, an exhibitionist, a powerful friend and contact, a producer of his operas, oh and yes, a father-in-law too, in one of Nature's more ironic jokes.

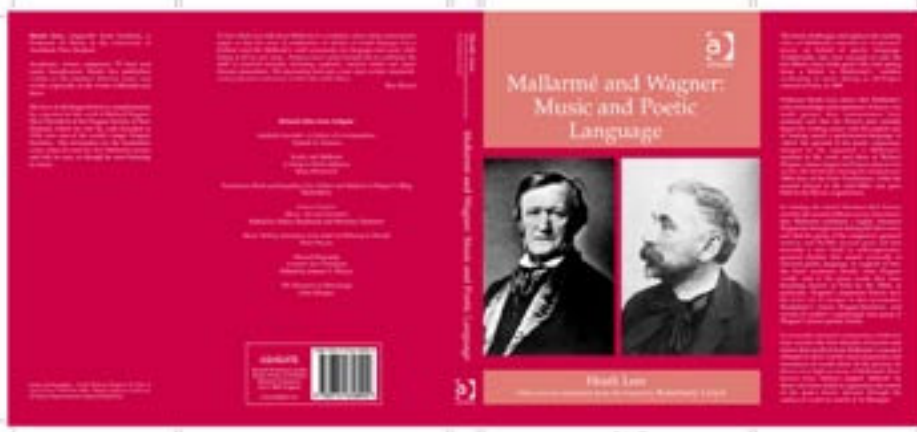
Wagner had little time for Liszt except in terms of money and influence but Liszt's transcriptions of Wagner's works for piano brought that music to thousands of concertgoers who might never have heard it.

Massey Theatre, **10 June, at 4pm.**

A contemporary cartoon of the Wagner-Liszt connection. Wagner welcomes his father-in-law into Heaven, having got there three years earlier, and (no doubt) taken it over.



... And lastly a sneak preview of the cover of Heath Lees' book, being published in just a few weeks..



NZ OPERA SOCIETY

DVD SHOWINGS (AUCKLAND)

9 May *L'Upupa* (Henze)

13 June *Roberto Devereux* (Donizetti)

In the Raye Freedman Theatre

Screenings 7.30pm

EGGS, Silver Road, Epsom. Ph: 625 7225

WELLINGTON

17 May, *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo)

14 June *The Turn of the Screw* (Britten)

19 July *L'Elisir d'Amore* (Donizetti)

In National Library Auditorium, 6.30pm

(Ph: 232-5786)