

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

Be in Erly!



It used to be said that you should join the Navy to see the world, but these days with the senior service's fire power under the ocean, there isn't very much for a sailor to see, if you'll pardon the pun! Now if he or she were a member of the New Zealand Wagner Society the world, in all it's Wagnerian glory, would await them.

2007 will be a busy year of travel for some of our members. In July, leiderhosen will be packed for a trip to the Austrian Tyrol, more specifically Erl. This small town that lies between Salzburg and Innsbruck has, since 1613, performed a Passion Play every eight years. In 1959 a theatre was built and in the years between Passions, orchestral concerts and semi staged operas have been staged. In 2003 under the guidance of Festival Director Gustav Kuhn, Erl began to mount Festivals of Wagner's work and in particular the *Ring*. These modest productions do not have the multi million dollar budgets of major opera houses and as a result could be viewed as being more authentically Wagnerian.

Bill Kenny of the Musicweb described the 2004 *Ring*:-*"The arrangement of the Passionsspielhaus requires the orchestra and conductor to be behind the singers, who play out the drama from a very small stage using limited sets and props. The orchestra sits inside an acoustic tent (used effectively throughout as part of the lighting plot). . . . There was an orchestra of some 120 players and a truly wonderful, sixty-strong chorus from Poland. Every inch of the auditorium is put to some purpose: the Nibelungs play their anvils from the side aisles, and then run through the whole hall when terrified by Alberich. Characters often enter from behind the audience, Siegfried's boat is carried down the centre aisle by firemen, and horn players pop up in the audience. This, plus the involvement of the firemen and lots of local schoolchildren makes for exciting theatre."*

The 2007 eight day Festival opens on Friday 6 July with *Das Rheingold* followed on succeeding nights by *Die Walküre*; *Siegfried Act 1 & 2* plus a reading of *Meistersinger*; *Tristan und Isolde*; *Meistersinger* (reading) & *Siegfried Act 3*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Parsifal* and concludes, on 13 July, with Brahms Symphonies Nos 1 & 2.

For those wishing to find out more information about Erl try these web sites:-

<http://members.virtualtourist.com/vt/gm/330859>

[www.erl.at/tourismus/uk/natur.shtml](http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/7c244/50c6b/)
<http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/7c244/50c6b/>

In October 2007 the WSNZ plans another trip. This time it will be a quick visit to Sydney for a performance of Australian Opera's revival of Elke Neidhardt's production of *Tannhäuser*. The cast includes Glenn Winslade as Tannhäuser, Daniel Sumegi as Hermann Landgraf and Bernadette Cullen as Venus. AO's musical director, Richard Hickox will conduct. The WSNZ tour departs New Zealand on 26 October and returns on Sunday 28 October. For those who like to cram as much opera as they can into these trips you might be interested to learn that Gilbert & Sullivan's *Gondoliers* will be performed on Friday 26 October.

Anyone who is interested in either of these trips should contact Liz: Email handelees@xtra.co.nz or Ph. (09) 528 1184.

PROGRAMMES AROUND NEW ZEALAND FOR 2006

AUCKLAND

Sun 3 Dec, 7.30pm

At Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street

Christmas Extras: Requests, round-ups and a few surprises

WELLINGTON

Sun 26 Nov, 4.00pm

At Massey Museum Theatre, Buckle Street

Tribute to Birgit Nilsson: Les Austin

CHRISTCHURCH

Sun 3 Dec, 6.30pm

At John and Ann Pattinson's home, 37b Highland Place, Avonhead.

Christmas BBQ

Das Rheingold at Riga Opera Festival

Earlier this year Christchurch members Tony and Jonet Ward visited the Latvian capital Riga, where Wagner was music director (1837-39), to attend a production of *Rheingold*. Here is Jonet's report.

This production which was a joint production by the Latvian National Opera and the Bergen International Festival was quite a contrast to the *Rheingold* we saw in Copenhagen (see Gloria Streat's report in the July Newsletter). The Director, Stefan Herheim was interested in revising the myths created by Wagner as well as those woven around Wagner himself during his lifetime and after his death. During the Prelude, Wagner was seen writing on the curtain "Es war einmal..." (once upon a time...) and, throughout the opera, Wagner appeared on stage at various times in his life so that as the story of power and love developed so did the story of the composer's personality, work and interpretations.

Wotan carried the story in a large book that he handed to other characters when it was their turn to continue singing the tale. When things did not go according to plan, a page was torn from the book, scrunched up and thrown on the floor by the affected person.

In Scene 1, the Rhinemaidens were dressed as school girls in sailor suits with pigtailed; they sat at revolving desks. Alberich was a lecherous old teacher who tried to seduce the girls in a very sexy scene.

Scene 2 opened with the men dressed as late 19th century upper class people. The Giants were in suits with enormous masked heads that they took off when singing. One carried a large yellow hammer, the other a large sickle. In telling the myth of our civilization the director chose suggestive images to illustrate social injustice due to working class exploitation.

In Scene 3, all Nibelungs were dressed as Nazi storm troopers and Alberich was made up as Hitler. There was a large turning swastika in the background. The gold hoard consisted of a large crucifix, a Jewish menorah, the Riga Freedom Monument (which celebrates freedom from Russia), a sitting Buddha, Shiva with six arms, a shield, a sitting Greek statue and other objects. When Alberich was captured Wotan cut off his ring finger sucked the ring off and spat it on the floor before putting it on his own finger.

All the gods were in present day evening dress in Scene 4, even the Giants and Freia came back wearing an evening dress. Valhalla was portrayed as the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, a Valhalla to Wagner's work.

The cast which was composed almost exclusively of Latvians and Scandinavians



A Riga Rheingold curtain call with the Bayreuth Festspielhaus as Valhalla.

was excellent throughout making it a most enjoyable production that worked at many levels and gave us plenty to think about.

The Riga Opera Festival lasts for two weeks each June. Next year *Die Walküre* will be produced by the combined Latvian-Bergen team, followed by *Siegfried* in 2008 and *Götterdämmerung* in 2009. The complete *Ring Cycle* is planned for 2010.

New members:

A big welcome to new members

Dr G & Mrs M Fogelberg, Wellington

Dr C & Mrs P Mellow, Whitford

Mr T Flower, Waiuku

Dr M & Mrs A Shackleton, Wellington

Ms C Halliday, Auckland

Books:

A Backward Glance – 20 years of the Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia by Christopher Fyfe.

This book has very kindly been sent to us by Bruce Pearce, President of the Richard Wagner Society of WA. It's an interesting look back over the Society's first 20 years of existence. If anyone would like to borrow it at any stage, please contact Liz - 09-528-1184.

Wagner & the Visual Arts –

We can report that the idea of converting Chris Brodrick's talk into book form is currently under investigation with a publisher, image rights being the most complex hurdle.

NZSO

An all Wagner Concert has been scheduled for Wellington on Friday 7 September 2007. Conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin the NZSO will perform overtures and preludes to *Meistersinger*, *Lohengrin* (Act 1), *Tristan, Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*. In addition Margaret Medlyn will sing the Immolation Scene from *Götterdämmerung* and the Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde*.

NZ Opera Society

DVD Showings - Wellington

16 Nov., 7.30: Nat. Library Auditorium.

La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein (Offenbach)

Ph: 04 232 5786

20 years old!

Happy Birthday to the Wagner Societies of South and Western Australia who recently celebrated their 20th birthdays.

Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language

In the last issue, Heath Lees drew on parts of his forthcoming book to show how the French poet Mallarmé tried to "musicalise" his language using Wagner's music and ideas. In this concluding article, Heath concentrates on the last dozen years of Mallarmé's life, and two specially Wagnerian works that the poet wrote.

The tenth of April 1885 was a memorable date for Stéphane Mallarmé. It was a Good Friday, and that evening, following the French tradition of holding *spiritual* concerts on Holy Days, the famous Parisian conductor Charles Lamoureux had scheduled an all-Wagner event. The programme was huge. There were three overtures: *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*. The preludes to *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde* were also performed, plus some lengthy excerpts from *Lohengrin*, *Götterdämmerung* and *Die Meistersinger*. As if that weren't enough, some lesser known pieces including the *Faust Overture* and the *Grand Festival March* appeared as well.

Mallarmé had been invited to the concert by his friend Édouard Dujardin (right), the editor of what was to become a very important Wagner journal called the *Revue wagnérienne*. Dujardin was to claim for the rest



of his life that, thanks to his invitation, Mallarmé came as an interested member of the audience, was converted during the playing, and left the hall as a totally committed Wagnerian, suddenly turned on to the power of music.

In fact, Mallarmé was much more musically aware than people have thought, and it's now clear that twenty-five years earlier, as a young man, he had been much affected by the scandal that occurred when Paris audiences booed *Tannhäuser* off the stage in 1861. Nevertheless, Mallarmé was mightily affected by the highly intense, almost spiritual atmosphere of the Good Friday Wagner-concert in 1885, and began to dream once more of the possibility of a magical, spellbinding poetry that might evoke the same sort of semi-religious public response.

Part of this dream was expressed in an article called *Réverie*, or, in its full title: *Richard Wagner, Réverie d'un poète français*. The article appeared in Dujardin's *Revue wagnérienne* and was written in a new, Wagnerian style of phrases that moved forward wave upon wave. It also introduced a new type of expression that seemed to hint at a whole network of emotional nuances and overtones, like the overtones of musical notes. The article was not really in the form of poetry, but appeared on the page as a piece of prose, yet the language was highly poetic. This itself was

Wagner-derived since, at the time, many people described Wagner's music, from *Tristan* onwards, as having broken through the continuous, four-bar phrases of the *Italian melodies*, and was now moving continuously, wave upon wave, like a kind of musical prose. In this article then, Mallarmé seemed to be modelling his writing on such musical prose (he called it *half-article, half-poem-in-prose*).

Unlike many of the circle around Dujardin's *Revue wagnérienne*, Mallarmé thought deeply about Wagner and Wagnerism, and the *Réverie* contains parts that are critical, even regretful, about Wagner. At the start, Mallarmé recalled those monumental moments in a country when poetry would be written and read as the noble marker of great events. Now, he says, music has arrived and become the nation's main performance art, with no need of great occasions or public festivals, yet the intensely involved response of an audience, especially a Wagner audience, was undeniable. Mallarmé reluctantly admitted that poetry had now lost its public place to music, but in the *Réverie* he felt that if he could only re-invent language so that it acted like music, then he could restore its status. To do this, he downplayed the information-giving content of language, and made his prose musically suggestive, full of hidden associations and fertile symbols. In effect, he tried to fashion his prose so that it worked *as though* it were really poetry — or better still, as though it were really music, yet with a word-influence behind it that also imparted ideas and ignited thoughts for those who really read and savoured it.

Mallarmé praised Wagner for having arrived at an art that had a transforming effect about it in the way it acted upon the senses, the emotions and the mind all at once, and never lowered itself to merely telling a story on a stage. The way Wagner had brought words and music together was, said Mallarmé, "*le plus compréhensif encore*" ("*the most all-embracing yet*"). But he felt that there was still more to be done and that Wagner was not, as his French disciples insisted, the be-all and end-all of art. Mallarmé actually disliked Wagner's primitive myths, describing them as a step backwards from modern society. He also felt that German music went all-out to be emotionally overpowering, whereas French music had still something important to offer in its greater sense of perspective and order.

In the light of these criticisms, scholars have often assumed that Mallarmé was actually attacking Wagner, trying to cut him and his music down to size. They usually base this on a part that seems to suggest that Mallarmé is blaming Wagner for having merely juxtaposed his music alongside the stage-play, to *pep up* the experience, rather than achieve that deeply artistic *fusion* of music, words and stage that Wagner always claimed in his writings. The mistake here is that, in the part these scholars are referring to, Mallarmé is not blaming Wagner for this, but actually re-telling Wagner's own



Stéphane Mallarmé

criticism of himself when, as a young composer in the days of *Die Feen* and *Rienzi*, he did indeed resort to the old style of *juxtaposing* pretty tunes alongside words. But from *Dutchman* onwards, his path had become clear, and his art changed in favour of a new joining-together of words, music and stage.

To understand this, one has to read a booklet called *Lettre sur la musique* that Wagner wrote in 1860, to try to introduce the French to the eventually ill-fated performances of *Tannhäuser*. There, Wagner criticises his early works for being just *typical* operas, but then he goes on to show how his art began to develop into a much deeper form of music-drama. Mallarmé had obviously studied this booklet of Wagner's, and understood what Wagner was criticising in his early work. He reproduced it faithfully in the poetic course of his *Réverie* but it has always been misunderstood as his own criticism of Wagner.

Fired up by this seeming anti-Wagner tone, writers have moved on to Mallarmé's second contribution to Dujardin's journal, the sonnet *Hommage (à Wagner)* and they have said that its sometimes *meaningless* language means that Mallarmé was really writing an anti-homage, sending up the composer in nonsense words.

On the face of it, the sense of the language is difficult to get to. But remember what we said about the *Réverie*, namely that Mallarmé was trying, under Wagner's example, to make words less information-heavy and more musically suggestive. In the last WSNZ Newsletter, we saw how the line

Trompettes tout haut d'or pâmé sur les vélins was not just meaningless overdone word-spinning (*trumpets of gold from on high swooning on the vellums*) but had a deeply layered Wagnerian content built in because the first half of the line suggests one of Wagner's leitmotifs for the gold in the Rhine:



The second half of this line is at least as interesting — despite the fact that most people claim they have *no idea* what it means! It's the dictionary that Mallarmé used (*Littre's Dictionary*) that opens the matter up by pointing out a meaning of the word *pâmé* in the context of

heraldry. It defines *pâmé* as a coat-of-arms device, and *vélin* as an embroiderer's term for the basic material through which the threads are worked — especially, says the dictionary, in the case of rich embroidery with specially prominent gold or silver threads. In this light therefore, Mallarmé's line can be seen to be referring to the shaping of particularly rich musical threads in making up a coat-of-arms.

One can easily apply this now to the Wagnerian leitmotif, which was able to *thread* so many layers of meaning into Wagner's mature Music-Dramas, yet actually began its life as a device of identity that could signify (or *herald*) a particular person, event or emotion. In the early days of Wagnerism, some commentators were highly intrigued by these suggestive musical emblems. The composer/pianist Liszt's book *Lohengrin et Tannhäuser de Richard Wagner* (1851) treats Wagner's early leitmotifs as an inventive means of description in music, but one that also provides signifying points of dynamic, focus and shape throughout the drama. Ten years later, in his famous booklet *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris*, Baudelaire chose the verb *blasonner*, from the vocabulary of heraldry, to describe the leitmotifs as a kind of musical coat-of-arms:

Chaque personnage est, pour ainsi dire, blasonné par la mélodie qui représente son caractère moral et le rôle qu'il est appelé à jouer dans la fable.

[each character is, so to speak, emblazoned with the melody that represents his or her moral nature and the role that they are called on to perform in the story].

In the light of all this, the line-

Trompettes tout haut d'or pâmé sur les vélins

is in fact combining the musical effect of leitmotif with its proper Wagnerian conception and Mallarmé is actually *performing* a similar kind of leitmotif process through the fusion of sound and idea (the sound of the theme and the way it is *threaded* through the whole). This is not the work of someone trying to cut Wagner down to size. This is a *homage* from one who was so impressed with Wagner's achievement that he strove to assimilate it within his own work, and to develop it further.

It is this view of Mallarmé, as a thinking follower of Wagner, and a poetic builder upon Wagner's legacy, that I try to project in this forthcoming book. I hope it will change the accepted view of the two of them in open opposition: of Mallarmé as a surly, dispossessed French poet in the face of Wagner as a triumphant German musician. The two of them were much more on the same side than people have realised, and they shared the same approach. This was why Wagner always referred to the texts of his music-dramas as poems, and Mallarmé always insisted that he "*made Music . . . magically brought into being by certain arrangements of words*".

These two 19th-century artists never met, yet each of them was bent on making the same kind of music-poetry. Only their so-called supporters have kept them apart.

Farewell...

The first newsletter this year reported the death of the great Birgit Nilsson so it is sad that this last issue for 2006 should have to report another four singers who have gone to Valhalla.

In September Nilsson's great friend and colleague **Astrid Varnay** died in Berlin aged 88. She was born in Stockholm in 1918 to Hungarian parents who were both opera singers working in Oslo. Legend has it that baby Astrid was put to sleep in a drawer in the dressing room of Kirsten Flagstad.

In the 1920's the Varnay family moved to the United States where Astrid started her singing studies. By the age of 22 she knew 15 dramatic roles, 11 by Wagner.

On 6 Dec 1941, the day before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the 23 year old Varnay, who had never sung on a stage, made her debut at the New York Metropolitan Opera. She was called, at the last minute, to substitute Lotte Lehmann as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*. Six days later she was back singing in the same production, again as a substitute but this time replacing Helen Traubel as Brünnhilde.

When in 1951 Flagstad declined an invitation to take part in the the first post-war Bayreuth Festival she recommended Varnay to Wieland Wagner. From this point Varnay's European career took off and when she fell out with the then general manager of the Metropolitan, Rudolf Bing, she had no difficulty in basing herself in Europe, around such opera houses as Munich, Berlin, Vienna, Paris and Bayreuth where she remained a regular until 1968.

Varnay was famous for the roles of Isolde, Brünnhilde, Ortrud (in *Lohengrin*) and Elektra; while her vocal technique was never as rock-solid as those of Flagstad and Nilsson, her electrifying stage presence and dramatic intensity remain legendary and led to the famous question posed by Wieland Wagner when defending his abstract Bayreuth productions: "Why do I need a tree on stage when I have Astrid Varnay?"

In August another of last century's great sopranos died. Although not 'known' as a Wagner singer, more acclaimed for her Mozart, Strauss and Wolf, **Elizabeth Schwarzkopf** did have an association with Wagner early in her career. In 1938 she made her debut at the Deutsche Oper as a Flowermaiden in *Parsifal*.

In the early 50's she sang Eva in *Meistersinger* at Bayreuth, a production conducted by Herbert von Karajan and recorded by EMI. Christian C. Rix describes the recording on Amazon.com "Casting is uneven, but the recording retains interest for the connoisseur because of the energetic conducting of Herbert von Karajan,



Left to Right: Astrid Varnay, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Anna Russell and Thomas Stewart

the ravishing performance of the young Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as Eva, and the authoritative resonant Sachs of Otto Edelman that shows the great tradition of the Bayreuth singers of the first part of the century."

She also sang Eva in *Lohengrin* at La Scala.

The Washington Post recalls this delightful story "In the early 1950s, Schwarzkopf became the centre of a heated musical controversy when it was revealed that she had dubbed two youthful high C's to a recording of *Tristan und Isolde* by the aging Kirsten Flagstad, who was having difficulties with her upper register. The substitution was carefully accomplished and nobody would have likely found out about it had it not been for the voracious hunger for gossip within the opera world. Purists were scandalized but the pianist Glenn Gould thought otherwise: He considered the loan of the two C's a professional courtesy from one artist to another, all to the creation of a more perfect *Tristan*."

Having said goodbye to two sopranos we also farewell a singer who covered the range of Wagner bass baritone roles. The following headline sums it up "Remembering **Thomas Stewart**: *Wotan, Wanderer, Gunther, Sachs, Dutchman, Tebramund, Amfortas extraordinaire*"

Born in 1928 in San Saba, Texas, Stewart moved, after early studies in Waco, to New York, where he studied at the Juilliard School. After graduation, he sang with the New York City Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he sang Raimondo (*Lucia*) in Maria Callas' American debut.

In 1955 he married soprano Evelyn Lear before moving to Berlin, where they sang at the State Opera and then throughout Europe. In 1967 Stewart succeeded Hans Hotter in the role of Wotan at Bayreuth, adding the role of the Wanderer in 1969. For his recording of the *Ring* (1966-70) Herbert von Karajan chose Stewart for the roles of Wotan (*Walküre*) and Wanderer (*Siegfried*). Stewart's favourite disc though, was one that he made of *Meistersinger* with the conductor Rafael Kubelik.

"Why were the works of Wagner so important to me as an artist?" Stewart asked in an essay he wrote to accompany a recording. "It's because of the marriage of word and music, something every composer seeks to achieve but few accomplish with such perfection. Being a singer who becomes completely absorbed in the text he is singing, I naturally felt an affinity for this aspect of Wagner's art."

Stewart eventually returned to America where he became a regular at the Metropolitan singing in 169 performances of 23 roles over 14 seasons. He died in September aged 78.

Although she never trod the boards of Bayreuth, **Anna Russell** who died in Australia aged 94 made her name with a wonderful 'lecture' on *The Ring*. After years of study at the Royal College of Music in London she observed "If you go in there with a tin voice, you'll come out with a loud tin voice." Although she made some appearances as a concert singer in the 1930s, it was a disastrous experience as an understudy in a touring production of *Cavalleria Rusticana* that first showed Russell what could be made of operatic parody. As the New York Times wrote in her obituary "The tenor, who was supposed to shove her, did not expect her considerable girth and fell backward. She herself then tripped and literally brought the house down, the sets collapsing to the accompaniment of an audience roaring with laughter."

At the start of the second world war she went to Canada where she developed a one-woman show out of which came *How to Write your own Gilbert and Sullivan Opera* and her *Ring Cycle* sketch which included such memorable lines as "The scene opens in the River Rhine — in it. And swimming around there are the three Rhinemaidens, a sort of aquatic Andrews Sisters." Her description of Wotan and Erda: "Weiche, Wotan, Weiche, which means be careful, Wotan. She then bears him eight daughters." Once Siegfried has met Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*, Russell reminded her listeners, "She's the only woman that Siegfried's ever come across who isn't his aunt." Describing Siegfried, "He's very strong and he's very brave and he's very handsome and he's very stupid" and of the Valkyries: "They are the noisiest people. They're all of them virgins, and I'm not the least bit surprised."

For anyone who'd like to sample a 10 minute clip of Anna Russell's *Ring*, go to the Wagner Society of NZ web site (www.wagnersociety.org.nz) and follow the link. I'd recommend to do this only if you have broadband.

Finally.....

To all members of the WSNZ, a very Happy Christmas and New Year.