

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre



NEWS LETTER

WAGNER AND LISZT AT THE PIANO

This year, Auckland's December meeting will be, as they say, something completely different. As luck would have it, Ode Records are releasing a double CD of Dunedin pianist Terence Dennis playing Wagner's piano music, plus some of the big piano transcriptions of excerpts from Wagner's works. Since the launch of this CD is scheduled for the same day as the 2nd December meeting of the Auckland Centre of the WSNZ, we decided to merge the two Wagner occasions as a special event for the next meeting, and a launching-pad for the release of the CDs. Professor Terence Dennis will be coming up from Dunedin to take part in the evening's programme. For the Wagner Society and the media guests of Ode Records, he will play piano pieces by Wagner, including the *Sonata for the Album of Mathilde Wesendonck* and some specially Wagner-centred pieces by Liszt. He has agreed to give a spoken introduction to each of the items he plays. The audience will also be able to hear there one or two tracks from the new CD introduced by Professor Dennis, including Liszt's amazing *Fantasy-Study on Themes of Rheni*. And there's more: in a never-to-be-repeated double act for Two

Piano-Playing-Professors, Terence Dennis will be joined by WSNZ president Heath Lees in a piano-duet arrangement of Wagner's luminous *Siegfried Idyll*.

"This event comes at exactly the right moment for us," says Heath Lees, "next year we are planning to open a Dunedin Centre for the WSNZ and Professor Dennis has kindly agreed to be part of a steering group to manage this, so his high-profile exposure here in Auckland and through the national release of the CD will add excellent impetus to the Society's South Island expansion."

Chris Brodrick, who is to be nominated as the Society's president in 2008, says "It's wonderful news that we will soon have another branch of the Wagner Society in the South Island. It will not only provide an opportunity to co-ordinate activities but also gives Christchurch members another excuse to spend time in Dunedin. Will this be the most southerly Wagner Society ever?"

Back in Auckland and beyond, members shouldn't miss this event on 2nd December. It promises to be a wonderful mix of concert/presentation/CD launch and will set an exciting musical seal on yet another busy Wagner year.



Professor Terence Dennis

Born in Christchurch, Terence Dennis is a graduate of Otago University, and of the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik, Cologne, where he graduated with Distinction. He is currently Music Professor and Head of Performance Studies at Otago.

Terence Dennis is acclaimed both overseas and in New Zealand for his performances, regularly partnering leading resident musicians and distinguished visiting artists in recital and recording, including such figures as Sir Donald McIntyre, Keith Lewis, Sarah Walker and Margaret Marshall.

Recent highlights have been the sellout recital in the Sydney Opera House with American soprano Alessandra Marc, and recitals with Jonathan Lemalu in New

Zealand and in the United States, including appearances together at the 2004 Salt Lake Winter Olympics.

He has appeared as pianist in piano quartets and quintets with the NZ String Quartet, and since 1991 has been the official pianist for the finals of the Mobil Song Quests and Lexus Song Quests, and has participated in NZ Embassy concerts in Washington DC, Paris, Bonn, and Singapore. He has been pianist for seven international string competitions.

Terence Dennis was appointed to the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2004. His 2007 season includes performances with Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, and he has recently appeared as official pianist at the World Rotary Congress in the United States.

END-OF-YEAR PROGRAMMES

AUCKLAND

Sunday 2 December, 7.30pm

In the Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street
Terence Dennis. Wagner Concert/Presentation/CD Launch

CHRISTCHURCH

Sunday 2 December, 5pm

Christmas BBQ at Ann and Sid Kennedy's home, 70 Perry Street, Papanui.

REVIEWS

At Bayreuth, **Jenny Lee** found things of great interest in Schlingensiefel's much-maligned *Parsifal*:

This was an extraordinary *Parsifal*.

Its feast of art historical references was a treat. The *Venus of Willendorf* - a four and a half inch statue dating from approximately 20,000 years ago - dominated the production. She was the holy grail in Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* sense, viz., that the 'real' grail was in fact Mary Magdalene's womb from which she bore a child to Jesus.

Not only was she there as a huge statue but also in human form, bronze-painted and wandering around the stage. The statue's role as a fertility symbol and source of new life was clear and shocking thanks to her menstrual blood into which the knights plunged their hands before imprinting it on Parsifal's nice white robe.

It seemed to me that the hare that featured in filmed images throughout was an allusion to German artist Joseph Beuys whose bewildering 'Self-portrait with a dead hare' of the 70s/80s was all about healing and new life. (Beuys was the fighter pilot shot down during WWII who claimed to have been healed by nomadic peoples who covered his burnt body with animal fat and felt - a story used in the novel and film *The English Patient*.)

The final image in the opera was on a huge screen that filled the stage and showed in graphic black-and-white detail a dead hare decomposing in time-lapse photography until it blew away and through the dust we saw Parsifal walking along a path in the distance towards a strong light!



Evelyn Herlitzius (Kundry) and Alfons Eberz (Parsifal) at Bayreuth

The rabbit or hare images that abounded throughout the opera along with spiders, snails and micro-organisms, followed by concentration camps, deserts, riots, bloody pagan rituals of varying kinds, were superimposed in a bewildering layer over the top of the staged action.

And that in itself was busy. Each character had a similarly dressed double that acted as an alter-ego at times, for example when Parsifal was resisting Kundry but didn't really want to - he had his cake and ate it in this production! A team of extra characters added to the feeling of inclusiveness and chaos - there were elderly and the very young. Three Downes syndrome children were significantly involved along with lots of women to keep Kundry company.

The set was a post-modern collection of structures, cultural references and general 'stuff'. The circular stage slowly revolved and the effect was of teeming life, including all times and cultures, anything that alluded to aspects of the human condition concerning new life, death and healing.

As a theatrical experience I have never had anything like it - my mind felt alive and challenged with a buzz that is still going on. But as a performance of Wagner's music and story of *Parsifal* it missed out.

But as *Parsifal* isn't my favourite opera and I was hoping it wouldn't be too much of a drag, I wasn't disappointed! Most of the audience boomed and jeered in a very serious way while only a few, myself included, cheered and applauded.

And **Howard Livingstone** was taken by the amount of activity in Katharina Wagner's *Meistersinger*:

I saw the final of seven performances of Katharina Wagner's new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* which had been awaited with such interest.

The scene is no longer a Middle Ages town but the common room of a coeducational high school perhaps in the mid 20th century. Veit Pogner is principal and Hans Sachs is a chain-smoking, barefooted rebel. Iconoclast, Walther von Stolzing applies for a job as art teacher. Like Sachs he is very casually dressed in contrast with the other conservative masters seated around a cluster of tables. Walther paints the tables, himself and anything else he can reach with white paint and presents examples of his work which show a lot of breast and pubic hair. He then competes with Beckmesser in a jigsaw puzzle competition but gets it all wrong. At the end of act one Walther is expelled.

Act Two is played on the same set. Sachs is now a poet sitting at an old typewriter. A giant hand and Campbell soup tins are part of the background. Eva and Magdalene are identically dressed but Magdalene spends almost the entire act asleep, with her head in her hands. Sachs hits the loud keys of his typewriter during Beckmesser's song and from there until the end of the act including the riot, the floor of the stage is pelted by shoes falling from above.

Act Three seems to be set in the present but for the old typewriter which isn't actually touched. Sachs and Walther are now dressed conservatively and Beckmesser is the rebel. Sachs puts on shoes and Walther and Beckmesser exchange their footwear. Included are nine giant heads of dead composers including Richard Wagner. They cavort with three naked women using devil's horns and phal-luses. Beckmesser's song is now a stag party with a male nude. During the great chorus it is impossible to see the choir as Sachs and a few stooges are warming their hands over a furnace from which appears a golden stag. This is to be The Prize; no laurel wreath here. It's all a bit like Moses.

Klaus Florian Vogt as Walther von Stolzing is a revelation. With a lovely bright voice he may just be the next Siegfried Jerusalem. Michael Volle (pictured) as Beckmesser is a wonderful actor who

coped with the extraordinary direction and also is a fine baritone. In a minor role, Heinrich der Schreiber, Arnold Bezuyen's glorious tenor capped the male ensemble.

Oh yes - New Zealander Martin Snell appears in the role of Hermann Ortel but sings only a few words.

I thought the chorus was something else; in all they did they were magnificent, but overall, the sound of the orchestra was the constant pleasure of my visit to Bayreuth. I found the cello sound particularly lovely. But then what can you say about the brass section? Majestic, heroic, brilliant!



The assembled Mastersingers are schooled by the marker, Beckmesser, in Katharina Wagner's new production

FROM RUSSIA WITH WAGNER



One of our WSNZ members, Anastasia Belina, is now engaged in research for a PhD at the University of Leeds. Her subject is Taneyev, a turn-of-the-century Russian composer who was very famous in his day. Anastasia has been uncovering his Wagner connections, and has forwarded them to us to share.

At first glance Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev (1856-1915) seems an unlikely prospect for a Wagnerite. He spent much of his time writing contrapuntal exercises, analysed the music of early Netherlands composers, led an ascetic existence, and only composed one opera, which was labelled 'dry' and 'academic' even before a single note of it was heard at its premiere in 1895. One critic wrote about him: 'Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev is a Wagnerian? No, it is not possible!' But Taneyev was also passionately drawn to the history and culture of Ancient Greece, learned to read Greek, appreciated Gluck's operatic reforms, and chose Aeschylus's tragedy *Oresteia* for his opera—the very work that Wagner admired to his dying day.

Taneyev was a brilliant pianist with a prospect of a dazzling performing career, but he chose instead to dedicate himself to composition and teaching harmony and counterpoint. A former student of Tchaikovsky's, and later one of his closest friends, Taneyev was also a successful pedagogue, counting among his pupils such giants of Russian music as Rachmaninov and Scriabin. He was not only known for his academic achievements, however—for many years he was an object of Leo Tolstoy wife's unrequited love, and Maria Benois, the wife of a famous artist Alexander Benois, almost left her husband and their four children to be with Taneyev.

In 1876-77 he spent eight months in Paris, where he met the French composers d'Indy, Duparc, Saint-Saens, Franck, and Fauré. Frequently, they all gathered to play and discuss music of various composers, and their interest in Wagner was infectious to the young Taneyev. On the way back to Russia he wrote in his notebook that he wanted to study Wagner's music dramas.

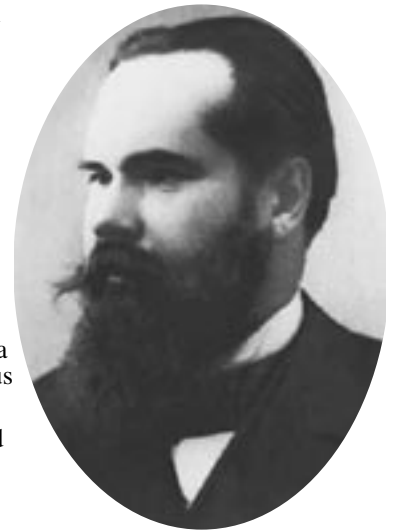
He began with *Siegfried*, followed by *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*. In 1889, he even planned his spring vacation around the first Russian premiere of *The Ring* in Moscow by a visiting German theatre headed by Wagner's friend Angelo Neumann. After the performances Taneyev wrote to Tchaikovsky that Wagner interested him in the highest degree, 'particularly in respect of harmony and instrumentation.' *The Ring* inspired Taneyev to complete his *Oresteia* so much that he even resigned from the post of the Director of the Moscow Conservatoire in order to free up the time to do it.

Because Taneyev's work on *Oresteia* went hand in hand with his growing interest in Wagner, there are Wagnerian influences in a number of areas. Taneyev's Orestes visits his family disguised as a wanderer, just as Wotan did in *The Ring*, and Orestes' arrival is foretold by Cassandra in the same way as

Siegfried's was predicted by Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*. The *Entre-Acte* in the third act of the opera has been hailed as Taneyev's most Wagner-inspired music, particularly in the orchestration—one of the areas that intrigued him in *The Ring*. Six years before the opera's completion, Taneyev decided to replace its overture with a short prelude—an obvious influence from Wagner.

From 1894, Taneyev held 'Wagner Tuesdays' at his house, where he played and discussed Wagner's music dramas with friends and visitors; among the many Moscow musicians who attended those evenings were Scriabin and Rachmaninov. The first evening was dedicated to *Tristan und Isolde*, and Rachmaninov, with the score in his hands, sitting in a comfortable rocking chair, grumbled: 'Still 1500 pages to go.' Taneyev himself was not yet convinced of Wagner's greatness, or dared not admit it, and as soon as the opera was finished, he pulled out a book of Wagner caricatures and went round the room showing it to his guests. However, as time went on, he began to find beautiful places in Wagner's music, and gradually came to admire the operas, with Parsifal becoming his favourite. Taneyev's diaries of that time are filled with notes about Wagner's music dramas and his own thoughts about them. He even stood up to Tolstoy's attack on Wagner's music, which the Russian writer never understood nor liked.

Taneyev's interest in Wagner is one of the little-known pages in the history of Wagner's reception in Russia, and also the least-known page in Taneyev's biography. Taneyev was just one of the many Russian musicians who were thought to be vehemently hostile to Wagner, but who in reality were very much intrigued by their German colleague and his music. The *Oresteia* is a great example of how Wagner's ideas were assimilated and adapted in the context of Russian culture. It also shows how even those musicians who were thought to be protected from Wagner's 'venom', as one critic sweetly put it, could not resist the power of the magic potion delivered by the Bayreuth wizard.



Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev (1856-1915)

NEW MEMBERS

A big, joyfully Wagnerian welcome to these new members:

Clare CastleWellington
Peter CresswellAuckland
Ian & Beverley DaweWellington
Robyn & Christopher Evans....Christchurch
Malcolm HammondAuckland
Roscoe & Judy TurnerOtaki

Including Honorary Members, the WSNZ roll now stands in excess of 420.

CAN YOU HELP?

Our yearly accounts Auditor has moved up to the vacant position of Treasurer, and we now need to find a new Auditor. Can you help? You don't need to be a CA or anything "official" but be good at figures and have done *some* work with accounts in the past. It's only a once-a-year job and shouldn't be (so to speak) taxing. Ring our Secretary Liz (09-528-1184) or e-mail her at handelees@xtra.co.nz.



OPERA SOCIETY

NZ OPERA SOCIETY AUCKLAND

14 November, DVD :
Les Paladins (Rameau), 7.30pm
In the Raye Freedman Theatre, Epsom.
12 December: End-of-Year-Party, 2pm.
In TAPAC, Motions Rd., Western Springs.

WELLINGTON

1 November, DVD:
La Belle Hélène (Offenbach)
28 November: General Meeting and Recital
Both dates in National Library Auditorium, 8pm.

MORE REVIEWS

Tannhäuser/Sydney/27th October

Many of the sixty-five WSNZ members who went to Sydney a couple of weeks ago had already enjoyed Elke Neidhardt's Adelaide *Ring* in 2004 and so had some idea of what to expect with her production of *Tannhäuser*. We knew that there would be a mixture of styles and periods, some thought-provoking twists, a lot of irreverent jokes in the staging, but underneath it all, a basic affection for Wagner and his work.

And so it proved. In terms of set and costume, the old and mythic rubbed comfortable shoulders with the contemporary and recent past. The Landgrave's hunting party in Act 1 was as 19th century as you could get, but the trench coats and battered suitcases of the passing pilgrims in Act 2 were much more 20th century, and carried an unpleasant whiff of people on their way to concentration camps. In Act 3, the returning pilgrims were all toggled up as trainee priests, with souvenir bags saying "I Love Rome", yet their open, black umbrellas told us that only the humdrum round of daily life would greet their "redeemed" state.

Through all of this, Tannhäuser himself remained constant, with flowing red hair (a Harry Kupfer trademark, reminding us of Neidhardt's years with Kupfer in Berlin), cavalry twill pants, and a red school blazer. In perfect consonance with the text, we were being told that this Tannhäuser never really grows up. But in a twist all her own, Neidhardt transformed the Shepherd Boy in Act 1 into the child Tannhäuser once was, and still yearned to be. So it was logical to have the boy appear in each act, and it gave the production one of its most original and successful touches.

Other memorable moments included the larger-than-life horns in Act 1, suddenly becoming blunderbusses and shooting a solitary pheasant, unceremoniously dropped from the roof at the end of the act — a final animation to what had been a somewhat slow and awkward first act. In Act 2, the robots who set the stage for the Song Contest gave a suitably lifeless tone to the arrival, as did the entry of the guests, who simply stepped into the theatre-boxes lining the cramped stage-space. It was quite the opposite

of the "fluid" entry that Wagner asked for, but it worked anyway. Huge, yuckie, black-winged flies/bats/beetles reminded you of Tannhäuser's spiritual ghosts, ready to burst through the polite social setting at any moment. The old and perverted Cupid figure was more difficult to explain, particularly since he was without his arrows, (though he sported other methods of penetration). In the final act, a successful touch saw the Shepherd Boy creating a blossoming staff directly from the decorative trim around Elisabeth's coffin, giving all the right vibes of human love and internal renewal over official forgiveness.

On the musical side, the chorus might well be up first for a mention, since it is so important in this opera, and was well-trained, confident, and often thrilling. Similarly the orchestra, capably captained by Richard Hickox, brought out all the descriptive moments from the woodwinds and brasses, though the upper strings seemed under-powered at times. The cellos were wonderful though, and even danced their way through the low-set semiquaver passages in the overture that you almost never hear.

As for the main singers, the New Zealand top vote clearly went to Janice Watson as Elisabeth. Strong and pearly as a saint yet young and vital as a princess, with a satisfying ring at the top, she also acted with ease and conviction. Venus (Milijana Nikolic) divided us. We all loved the actual sound of her voice, but a few of us protested that we couldn't really make out any of the words — not that we're all German experts; it was just that the vocal line seemed to be made up of nothing but vowels, and you couldn't get even the impression of a meaning. Richard Berkeley-Steele as Tannhäuser was more lyric than helden, and had the usual struggles with the part, but won through by the end. As for Wolfram, the "Evening Star" was nicely sung, but Jonathan Summers' singing was somewhat toned down by a lack of presence in the dramatic scheme of things.

Overall, a wonderful excursion for us all, though *Tannhäuser* itself, like the curate's egg, was only good in parts. We gave it seven out of ten.

Heath Lees



Janice Watson (Elisabeth)
and Daniel Sumegi (Landgrave)

... and Heather Simpson fills us in on the Wagner Festival at Erl, Austria

WAGNER IN TYROL

The village of Erl with only 1700 inhabitants is nestled below the mountains and washed by the River Inn. The emerald fields are dotted with cows and are the unlikely setting for a swirling white Passionsspielhaus built in the 1950s for Erl's traditional sexennial Passion Play. The Passionsspielhaus lay empty during the intervening five years for decades until it was recognized as an acoustic natural wonder. A simple wooden interior and a broad fan of 1500 seats provide excellent sight and sound making up for the absence of stage machinery and fly tower. Attracted by this potential Gustav Kuhn founded the Wagner festival in 1997.

Almost every July since then, Wagnerians from all over the world have made a pilgrimage to Tyrol's answer to Bayreuth. From a modest start Kuhn has built up the festival's Wagner repertoire and the orchestra's Wagnerian sound. The low budget productions have not sacrificed orchestral sound or strong casting. A sprinkling

of well known performers have been augmented each year with talented young artists collected at the Accademia di Montegrat. A core group of musicians from Minsk have been fleshed out with gifted young Europeans.

This year the festival offered Wagner's works in the order that they were written. *Tristan und Isolde* was performed between the second and third Acts of *Siegfried*, Parsifal followed *Götterdämmerung* and there was a reading (in German) of the text of *Die Meistersinger* to fill out the shorter *Siegfried* evenings. There were no free nights between events so there were greater demands on both performers and audience than in Bayreuth.

Kuhn has staged, lit, organized and conducted all his own productions. The sparse staging and vaguely contemporary costumes in *The Ring* were enlivened by some regional references (*Siegfried* in Lederhosen and Valkyries riding mountain bikes). In *Tristan und Isolde* the costumes referred to the Wesendonck period. The orchestra, deprived of the Bayreuth pit, was arranged on platforms at the back of the stage.



Tristan und Isolde at Erl/Michela Sbrulati (Isolde)
and Monika Waeckerle (Brangäne)

The singers included such well known performers as Robert Hale and Phillip Joll as Wotan-cum-Wanderer. Relatively new voices included Bettina Kampp who presented a youthful and energetic Brünnhilde and Monika Waeckerle impressed as a sensitive Brangäne. The Erl festival also provided opportunities for rising stars to display their talents. Jurgen Müller was a boyish Siegfried and Liang Li who appeared as Fasolt in *Das Rheingold* and Fafner in *Siegfried* was colourful and intriguing in both roles.

The whole festival was most enjoyable and a marked contrast in atmosphere to the more formal Bayreuth experience.