



SIMON O'NEILL RECORDS WAGNER WITH NZSO...



Simon O'Neill – Tenor
New Zealand Symphony Orchestra
Pietari Inkinen – Conductor

WAGNER:

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG: *'Mime hiess ein murrischer Zwerg / Brünnhilde! Heilige Braut! / Trauermusik'*

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG: *Siegfried's Rhine Journey*

LOHENGRIN: *'In fernem Land'*

SIEGFRIED: *'Selige Ode auf sonniger Hoh'*

PARSIFAL: *'Nur eine Waffe taugt'*

DIE WALKÜRE: *'Ein Schwert Werheiss mir den Vater'*

DIE WALKÜRE: *'Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond'*

PARSIFAL: *'Amfortas! Die Wunde!'*

DIE WALKÜRE: *'Siegmond heiss ich, Siegmund bin ich'*



Pietari Inkinen and Simon O'Neill.

Photos: Joseph Kelly (www.josephkelly.com)

...AND THE WAGNER SOCIETY AND FOUNDATION GIVE THEIR SUPPORT.

In late August early September 2009, Simon O'Neill, the NZSO under conductor Pietari Inkinen and sound engineers from EMI spent four days in the Michael Fowler Centre in Wellington recording excerpts and scenes from Wagner's operas for a CD to be released next year.

The Society and Foundation were delighted to give their financial backing to this venture, in particular to support Simon's wish to make the recording in New Zealand with the NZSO rather than the less expensive option of making the disc in London.

The recording is an important milestone in the history of Wagner in this country and despite our relatively small population we have shown that we can produce world-class Wagnerian singers. Such is Simon's reputation that he persuaded Sir John Tomlinson to sing the part of Hagen in one of the extracts from *Götterdämmerung*.

The last time a commercial recording was made with a New Zealander singing Wagner was back in the 1970s when our Patron, Sir Donald McIntyre, the NZSO and conductor John Matheson recorded excerpts such as The Dutchman's 'Die Frist ist um', 'Wahn Wahn' from *Die Meistersinger* and Wotan's Farewell from *Die Walküre*.

On 5 March 2010 Simon will launch the recording at a Wagner Gala concert which forms part of the International Festival of the Arts. The WSNZ has arranged for members to receive a block-booking discount for this concert. Please find a booking form enclosed with this newsletter. We hope that as many members as possible can be in Wellington for this special event.

DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN

17–22 AUGUST 2009

Michael Sinclair reports on the WSNZ trip to the Seattle Opera Ring

Seattle is already well established as a pre-eminent centre for Wagner performances and once again visitors from across the United States and around the world flocked to the Pacific Northwest for the third outing of Stephen Wadsworth's traditional production of Wagner's *Ring*. Twenty-nine members of the Wagner Society of New Zealand and two from the Wagner Society of Western Australia attended the second cycle of the *Ring*, being the largest contingent from an overseas Wagner Society.

Like Bayreuth, on which Seattle Opera likes to model itself, revivals are always treated to a complete re-inspection and director Stephen Wadsworth was again on hand to add further insight to his already detailed production. Based on what was seen in the second cycle of this run this proved to be its most successful staging yet.

The production remains unabashedly traditional and for many this is its strongest asset. With the demise of the Met's Otto Schenk production, Seattle is probably the only place on the planet where you will find a *Ring* with trees, rocks, cliffs, swimming Rhinemaidens, real fire, a dragon etc. The sets (Thomas Lynch), costumes (Martin Pakledinaz) and lighting (Peter Kaczorowski) are as fresh as ever and offer scene after scene of breathtaking beauty. Many of the scenes did seem more theatrical than in 2005, although the overall effect remained cinematic rather than theatrical. When all is said and done this is a handsome production that tells the story lucidly and clearly, although a little more to challenge the brain would have deepened the impact.

However it is the vocal and dramatic side of the performance that made this revival exceptional.

Of those returning there are three notable stand outs. Greer Grimsley (Wotan/The Wanderer) has developed considerably since 2005. He has now found a few extra gears in his voice with more variety and colour, resulting in a most satisfying portrayal of this complex character. The final scene of *Die Walküre* was particularly moving and his contribution in Siegfried was pivotal to the success of this opera.

Commentators were suggesting that this revival of the *Ring* had turned into The Stephanie Blythe Show and such was the intensity of her singing in her various roles (Fricka, Second Norn and Waltraute) that there was occasionally the danger that she would overwhelm the production. Her Fricka was absolutely world class displaying an incredible range and security of voice that was simply breathtaking. Wadsworth has also thought through this character carefully – from loving wife to imperious matriarch as the story develops.

Richard Paul Fink (Alberich) has also improved immensely since 2005, using his strong, dark and incisive voice to offer



The WSNZ party

a near perfect portrayal of the brooding Nibelung. Although only a tiny scene, his encounter with Mime in *Siegfried* was an absolute *tour-de-force* as they volleyed vocal insults and rocks.

There were new singers in three key roles: Siegmund, Brünnhilde and Siegfried. Stuart Skelton's Siegmund was a joy to listen to from start to finish. His beautiful, burnished voice is sufficiently flexible to cope with both the heroic and lyrical aspects of this role and his clear diction demonstrated his deep understanding of the text. It would be hard to imagine a more complete performance.

There were many good things about Janice Baird's Brünnhilde. She looked perfect for the part and acted with an intensity that took her from the youthful Valkyrie to the mature woman who redeems the world. On the whole her singing also marked this development, growing in authority as the cycle progressed. However, her singing was erratic and never quite commanded the vocal confidence that a Brünnhilde needs to have. Her entrance in *Die Walküre* was subdued, while the much talked about vibrato became evident in *Götterdämmerung*, although never to the point where it ruined her performance. Nevertheless she was thrilling in the duet at the end of *Siegfried* (brilliantly staged by Wadsworth) and her immolation scene had the right amount of solemnity and was vocally exciting.

Stig Andersen has sung Siegfried many times and it is clear that he understands the role well. He acted the young Siegfried with sufficient boyishness to be convincing without overdoing it and his transition to the mature hero was well done. His voice no longer has a heroic ring, using bluster instead to hide his inability to reach the high notes. Having said that, he managed his voice extremely well over the course of the two evenings, was always a joy to listen to and portrayed the character sympathetically and with conviction. There are not that many Siegfrieds that can do that!

There was also much to enjoy in the smaller roles. Andreas Silvestrelli was a booming Fasolt in *Das Rheingold* and a menacing Hunding in *Die Walküre* while Daniel Sumegi offered equal menace as Fafner and Hagen. Denis Petersen was a vivid Mime with strong singing and understated caricature that worked well in this production. Kobie van Rensburg's Loge needed greater vocal authority given that Wadsworth does not do much with this pivotal role.

On the ladies' side, Margaret Jane Wray repeated her solid Sieglinde from 2005, as did Marie Plette in the roles of Freia and Gutrune. Maria Streiffert needed a little bit more vocal heft to be a commanding Erda, although her scene with The Wanderer in *Siegfried* worked extremely well.

In the pit Robert Spano adopted a lyrical approach to the *Ring*, which resulted in many beautiful passages, most notably in *Siegfried* where lyricism comes to the fore. However he failed to grasp the organic flow of the work and there were many times when his reading seemed flabby and lacked momentum and tension. The end of *Das Rheingold* was short on grandeur; the prelude of *Walküre* needed more brooding menace as the storm rages, while much of *Götterdämmerung* suffered from a lack of tension and drama.

In the final analysis this was a *Ring* of the highest order, despite the non-demanding aspect of the staging. It was cast strongly, particularly given the difficulty of casting Wagner operas these days, and Stephen Wadsworth has obviously worked hard to develop the characterisations.

In addition to the *Ring*, Society members took advantage of the week in Seattle to explore the city's many delights and everyone came back feeling that they had been enriched both by Wagner's music and the city itself. Seattle Opera will reprise this *Ring* one more time in 2013 – if you are looking for a traditional *Ring* this could definitely be the one for you.

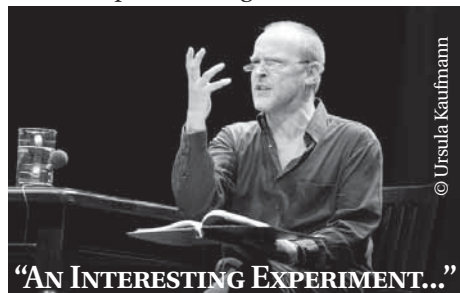


Foto: W. Heider - Sawall

Stefan at the Master's feet

**LA MUSIQUE DE WAGNER AU PIANO:
LE PASSÉ DANS LE PRÉSENT**

The Presse Musicale Internationale internet site (www.musicalpress.org) has published an article by Heath Lees on Wagner-pianist Stefan Micksch, entitled 'Wagner au Piano'. Stefan, who's been playing 'introductory' Wagner programmes in Bayreuth for the last 13 years, was the first overseas visitor to the WSNZ 15 years ago, just after the Society started. He gave a concert in Auckland, including his own, new arrangements of Wagner's music on the piano. Now he's made it into a career with lots of 'fans' and 20 CDs of piano arrangements.



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"AN INTERESTING EXPERIMENT..."

A 'RING' RECORDING THAT HAS IT ALL
(EXCEPT THE MUSIC)

The actor/director Sven-Eric Bechtolf (above) has released a recording of Wagner's entire *Ring* with 'every word of the original German spoken rather than sung, without a single sound effect or music cue for relief.' Speaking to the New York Times he said "You could call it naïve... Each character is like a figure in a fairy tale. But take them all together, and you see the complex structure. Wagner's language is full of alliteration, which to modern German ears sounds funny and strange. A lot of people say that the music is great, but the text is awful. So it's an interesting experiment to see if an audience can just listen to the words without bursting out laughing all the time. And from my live readings it seems to be that people can tolerate long stretches of it surprisingly well."



2009 GRANDE FINALE

On Sunday 29 November 2009 at 5.30 pm at St Andrews on the Terrace, the Wellington branch will finish the year in style.

Well known Wellington baritone, Roger Wilson (above right), will perform the rare early Wagner *Faust* settings accompanied by Terence Dennis (above left). In addition Roger will talk about the *Meistersinger* guild.

The second half of the evening will include Terence Dennis playing Hans Von Bulow's piano transcription of



Wagner's *Faust Overture* and the rare Hugo Wolf *Paraphrase on Meistersinger*.

On the same day Christchurch members will get together for the traditional end of year barbeque at Jonet & Tony Ward's house in Shands Road.

The following week, 6 December, Dunedin members will enjoy the afternoon with a complete viewing of *Lohengrin* and Auckland finishes 2009 with their traditional Wagner Pot-Pouri.

We trust that you all have a wonderful Christmas followed by a relaxing break. The next WSNZ newsletter will be out in late January early February and will list all the events planned for 2010.

HILDEGARD BEHRENS (1937-2009)

The German soprano Hildegard Behrens whom we know best as Brünnhilde in Otto Schenk's Metropolitan Opera *Ring*, was taken ill on her way to the Kusatsu International Festival in Japan and died in a Tokyo hospital.

A more in-depth look at her life will appear in a future edition of the newsletter.

NEW MEMBERS

A very Warm Wagnerian Welcome to:-
Ted Marr Auckland
Dr Mark Davis Lower Hutt
Anthony & Jena Keen.....Auckland
John Garmonsway Wellington

**2009
PROGRAMME
DETAILS**

Auckland

Sunday, 6 December 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street

Wagner Pot Pourri - A Christmas celebration. An evening of requests, roundups, selections and surprises

Wellington

Sunday 29 November at 5.30 pm

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace

Roger Wilson & Terence Dennis - a lecture/recital to include some Wagner songs

Christchurch

Sunday, 29 November 6.00pm

Venue: Jonet & Tony Ward's home 949 Shands Road, Christchurch Christmas BBQ

Dunedin

Sunday, 6 December 12.30pm

Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum

Complete viewing of the famed Bayreuth production of *Lohengrin*, and our end-of-year Christmas function

WAGNER SOCIETY LIBRARY

The WSNZ has a collection of Videos, DVDs and Books, most held in Auckland, that are available for members to borrow. Those held in Christchurch are marked *.

VIDEOS

Sing faster - New York Met stage hands
Wagner - Tony Palmer (5 & 10hr versions)
Siegfried - Bayreuth Fest, Barenboim/Kupfer*
The Ring - Bayreuth Fest, Boulez/Chéreau*
Rheingold - Bayreuth Fest, Boulez/Chéreau
Walküre - Met, Levine/Schenk
Siegfried - Bayerische SO, Sawallisch
Götterdämmerung - Met, Levine/Schenk
Fliegende Holländer - Savolinnna, Segerstam

DVDS

Lohengrin - Vienna, Abbado
Lohengrin - Vienna, Abbado*
Tannhäuser - Naples, Kuhn/Herzog
Meistersinger - Opera Australia, Mackerras
Parsifal - Film, Syberberg
Walküre - Barcelona, de Billy/Kupfer
Siegfried - Barcelona, de Billy/Kupfer
Tannhäuser - Zurich, Welser-Most/Herzog
Lohengrin - Met, Levine*
Tannhäuser - Met, Levine*

BOOKS

Mallarmé & Music: Music and Poetic Language - Heath Lees. (Held in each centre)

Contact: Auckland - Michael Sinclair

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Christchurch - Gloria Streat (03) 332 3242

or gstreat@xtra.co.nz



Nina Stemme (Isolde) & Ben Heppner (Tristan)

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

It is rare that an opera production can divide opinion so dramatically, but such has been the case with the Royal Opera's new production of *Tristan und Isolde* directed by Christof Loy. For many it was an abomination, while for others it was an ecstatic assumption of one of the greatest pieces of music theatre ever written. So what makes this production so divisive?

If you are a traditionalist then this *Tristan* is not for you. Christof Loy takes an intensely minimalist view of the work offering no hint of time or setting. The set (Johannes Leiacker) is stark; the front of the stage, a bare grey acting platform, represents the existential world where Tristan and Isolde play out their inner emotions, while to the rear of this is the banquetting hall of King Mark's castle, a symbolic representation of the real world. The two areas are divided by a velvet curtain which opens and closes as the characters move between the two worlds. The overall feel is somewhat surreal. Leiacker's monochromatic sets and costumes are brilliantly lit by Olaf Winter and offer plenty in terms of mood, but little in terms of reality.

Pretentious nonsense? Probably, if you expect to see ships, forests and castles, but, while Loy chooses not to depict these settings, this is hardly a case of director's folly and certainly not a concept that deserves to be booed out of the building. Choosing to present a theatrical work on a blank stage is hardly new and it is generally done for a reason: to heighten the relationships of the characters on stage and the emotions they generate. The starkness of the setting with its minimal use of stage props (at most a table and two chairs) allows Loy to focus his attention on the singers and it is here that the strengths of this production begin to emerge. In fact without the contribution of the singers and the music Loy's production says very little at all.

While Loy may take some liberties with the settings, he rarely takes such liberties with the text and he certainly treats Wagner's glorious score with the respect it deserves. Among the many pluses in the staging is the fact that it serves the music so brilliantly, music that tells the story in its own right without the need for fussy stage action. And at the heart of this performance is the incandescent conducting of Antonio Pappano with the Royal Opera House Orchestra on absolutely top form. In his hands the score emerges with chamber-like beauty, considered dynamics and tempi, and a pulsating rhythm that reaches the very soul of the work. Singers are never drowned during the climaxes, while hushed pianissimo reach every corner of the theatre with their doom laden message. This *Tristan* proves once and for all that Pappano is a truly great Wagnerian conductor.

In this environment the singers do not have an easy task. For Loy's vision to be successful they need to be wonderful actors, while at the same time coping

with the challenging demands of the music. At a time when good Wagner singers are incredibly hard to find it is a miracle that the Royal Opera have been able to assemble such a dream cast, one which could hardly have been bettered. Each singer, including Lars Cleveman making a late replacement for an indisposed Ben Heppner as Tristan, buys into Loy's vision of this work and delivers an acting performance that offers exceptional insight into their character. As a result the stark stage comes brilliantly alive with the emotions of this work: love, pain, jealousy, betrayal and finally death are all there plainly to see and feel.

Nina Stemme is an exceptional Isolde. Her voice has grown over the past few years, and is now able to combine fearless power, in the curse for example, with incredible tenderness and warmth at other times. Her Liebestod is breathtaking in its beauty and crowns a truly superlative assumption of the role. It is doubtful that there is anyone around at the moment who could match her. Lars Cleveman is a remarkably good Tristan given the circumstances and there is certainly nothing second rate about his performance. His voice is strong with a gleaming top that suggests heroic and he combines passionately with Stemme in the love duet. The delirium in Act 3 is perhaps a little underdone, but he sings honestly and sincerely and makes the distance with ease.

Sophie Koch is a sexy Brangäne with a thrilling voice to match, able to muster incredible power when required, while Michael Volle is an superlative Kurwenal, his large beautiful voice making a strong impression in a role that is often forgotten. One interesting and unusual aspect of this production is the love tryst between Brangäne and Kurwenal in Act 2, a love that compliments the tortured relationship of their masters with its simplicity and the fact that it takes place in Loy's 'real world.'

Matti Salminen, taking over from John Tomlinson in the final three performances, is a benevolent King Mark, using his large, beautiful voice to plumb the depths of his despair at the events unfolding in front of him. You really feel his pain here. Richard Berkeley-Steele's Melot is powerfully sung and demonstrates sufficient nastiness for the opera's bad guy. The three smaller roles of the Sailor, Shepherd and Steersman are well taken by Ji-Min Park, Ryland Davies and Dawid Kimberg respectively.

It is rare to see emotions laid so bare on an opera stage and a large part of the credit for this must go to Christof Loy who has created a thought provoking staging which allows the story to be told in a bold and intense way. If a real ship is still your thing then open your eyes and look beyond the trappings and see real passion, real anger and ultimately real love. The Royal Opera's *Tristan und Isolde* is a spectacular success from beginning to end and deserves to be remembered as such.

ONE MAN'S MEAT IS ANOTHER MAN'S POISON

Over the last few weeks opera audiences, rather than performers, have dominated the headlines. 'Night at the opera brings out the boos' headed a front page story in the Christchurch Press which reported that 'Bleating cellphones and boorish behaviour have upset audiences' at Southern Opera's *Magic Flute*. Around the same time as the cell phones in Christchurch, the New York Met's *Tosca* caused a storm. This new production by Swiss director Luc Bondy replaced Franco Zeffirelli's 25 year old 'beloved, lavish, and faithful production' with a stripped-down, less authentic staging. The New York Times under the heading *Boo Who?* reported that 'Frank expressions of displeasure pierced the applause at the conclusion of Act II and exploded when the production team took its bows at the end of the opera. Many in the audience took umbrage at the villain's lewd advances toward a statue of the Madonna; at the failure by Tosca to make her customary sweeping exit after stabbing the villain to death; and at the substitution, after an awkward pause, of a stunt double for her suicidal leap.'

The most divided opinion of all though was on the other side of the Atlantic and concerned a new Royal Opera production of *Tristan und Isolde* by Christof Loy.

While some panned the production - '...nothing more than smug charlatanism, wrapped up in a welter of wordy, windbag, half-baked philosophising best confined to programme notes and certainly incapable of embodiment on an actual stage... I'll spell out my assessment. Staging, precisely zero. Musical performance, four stars.' Stephen Jay-Taylor Opera Britannia. Others thought differently. 'Note to the Royal Opera House boosers: grow up. An intense evening of Wagner at the Royal Opera House was marred by the booing of the production team during the curtain call. Why do audiences insist on behaving like three-year-olds?' (Charlotte Higgins in the Guardian), an opinion echoed in his blog by James Higgs 'It is a triumph of thought, of singing, of orchestral playing and of staging. It deserves to be applauded and remembered. Keep your boos to yourselves.'

With such a polarising production, in which corner did 'our' Michael Sinclair stand? Read on...