

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

A Kiwi's-Eye-View of Bayreuth's 2004 Season

Back from Bavaria, Wellington's John Davidson reports on the current Raves and Rages from the Theatre on the Hill

This was my first time in Bayreuth, and with any amount of luck and good management it won't be my last. The weather was relatively cool for this year's third cycle (20-28 August), but that was probably a blessing in disguise, and the rain stayed away, apart from very occasional drizzly showers.

I found Bayreuth itself to be a charming and relaxing town, and enjoyed my visits to local attractions such as the Wagner house Wahnfried, the adjacent Liszt Museum, the Hofgarten, Neues Schloss, Stadtkirche, Schlosskirche, the ornate Markgräfliches Opernhaus, the cemetery (with graves of Wagner family members and Liszt's tomb) and so on. The artist Ottmar Hörl had an 'exhibition' which included, among other things, hundreds of life-size plastic models of Wagner's dog tied to every bench throughout Bayreuth. It was, however, an easy decision not to pay the large number of Euros required to purchase one of these beasts!

I must admit to an extraordinary sense of growing excitement each day as I made the 15-minute walk from the hotel to Der Grüne Hügel and on up to the Festspielhaus. What an atmosphere even outside, with the 'fashion parade' doing homage to the busts of Richard and Cosima in the gardens, waiting for the fanfares from the balcony before each act, queueing up for drinks and Bratwurst, promenading round the Festspielhaus, scrambling for postcards and CDs at the

shop across the road. Sheer magic inside as the lights went down and the music suddenly penetrated the darkness. The thunderous applause (with seemingly endless curtain calls) at the end of each opera — and often at the end of acts — was something I hadn't expected, and was worth the trip to Bayreuth in itself.

Jürgen Flimm's *Ring* production is a mixed bag, with *Die Walküre* and parts of *Götterdämmerung* probably working best overall, with the less said about some of the 'misjudgements' the better. Musically, it was excellent, and I liked conductor Adam Fischer's pacing.

Alan Titus was wonderful as Wotan, and the petite Evelyn Herlitzius was a real audience favourite, although I took a while to get used to such a 'pixie' Brünnhilde. Hartmut Welker was superb as Alberich, and I also very much liked Graham Clark as the Siegfried Mime, although others are turned off by his constant athleticism.

Thankfully, Wolfgang Schmidt just about 'made it' as Siegfried, although he'd run out of puff by the end of *Siegfried* so that the awakening scene was less than perfect vocally. Peter Klaveness was significantly underpowered as Hagen, but was deliciously 'evil'. I simply loved the clean, imaginative and enigmatic *Holländer*, with John Tomlinson in great form as the hero, and in the colourful production of *Tannhäuser*, we got the best tenor singing from Stephen Gould.



Most interest, however, centred on the film director Christoph Schlingensiefel's controversial new production of *Parsifal* to which Heath Lees gave a mouth-watering introduction in the last newsletter

On arrival at the Festspielhaus, we were greeted with notices in several languages posted at strategic points in the foyers and signed by most of the singers (an interesting exception was the Parsifal himself, Endrik Wottrich, who, as Heath reported, had been involved in a public slanging match with his director). The notices pleaded with the audience not to 'prejudge' the performance in the light of the prior publicity, but to take it on its merits.

The big question then — did it have any merits? Basically, the audience was bombarded with visual images, both on the stage itself, and also via moving images on screens at the rear and on various other parts of the stage. At times too, the entire proscenium arch was supplied with a giant screen, with the stage action continuing in shadow behind it. Most of the stage action throughout, in fact, was carried on in semi-darkness, with interludes of strobe lighting. There was a large revolving stage which was constantly moving, revealing a range of localized sets at various levels with numerous stage props, which kept changing. There was also a generous amount of often enigmatic graffiti plastered everywhere.

END-OF-YEAR PROGRAMMES

AUCKLAND
Sunday, 28 November, 7.30pm

At Music Theatre, School of Music, 6 Symonds Street.
Last Meeting This Year. Gala Excerpts and Selected Requests.

WELLINGTON
Sunday, 28 November, 7pm

Christmas Get-together at Rex Benson's house, 46 Garden Road, Northland.

CHRISTCHURCH
Monday, 6 December, 6pm.

Christmas Party at Noelle and Albert Brownlie's, 66 Clyde Road, Ilam.



Endrik Wottrich, a reluctant Parsifal by the time of the performance

The effect of all this was to distract one almost completely at times from the music. There was simply so much to look at, so many competing images. One's brain was constantly trying to decipher 'messages', to 'understand' what was going on. Wagner's music was really just background to Schlingensiefel's ego-trip, although one could argue that this was merely the next step (courtesy of modern technology) in the quest for the Gesamtkunstwerk!

What were some of these images? Well, most critical attention has been focused on the rabbits in varying stages of life, death and decomposition (there was even a real rabbit in a cage carried solemnly in one of the many stage processions) – even during the rehearsal period the wits were renaming the opera 'Hasifal' (from the German word 'Hase', meaning a hare). However, that was only part of it. We also got such things as a colony of seals basking in the sun, a giant insect, and a recurring pattern which resembled an amoeba under a microscope, not to mention extraordinary rituals, one involving a black 'priest' with antlers holding up the chalice. In the flesh too, we had regular appearances of what appeared to be a Downs Syndrome girl dressed in a party dress, accompanied by a very short man in a dinner suit, a grossly fat man, and a grossly fat topless woman.

The idea seemed to be a kaleidoscopic view of the natural world and humanity. There were certainly some good ideas

mixed into the morass. Thus religious processions featured people dressed in the clothing of and acting out the rituals of every conceivable type of religion including animism, and this to a degree can be said to reflect Wagner's own religious and philosophical eclecticism. Mind you the knights of the Grail were a very weird bunch (all black, except for the richly sung Gurnemanz of a brave Robert Holl, who sported a shock of ginger hair and a bushy ginger beard to complement the giant sheepskin which he was wearing already in act 1). It's anyone's guess who or what they actually worshipped – one of the prominent graffiti read: 'Heilige Hund. Bitte für uns' ('Holy Dog, pray for us').

There was a very strong African flavour, and I was told that Schlingensiefel was making a 'comment' on German colonialism in the former colony in West Africa which is now Namibia, a country which he has apparently visited. There was also said to be punning going on with the German word for 'Grail', which is 'Gral' and the African word 'Kraal'.

Rumour had it that everything had actually been watered down since the first cycle (hard to believe!), and that originally the director had tried to make the singers sing in impossible positions such as when they were standing on their heads. As it was, they really had their work cut out finding their way through the veritable maze of the constantly changing set. John Wegner (as a black Klingsor) at one point had to relocate from one set to another via a flying fox.

And perhaps the pièce de résistance was Klingsor's 'disappearance'. Would you believe that he jumped into a rocket which whooshed up into the flies? There's no direct German equivalent of the English expression 'a send up', but I have little doubt that Schlingensiefel would be fluent in English!

Well, this is just the tip of the iceberg. The singers battled gamely. Endrik Wottrich, dressed in white like a Victorian Christ, looked like a fish out of water – and sang with dubious conviction. Michelle de Young as Kundry appeared initially in what looked a bit like a clown's suit or pyjamas, later changed into evening dress, and arrived for her baptism as a fat black woman . . . and so on.

When the final curtain fell, in the split second before the audience could respond in general, someone yelled out 'Kitsch!', and this was followed by a tumult of booing (this had already started at the end of Act 1) which then found itself



Wolfgang Wagner with a Bayreuth cast of happier times

competing with a slightly weaker chorus of bravo-ing from the Schlingensiefel groupies. The singers, however, received a thoroughly deserved ovation, as did Pierre Boulez when he appeared.

I left the Festspielhaus with a divided mind. There was much to think about here, at any rate. In the end, though, there was just too much clutter, too much to mentally process, too much of dubious relevance to Wagner, even at the most generous level of interpretation. But who knows? After all, the Chéreau *Ring* was greeted with disapproval, but became a 'classic'!

Knowing the Ropes Before Entering The Ring Chris Brodrick's Part Two of Ring-Awareness for the Adelaide-Bound

In last month's article I suggested that those of you who are going to the Adelaide *Ring* start your study early so that by the time November arrives you feel ready for a week with Wagner! In this issue of the newsletter I will look at what it's like being in Adelaide.

The wonderful thing about attending a *Ring* cycle away from home is that the work can have your full attention. There are no domestic or work distractions to upset your concentration. You are where you are for one purpose — *The Ring* — and so are a large number of other people from all over the world.

I was somewhat taken aback to meet an English couple at the 2002 Berlin *Ring* whom I had met 7 months previously at the Seattle *Ring*. But Wagner lovers are travellers, and completely devoted to *The Ring*. In Adelaide 1998 an American doctor attended his 50th *Ring* cycle. If one stops to consider, as each production lasts a week, he had spent almost a year of his life watching the destruction of the world!

I also met an American couple after one of the performances who had recently retired as research chemists with Pfizer Pharmaceuticals. They had both been with the company over thirty years and bought up all the stock options the company had offered them. At the time they left Pfizer, the company launched the wonder drug Viagra that caused the stock price to go through the roof and allowed two very happy chemists to tour the world attending opera.



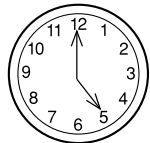
In Adelaide you will be amongst friends, old and new. You'll see them at the theatre, in the street, out shopping and at the associated events.

On each performance day there will be lectures. For independent travellers, the lectures will be held at the Festival Theatre. For the WSNZ group, they are held at the hotel (see your Calendar/Itinerary for details.) They will provide you with the opportunity to discuss various aspects of the production with your fellow WSNZ members.

The lectures will end around noon, giving you just enough

time to have a bit of exercise, a bite to eat, a short lie down and change, before strolling to the theatre. Rushing around the shops or sight seeing is not conducive to attending a *Ring* opera.

Remember that each performance starts at a different time. To aid your planning I've downloaded the following from the South Australia Opera web site which not only gives the start times, but information about when the intervals occur, except *Rheingold*, which has no interval!



PERFORMANCE TIMES AND INTERVALS

Das Rheingold

Starting time 2.00pm.

Total time approx. 2hrs 45 mins

No intervals.

Finishing time approx. 4.45pm.

Die Walküre

Starting time 5.30pm

Act 1 approx. 1hr 10 mins

Drinks interval of 30 mins (6.40 – 7.10pm)

Act 2 approx. 1hr 35 mins

Dinner interval of 1 hr (8.45 – 9.45pm)

Act 3 approx. 1hr 15 mins.

Finishing time approx. 11.00pm.

Siegfried

Starting time 5.00pm

Act 1 approx. 1hr 20 mins

Drinks interval of 30 mins (6.20 – 6.50pm)

Act 2 approx. 1hr 20 mins

Dinner interval of 1 hr (8.10 – 9.10pm)

Act 3 approx. 1hr 25 mins

Finishing time approx. 10.30pm

Götterdämmerung

(Cycles 1 & 2) Starting time 4.30pm

Prologue & Act 1 approx. 2hrs

Dinner interval of 1 hr (6.30pm – 7.30pm)

Act 2 approx. 1hr 10 mins

Drinks interval of 30 mins (8.40 – 9.10pm)

Act 3 approx. 1hr 20 mins

Finishing time approx. 10.30pm

As you will see, it is worthwhile giving some thought to your stomach! With *Rheingold* starting at 2pm I'd suggest a light lunch and please, please remember that drinking vast quantities of liquid before *Rheingold* is not advised. There is NO interval and, even in emergencies, only two places (during the anvils) to make an exit that doesn't bring on the wrath of your fellow audience members! After the performance 100 of us will be attending the *Rheingold* dinner which starts at 7.30pm.

The other three operas will require some planning as the times for the designated meal breaks vary. The dinner interval for *Walküre* is not until 8.45pm while *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* are 8.10 and 6.30pm. For those with strong constitutions, Bass offer various meal packages that are available at the theatre during the long interval. In 1998 they were not good but I'm sure they will be vastly improved this time around.

An alternative is to reserve a table at one of the restaurants close to the theatre. Make sure you book early and alert them that you are attending *The Ring* as they usually have a special theatre menu.

Another idea is to order a meal from the Hotel Room Service prior to the performance with instructions for them to deliver it to your room at the interval time. For those who don't like to eat late I'd suggest that you have a good lunch and have something light during the intervals. The Festival Theatre has a coffee bar or you may like to take your own.

Energy bars or a banana can be discreetly carried into the theatre and consumed during one of the intervals to sustain you through the next act. Try and avoid a mistake I made last time and that was to assume that I'd just find somewhere to eat. I did eventually.....at McDonalds!

For the performance, do wear something that is comfortable, particularly if you plan to follow my last suggestion as bananas and/or bars of chocolate don't really mix with high fashion. You've paid good money to be in the theatre so it makes little sense to ruin it while you sit in agony in something that should be paraded, not sat in.

Try and get to the theatre early and soak up the atmosphere. This is a moment when you will see all kinds of nationalities parading in their finest. I can still recall the Japanese lady at the Berlin Staatsoper in full kimono and the German gentleman who wore more jewellery than any of the *grand dames*!

The State Theatre in Adelaide is well designed for parading, a place to see and be seen! In 1998 a really nice aspect was that the singers who were not performing in the night's opera attended the performance or, if they had finished the evening's work, would mix with the audience. In the second interval of *Seigfried*, I found that evening's magical Mime, Peter Keller, having a drink in the coffee bar!

It's now time for the performance. For those who are first timers there are some acts that will simply fly and others that will tend to go on! It's the latter for which one has to prepare. The three Norns opening *Götterdämmerung*, and retelling the whole *Ring* story for the umpteenth time, have gained the nickname 'the three yawns' for a reason.

The second acts of *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* can cause heavy eyelid syndrome simply because the preceding acts are so action-packed. My advice is peppermints! *Strong* peppermints! But please ensure that you have removed most of the wrapping paper before the curtain goes up. If you're someone who needs to keep up their sugar level, barley sugars could be useful. After the performance members of the society usually retreat to a bar somewhere and get down to some hearty and light-hearted discussion.

The Ring is a big event in Adelaide and other attractions will be held in conjunction with the performances. The Australian Psychoanalytical Society has organized a seminar *Engaging with the Ring* and the Wagner Society of South Australia will hold a *Day with the Wagner Society*. But if all of a sudden you feel that you may be drowning in a surfeit of German culture, there are plenty of other activities in which to submerge yourself.

The Botanical gardens are well worth a visit. They have an amazing hot house that features a tropical rain forest.

The Gallery of South Australia is also well worth visiting as is the State Library, The Adelaide Oval (cricket ground) and St Peter's Cathedral. For those who want to move out of the city and/or taste South Australian wine, there is a day tour of the Barossa Valley. If you'd prefer to stay closer to the city a tram trip to Glenelg makes a nice seaside break.



Adelaide's Botanical Gardens

Outside The Ring — Other Events in Adelaide

Wagner's Ring, "An Artistic Vision"

Curators: Robert Reason, Dr Christine Rothauser.
November/December Art Gallery of South Australia,
North Terrace, Adelaide. FREE

Herbert von Karajan "New Images"

A journey through the public and private life of the famous conductor, seen through the artistry of several photographers and friends. On loan from the Karajan's Archive, Vienna. Coordinated by Dr Christine Rothauser.
November/December Festival Theatre Dress Circle Foyer.
FREE

The Language of The Stage

Wagner's Scenic Vision and Guidelines for Staging the Bayreuth Festival. A journey through the production of the Festival from 1870 till 1989. On loan from The Museum of Fine Arts, Munich. November/December Adelaide Town Hall, King William Street, Adelaide. FREE

The Ring paintings of Andreas Christensen

Throughout *The Ring* season. Adelaide Festival Theatre main foyer. Series of large canvases on *Ring* themes by Danish-born artist Andreas Christensen. FREE.

Richard Wagner in Images

An exhibition of lithographs, posters, memorabilia, cartoons, magazines and early photographs illustrating Richard Wagner's life and operas. Curator: Dr Christine Rothauser November/December Barr Smith Library, The University of Adelaide. FREE

Avarice

November - December 2004. Artspace, Adelaide Festival Centre. Curated by Dianne Longley An exhibition by established and emerging South Australian artists, exploring aspects of *The Ring*. Drawings, paintings, prints, photographs, and sculpture. Exhibiting artists include Nicole Cumston, Shaw Hendry, Dianne Longley, Christine McCormack, Craigh Marsden, Christopher Orchard, Jim Parker, Olga Sankey, Sandra Starkey Simon, and Jim Thalassoudis. FREE.

Australian Psychoanalytical Society Conference

Psychoanalysis and Symbolisation — The Lightness and Darkness of Creativity: A Socio-Cultural Perspective.
15 & 16 November 2004.

Open Day

Engaging with The Ring: an Open Day to be hosted by the Australian Psychoanalytical Society 18 November 2004.
Radisson Playford Hotel, Adelaide. Bookings: (08) 8271 4577
Email: rickcurnow@ozemail.com.au

Great Wagner Voices of the Past

Throughout *The Ring* season, during the day. Adelaide Festival Theatre main foyer, Quartet room. Perpetual audio exhibition. Voices of hundreds of singers of the past who have recorded the works of Richard Wagner. FREE

A Day with the Richard Wagner Society of South Australia

Lectures, seminars, panel discussions and live performances. In association with The Elder School of Music. 21, 28 November and 8 December 2004. 10am to 6pm. Hartley Concert Room and environs, University of Adelaide, Kintore Avenue. Members \$60, non-members \$70. Bookings: Marian Frost (08) 8331 8043

L'Enfant et les Sortilèges

'The Child and the Magic' by Maurice Ravel

This State Opera Young Artist production represents the AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE of the new chamber orchestration as conducted by Lorin Maazel for Opera de Lyon Workshop. Young artistic and musical directors Patrick Lim and Anthony Hunt team up with a magical singing cast of sofas, tea-sets, clocks and animals!

November 21, 28, December 5, 10.

THE OPERA STUDIO 216 Marion Road, Netley
Bookings: (08) 8226 4758.

Backstage Tours

A limited number of backstage tours of the Adelaide Festival Centre will be available at each cycle of *The Ring*.

For further information call BASS on (08) 8400 2222

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR ADELAIDE COURIER-PACKS

Those travelling to Adelaide in the WSNZ group should have their Courier-Packs delivered by Friday, 22nd October. If you haven't received your Pack by then, please contact Liz at 528-1184, or e-mail: handelees@xtra.co.nz.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We discovered recently that Adelaide-goer Gudrun Taylor actually has the name "Adelaide" as her middle name, but in the German form of "Adelheid". We asked her about her name, and were very impressed by the following reply:-

"The "Kudrun" epic is said to date from around 1230-40, author not known but possibly from Bavaria / Austria. It's also known as the "Gudrun Lied". It is written in Middle High German Verse.

Gudrun (Kudrun) was a Germanic princess betrothed to Herwig von Seeland of Denmark, but abducted by Hartmut the Norman and kept virtual prisoner by Hartmut's wicked mother Gerlind because Gudrun wouldn't give in to Hartmut when home from his adventures.

For 14 years she was forced to wash the court laundry at the beach (good for the hands).

During that time Herwig gathered a new army and finally rescued his beloved who, after all those years and rough work, was as beautiful as ever."

Gudrun says:- "Until I read that saga I was always puzzled why so many public laundrettes in Germany were called 'Waschsalon Gudrun'!"

New Members:

Mr & Mrs G&P Beavis, Auckland
Mr D Gordon, Auckland
Ms J McClew, Auckland
Mrs P McClew, Auckland
Ms J Yarwood, Christchurch



Bayreuth Festival 2005

The application for tickets for the Bayreuth Festival 2005 has now been received. If you are interested in going to Bayreuth next year and would like further details, please contact Liz as soon as possible. Phone: 528-1184 or by email: handelees@xtra.co.nz

NZ OPERA SOCIETY (Auckland)

10 November *Turandot* 7.30pm.
Duncan McChie Theatre, ACE.
Enquiries: Ph.575-5051

NZ OPERA SOCIETY (Wellington)

17 November Vocal Extravaganza
St. Andrews on the Terrace, 7.30pm
Enquiries: Ph.237-4176

EXTRA SHOWINGS IN CHRISTCHURCH

Following their very successful DVD showing of *Rheingold*, and last Sunday's *Die Walküre* (Chéreau version) Christchurch Centre will soon be showing *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* at 20 Pentre Terrace. Date and time to follow.

ENDPIECE

from Associated Press, 21/8/2004

Opera director acquitted following scene

Sao Paulo, Brazil — The Supreme Court has quashed charges of obscene exposure levied last year against avant-garde theatre director Gerald Thomas.

After an August 2003 performance of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* at Rio de Janeiro's municipal theatre, Thomas shocked the audience and members of his cast by pulling down his pants and displaying his buttocks in response to jeers at the curtain call.

The Supreme Court said it shelved the charges after deciding that Thomas' gesture "may have been rude and in bad taste" but not obscene.

The gesture was an "exercise in freedom of expression," the court said in a statement on its Website. The decision freed Thomas of a possible jail term of up to a year.