



In the July issue of Classic FM magazine, the influential London Radio Station has named Simon O'Neill as one of the world's top ten tenors. He joins an illustrious group headed by the 68 year old Plácido Domingo. The other eight tenors are Jonas Kaufmann, Roberto Alagna, Juan Diego Flórez, Rolando Villazón, Marcelo Alvarez, John Mark Ainsley, Piotr Beczala and Ian Bostridge.

Simon's entry reads:

Simon O'Neill Age: 37

The next truly great Wagnerian heldentenor? The signs are good...

After his triumph in the Royal Opera's Ring cycle as Siegmund, all ears are open to hear when the young New Zealander will step up to the most punishing roles in the repertoire: Siegfried and Tristan. Authentic, vigorous and tireless heldentenenors with gorgeous voices are as rare as hen's teeth, but he just may be the great hope for Wagnerian opera.

Congratulations Simon.



Katharina Wagner (r) and her half-sister Eva Wagner-Pasquier. Photo: Picture alliance dpa.

A New Dawn

On 25 July a performance of *Tristan & Isolde* opened the 2009 Bayreuth Festival and in doing so marked the start of a new era for the Wagner Festival. With the retirement of Wolfgang Wagner the festival is now led by two of Richard Wagner's great-grand children, Katharina Wagner and Eva Wagner-Pasquier.

Their first festival has been a baptism of fire. Stage technicians threatened strike action over wages and a resolution was only found the day before the opening performance and arrival of a number of VIPs including German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

With problems of the present overcome, Katharina and Eva have announced some changes to future festivals. The half sisters have said they intend to perform Wagner's early works *Die Feen (The Fairies)*, *Das Liebesverbot (The Love Ban)* and *Rienzi*. "But it won't be in the festival theatre. Just to share it for rehearsals with *The Ring* would be impossible," Katharina told the German Press Agency dpa. The half sisters have introduced a new Website with podcasts showing live rehearsals and a staged version of *The Flying Dutchman* for children. The live screening of a festival production in Bayreuth's main square will continue with the support of Siemens AG.

Possibly the most contentious issue is Katharina's desire to open up the family archives to a team of scholars and allow them to research the Wagners' association with Hitler and the Nazi party. She is currently raising money to fund the project.

Once again the WSNZ will have members in attendance at this year's festival. For those who would like to attend in the future, it is essential that you make your interest known to Michael Sinclair who will put you on the list for tickets.

Der fliegende Holländer – Adelaide

A special handbook will be produced for those members attending *Der fliegende Holländer* in Adelaide. The members of the WSNZ party who are attending the 14 November performance will receive the

publication automatically, but any member who is going to Adelaide independently and would like a copy should contact Chris Brodrick. Email cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz or phone (03) 343 0353

Wagner Scholarship

Heath Lees has been invited to contribute to a conference on Wagner to be held in Lisbon, Portugal in November.

CESEM (the Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical, a research unit at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa Portugal) is hosting an international conference on the theme *Consequences of Wagner* to mark the 100th anniversary of the first staging of Wagner's *Ring* in Portugal. The conference venue will be the very theatre where these historical performances took place: the Teatro Nacional de S. Carlos (Lisbon Opera House, see left). The conference forms part of an ongoing research project funded by the FCT (Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology).

Meanwhile, Professor Terence Dennis presented lecture-recitals on Wagner's piano works, as featured in his recent CD for Ode/Manu, at recent international conferences. He was honoured to be invited by the EPTA (European Piano Teachers Association) Voydovina to present this recital at their World Piano Conference in Serbia in May, (with over 100 presenters) and repeated it at the 9th Australasian Piano Pedagogy Conference in Sydney in July.

The programme was entitled *A Potent Symbiosis: The Piano Works of Wagner and late-Liszt* and was particularly lauded at both international events.

During the lecture recital Terence Dennis performed Wagner's *A Sonata for Matilde Wesendonck*, the *Albumblätter for Kietz and Betty Schott* and the *Arrival at the Black Swans*, he also demonstrated from the late Liszt piano pieces associated with Wagner's death.

NEW MEMBERS

A very Warm Wagnerian Welcome to:-
Jonathon MasonAuckland
Martin BoswellWellington
Dr Anton Pernthaner..... Palmerston North
Robert van MackelenbergAuckland

SEATTLE TRISTAN

As the season of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* got underway, Seattle Opera announced that in 2010 they will mount a new production of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, a work they last staged in 1998.

Under the musical leadership of Asher Fisch, who conducted the Adelaide *Ring* in 2004, Tristan will be sung by the American tenor Clifton Forbes and Isolde by the Swede Annalena Persson. Other roles will be sung by Jane Wray as Brangäne, Greer Grimsley as Kurwenal and Stephen Milling as King Marke. The production will be directed by Peter Kazaras, designed by Robert Israel and will run from 31 July to 21 August 2010.

Obituaries



Photo: Ammit Lennon

Sir Edward Downes (1924–2009)

The distinguished conductor Sir Edward Downes, who at the age 85 was almost blind and deaf, has died alongside, Joan, his terminally ill wife of 54 years, at the assisted suicide clinic Dignitas in Switzerland.

Sir Edward had a long career, particularly at Covent Garden where he conducted at least 950 performances of 49 operas. He was regarded as one of the finest Verdian interpreters and loved by the musicians with whom he worked. His intellectual commitment went beyond his activity as a conductor. He was a distinguished musicologist and opera translator, and also promoted new and neglected music. He first reconstructed and performed Wagner's *Rienzi* and brought to life early Wagner works such as *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot*.

Bernd Bentaak (1943-2009)

Those of us who remember the wonderful semi-staged production of *Parsifal* at the International Festival of the Arts in 2006 will be sad to learn of the death of opera director Bernd Bentaak at the age of 66. Bernd Bentaak, according to Professor Roger Covell in The Sydney Morning Herald "helped to raise professional standards in the national company now known as Opera Australia." Born in Hamburg, he came to Australia direct from the Hamburg State Opera where he had been Resident Stage Director. Bentaak was engaged by the Australian Opera as the Company's Resident Producer. During his tenure with AO he worked on a *Der Rosenkavalier* with musical director Sir Edward Downes.

During his career he worked alongside or in the steps of such noted opera directors as Menotti, Everding, Ustinov, Felsenstein and Hotter (with whom he collaborated in 1968 at Bayreuth in a revival of one of Wieland Wagner's *Ring* productions). His later freelance career included being a visiting fellow at the University of NSW and a rewarding period at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin, as a resident producer before he returned to Sydney. He subsequently made a new career in New Zealand, working at Victoria University.



OPERA HOUSES OF THE WORLD



Teatro Nacional de São Carlos or the São Carlos National Theatre is one of the major opera houses of Portugal and has a seating capacity of around 1148. It was built in 1792 as a replacement for the Tejo Opera House, which was destroyed in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake.

Lisbon opera achieved a good reputation during the 19th century. Famous musicians who have performed in the house include Toscanini, Liszt, Saint-Saëns, Paganini, Richard Strauss, Rubinstein and Padarewsky along with singers Beniamino Gigli, Mario del Monaco, Tito Gobbi, Renata Scottò, Birgit Nilsson, Alfredo Krause and many others.

WSNZ Events

The arrival of Spring brings with it a number of WSNZ events. Elric Hooper kicks the season off in Auckland (6 September) with a fascinating talk on *The Evolution of Wagner Production*. He has already given this talk to great acclaim in Christchurch and Wellington. Elric is a regular contributor to Concert FM where he demonstrates a prodigious knowledge of the Arts and in particular the history of theatre. Do get to hear this talk!

On 18 September, John Pattinson will enlighten Christchurch members with a presentation on *Rienzi* (see page 3) and Chris Brodrick will give his talk on *Wagner and the Visual Arts* to Dunedin members (27 September) and a couple of weeks later (9 October) will deliver it in Christchurch.

Members are very welcome to bring along friends to these talks as it is not only a way of increasing interest in our Society but also nice for the speakers if we attract a good crowd.

Bar, bar black sheep... 7 hours full!

"If you can't join them, beat them" seems to have been Wagner's attitude when, both *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* having failed in Germany, he decided to tackle the Parisian scene head on in a bid to outdo the reigning giants, Spontini and Meyerbeer. The result, *Rienzi*, had to wait 25 years for its Paris debut, but was an instant hit in Dresden, providing a tremendous boost to the young composer's morale and a temporary solution to his financial problems. The work is a massive five-act Grand Opera inspired by the heroic style of Spontini and the dazzling brilliance of Auber, Meyerbeer and Halévy, replete with arias, ensembles, choruses, pantomime and ballet. Despite his assurances to the Dresden authorities that, although longer than the current record-holders, (Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*), the work would run for no more than four hours, the first performance (already heavily cut) lasted six hours. A full performance, as originally conceived, would take about seven hours!

Two months later, in an attempt to present *Rienzi* intact, it was divided into two and given on successive evenings. In a letter to Schumann shortly after this experiment, Wagner confided his intention of reducing "my *Rienzi* to a single evening's length. The provincial theatres find the division into two evenings a great obstacle." The opera was never given in its complete original form during Wagner's lifetime. Sadly, it is now impossible since the autograph score which, along with other priceless manuscripts, was in the possession of Adolf Hitler, is presumed to have perished with him in his Berlin bunker at the close of the war.

After Wagner's death, Cosima & one of her Bayreuth collaborators, the dastardly Julius Kniese, attempted to convert *Rienzi* from 'grand opera' to 'Musikdrama' by means of haphazard cutting of choruses, word-repetitions, ornaments, and anything considered 'inessential' to the dramatic action. Regrettably, this heavily mutilated version has formed the basis for all subsequent scores and performances, making the opera into something of a black sheep. Wagner himself clearly regarded *Rienzi* as an 'opera' and nothing more, certainly not as a 'drama', or as a 'significant' work. Later, he even tried to disown it. "*Rienzi* is very repugnant to me" an entry in Cosima's diaries quotes, "...I was a music director and I wrote a grand opera; the fact that it was the same music director who later gave them such hard nuts to crack - that's what should astonish them."

WSNZ 2009 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 6 September 7.30pm

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

Elric Hooper presents: *From Maestro to Myth* – The evolution of Wagner production

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 4 pm

(*To be confirmed)

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace

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

Around 1957, Wieland Wagner toyed with the idea of adding *Rienzi* to the Bayreuth repertoire, but decided it was too cumbersome for that venue. The latest news is that, in 2013, the festival intends, at long last, to include the early works, *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*, although these will not take place in the festival theatre. It seems that after 171 years out in the cold, the black sheep of the family will finally be allowed into the fold.

Performances being, understandably, a bit thin on the ground, it's hardly surprising that no commercial DVD of *Rienzi* is available. However, John Pattinson has obtained an off-air recording of a German TV broadcast, to which he has painstakingly added English subtitles. The sound quality is perfectly acceptable, although the video leaves something to be desired. Nevertheless, it's better than nothing so, on Friday 18 September, John will introduce excerpts from *Rienzi* as a prelude to a complete screening at a later date.



Rienzi vowing to obtain justice for the death of his brother - *William Holman Hunt (1848-49)*

Christchurch

Friday, 18 September 7.30pm

*NOTE CHANGE OF PROGRAMME
Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

John Pattinson presents: *The Black Sheep of the Family* – An introduction to *Rienzi*

Friday, 9 October 7.30pm

*NOTE CHANGE OF PROGRAMME
Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Chris Brodrick presents: *Wagner & the Visual Arts*. A repeat presentation from 2006

Sunday, 29 November 6.00pm

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

Christmas BBQ

Dunedin

Sunday, 27 September 2.00pm

Venue: Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Chris Brodrick presents: *Wagner and the Visual Arts* - A look at some of the artists who were influenced by the Master of Bayreuth. (In conjunction with Friends of the Art Gallery)

Saturday, 7 November 12.30pm

*NOTE DATE & VENUE CHANGE

Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum
Ludwig - Luchino Visconti

A DVD screening of the film based on the life of Wagner's benefactor, King Ludwig II of Bavaria

Sunday, 6 December 12.30pm

*NOTE CHANGE OF TIME & VENUE
Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum

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

New Artistic Director for OA

Following the death of Richard Hickox last November, Lyndon Terracini has been appointed as artistic director of Opera Australia.

Terracini began his career as a singer with the national opera company in 1976 and has sung in international opera productions.

In a statement from OA announcing his appointment, Terracini says he wants to commission new Australian operas and mount a full production of Wagner's four-part *Ring cycle*.

If the Melbourne *Ring* also gets off the ground we had better start saving!

Lohengrin in London

Every now and again you find a review that is a joy to read. It contains the essential elements of criticism and in addition a dry sense of humour. Covent Garden's recent production of *Lohengrin* inspired the following reviews:

In the Times Richard Morrison wrote:-
"Mussolini had his bad points. But when he had *Lohengrin* performed by 10,000 singers on a stage 300 feet wide, he was on to something.

Lohengrin is Wagner's *Aida*: a tragic love story forever doomed to be clobbered by its opportunities for vast spectacle. Elijah Moshinsky's Royal Opera production has been knocking round Covent Garden almost as long as I have: 32 years, to be precise. It's not hard to see why. With minimal sets, he floods the stage with enough spectacle to satisfy Cecil B. DeMille.

Totem poles, replete with human sacrifices straight out of *The Wicker Man*, jostle with Christian banners and crosses (Moshinsky takes the old-fashioned view that the conflict between the Grail-inspired *Lohengrin* and the sorcery of *Ortrud* is a simple clash of old and new religions). Swords as big as goalposts are wielded in fights that entertain for all the wrong reasons.

The frocks are gold, gorgeous and as massive as marquees, and that's just the blokes. Admittedly, *Lohengrin*'s swan is reduced to a risible Batman-style logo projected on a gauze. But those who giggled should remember that this was thought very high-tech and daring in 1977.

Most impressive of all, an augmented chorus (not quite as big as Mussolini's, but these are tough times) stands around for hours, singing lustily, emoting slightly, as Wagner unfolds his epic tale of the knight who dare not speak his name. Many younger directors would feel an irresistible urge to concoct time-filling sideshows. Not Moshinsky. His view is that if Wagner wrote an hour of hearse-paced music before the main character even appears, why should the staging do anything to disturb the torpor? I don't think Johan Botha, in the title role, moves more than two paces in any direction all night, and that includes two swordfights.

But this is a show in which the goodies are acted off the stage by the baddies. Botha has a crystal-clear tenor, mostly in tune until his last scene, but the charisma of a tea towel. His Elsa, Edith Haller, is even more inert, and her singing is eerily disengaged from such concepts as emotion or theatricality. Not so the magnificent Petra Lang, whose venomous, scenery-chewing *Ortrud* turns every consonant into an act of malice. After a dull start her easily manipulated hubbie, *Telramund* (Gerd Grochowski), matches her grimace for grimace.



Johan Botha (*Lohengrin*) and Edith Heller (*Elsa*) Photo Clive Barda

Semyon Bychkov conducts with great flair, but the ensemble isn't tight enough and some of the orchestral tuning, particularly from the constantly fanfaring trumpeters, is very sour. Mussolini would have had them shot."

Followed by Hugh Canning in *The Sunday Times*:-

As the jaunty strains of the *Wedding March* in Act III of Wagner's *Lohengrin* struck up at the Royal Opera House on Monday night, I mouthed to myself: "Here comes the bridegroom, all..." The shimmering swan-knight in the latest revival of Elijah Moshinsky's venerable (1977) and now distinctly moth-eaten production of Wagner's romantic opera is the well-upholstered South African Johan Botha, king of the tenortubbies since the demise of Pavarotti.

I praised Botha's *Lohengrin* on disc last week, but on stage he strikes an almost comic, Falstaffian figure, in costumes that now look like a fashion parade for flamboyant vicars: acres of monastic white sackcloth embellished with gold thread and ecclesiastical festoonery. Unlike Pavarotti, Botha doesn't act with his face: when declaring his love for Edith Haller's saintly, voluptuous Elsa, his gaze is fixed on the tip of Semyon Bychkov's baton and his eyes flicker from right to left like one of the actors, unsure of their lines, in *Victoria Wood's Acorn Antiques*.

Although he sings tirelessly and avoids Heldentenorial yelling, he is as much of an operatic relic as the saint's mummy strapped to one of John Napier's now wobbly Christian totems on sledges, praised in 1977 for ridding *Lohengrin* of Wagnerian clutter, but now looking quaint....

...Despite these reservations, I would not have missed the performance, for two principal reasons: the magnificent singing of Renato Balsadonna's chorus

and Bychkov's masterly conducting, which was lyrically intense, bringing an almost religious devotion to the shimmering polyphony of the strings, yet boldly theatrical in the ceremonial scenes, resplendent with reverberating trumpets and horns. Moshinsky's production has been lucky in its conductors, but Bychkov is the most revelatory of all, opening up the traditional cuts and revealing this relatively youthful work as Wagner's earliest masterpiece. With conducting like this, you barely notice Wagner's cracks, joins and occasionally flagging inspiration. A just-short-of-five-hour evening sped past, notwithstanding the longeurs and largeurs on stage.

Property News

It's always nice to bring something new to the WSNZ newsletter and this edition can claim a first – the first time we have featured a real estate advertisement!

We were recently contacted by Cornelia Seitz, an agent with Re-Max, Vienna, to inform us that an apartment, in the house at Hadikgasse 72, Vienna in which Richard Wagner lived between 1863-64, is on the market. The 6 room flat is on the market for €220,000 (\$NZ 475,00). Anyone interested?

