

WAGNER NEWS OF VICTORIA



NEWSLETTER OF THE
RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY INC.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This is a busy time for the Society. On 19 May, we celebrated Wagner's 206th Birthday. Opera Director Suzanne Chaundy gave a humorous and insightful speech on 'Where there's a Will, there's a Wagner', discussing the four Wagner productions she has directed for Melbourne Opera in the last three years. The first Wagner Birthday celebration was a black tie dinner held in May 1983, following the Society's founding in August 1982, and we have held Wagner Birthday celebrations every year since.

Our 2019 Bayreuth Festival group will be anticipating that marvellous sound and special atmosphere of their Bayreuth experience in August. We are planning a public event, yet to be announced, for 2020, as well as continuing to source presenters for functions and undertaking our Strategic Planning Project.

Hearing Members' Voices

Thank you to the many members who have responded to Phase I of our Strategic Plan Questionnaire. It was good to hear that members are happy with the Society's communication, highlighting the value of news-

letters, members' functions and the web. We will search for a venue for some 2020 members' functions to be held south of the Yarra. We must also make greater connections with ANAM, the MSO and university music departments. A former President, Shirley Breese, highlighted "the original impetus, goal and spirit of the Society comes from people past, present and future; there is a real connection and camaraderie, in addition to education and entertainment". It is the Society's wish to continue to uphold these sentiments.

Living Within Our Means

There are some very interesting Wagner productions planned for Australia in 2020. In order to maintain the Society's Net Equity position, we may be unable to continue to offer such widespread and high level support to Wagner productions as we have undertaken in recent years. Production funding choices will necessitate difficult decisions, which may not be universally popular.

A members' survey which I conducted on behalf of the Society in 2008 identified two distinct groups: those who believe only Opera

Australia productions should be supported, because they generally are of the highest standard. Conversely, there is a strong contingent who recommend we support other companies which do not enjoy Opera Australia's level of federal funding and Opera Victoria's level of state funding. Additionally nowadays, compared with 2008, we have a much wider choice of Wagnerian productions being performed in Australia, in particular in Melbourne. This, of course, is a luxury for Wagnerites.

There will be a fundraising drive in the last quarter of 2019 where members will be able to specify which 2020 production/s they wish to support. Your Committee is also endeavouring to find other revenue streams. Of course, many members will continue to be individual donors to their favoured productions and/or companies.

2020 Rings: Spoiled for Choice

Bayreuth (August), the Paris Opera (November) and Chicago (April) will be staging new *Ring* productions in 2020. The 2020 Bayreuth *Ring*, which has not yet announced

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its latest conductor choice, will have different Directors for the four operas. Here's hoping for a coordinated degustation, where feuding can be put aside for the greater *Ring* story.

The Paris *Ring* will be conducted by Philippe Jordan and produced by the Spanish enfant terrible Calixto Bieito, who is sure to provoke and surprise.

The Chicago *Ring* is to be conducted by Sir Andrew Davis. Wotan

will be played by Eric Owens; Burkhard Fritz, who was Opera Victoria's 2019 *Parsifal*, is performing the role of Siegfried.

The Chicago *Ring* has been receiving glowing reviews for its separate operas; the online pictures of its 2016 *Das Rheingold* are stunning.

If you do not want to undertake long-distance travel, Opera Australia will be producing the Brisbane *Ring* in 2020. The dates of the three cycles are 10-17 November, 19-26

November and 28 November-5 December. The Brisbane *Ring* is a co-production with Beijing Opera and will be a modern production with the latest technologies.

I am aiming to go to both the Brisbane and Paris Rings in 2020—what a feast!

~ Dr Susan Cumming
President



EDITORIAL COMMENT

I saw the production of Victorian Opera's *Parsifal* and was very impressed with the quality, despite the shoe-string budget. Derek Welton, who was sponsored by our society, was, in my opinion, the star of the show, demonstrating superb histrionics, and singing the role with a wonderfully rich and powerful voice.

Already, he has been taken up by Bayreuth, where he has sung the same role, and has been signed up by Deutsche Opera to sing Wotan in their 2020 *Ring*. It won't be long before he takes on the great role in

Bayreuth. Maybe in 2021, as he is engaged there then.

This is another good example of the success of the society's sponsorship programme. I support continuation of this for all Wagner productions, especially the cash-strapped and highly successful productions of our local Victorian and Melbourne opera companies.

~ Stan O'Loughlin



LUNCH WITH EVA WAGNER-PASQUIER



Janice Carpenter with Eva Pasquier-Wagner, Wolfgang Wagner's eldest daughter



Society members John Carpenter, Janice Carpenter, Libby Smith and John Middleton

During my recent visit to New York to attend Cycle 2 of the Lepage *Ring* I was asked to attend a lunch in honour of Eva Wagner-Pasquier, the great-granddaughter of Richard Wagner.

The lunch was hosted by the Wagner Society of New York and the invitation was delivered by Natalie Wagner (no relation to Richard), the President. I was there representing our Society.

The lunch was held in the Princeton Club, 15 West 43rd Street, where Natalie's husband is a member. I love New York addresses.

Other guests included my husband John, John Rowe and his wife Juliet from the Wagner Society of New Zealand and members of the Wagner Society of New York.

I was lucky to be sitting opposite Eva and we talked about her busy life. She was discreet when asked

by another attendee to give her opinion about the Lepage production of the *Ring*.

At the end of the lunch Eva announced with pride that her son, visual artist Antoine Amadeur Wagner-Pasquier, was expecting a child, so the Wagner family continues.

This lunch was a highlight of my time in New York.

~ Janice Carpenter

~ WAGNER BIRTHDAY LUNCH ~

The Wagner Society lunch to celebrate the anniversary of Richard Wagner's 106th birthday was held on Sunday 19 May 2019.

Once again, we were at the lovely Rylands of Hawthorn. Fifty-two guests attended the lunch, heralded into the dining room by a horn and tuba rendition of 'Happy Birthday' by Rob and Bev Gospell.

The guest speaker for the lunch was director Suzanne Chaundy. Suzanne and I are good friends since crossing paths during my acting days, then working together in 'Strange Fruit' and more recently on Melbourne Opera productions.

It was a great pleasure to have her speak to the Wagner Society at our Birthday Lunch on the topic 'Where there's a Will, there's a Wagner', an opportunity to find out a little bit more about the programming side of the Wagner performances that we have been enjoying recently.

Melbourne Opera has had an amazing run of Wagner operas directed by Suzanne, starting with *Tannhäuser* in 2016, *Lohengrin* (2017), *Tristan und Isolde* (2018) and most recently *Der Fliegende Holländer* (2019). For a local opera company with no government funding, this has been no easy task. But it has been done, quite successfully, and Suzanne announced a further production *Das Rheingold*, in 2020.

Being a NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Arts) graduate and having worked as a trainee opera director

with the Victoria State Opera, Suzanne has a strong theatre background and approaches opera as a piece of 'sung theatre'. She observes that a theatre manifesto she wrote in her university days bears similarities to Wagner's ideas on Gesamtkunstwerk ('total work of art') which has enabled her to stage successful interpretations of his work.

Suzanne said she unexpectedly found herself directing *Tannhäuser*, and subsequently all these other Wagner operas. For Melbourne Opera it was a big financial risk to take on such a large project, and staging it at the Regent Theatre which had until then not been used for traditional opera—but necessary for *Tannhäuser's* grand scale, including the large orchestra.

For the direction, Suzanne focused on storytelling. For the visuals, she brought in the element of video which in a way has become a signature of her Wagnerian direction, invoking strong emotions and atmosphere through the imagery. This is very fitting, with Wagner sometimes being considered to be the 'first film composer' with his work, having inspired music-making for films. Video enabled tackling of Wagnerian staging challenges such as the portrayal of Venus' grotto in *Tannhäuser*, and the all-important swan in *Lohengrin*.

Melbourne Opera itself has evolved with these operas. Originally producing operas in English, *Tannhäuser* had the principals singing in German, but the chorus (made up of volunteers ranging from retired singers to devel-

oping artists) sang in English—a result of last-minute casting changes. Yes, you may have been wondering why! By the next opera, *Lohengrin*, the chorus was singing in German as well.

Each opera has been a further stepping stone for Melbourne Opera, attracting artists of international acclaim such as Maestro Anthony Negus and singers including Neal Cooper and Darren Jeffery, as well as high-calibre Australian artists including Helena Dix, Lee Abrahmsen and Daniel Sumegi.

Holländer felt a bit strange for Suzanne to go backwards chronologically in Wagner's works. But again, she was able to tap into what she believes Wagner wanted, which resulted in artistic directions such as having a live Ghost Chorus on stage.

I am excited that *Das Rheingold* will be directed by Suzanne and hope that she will get to tackle all of the Ring Cycle. In the meantime, watch out for her next Melbourne Opera production of Bellini's *Norma*, featuring Helena Dix, Sam Sakker, Jacqui Dark and Adrian Tamburini.

Suzanne led the ceremonious toast to Wagner for his birthday, followed by a piano duet of 'Happy Birthday' by committee members Gavin Cornish and James Alker. Much conversation flowed with good food and wine.

We've had some wonderful feedback from the attendees and from Suzanne. Hopefully Herr Wagner was smiling from wherever he may be!

~ Miki Oikawa, Secretary



Suzanne Chaundy's toast



James Alker and Gavin Cornish's 'Happy Birthday' by four hands

MELBOURNE OPERA'S *DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER* 2019

Melbourne Opera's recent production of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* was a tour de force and a production triumph for the opera company founded in 2002.

Their production of *Der Fliegende Holländer* marks a high point in Wagner productions for Melbourne Opera audiences and has 'raised the bar' for all subsequent Wagner productions.

Building on the success of previous Wagner productions, Melbourne Opera have managed to combine the talents and skills of their considerable number of volunteers with expert solo performers, a brilliant production team comprising the Director, the Set Designer, the Costume Designer, the

Lighting Designer, the Musical Director and the Chorus Master.

Anthony Negus is well acquainted with Melbourne Opera, having conducted their production of *Tristan und Isolde* to great acclaim in 2018. Anthony's musical approach is highly sensitive to the needs of the drama, but he also moulds the orchestral forces, enabling expressiveness and dramatic clarity, as well as allowing the subtle emotional colours to emerge. I was present at an informal discussion session where Anthony was able to elaborate on some of his thoughts, research and experience over many years. It was indeed thrilling to hear his ideas expressed in performance.

It is clear Anthony takes a highly nuanced and informed approach to his interpretation of the opera, and to the score in particular. Both in the program notes and in conversation, he emphasised the importance of addressing changes made to the score by Wagner between 1842 and 1880. Of special interest is the revision of 1860, which included new composition, a coda for the overture and finale, and the greater use of subtle dynamics along with an expanded role for the strings in the orchestra. Anthony noted how the strings create a 'humanising effect' in the score.

Added to this, he also supports Wagner's original concept of a single



act performance without an interval. I wholeheartedly agree with this decision, from the point of view of the audience. The drama seemed to flow smoothly, and the overall effect was of greater musical cohesiveness.

Now a seasoned Wagnerian with several Wagner opera productions of note to her credit, director Suzanne Chaundy has created a chef-d'oeuvre with *Der Fliegende Holländer* for Melbourne Opera. *Tristan und Isolde*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* were all beautiful productions, but the recent *Der Fliegende Holländer* is outstanding in all areas of the production.

For this production, Suzanne was keen to provide a satisfying narrative for Senta. Conceived as an empathetic character longing to escape the simple social expectations of the village, Senta is deeply moved by the story of *Der Holländer*. Senta is also a complex character, perhaps obsessed, but not mad or possessed. She is also an artist and a dreamer. Suzanne intentionally and masterfully directs all central characters to allow for their inner turmoil to emerge.

Lee Abrahmsen is a stunning performer with an exquisite instrument. Lee is wonderfully engaging on stage, her powerful but expressive voice soars above the orchestra in moments of heightened emotion, while at other times she warmly conveys Senta's humanity and resolve. As Anthony stated, Senta's ballad from Act 2 is the central source of musical material from which the drama springs. Lee's performance of this pivotal piece was thrilling and highly memorable.

Der Holländer, played by Darren Jeffery, was magnificent. His commanding and powerful voice was well suited to the role, as was his character interpretation and presentation. Although *Der Holländer* is often played as a quasi-spectral character, Darren imbued his character with a very human and troubled heart, one full of sorrow and yearning for redemption and deliverance from his diabolical fate.

Nothing with Wagner is simple or straightforward. In Wagner's own words from 1851, *Der Holländer* is conceived as a synthesis of Odysseus, Ahasuerus and Columbus. It is likely that Wagner saw himself reflected in the story of *Der Holländer* and the story of Ahasuerus. It is also perhaps as much a myth about his life as an artist as it is about mythical redemption.



To the extent that we see another wandering spirit longing for redemption and death in the character of Kundry from *Parsifal*, this underscores Wagner's central preoccupation with this trope.

A Wagner authority, Dieter Borchmeyer, is confident that Weltschmerz plays an important part in the creation of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Weltschmerz, the popular symbolic subject of the mid-19th century, is characterised and translated as a feeling of world-weariness, and is expressed in the characters of Hamlet, Faust, Don Juan and Ahasuerus.

However, Wagner's *Der Holländer* is a 19th century creation, and as such is perhaps a closer representation of the mood or *Zeitgeist*. Wagner's story emphasises the curse of life without end, life of continuous repetition and perpetual existence, life as little more than suffering where peace is only to be found in death. Weltschmerz is a metaphysical pain, but an expression of the pain supposedly inherent in the world.

Erik was played and sung superbly by Rosario La Spina. His character was convincing and his concern to save Senta from a terrible fate was admirably conveyed. Erik sadly misunderstands Senta's kindness, his heart is broken, and he is 'thrown under the keel', so to speak.

Daland, brilliantly played and sung by Steven Gallop, was well cast in this role. His interpretation of Senta's father replete with dubious character traits was well portrayed.

It is worth considering an interesting parallel with another Wagner music drama. In *Die Meistersinger*, Veit Pogner is portrayed as a father also willing to cross ethical boundaries with a less than contemporary concern for the

wellbeing of his daughter, Eva.

Roxane Hislop, who was cast as Mary, Senta's nurse, has a magnificent voice. Although the role of Mary is quite dour, Roxane played the role beautifully.

Michael Lapina was well cast as *Der Steuermann*. His singing was terrific, his acting was engaging, and he used the stage to full advantage. The image of Michael climbing up the ship deck as he addressed the massed sailors in a manner reminiscent of a swashbuckling Hollywood movie was very memorable.

Andrew Bailey's set created for Melbourne Opera's *Der Fliegende Holländer* is the most impressive to date. The design was highly evocative and set the tone for the entire production. It functioned beautifully, and easily transformed to create the required *mise-en-scène*.

On stage, the hull and deck of Daland's ship pivoted to allow the creation of different performance spaces, sails were simple but effectively framed and lowered from the fly. Window frames replaced sails for the interior cottage scene. *Der Holländer*'s ship, with glowing red sails, was neatly projected on the rear cyclorama, creating a highly effective image without requiring extra stage space.

The costumes were well coordinated and looked fabulous on stage in what would be considered a traditional period setting. The lead characters' costumes all projected strong images and the ghostly sailors' costumes created a fabulous effect.

I am not quite sure where the source of inspiration and drive is to be attributed within Melbourne Opera, but all involved are to be commended for their efforts and fine achievement.

~ Gavin Cornish

VICTORIAN OPERA'S UNVEILING OF THEIR HOLY GRAIL: *Parsifal*



There was a buzz leading up to opening night of Victorian Opera's *Parsifal*, a work which astoundingly had never been staged before in Victoria. Any major opera company has their work cut out for them staging *Parsifal* but the fact that Victorian Opera were able to mount a production of *Parsifal* at such a high standard, let alone pull in the cast they did, is beyond anything we could have dreamed.

Through *Parsifal*, Wagner presents us with a world full of sacred spirituality, mysticism, and nobility; but here Roger Hodgman has crafted a production that puts humanity front and centre, taking us all on a profound journey to realise our own capacity for compassion, something that is seemingly not currently in abundance.

The stage opened up into an indistinct time and place, a blank box with a tear running through it that falls further apart as the night goes on. This suggested a breaking down of the world through neglect and abandonment, but also the structures of tradition and power are shifted by Parsifal making his way through the kingdoms.

With minimal props on the sets, what we did see was compelling, including the 160,000 black leaves that covered the ground of Act 1. While I'm sure many were likely to have felt differently, I found the sweeping of the leaves was an effective use of 'poor theatre' techniques to provide movement during the *Verwandlungsmusik*. Less effective for me was the use of what looked like the Bekväm stool I have in my garage that you can pick up at your local Ikea, rather than something that appeared worthy of holding an object such as the Holy Grail.

Set lighting usually creates an unobtrusive atmosphere or draws the eye to something, but rarely draws attention to itself. In this production it was to great effect that Matt Scott used his mastery of the craft to build a feast for the eyes. No more evident than the James Turrell fever dream of Act 2. With the destruction of Klingsor's kingdom—aside from a slightly awkward spear exchange—the almost instantaneous washout of all colour and sparkle, transitioning to a

solid blue hue as Parsifal makes his exit, was nothing short of stunning. I was fortunate to see all three performances of this run, and it was this second act that had me most excited to get into my seat each subsequent night.

Furthering the human view of this work, through her costumes, Christina Smith allowed us to see ourselves (at least the men) in the fallible grail knights. Smith's crowning glory though was Klingsor's dazzling outfit, counter to the grail knights, ensuring that your eyes never drifted from the star of the night. Effective also was the transition through Kundry's outfits, from that of a wild wanderer, to beautiful and seductive, then finally landing on the reformed and pious woman we see in Act 3.

Alongside the excellent cast, the Australian Youth Orchestra truly held their own. In the capable hands of Richard Mills, the orchestra displayed a tremendous artistry even in the face of a work of such exquisite beauty, complexity and length. This wasn't just Good Friday music, it was great Friday music. A true testament to the possibilities of music education in Australia.

As a product of the youth orchestra system, some of my fondest memories are from that time and the challenges that I went through. It wasn't hard to put myself in the seats of these young performers, knowing how tiring such a mammoth undertaking would have been, but all worth it for the sheer joy they would have felt creating this marvellous music. The tempo drawn by Mills often verged on the quicker end of the spectrum, which I took as being a compassionate act towards the young orchestra.

There were, of course, a few standout instrumental performers, most obvious being the off-stage (or was it on-stage?) brass with their rich and majestic fanfares. We also had the unfortunately positioned percussion and harps, delegated to the aisles of the theatre due to the overflowing pit. I felt for the audience members in the proximity of the timpani during the thunderous close of Act 2, but from my position it was nothing short of thrilling. The logistics required of the Parsifal Bells is now covered by a recorded

solution played through a PA system (I imagine it would have been nigh on impossible for VO to get their hands on an authentic Gralsglocke), and while we didn't quite experience the earthquake-like sounds you get in Bayreuth, it still gave the transitions the requisite solemn gravity the scenes call for.

The ensembles were commendable across the board, from the full-voiced male chorus, to the alluring flower maidens, and the heavenly youth chorus. Having some of the chorus members visible and up high looking down onto the stage added a sense of humanity that was well aligned to the overall message of the opera.

The first of the exemplary cast to be heard on stage was Peter Rose, and it was obvious from the outset that we were in the presence of a great Gurnemanz. Rose's warm, grandfatherly voice boomed into the theatre all the way through every performance. Even on the final night when we were pre-warned about Rose being struck by a Melbourne lurgy and not being 'up to scratch', had we not been informed, I doubt I would have even noticed.

There were clearly some Klingsor-inspired dark arts performed by Victorian Opera to cast legendary Swedish soprano, Katarina Dalayman. Her presence was striking from the moment she first emerged on stage, a truly seasoned actor and performer. Whether it was the wildness of her top register, the tenderness in the more 'motherly' moments, or her palpable desperation and suffering, it was abundantly clear why Dalayman is one of the most sought after Kundry interpreters today. We can only hope that Victorian Opera has more of this magic up their sleeves to lure her back for more.

Burkhard Fritz gave us a Parsifal of sensitivity and clarity that would more commonly be found in lieder singing than in a heldentenor role, but it was no less potent. Where his voice held up to the demands of the part, his physicality and movement often betrayed the innocent youth the role represents. The more emotionally charged moments certainly made up for this, in particular the profound display of Parsifal's newly discovered understanding after the kiss from Kundry. My breath caught as his cries of "Erlöse, rette mich..." rang out into the theatre.

As the curtain closed at the end of the night, there was no doubt that we had just witnessed an exceptional *Parsifal*.

If I knew nothing of James Roser before seeing his superb delivery of the tortured Amfortas, I never would have believed it was in fact his first. There was a command and deep understanding of the role that is only seen in the most experienced performers, with the final moments full of distress and a release that felt like a collective sigh throughout the theatre.

Fresh from his recent Bayreuth seasons in the same role,

Derek Welton gave the audience a Klingsor that left no questions about the praise that has been reaching our shores from lands afar. For those of us lucky enough to have seen Welton in Bayreuth this was of course no surprise, but it made it all the more special that the Richard Wagner Society were able to support Victorian Opera and Welton to give locals a chance to see this remarkable talent.

Surging with vengeful energy, and with a voice of striking richness and depth, Welton managed to hold his characterisation and vocal skill in equal standing, high above where many fall flat. It's also thrilling to hear a non-native German with such brilliant clarity and diction. As with Dalayman, I can't help but hope this successful run of performances with Victorian Opera isn't the last time we see Welton on an Australian stage.

Appearing in a world vastly divergent from the spartan and austere grail kingdom, the inhabitants of Klingsor's kingdom represented everything that the grail knights were not: colourful, sensual, flamboyant and self-determined. After proclaiming "The boy is handsome, roses in his cheeks", the lascivious grin from Welton's Klingsor felt more like a statement than a simple suggestion of an individual grappling with more than just his self-inflicted chastity. Perhaps Klingsor has eyes for people beyond Kundry or the flower maidens.

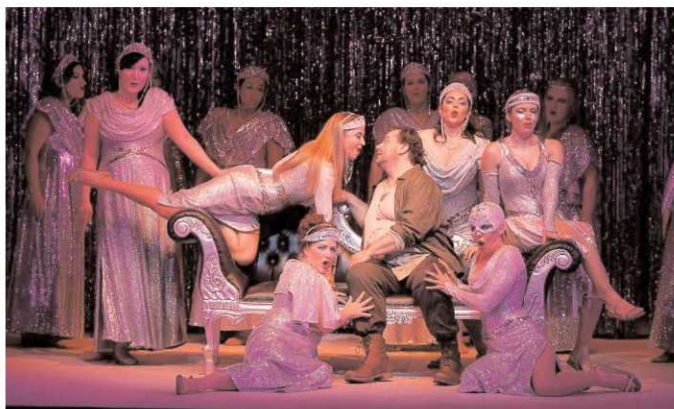
We're usually shown a dark, tortured and chaste soul of Klingsor but this time I saw a character that didn't represent the evil we normally see. I was left to contend with the relevance of this incredible work in today's world in which we may no longer accept that a compassionate life is incongruous with a life of individualism and passion.

I would agree with many who take some of the messages in *Parsifal* as promoting the discrimination against and exclusion of 'others'. Much to the chagrin of those against regie-theater, I would suggest that there is ample opportunity in new productions of *Parsifal* to dramatise the discrimination evident against the subversive roles of Klingsor and Kundry while simultaneously exposing the effects that exclusion can have on people who don't fit within the mould. This would give audiences a greater benefit than a general reading of compassion for your fellow (same) man.

As an agnostic individual, experiencing *Parsifal* live is the closest thing I have ever come to a religious experience. Not unlike Amfortas and his wound, it is my unsatisfiable desire, one that I will never quench regardless of how many times I see it.

Parsifal may have been Wagner's final masterpiece, but this will certainly not be Victorian Opera's last. If this is a sign of their new status as an Australian Major Performing Arts company, then Victorians (and beyond) are in for a treat for years to come.

~ James Alker



PARSIFAL IN CONVERSATION



Parsifal in Conversation and 'Blocking Session'

In recognition of our Society's support for the role of Klingsor in Victorian Opera's new production of *Parsifal*, our members were invited to 'Parsifal in Conversation' at the Palais Theatre, St Kilda on Tuesday 12 February. We arrived at 4:45pm to watch a 'blocking session', then enjoyed a conversation between Scott Whinfield (Media and Communications Executive, Victorian Opera), Richard Mills (Conductor) and Derek Welton (Klingsor).

For those not familiar with the term 'blocking' it is the 'stage direction' part of rehearsals. Singing may occur but the main purpose of the session is the movement of the cast on the stage. We were able to watch director Roger Hodgman block part of the Third Act where Parsifal (Burkhard Fritz), Gumemanz (Peter Rose) and Kundry (Katarina Dalayman) begin their slow march towards the Hall of the Grail.

It was obvious that the three singers were very experienced in these roles and were in a very collaborative situation with the director. We were excited to have a preview of the stage setting. Stark but effective. I'm sure we were all thinking 'mind the gap' as the three characters slowly proceeded from front to back stage across the chasm dividing the stage.

Scott conducted the Conversation with Richard Mills and Derek Welton. Answering the question as to how he prepares himself for a performance, Richard said that he did not do anything special physically except to not eat heavy food or drink alcohol.

He also said a conductor needs to be in control of himself, as "If you can't control yourself you will never be able to control anyone else."

Derek noted that his role is short and intense, and can be said to be at the shoutier end of the spectrum. Derek continually thinks of how he can perform the role in a more lyrical way, which will allow the audience to see the inner torment of Klingsor.

In answer to a question: "How does the role evolve with each time you perform Klingsor?", Derek said that he never stops trying to interpret the role; that each director provides different aspects to the character of Klingsor and these can inform the way he interprets the role.



Janice and John Carpenter at Parsifal in Conversation

Derek was also very happy with the director, Roger Hodgman. The cast members and director have been in harmony about the way the opera is being interpreted. With this production there is no particular time and place.

Derek also appreciates the way this set is excellent for the singers. Derek sings from a tower, thus allowing for projection of his voice which is not a given with all productions.

Richard Mills went on to compliment the generosity of the very experienced cast. For instance, Burkhard Fritz has helped the chorus with their German diction.

To the question, "How do you approach tempo in this production?", Richard said he believes the tempo should be that of 'dignified speech' or the 'pace of breath'. He added that if the conductor diverts too far from this tempo then there is a risk that the roles just become caricatures.

Another question asked of both Richard and Derek was, "Why is this considered Wagner's greatest achievement?", Richard answered that *Parsifal* is a mature philosophical work with a unity of purpose. Derek added that Wagner was at the height of his compositional powers when he wrote *Parsifal*; he had his own theatre and so did not have to sell his opera to others, therefore it was totally his own show.

Directly after the completion of *Parsifal* for Victorian Opera, Derek is singing Klingsor in Munich, then in Berlin; and in August he will reprise this role in Bayreuth.

At the completion of the Conversation we enjoyed an excellent supper and had a further opportunity to talk to Derek about his life as a permanent singer with Deutsche Oper Berlin. He has been impressed by their willingness to support his career by allowing him time away to take up roles with other opera companies. Deutsche Oper has also provided him with opportunity to sing in a large number of operas and has taught him not to be too precious as a singer.

The Balcony Lounge of the Palais was a delightful venue for our social time. Our thanks to Victorian Opera for providing us with an informative Members' Function.

~ Janice Carpenter

Recital of Lee Abrahmsen and Raymond Lawrence

The first time that I heard Lee Abrahmsen was Easter 2016 when my wife and I were spending the weekend in Lorne. We were looking for things to do in the area and stumbled upon a music festival in the small town of Birregurra, a bit inland from the Great Ocean Road.

The music festival offered a recital in an apple store (a place to store apples from the surrounding orchard, not a technology shop!).

Lee was the main act and gave us a fantastic recital of arias from numerous operas.

Afterwards I took the chance to speak with Lee and was impressed by her forthright way. When we chatted we found a few friends in common, like Per Forsberg, who plays tuba in the Melbourne Opera orchestra and has given performances at the Swedish Church in Toorak, where I'm a board member.

I raised the idea with Lee that it would be a great opportunity if we could get her to perform for the Wagner Society. Somehow between committee changes the idea was lost until fortunately Janice Carpenter came with the idea

independently late last year.

Of course since my meeting Lee in 2016 and today we have been blessed to see her fantastic performances in Melbourne Opera productions: Isolde in *Tristan und Isolde*, and most recently as Senta in *The Flying Dutchman*, both roles supported by the Society. There was also Lee's fantastic performance as the Marschallin in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.

So it was a singer that I'm sure most of us were familiar with who appeared before a large audience in Flockhart Hall on 31 March this year. Lee didn't disappoint.

Brilliantly supported by Raymond Lawrence on the piano, Lee gave us a fantastic trip through the worlds of Lieder and Opera.

The recital started with all five of the Wesendonck lieder. These were delivered with great clarity and poise. I was particularly impressed by *Schmerzen* (pain), though all were compelling.

The settings of the poems of Mathilde Wesendonck are something we get very few chances to hear live here in Australia so it was great to have the chance to hear such a great performance with so

much emotion and energy.

The next piece in the recital was, to quote Monty Python, something completely different. Lee gave us the aria 'Per Pietá' from Mozart's decidedly non-PC opera *Così fan tutte*. This gave her the opportunity to display her vocal abilities to the max.

Then we were presented with a fabulous performance of Desdemona's aria 'Salce salce ... Ave Maria'. A great moment where Desdemona awaits her fate when Othello comes home.

The recital concluded with two arias of Wagner, Elsa's aria 'Euch Lüften, die mein Klagen' from *Lohengrin* and the always popular 'Dich teure Halle' from *Tannhäuser*. These arias were a fantastic high point to end on.

Both Lee and Raymond received a rapturous response from the audience at the conclusion of the recital, after which we were able to chat with both of them during the customary refreshments.

I'm sure all those fortunate enough to attend would agree that this was an amazing afternoon.

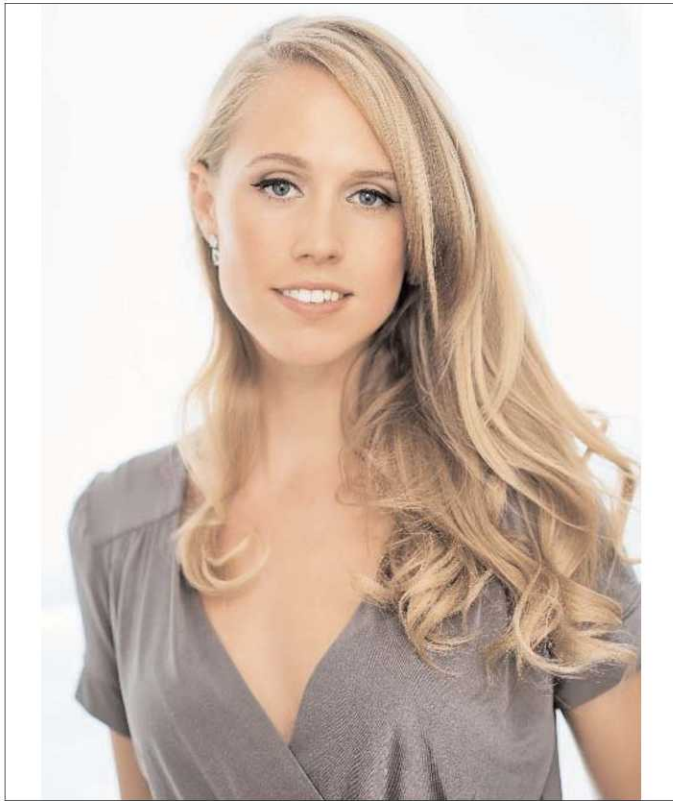
~ Ken Sayers



Lee Abrahmsen accompanied by Raymond Lawrence



Lee and Raymond with President Susan Cumming



Sophie Burns: Winner of 2019 Young Artist Award

Thanks to a repeat generous donation from a member of the Society who wishes to remain anonymous, we are able to continue the Young Artist Award that we introduced in 2018.

As with last year, a call for expressions of interest was made for an Australian young artist whose career development would benefit from attending the Bayreuth Festival. The recipient would receive tickets to the performances the Society has allocations for this year, plus accommodation, per diems and some travel costs.

From 13 applications received this year from a mix of singers and directors, mezzo Sophie Burns was selected as the winner for 2019.

Sophie is currently studying in Berlin, and has a lovely mature voice with already a good sense of presence and delivery, and came highly recommended by those who know her.

Sophie is very excited to receive this award, and wrote in an email, "I am absolutely in awe of this opportunity to attend the festival. It will be an experience that will fuel my inspiration for this art. Inspiration is that very fuel that allows us to do what we do—it is a priceless gift."

Last year's winner, director Greg Eldridge, has spoken highly of the initiative and the experience in his correspondence with the Society. His account of the experience can be read on our website at:

<http://wagnermelb.org.au/adventures-in-bayreuth>.

Greg will also be doing a talk for the Wagner Society in September.

We wish Sophie a fabulous adventure in Bayreuth, and look forward to hearing about her experience. We also hope to hear her in a Wagnerian role sometime in the future!

~ Miki Oikawa, Secretary

Derek Welton thanks Society for support



Derek Welton sent a card thanking the Society of his home state Victoria for our support in his role as Klingsor in Victorian Opera's 2019 *Parsifal* production.

Parsifal is his favourite Wagnerian opera. He thought Victorian Opera had put together a remarkable cast and he was proud to stand alongside some very distinguished colleagues.

He stated that though the role of Klingsor is short, "It is integral to the fabric of this great work, and a strong performance of this character can really 'make' a production of *Parsifal*."

Derek is returning to Bayreuth this European summer for his third and last Klingsor of this current production. He will also be singing Klingsor in Munich and Berlin this year. In 2020 he will be Wotan in *Das Rheingold* in Berlin and has been signed up for Bayreuth in 2021.

Those of us fortunate enough to be at his 'Parsifal In Conversation' interview on 12 February met a thoughtful and knowledgeable young Australian singer.

We will watch Derek's international career development with great interest.

~ Susan Cumming



Derek Welton as Klingsor with Katarina Dalayman



• *Cont. from Page 12*

Many themes run through the play—anti-Semitism, marriage, friendship, religion—each illustrated with a balance of class and comedy by the talented actors and Leicht's wonderfully effective and alliterative writing.

One of the play's greatest talents, however, lies in its ability to depict the lives of a series of complex and intertwining historical figures in a manner expository enough to understand, yet entertaining enough to remain engaged. The added character of rambunctious Nietzsche—both a friend and critic of Wagner—helps create a well-rounded historical picture, adding depth and layers both to the depiction of *Parsifal* and its critical reception as well as to Cosima's character and marital relationship with Wagner.

One who sits down in those velvety seats with no knowledge of the historical context stands up with a historical gap in their education filled. Littered with chuckle-filled moments as well as thought-provoking themes, 'My Parsifal Conductor' manages to make an entertaining evening from some well-told history.

Playing for a limited time at the Marjorie S. Deane Little Theater at the West Side YMCA, 'My Parsifal Conductor' will surely prove to be an afternoon, or evening, well spent at the theatre.

Deutsche Oper Berlin and a new *Ring* from Stefan Herheim



Deutsche Oper Berlin has announced that the first part of the new Stefan Herheim *Ring* will premiere, logically enough, with *Rheingold* on Friday 12 June 2020. Donald Runnicles will be holding the baton.

So, what can we expect from a Herheim *Ring*? In the following inter-

view, he gives us some clues.

"Since I began preparing for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, I have been considering how the end of *Götterdämmerung* could look. An ending that leaves the question of the future of man, of overcoming the old order, open. As long as we are failing in modern society due to lust for power, exploitation, betrayal and violence, the *Ring* remains an 'artwork of the future'. To find ways toward the future we must begin searching for the prerequisites for being human. This search is reflected in the drama itself, as well as in the figure of Richard Wagner. He worked on this piece for more than quarter of a century. The self-actualisation expressed therein also reflects Germans' longing for national identity.

"The fabulous attempt at questioning truth, ideology and values with art in such a way that a revolutionary dynamic could form is presumably a uniquely German characteristic, as nowhere else has so much been entrusted to, and expected of, art. It is important to visualise that in a modern context in which only a few media are conveying the quieter messages

"For me, faith in art is existential. It is part of my relatively late German socialisation and also an expression of my fear of not belonging. At the same time, through my Norwegian heritage, I have the advantage of being able to separate myself from the more unsettling aspects of 'being German'. This play between distance and closeness is also apparent in my affinity for Wagner's romantic dialectic.

"Without the inclusion of its creator, his spiritual-cultural background and the influential consequences of his work to this day, I can hardly imagine being able to realise *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Of course, the audience doesn't all have to be able to consciously decode these layers. Nor do they need to analytically perceive the difference between C major and F minor. Or understand each word that is being sung. In Wagner's total work of art, comprehensibility is conveyed at many levels. Through the consolidated powers of word, tone and scenic

depiction, the dramatic thought takes shape. My job is to find a substantially coherent and emotionally moving form."

Conductor: Donald Runnicles

Production: Stefan Herheim

Stage design: Stefan Herheim

Wotan: Derek Welton—and others.

It is noteworthy to see that Derek Welton, who was sponsored by our society has achieved this major role, as many of us predicted, after his brilliant role as Klingsor.

Vale: Michael Oley



Michael and Liz Oley have been members of the Wagner Society for 34 years, so it is with great sadness that we must mark Michael's sudden death on 16 February.

Since their return to live permanently in Melbourne, Michael and Liz have been familiar figures at Wagner Society functions and in the audience at the Opera and concerts.

Michael was notable at Wagner Society meetings for his penetrating observations or questions often coming from an unexpected angle.

He was present at the Palais on 12 February for the 'Parsifal in Conversation and Blocking' in his usual good form, so a wonderful memory for those of us who shared that interesting evening with him.

The number of Wagner Society members at his Memorial is witness to the affection and regard in which he was held. We extend our sincerest sympathy to Liz for her grievous loss.

~ Maggie Cash

Vale: Lindsay Moore

(4 December 1939 - 22 February 2019).

Lindsay was a member of the Richard Wagner Society for almost 25 years.

Vale: Rosemary Thomson

(died 12 April 2019)



Wagner goes on Broadway

Comedy: *My Parsifal Conductor*

The Directors Company stages *My Parsifal Conductor*, a comedic spin-off of real-life events in which Wagner finds himself in a moral, political and musical dilemma when King Ludwig of Bavaria insists that the son of a rabbi, Hermann Levi, conduct the premiere of Wagner's sacred final opera, *Parsifal*.

My Parsifal Conductor, written by Emmy Award-winner Allan Leicht and directed by Robert Kalfin, retells the historical story of the premiere performance of Richard Wagner's (Broadway actor Eddie Korbich) famed opera *Parsifal*. Meant, according to Wagner, to be "a festival play for the consecration of the stage", *Parsifal's* deeply-religious themes ran through the roots of the opera and its music.

Wagner and his wife, Cosima (Claire Brownell), could not imagine anyone other than a Christian conducting the orchestra for the performance; so, when King Ludwig II of Bavaria (Carlo Bosticco) chooses highly-acclaimed Jewish conductor Hermann Levi (Geoffrey Cantor), to lead the opening performance of Wagner's last opera, Wagner and Cosima immediately object, leading to the opening plot of the play.

Set in the 1930s by Cosima Wagner's deathbed at her home, 'Haus Wahnfried' in Bayreuth, Bavaria, *My Parsifal Conductor* retells the series of events between the appointing of Levi as conductor, the first ever *Parsifal* performance, and the death of Richard Wagner, through the words and eyes of Cosima as she attempts to

prove to the angels that she deserves a spot in heaven despite her history of anti-Semitism and bigotry.

During her story, we meet not only Wagner, Levi and Ludwig, but also Friedrich Nietzsche (Logan James Hall). One can know nothing about Wagner or be able to sing every note in *Parsifal*, and still enjoy the story, acting and script. Leicht's writing allows each of the characters to shine, moulding and shaping them through both serious soliloquies like those of Cosima and comedic quips like those of Nietzsche.

One character, however, remains relatively stoic and static throughout the play, showing little comedic acting or nuanced human flaws—Hermann Levi.

Perhaps the strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism put Leicht on the defensive when it came to writing Levi's lines, making him a relatively calm, intelligent character to ensure that, as Michael Dale wrote in his review of the play for *Broadway World*, "The audience laughs at Wagner's anti-Semitism, rather than with it."

Leicht's theme of anti-Semitism takes on a character of subtlety as we discover that while Wagner and Cosima decried Jews in Bavaria, they adored their 'friend' Levi—as they so endearingly called him throughout the play—and his musical brilliance. Their objection to his conducting the premiere *Parsifal* performance had nothing to do with his character, but rather his Jewishness. From this subtle



theme arises a nuanced question: Can a general criticism of one's religious identity really stand separate from criticism of one's character?

Once brought to light by the beginning scenes of the performance, this question of separation and specificity begins to weave its way into the underlying fabric of the play and its historical foundation. Can we separate Wagner's art from his atrocious anti-Semitism? Does Cosima's friendship with Levi counteract her lifelong hate of the Jews in Bavaria? Can we sever the association of Wagner's music from Hitler and simply view Wagner's art in a vacuum?

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RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY INC.

Registration No. A0004004P
ABN: 62057122885

OFFICE-BEARERS



President: Dr Susan Cumming
0400 274 100
president@wagnermelb.org.au

Secretary: Miki Oikawa
secretary@wagnermelb.org.au
The Richard Wagner Society
PO Box 7367
Melbourne Vic. 3004

Treasurer: Tom O'Dea
treasurer@wagnermelb.org.au

Committee: James Alker
Janice Carpenter
Gavin Cornish
Ruth O'Dea
Ken Sayers
Robin Trotter

Wagner News Editor: Stan O'Loughlin
0438 797 130
solust2@bigpond.com

Newsletter layout: Dawn Volz

Website Managers: Tom O'Dea, Ruth O'Dea
wagnermelb.org.au