

## Opera Nights *The Memoirs of an Opera Knight*

At home in Munich, Sir Donald McIntyre takes great delight in showing off his book of memoirs, entitled *The Only Way Is Up*.

Together with The Sir Donald McIntyre Trust, the WSNZ arranged for the funding and publication of this book, not only as a way of honouring the society's patron, but also as a way of celebrating its own twenty-fifth birthday.

During May and June, Heath and Liz Lees, the 1994 founding pair of president and secretary, toured all four NZ centres with a retrospective presentation of the growth of the society since its inception, and launched the book into the wide Wagnerian sea with a review of Sir Don's 50-year career, short excerpts from the book, and a showing of Peter Coates' excellent 1974 film about Sir Don's many appearances in



major Wagner roles during nearly two decades at Bayreuth.

The Auckland gathering welcomed about twenty of the McIntyre family and friends, and a family group from Nelson came to the Wellington meeting. This latter event was enriched by a 'drop-in' appearance from Simon O'Neill, who spoke with Heath Lees about Sir Don as his model and teacher. With typical generosity, he sang two Wagner items, with Heath at the piano.

The book has been very well received and sales are brisk, now passing the 200-mark. WSNZ members enjoy a discount of 30% (\$35 instead of \$50) if they order from Liz Lees ([handelees@extra.co.nz](mailto:handelees@extra.co.nz)) or the publisher, Quentin Wilson ([wilson.quentin@gmail.com](mailto:wilson.quentin@gmail.com)).

Copies will be available at all WSNZ meetings this year, and a full review of the book will appear in the next newsletter.

### *... and the Continuing Waves of an Opera Watershed Nearly Thirty Years Ago*



No prizes for guessing that the figure on the right is Sir Donald McIntyre (Hans Sachs). His earnest partner in conversation is Georg Volker, a seasoned baritone who was brilliant in the role of Beckmesser.

Together, Georg and Sir Don created a memorable *Meistersinger* partnership, especially in Act III, in Hans Sach's workshop. There, they combined the finest singing with their own well-rehearsed brand of acting that turned the town clerk's attempt to steal the cobbler's song into a brilliantly artistic yet lightly knockabout comedy double-act.

A similar approach re-surfaced two years ago in Barrie Kosky's Bayreuth *Meistersinger*, between Michael Volle and Johannes Martin Kränzle, but this time it was hailed as a completely original idea. Obviously the critics should have been in Wellington three decades earlier!

The picture above was snapped in 1990, during rehearsals for the Wellington *Mastersingers*, whose watershed operatic achievement is now being serialised on our back pages by New Zealand baritone Roger Wilson.

Seated behind Sir Don is WSNZ member Rosie Barnes, much-travelled musician and pianist extraordinary who was such a supportive repetiteur and unofficial dramaturg for that 1990 production.

The toddler next to her is 15-month-old Alexander, son of Rosie and clarinettist Murray Khouri. That little boy is now all of thirty years of age, with a music degree in the recent past and a Graduate Diploma in Computer Science in the near future. Time flies.

Sadly, Wellington-born Murray Khouri died just nine months ago, taking with him his multiple musical gifts and his wonderfully outsize personality.

A New Zealand memorial service for this clarinettist, conductor, music manager, recording entrepreneur and broadcaster is to be held in the Auckland church of St. Marks, Remuera, 95 Remuera Road, on Saturday 31 August, at 2.30pm.

## NOTEBOOK

### Die Walküre

The Met HD showing of *Die Walküre* will be making its way through New Zealand (there's a review/preview on the next page).

The film will be at a cinema near you sometime between 25 July and 7 August. Check out the movie times from the internet or you might miss it!

### Wagner Murmurs

- Deutsche Oper Berlin launches a new *Ring* cycle in June 2020 with *Das Rheingold*, directed by Stefan Herheim and conducted by Donald Runnicles.
- In September this year Simon O'Neill will sing Siegmund and Froh in a *Ring* revival at the Staatsoper, Berlin.
- Asmik Grigorian will be Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Bayreuth Festival in 2021.
- Oper Leipzig aims to present all of Wagner's operas (13 of them!) in a Wagner Festival in June/July 2022.
- Simon O'Neill will sing Tristan in a new production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Santa Fe Opera in July/August 2020.
- Opera Australia are presenting a new production of *The Ring* in Brisbane in November/December 2020.
- Melbourne Opera is to mount *Das Rheingold* in August 2020 with Anthony Negus conducting.
- Opera Australia will stage *Lohengrin* (with La Monnaie, Brussels) in May 2020.
- Opera Queensland plans semi-staged performances of *Tristan und Isolde* in October 2020 with Simon O'Neill and Meagan Miller in the title roles. Pietari Inkinen conducts.

Michael Sinclair

### New Members

Big Wagnerian greetings to:

Thelma Greer .....Dunedin  
 Fiona Luey .....Wellington  
 Christopher Marshall .....Christchurch

### Leb' wohl . . . Wellington Member Rex Benson



We record with sadness the death on 7 June of Rex Benson, pictured left at Wagner's grave in the gardens of *Wahnfried*, two years ago.

Rex had been fighting worsening health since last February. His indomitable enthusiasm for the works of Wagner took pride of place in a huge range of interests and passions, including cinema, philosophy, bridge, and rugby.

As special friends of the conductor Anthony Negus, Rex and his wife Judith were often welcomed to Wagner performances, especially during the Longborough Festival in England.

Michael Ashdown, a Wellington friend, says "I will always remember Rex as a very warm-hearted, clever and supportive guide to the Wagnerian riches. I will miss him."



Antony Ernst will be returning to New Zealand this month, with three different Wagner presentations.

In Auckland, on 14th July, he will unveil a four-hour view of *Lohengrin in Perspective*, from 2.30 to 6.30pm.

On 19 July, in Christchurch, Antony's presentation will be less Wagnerian — two hours rather than four — and the opera featured will be *Tristan und Isolde*. Then, on 21 July in Wellington, Antony's two-hour subject is again *Lohengrin*, beginning at 4pm.

Antony was born in Sydney and holds a PhD from the University of Newcastle. He is currently the artistic director of the Royal Danish Orchestra, the world's oldest orchestra.

In the past he has worked as a dramaturg, opera director and artistic planner, most recently as Artistic Planning Manager of the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, having previously held a similar position with the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra.

He has also worked with many European and Australian orchestras, as well as being a tour leader for Renaissance Tours and a contributor of musical services to various international organisations.

## COMING EVENTS

### Auckland

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre, 100 St. Heliers Bay Road*

**Sunday, 14 July at 2.30pm.**  
**Please note afternoon time**

*Lohengrin in Perspective*

Antony Ernst, artistic director of the Royal Danish Orchestra, arrives with a packed, four-hour presentation on Wagner's opera.

**Sunday, 22 September at 3.00pm**

*Lohengrin*

A full screening of the opera with optional catered dinner. Performance is from the Semperoper, Dresden, with Anna Netrebko.

**Sunday, 8 December at 7.00pm**

A festive fare of Wagner items, and our much-talked-about cake and wine.

### Christchurch

Venue: *The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester St.*

**Friday, 19 July at 7.30pm**

*Tristan und Isolde*

As part of a New Zealand tour, Antony Ernst, lectures on *Tristan und Isolde*, the opera to be shown on 13 October.

**Friday, 13 September at 7.30pm**

*Magic Fire*

The 1955 film of the life of Wagner, with Alan Badel as the composer. Music arranged by Erich Korngold.

**Sunday, 13 October, Time and Venue TBA**

*Tristan und Isolde*

Complete DVD with a meal between the acts.

**Sunday, 1 December, Time and Venue TBA**

*Christmas BBQ/Pot-Luck*

### Dunedin

Venue: *Black-Sale House Lecture Room, cnr. St. David and Leith Streets*

**Sunday, 20 October at 2.00pm**

*Don Juan in Hell*

*Mozart, Ibsen, Wagner, and Shaw*

Chris Ackerley joins this quartet through two semi-serious Wagnerian parodies by GBS.

**Sunday, 24 November at 12 noon**

*Note Venue Change: Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row (Turn right off Pitt St.)*

Christmas lunch followed by Wagnerian goodies.

### Wellington

Venue: *St Andrew's Hall, 30 The Terrace (except 14 July)*

**Sunday, 14 July at 9.30am (note time)**

At Te Auaha; NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon St.

*Rienzi the Last of the Tribunes*

Joint meeting with the Opera Society for a DVD screening of the complete opera.

**Sunday, 21 July, at 4.00pm**

*Lohengrin*

Antony Ernst's NZ tour finishes with a two-hour session on Wagner's "Romantic opera".

**Sunday, 13 October at 4.00pm**

Documentary film. Details to follow.

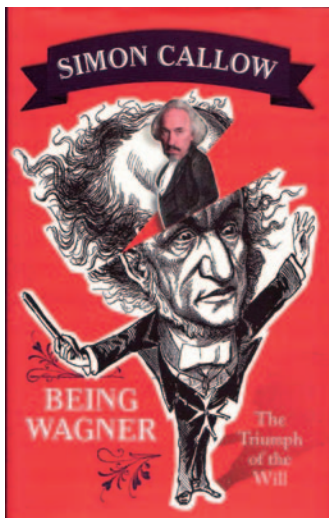
**November/December/Date TBA**

End of year party.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Being Wagner** by Simon Callow, 2017 (Collins)  
Reviewed by Syd Kennedy

Simon Callow is an actor, director and writer who has appeared on stage and in many films. Previous biographies include Charles Dickens, Charles Laughton, and Orson Welles.



This book is an easy read, informative, and at times just a wee bit funny. The Contents page lists a Foreword, Vorspiel, 12 Chapters, Coda, Chronology, a list of 113 Works (1826-80, music and writings), Bibliography, List of Illustrations, Acknowledgements and Index. There are no photographs, but 16 cartoons.

If your knowledge of Wagner's life and times is based on CD notes, LP record covers, Google and the Tony Palmer film starring Richard Burton and Vanessa Redgrave

then this book is a must for your music library. It catches well the astonishing whirlwind that was Wagner's life, his ceaseless travelling, homelessness, penny pinching, roving eye and overwhelming charm.

Simon Callow is blunt, honest, and truly inhabits the personality of an extraordinary Wagner, presenting him as a gargantuan figure, an ineffable genius, with just a touch of the insane dreams and personal foibles. Wagner's

poisonously anti-Semitic views are not brushed away. He was a composer like no other, and the creator of perhaps the most sublime and most troubling body of work in the history of music.

I learned many new snippets. The Wagner household had lots of pets — hamsters, dogs, parrots, even a wolf pup sought shelter and a Newfoundland dog named Robber. Wagner, idolised, was the subject of a magazine 'Bayreuther Blätter', and hard-core Wagner audiences came dressed in Wagner berets and Wotan hats as part of their devotion to the great man.

There are some omissions. In the *Parsifal* preparations there is no mention of Engelbert Humperdinck as assistant, nor of how Wagner achieved the long low notes of the Grail Temple bells, and we all know that when it came to bells Wagner wanted a really big donger!!

Wagner's dad Carl Friedrich Wagner died when Wagner was very young. His mother married again, and the new step-dad was Ludwig Geyer, so the infant Wagner was re-named Wilhelm Richard Geyer. Wagner reverted to being Richard Wagner when Geyer died in 1827. Nearly 50 years later Wagner discovered intimate letters from Geyer to his mother and questions are raised. Who is Wagner's biological father, is he a Wagner or a Geyer?

For me, one very valuable insight came from this book: Callow was able to tell me, in layman's language, what it is about *Tristan* that makes it so powerful.



Syd Kennedy is a structural engineering design draughtsman who lives in Christchurch and has been a WSNZ member since 2000. From 1992-99 he was stage manager of the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, and in 2013-15 he presented three talks on *Parsifal*. Find him at <http://kd.co.nz>.

## STAGE REVIEW



Photo: Ken Howard/NY Met

**The Ring** at the New York Met  
Reviewed by Heath Lees

This review has a single focus and a tell-all title: *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Machine*.

The story so far: for more than two decades, whenever the call came to put on *The Ring*, the New York Met would reach for its tried-and-true production by Otto Schenk. Based on some re-discovered 1876 paintings by Josef Hoffmann, the stage scenes unfolded like pages from a history book, and very soon the trigger-happy New York critics were shooting it down as a museum piece.

But the production was much loved by key figures at The Met, and in the wings the private sponsors often tied their large amounts of cash to assurances of a 'traditional' *Ring*.

However by the early 2000s, the company was finding itself marooned in a sea of director-led *Rings* that played fast and loose with Wagner's text and directions, and gave birth to new insights and highly contemporary ideas.

So, for its new production, the Met hammered out a

compromise. Story and costumes would remain traditional, but the avant-garde cutting edge would be entrusted to Robert LePage's massive stage machine — 24 huge planks that weighed in at 44 US tons and could twist and turn at the same time as they rose and fell. Stationary, their sculptured shapes could be flooded with video imagery, and their movement could be computer-directed by the ebb and flow of the action.

At least that was the theory. But, from the very first performance of *Das Rheingold* in 2010, the creaks and groans of the planks were loud, the technical challenges were overwhelming, and the performers found stage navigation hazardous — witness the famous fall that Deborah Voigt had as she ran up to greet Wotan in *Walküre*, Act 2.

Happily, all that changed for the recent revival. Whatever the tech-gangs did, they transformed The Machine from a dangerous enemy into a collaborative friend. In near-silent, trouble-free performance, LePage's original conception was revealed. The planks became a flexible, all-embracing womb for the birth of the story while they changed and gestured according to the symphonic moods of the music. The performers could relax and shine.

And shine they did. Christine Goerke sang Brünnhilde with a strong, luminous voice while Stefan Vinke powered his way through the role of Siegfried, delightfully boyish at the start, but later becoming adult, even jauntily flirtatious.

Other stars included Tomas Konieczny as an Alberich whose stunning voice threatened to depose even the majestic Wotan (Michael Volle, in his first major Met role). Gerhard Siegel showed with ease why he is today's top choice as Mime, and Philip Jordan, conductor, found clarity and colour in the score despite some brisk tempi.

## Part 3 of that famous 1990 NZ “Meistersinger” Roger Wilson, (extreme left in the picture below) continues the tale)

One of the things I remember about the rehearsal lead-up to *Die Meistersinger* was the almost deafening sound of the cicadas. Now I find that every February-March their sound evokes that wonderful time.

As for the rehearsals, they benefited hugely from another bout of Chris Doig networking, this time through his brother who was prominent in the Police Force and had gained permission for us to rehearse in the Police College at Papakowhai. There had been no intake of recruits that year so the whole complex was lying idle. Its enormous gymnasium could accommodate all three *Meistersinger* sets side by side. We could rehearse everything on set, an absolute boon for performers, and move from one act to another without continually dismantling and re-assembling.

A shuttle bus from the city was provided and during the inevitable long waits we had the run of the place, including the Olympic-sized swimming pool and the gruesome Police Museum. Or we could just sit outside in the sun, accompanied by those ever-present cicadas. Never was there such a pleasant rehearsal period and seldom were one’s colleagues such congenial company.

### “... a strong cast”

Yes, it was certainly a strong cast. New Zealanders wherever this was possible, all of them bringing an enormous amount of collective experience and know-how.

Many were fluent German speakers. Of these, Georg Volker was the single German, and there was Donald McIntyre of course, but others included Americans Bill Ingle and Kay Griffel, plus Christopher Dawe from Australia. Peter Baillie, Peter Russell, Richard Green and I had lived and worked for years in German-speaking countries; Edmund Bohan and Conal Coad were old campaigners on the international stage, Derek Miller had been a

language teacher and the others could all cope well enough with the language. Andreas Homoki, the young German-Hungarian director who had brilliantly recreated the Hampe production, spoke perfect English, but if he hadn’t we could easily have rehearsed in German — an extraordinary situation for New Zealand.

### “powerful singing”

Some wondered where twelve apprentices — eight tenors, four mezzo sopranos — could be found. A few young baritones had to pretend, but

Hans Sachs was as good as you get. With his imposing, leonine presence, his tremendous vocal stamina, his worldly wisdom and understanding drawn from a lifetime’s experience in the theatre, he was an unsurpassable Sachs, dignified yet impassioned, ironic, irascible, benignly resigned. Fully matching him was Georg Volker’s volatile and pedantic Beckmesser, who was never out of character for a second. Offstage, he waited in the wings, chain-smoking and swigging Coca Cola, but back on stage he was a Beckmesser Wagner might have dreamed of.

Beckmesser is a ridiculous figure, but Volker, like all great comics, played it absolutely straight, attaining a very real pathos. After being humiliated for his disastrous prize song in the last scene he slunk off, dragging his lute on the ground, looking so broken and dejected that he brought tears to my eyes every evening. In this production Hans Sachs sportingly calls him back and all is forgiven. A kindly ending, but certainly not what



**Fritz Kothner reads the rules**

Roger Wilson (Kothner), Donald McIntyre (Sachs), Conal Coad (Pogner), Peter Russell (Nachtigall).  
Kneeling: Don Edwards, Margaret Medlyn  
Photograph: Woolf Photography

they all flung themselves into the show with enthusiasm. Some mutterings were heard from the regular chorus singers when the Orpheus Choir was engaged *en bloc* to be the bulk of the chorus, but the decision was vindicated by the choral discipline displayed in their powerful singing of the mighty chorale. Most had not been on stage before and relished letting their hair down, especially in the Act Two riot, where the brawling became alarmingly enthusiastic. Even here though, the company as a whole mixed high energy with impressive discipline and the result was a *Meistersinger* that was full of life yet admirably professional. It’s no surprise that it continues to be spoken of with pride and joy.

Looking back on the production and on the singers’ performances, I think we all performed well enough, but two towered above the rest. McIntyre’s

the malicious Wagner intended.

Someone commented to me afterwards on what a wonderful voice Beckmesser had. I could only say that I supposed he must have — it’s a cruelly demanding rôle technically — but that I’d never even noticed. This performance went far beyond mere singing, it was a complete fusion of drama and music, the very essence of what opera should be.

### “an honour to share the boards”

These were two of the finest and most complete operatic performances I’ve ever seen. It was an honour to be allowed to share the boards with such artists. I thought, as I sat in Kothner’s chair between them as they sparred, that this was surely as much as life could offer a performer. I knew then that, were I to die that night I would not have lived my life in vain.



*"The Wagnerian Tenor  
of his generation"*

# Simon O'Neill

in Concert with

**Iain Paterson**

bass-baritone

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piano

Principal artists with:

The Royal Opera House Covent Garden,  
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Berlin Staatsoper, Bayerische Staatsoper  
and Vienna Staatsoper.

**Tuesday 2 July, 7.30pm**

Glenroy Auditorium, Dunedin

Tickets available via [www.ticketmaster.co.nz](http://www.ticketmaster.co.nz)  
and the venue

**Thursday 4 July, 7.30pm**

Ashburton Trust Event Centre, Ashburton

Tickets available via [www.ticketdirect.co.nz](http://www.ticketdirect.co.nz)  
and the venue

**Friday 5 July, 7.30pm**

The Piano, Christchurch

Tickets available via [www.eventfinder.co.nz](http://www.eventfinder.co.nz)  
and the venue

**Monday 8 July, 7.30pm**

Town Hall Concert Chamber, Auckland

Tickets available via [www.ticketmaster.co.nz](http://www.ticketmaster.co.nz)  
and the venue

**Wednesday 10 July, 7.30pm**

Gallagher Concert Chamber, Hamilton

Tickets available via  
[www.waikato.ac.nz/academy/simononeill](http://www.waikato.ac.nz/academy/simononeill)  
and the venue

**Friday 12 July, 7.30pm**

Royal Opera House, Whanganui

Tickets available via [www.whanganuivenues.co.nz](http://www.whanganuivenues.co.nz)  
and the venue

**Sunday 14 July, 3.00pm**

St. Andrews The Terrace, Wellington

Tickets available via  
[www.waikato.ac.nz/academy/simononeill](http://www.waikato.ac.nz/academy/simononeill)  
and the venue

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