

WAGNER NEWS OF VICTORIA



NEWSLETTER OF THE
RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY INC.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

An End and a Beginning

As we come to the end of 2019, I would like to acknowledge the importance of the work of our volunteer Committee members, present and past, who work energetically and with passion to ensure we have a vibrant and relevant Society.

Apart from our usual activities, the principal 2019 project for the Society has been the development of its three-year Strategic Plan, importantly with accountabilities. Membership feedback was sought in April (what the Society does well and what it could improve on) and August (specific questionnaire on support for productions). The responses to these have shaped our planning for the future.

A summary of the 2020-2022 Strategic Plan will be presented at the 34th Annual General Meeting (18 November) and uploaded on our website.

Vale Foundation Member Dr David Gale

It is with regret we record that Dr David Gale died on 16 August 2019.

David was one of the four inspirational and original Foundation members, who established the Society in 1981 (refer obituary, page 11). Those were the days when there were very few Wagner productions performed in Australia. Such dedicated Foundation members as Dr David Gale are to be thanked for the thriving Society we have today.

Thank you Honorary Auditor Mr Gordon Edwards

Gordon has given 20 years of exemplary services, working with many Treasurers, as Honorary Auditor to the Society. A quiet achiever, Gordon's unstinting service and professional advice are acknowledged with appreciation. I am pleased we have in place a Strategic Plan for the Society, a project Gordon recommended for the Society some time ago.

2020 Productions' and Artists' Fundraising Project

Ninety-seven per cent of the 90 members who responded to our recent Productions Support Survey agreed the Society should support

Wagner productions. Importantly, members listed, in order, that support should be directed to productions in Victoria (1), Melbourne Opera productions (2), Full *Ring* Cycles (3), stand-alone productions (4) and up-and-coming artists (5).

In 2020, the Society aims to provide support to both Melbourne Opera's *Das Rheingold* (August) and Opera Australia's *Lohengrin* (May) Melbourne-based productions as well as a small sum to OA's Brisbane *Ring* Cycle. For each of these there will be related activities for members.

We are asking members to contribute to our 2020 Productions' and Artists' Fundraising Project, which will close 31 December 2019. Our aim is to raise \$20k. Visit: <https://wagner-melb.org.au/fundraising-project/>

Professor Heath Lees to present "Wagner's Lohengrin: an End and a Beginning"

In association with Opera Australia's *Lohengrin* production, the Society has commissioned Professor Heath Lees to present three pre-

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 opera talks (16, 20 and 23 May) for members and the public, at St John's Southgate. Heath's insightful, witty and musical presentations always greatly enhance our opera experiences. Members will be advised as soon as tickets are on sale. You are encouraged to invite friends to the pre-opera talks, including interstate or international visitors whom you know will be attending *Lohengrin*.

2020 The Beginning

We have a very special early 2020 function. The Karlsruher Konzert Cello and Piano Duo, Reinhard Armleder and Dagmar Hartmann, will perform for the Society on 1 March.

Singapore is mounting a semi-staged production of *Die Walküre* on 5 January, with member Warwick Fyfe in the lead role of Wotan.

To all members of the Society,

warmest best wishes for the Festive Season. However you enjoy summer, whether it be at the beach, the cricket, the Australian Open Tennis or perhaps music in Europe, may your New Year be full of optimism.

~ Dr Susan Cumming
 President



EDITORIAL COMMENT

Potions in Wagner

'Magic potions' are often used by Wagner, the most discussed being in *Tristan* and the *Ring*. Gunther Weiss proposed that the love/death potion in *Tristan and Isolde* caused symptoms fitting with a severe anticholinergic crisis. He describes symptoms of dry mouth, tachycardia, palpitations, flush, blurred vision, disorientation, confusion, hallucinations, and eventual coma and death. This sounds like an amusing medical interpretation of something which is much more likely symbolic.

Potions used by Wagner occur at critical points in the dramas as symbols for the release of an already existing and irresistible desire. Tristan and Isolde are madly in love. They drink what they think is a death draft. Knowing they are going to die, their inhibitions are released, and they behave as the lovers they are.

In *Götterdämmerung* a potion is given to Siegfried, which makes him forget Brünnhilde. Really, Siegfried subconsciously wants to escape from Brünnhilde's intellectual power and domination. He symbolises masculine power, which relies on physical strength. He does not want to be dominated by intelligence, so he falls for a bimbo (Gutrune). The potion merely acts as an excuse for his actions. Later, another potion, administered by Hagen, wakes him up to reality and to his responsibilities.

So, I am of the opinion that Wagner's potions are really smoke-screens for the real emotions and their enactment, not an outside force making characters victims.



~ Stan O'Loughlin

BAYREUTH FOR THE FIRST TIME

As any Wagnerian knows, Bayreuth is the pinnacle of the Wagnerian experience, the Everest, the Olympics, the culmination of years of seeking the perfect Wagner performance in theatres, castles, ruined forts (Savolinna), chicken sheds (Longborough) and Passion-spielhaus (Erl, Austria).

As I joined the pilgrims wending their way along the wide avenue that leads up the hill to the theatre on a beautiful, hot afternoon, the atmosphere was one of quiet excitement and contained anticipation, rather like the feeling before a religious event. Most people had dressed up for the occasion; sequins, rhinestones and serious jewellery glittered in the sun.

I saw *Tannhäuser*, *Parsifal*, *Meistersinger* and *Tristan and Isolde*, four nights in succession. When the first

bars of music floated from the pit to blend with the singers on the stage, I was amazed at the clarity and beauty of the sound. I don't think I have ever heard anything quite like it.

While I may have found some of the productions challenging (*Tristan* was unbelievably drear and tedious, *Tannhäuser* fun but rather too clever for its own good, and a rather overwrought Kosky production of *Meistersinger*) the singing, orchestra, chorus, were all glorious.

The hot, stuffy theatre and excruciating seats were just about made bearable by the quality of the music but I found myself infuriated by the lack of surtitles. It isn't that I don't know the stories off by heart, and I have seen many *Rings* with surtitles in languages that I don't speak; the problem lies with the

way in which the directors chose to interpret the stories. They take such liberties with sets and text that you need the words to know where you are in the story. Since they make free with projections during the opera, I don't think surtitles would be too much more of a stretch.

Leaving the theatre with the last chords of *Tristan* still swirling in my head, I joined the crowds streaming down the hill. Mostly they were quiet and reflective but now and then passionate arguments could be heard, such as the production wasn't true to Wagner's vision, or the singing wasn't as good as expected, but for me, on this warm and balmy night, I felt utter contentment. I had been to Bayreuth, I had experienced the pinnacle and I would never forget it.

~ Maureen Wheeler AO

Another first experience at Bayreuth



Frei im Wollen, frei im Thun, frei im Geniessen ("free in your desiring, free in your actions, free in your enjoying") by Wagner. What a great greeting to my first experience of Bayreuth! Yes, I was strangely and excitedly apprehensive about entering this magic of Wagnerian Circle surrounding the legend of his Festspiel on the Green Hill and scary cauldron of Wahnfried in downtown Bayreuth.

It was my first time there. I had never been initiated to the mystery of 'self-flagellation' of walking up the Hill (which should be done on the knees, not comfortably shod feet) and praying to stunning music in the place where it has been played...forever.

My trepidation was quickly put to rest at the sight of a scrappy Citroën van driven by a merry band of anarchists (see picture above). Venus was at the wheel, looking sultry in a sparkling black unitard. 'Tannhäuser' was just a raggedy clown (whom I could very much identify with). There was also a drum-playing dwarf (taken out of Gunter Grass book the *The Tin Drum* — about a boy who never wanted to grow up) and a drag queen named Le Gateau Chocolate who added the quirky and draggy glitter to this strange, crazed bus.

Wow! I was in a right place. I quickly forgot about the real glamour of everyone in the audience and

started to simply enjoy the music and the pace of this new, quickly evolving production of *Tannhäuser* (by Tobias Kratzer).

The pretence of 'being in Bayreuth' was quickly dropped by the action on the stage where the 'pilgrims' were a mirror image of the audience making their way to Wagner's theatre — the 'Rome' of Bayreuth. They were in tuxedos, gowns, formal lederhosen ... just like us on the wooden benches — melting in the stalls of the increasingly humid theatre.

The religious spirituality of being at the Green Hill was replaced by music and a true theatre of *Tannhäuser's* torment and confusion. Elizabeth's death and the stark ending of the opera contrasted with Le Gateau Chocolate's glitzy ad glowing on the stage at the end of the opera.

I have arrived! I was initiated to Festspiel with such an unexpected treat of music and Valery Gergiev's musical directing of this opera. Personally, I do not agree with the fierce criticism of his apparently 'under-powered' production. The powerful imagery, constant sense of movement and dynamic energy was well met with more subtle music, which created a stunning experience, not only for the novices like me but for the crowds of others entertained not only inside, and also outside the theatre (by the pond)

during the long intermissions. It was not bacchanal, but anarchistic and provocative....I was well primed for the next three operas to come.

Parsifal was more predictable. The more you look at this production the more of the world you see in it. It was a 'vulnerable set', threatened and needed (designed by Gisbert Jakel). It was not a mysteriously spiritual production, but more human and non-overtly religious. There was no forced salvation, which could frequently spoil the exquisite music (in other productions). There was also a sense of participation in the purity of the paradise of the lusciously green plants, the rain and realistic nakedness of actors. Even the apple was real and was passed on around...I was redeemed!

There are two operas to reflect on. I mention Barry Kosky's production of *Die Meistersinger*, which started with the Wahnfried fecund of silk fabrics and perfumes, high art and petty squabbles and finished in the awkwardly renovated space of the original Nuremberg Tribunal Court rooms where the final song competition took place.

Kosky moved through the history, abstracts of cultural richness and had a good giggle at the expense of everyone. For the first time I could seriously see the fun of this opera, not just the heavy overtones of disgraced politics and overbearing history.

The last opera of this Festival was the renewed production of *Tristan und Isolde*. It was a great experience and intriguing staging. However I could hear the famous, loud boos of Festspielhaus. Who I am to boo and judge, but some in the audience had a strong opinion of this older production by Katharina Wagner. I personally was a little disappointed about Liebestod, but still joined the applause enthusiastically at the end of this performance. It was my last one...for the current season.

I am very grateful to The Richard Wagner Society (Victoria) for this privilege of spending these four nights at Festspiel. My suitcases remain primed for further festivals in the future.

~ Jaroslaw Hryniewick

2019 YOUNG ARTIST'S AWARD-WINNER'S BAYREUTH EXPERIENCE



Sophie Burns with Miki Oikawa at Bayreuth

Attending the Bayreuther Festspiele was an honour that I hadn't dreamed would come true for me yet, as a young budding mezzo-soprano, who has just made my move to Europe. Upon receiving the information that I had been chosen as the Society's Young Artist who would attend the 2019 Festival, I began reading about the background, history and of course all about Wagner himself and the creation of his wonderful theatre.

All of the research, googling and listening couldn't have prepared me for what I was to experience and for what I was to take in as a singer who aspires to one day sing his music on the professional stage.

This festival, apart from being a place to hear some of the finest works of opera from one of the finest composers of all time, would be a chance to be immersed in the culture that surrounds this great music, this great man.

I had heard all about the formal attire, the celebrity attendees, and the wondrous architecture of the theatre itself, but I don't think anyone could have described to me the feeling of being in that little southern German town, being in the crowd of attendees walking up to our seats, cushions in hand. It was electric.

The first impression I had upon arriving by shuttle at the theatre from

our beautiful Hotel Rheingold was that of all of the tradition and ceremony. Already I could see fans fluttering; it was a boiling 30 degrees daily and standing in a full-length gown can be a little warm.

I loved experiencing the first leit-motif being trumpeted from the balcony of the theatre, once played at 15 minutes, twice at 10 minutes and three times at five minutes, to call the audience back to the theatre. Without fail there was a crowd for each and every playing, marvelling up at that balcony.

The festival was a full immersion into a Wagner-lover's paradise. I loved seeing all the fellow Wagnerians, dressed in designer frocks, champagne flutes in the left hand and in the right a Bayreuther bratwurst with the traditional mustard and tomato sauce, of course.

Reflecting on the music, the direction and the stunning voices of each performance with those who travel the world to see Wagner's music was ever an intrigue, especially when discussing the productions and directors they loved and didn't love so much.

One of the most unexpected and meaningful experiences of my time in the festival was having the pure luck of sitting next to the wonderful mezzo-soprano Christa Mayer at dinner. As a fellow mezzo she was so kind, down-to-earth and generous in talking to me about being a young dramatic, telling me about what repertoire she started with, and what she thinks would also be a good fit for me as a fellow future dramatic mezzo-soprano.

She said to me, "You want to be Erda, and so you will." She was so warm and I loved her honesty and in general her ability to be just your everyday human, sharing experiences with an openness I found to be so inspiring.

Two days later to see her performing in Katharina Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* as Brangane was just captivating. Not only was she such a kind mentor to me in that short encounter, but she also had to me by far the most moving, captivating and quite frankly

overwhelming performance. Her manner and then her brilliance on the stage will forever stick with me.

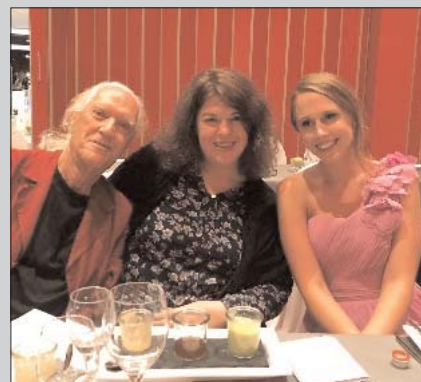
Each production we saw was so different with regard to the interpretations of the director and the soloists. The constant success was most definitely that of the chorus, who performed outstandingly in each and every show. I found that each show moved me in a different way, and in a way that I didn't expect. *Parsifal* left me in tears, *Die Meistersinger* left me solemn and *Tannhäuser* took my breath away.

The moment when the lights went down, as we waved our fans and waited for the baton to fall was always something that made me sit back and be grateful for this experience. Hearing the majestic overture coming through thin air, wonderfully diffused by Wagner's covered orchestra pit, simply cannot be described in words.

Another true highlight for me was being able to experience the world-class conductors Beychikov, Gergiev, Jordan and Thielemann. To hear Wagner's music in his theatre exactly as it should be, being conducted by some of the world's best Wagner specialists, is absolutely unforgettable.

For me, this experience has been so much more than I could have predicted. I was blown away at being given the opportunity to attend, but I will be forever grateful for the love, inspiration and deep appreciation that these four nights at the opera have given me for Wagner, his music and our wonderful world of art that we are so privileged to experience.

~ Sophie Burns



With Christa Mayer

'BELLOWINGS AT FATE AND DEATH'

Greg Eldridge in rehearsal



Greg Eldridge, the recipient of the Wagner Society's Young Artist Award for 2018, was our guest speaker at the Members' Function on Monday 17 September.

Greg provided an erudite speech titled 'Bellows at Fate and Death'. This title came from a D.H. Lawrence quote describing Wagner's operas as 'Bellows at Fate and Death' in comparison to Italian operas that "run all on impulse, and don't care about their immortal souls, and don't worry about the ultimate".

Greg proceeded to do a little 'bellowing' himself at the fate of young opera directors. Whereas there are training paths for opera singers there is little available for those young people wanting to direct operas. Greg has forged a path for himself, eventually becoming Associate Director at Covent Garden in 2015 and has since worked on 60 productions in seven countries.

He has worked with directors such as Sir David McVicar and Kasper Holten but his path and the path of other young directors has not been easy. We, the Wagner Society (Vic.), were thanked for providing our first Young Artist Award to a young director rather than a singer. Greg urged us to provide influence where we can to the provision of training for young directors.

Greg provided us with a passionate argument for the position of the Opera Director. The Arts are stronger than ever, asserted Greg, but we must continue to refresh our presentation of operas if we wish to encourage the younger generations to attend operas.

It is important that directors have the freedom to present the limited canon of operas in different ways to make the audience think as well as feel.

Traditional and progressive interpretations of operas each have their place. In his own words "a diversity of interpreting voices is vital for the continued exploration and interrogation of artistic works."

Greg has worked with text-based interpretations of scores with such directors as Sir David McVicar, John Copley and Sir Richard Eyre, all of whom he says "possess an extremely detailed knowledge of the text and of the way the music relates to it, and who work with designers to create worlds that allow an expression of both the narrative and its symbolic meaning through naturalistic movement with symbolic overtones."

However, Greg also champions the 'concept-driven' approach to directing, having been influenced by such directors as Kasper Holten, Christof Loy and David Bosch. The regietheatre approach is likely to make us think. These new interpretations of familiar operas can lead us to understand more about the opera than just the storyline.

Greg described three productions of *Don Giovanni* he has worked on. The first directed by Cameron Menzies at the National Theatre in St Kilda, the second directed by Francesca Zambello at Covent Garden and the last directed by Kasper Holten in London and Tel Aviv. Each of them was very different, but each focused on "different characters and the consequences of their actions".

Of course, of great interest to the audience was Greg's application of the case for diversity in the direction of opera when he focused on Wagner's operas. He put the case that Wagner's operas are particularly suitable for both traditional and concept-based interpretation.

After providing us with a comparison of different productions of *Tristan and Isolde* he proceeded to discuss the two very different productions of the *Ring Cycle* that he had worked on, the 2013 Longborough *Ring* and the 2016 Melbourne *Ring*.

The Longborough *Ring* "highlighted the chamber-opera intimacy of the *Ring* with a focus on familial tension". This interpretation suited the small theatre and concentrated on personal tensions between the characters.

The Melbourne *Ring* was produced for a much larger stage. Director, Neil Armfield, an experienced theatre director, produced a *Ring* all about the 'show', with references to vaudeville and cabaret.

As most of the audience had attended the Armfield *Ring* and Greg's description of the Longborough *Ring* with visuals allowed us to make the comparison ourselves, I think we were all able to agree with Greg that each of these directors provided us with a valid and thought-provoking interpretation of the *Ring*.

I would advise those members who were not present for Greg Eldridge's talk to read the full text and visuals that Greg has kindly provided.

These are available on our web site wagnermelb.org.au

~Janice Carpenter



OUR MARJ



The amazing story of Marjorie Lawrence

Recently, whilst driving through the town of Winchelsea, I noticed a large roadside sign, 'Marjorie Lawrence Drive, 1907-1979', and, in the middle of the town, The Globe Theatre, bore the sign 'The home of Marjorie Lawrence'. Did these signs refer to the Marjorie Lawrence who was a Wagnerian dramatic soprano who reached fame in the 1930s?

At the time all I knew about Marjorie Lawrence was that she was Australian, sang at The Met in the 1930s and was famous for being the first Brünnhilde to jump on the back of Grane and ride the horse into the flames in the Immolation scene in *Götterdämmerung*. Curiosity aroused, I found a recent biography of Marjorie and her ghost-written autobiography and thus learnt of her connection to Winchelsea.

Marjorie Lawrence was born on a farm near Deans Marsh in country Victoria, the sixth of seven children, and she was brought up there and near Winchelsea, a short distance away. Her mother died when she was two and she moved to live with her grandmother until she too died. As a child she learnt the piano and sang in the church choir and at community events where, from the age of ten, she was a regular soloist. The local parson was a musician and recognised that Marjorie had an outstanding and unusual voice, able to sing across both the contralto and soprano range.

By the age of 16 she had decided that she wanted to become a professional singer, a goal that her father violently opposed. In 1925, two days after her 18th birthday, she ran away to Melbourne, accompanied by her brother, Percy (later Cyril). She was accepted as a student by Ivor Boustead, a prominent singing teacher of the time, found work as a seamstress and began to learn Italian. However, life was difficult and finance tight and she was eventually reconciled with her father and went home to live but continued to commute to Melbourne for singing lessons. In 1926 she entered her first singing competition in Colac and in 1928 she won the Sun Aria and 3LO Gold Medal and became a state-wide celebrity.

Later in 1928, at the age of 21, she left for Paris upon the recommendation of John Brownlee, a past student of Ivor Boustead and a member of the Paris Opera company. She began singing lessons with Cecile Gilly who declared her to be a natural Wagnerian soprano and capable of singing 'Falcon roles' in French operas, which require a wild quality. During this time she also learnt French and German. She started singing in

concerts in 1929 and in 1932 made her opera debut at the Monte Carlo opera in the role of Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, to critical acclaim. In the same year she auditioned for the Paris Opera and was accepted into the company's development programme. Her first major roles in Paris were Ortrud in *Lohengrin* and Brünnhilde in 1933. The same year she made her first recordings of Wagner, all in French.

She was offered a contract for the 1934/35 season at The Met to sing Wagner in German but declined, because she was dissatisfied with the terms of the contract and content with her situation at the Paris Opera. She later came to regret this decision as the position at the Met was given to Kirsten Flagstad, who was hard for Marjorie to displace when she did eventually go to New York.

She was again approached by The Met in 1935 and agreed to a five-week season. It was in January 1936 at her first Met performance as Brünnhilde that Marjorie vaulted onto the back of Grane at the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* and rode him into the flames — in those days Grane was a real horse. Marjorie had been intent on following Wagner's explicit stage directions that Brünnhilde should mount her horse and ride into Siegfried's funeral pyre rather than repeat the accepted practice of walking the horse into the flames.

The audience was astounded and totally delighted, while



The Met management were dismayed at all the things that might have gone wrong. The performance was broadcast throughout the USA and was rebroadcast by the ABC the following evening. Marjorie Lawrence was famous. The Australian media followed her progress, always pleased to report on the success of 'Our Marj'. It would seem

that opera singers at this time received the same attention and acclaim as today's football and pop music stars.

For the next three years Marjorie sang the season with The Met, sang in Chicago, Buenos Aires and in concert performances and returned to France each year to sing at the Paris Opera and in provincial centres. It is interesting that in the 1930s the *Ring* was included in The Met repertoire most years until the start of the war when Wagner became less popular. As well as Wagnerian roles, Marjorie became famous for her performance of *Salome* in Richard Strauss's opera, where she insisted on doing the Dance of the Seven Veils herself, rather than sing while a dancer performs. She was renowned for the breadth of her range, the expressive capability of her voice, her acting ability, her spontaneity and her athleticism on stage.

In 1938 Marjorie was invited to sing in the Wagner Festival in Zoppot in Poland and she hoped that success there would lead to her being invited to sing in Bayreuth, but the war intervened.

In the middle of 1939 she made her first concert tour of Australia and kept her promise to give her first Australian performance in Winchelsea. The concert was held at the Globe Theatre (capacity 200), built by her father in 1926. Marjorie arrived in the town escorted by 100 local citizens on horseback. On subsequent return visits to Australia in 1943 and 1949 her first concerts were always held in Winchelsea before she performed in Melbourne and other capital and provincial cities. She was still in Australia when war broke out in September 1939.

Marjorie returned to the United States; there would be no more travel to Europe for the duration of the war. At The Met she had the pleasure of performing with some of the greats of Wagnerian performance — Lauritz Melchior, Kirsten Flagstad, Lotte Lehmann, Friedrich Schorr; she considered the years 1939-1941 to be the highpoint of her career.

In early 1941 she met Tom King, a general practitioner, and they were married two months after meeting. Her life now felt complete. When she was asked by the Mexican National Opera to be principal singer for their inaugural season, she persuaded Tom to go with her. At the final dress rehearsal of *Die Walküre* in Mexico City Marjorie collapsed on stage at the end of Act 2. The same evening paralysis set in and she was diagnosed with poliomyelitis; it was lucky Tom was with her. She was 34 years old.

She applied herself to an intensive rehabilitation programme using the Sister Kenny treatment method, regained the use of her upper body and voice but not her lower body. She would never walk again. In September 1942 she began taking part in radio concerts and, gaining confidence, participated in benefit concerts for polio victims and others. She also did three complete performances of Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* at The Met, seated on a divan. Alas, she was not asked back to The Met

and she believed this was due to her co-stars plotting against her because of the attention she received. She did however do three performances of a reclining *Isolde* in Montreal with Sir Thomas Beecham who considered her "the greatest living dramatic soprano", sang *Amneris* in *Cincinnati* and, in 1947, sang *Elektra* supported by a platform which allowed her to stand. However, after she contracted polio she was largely confined to singing concerts. She toured widely in the US, Canada and Cuba and gave many benefit concerts for the war effort, including visiting camps and military hospitals.

In July 1943 she returned to Australia in response to an invitation from the Australian government and toured and gave concerts at bases in northern Australia. She returned to the US and in mid-1945 travelled to Europe and did a concert tour for the Allied troops. In Paris she was reunited with old friends and sang at a gala benefit for 6,000 people. She was awarded the Legion d'Honneur for services to French music. In London she gave a private concert for the Queen and the Princesses and gave a concert at Royal Albert Hall.

In 1949 her autobiography, titled *Interrupted Melody*, was published, ghost-written by Charles Buttrose, though she took the credit. The book was extremely popular and was later (1955) made into a film of the same name starring Eleanor Parker as Marjorie, Glenn Ford as Tom and Roger Moore as brother Cyril. This was also a great success.

By 1950 Marjorie's voice was beginning to decline; she could no longer move comfortably between soprano and mezzo-soprano roles and the top of her range was diminished. Her many years of immobility may have required her to compensate for the inability to use the muscles in her lower abdomen. She sang Wagner for the last time on stage in this year. She continued to give concerts till 1958 but from 1950 focused on teaching, first individual students, and then in professorial positions in Tulane, Southern Illinois and Arkansas Universities.

She returned to Australia in 1966 to see family and in 1976 when she was asked by an Australian television station to be on *This is Your Life*. She died of heart failure in 1979.

Hers is an amazing story of a girl from Deans Marsh who ran away from home to train as an opera singer, developed her abilities at the Paris Opera and established herself as a principal at The Met before she was 30 years old. It is also a story of a young woman who showed courage and determination when her life fell to pieces around her and who doggedly worked to reclaim her voice so that she could do what she loved — to sing. Opera was her passion and it was a tragedy that her physical afflictions later denied her the joy of taking part in staged opera. Had she not contracted polio at the age of 34 she would have been likely to stand alongside Dame Nellie Melba and Dame Joan Sutherland as an exceptional Australian soprano who became famous on the world stage.

~ Libby Smith



Richard Wagner as walking companion

Robert and I have recently returned from trekking along the 550 km Munich to Venice Traumpfad, a walk “not for the faint-hearted”. That said, the trek offered us far more than sore feet, thirst, sunburn and exhilarating mountain views.

We discovered that, as with previous European trips, Richard Wagner was never far from our thoughts and also that he can be found in so many and varied places.

Before starting, we headed to Bayreuth and the Grüner Hügel for *Lohengrin*, an interesting interpretation, set in a transformer station, with Yuval Sharon as Director and conducted by Christian Thielemann. Annette Dasch was a beautiful late replacement for Elsa, with Klaus Florian Vogt as a superb Lohengrin.

Then via Nürnberg, to renew our acquaintance with Hans Sachs as well as Albrecht Durer, and on to Munich, where we went to the Prinzregenten-theater to see Handel's *Agrippina*, directed by Barrie Kosky.

The theatre was built as a festival hall for the operas of Wagner, opening in 1901 with *Meistersingers*. The building also includes the August

Everding Akademie Theater.

Many Wagner Society members will remember the stunning VSO production of *Lohengrin* in 1985, directed by August Everding assisted by Elke Neidhardt, which included a terrifying portrayal of Ortrud by Society member Nance Grant.

The next day we walked out of Marienplatz and along the Isar to commence our one-month trek — over the Bavarian Benediktenwand, a stone's throw from Neuschwanstein, into Austria, and crossing the Alps into Südtirol.

This long-disputed region, valued for its access to the Brenner Pass, has over the centuries been part of Bavaria, the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy and then Austria. Eventually, at the Treaty of Versailles, it was ceded to Italy. It is totally Germanic in language, architecture, culture and food and it is hard to believe one is in Italy.

As part of exploring Südtirol we made a side trip to Bolzen (Bolzano), and were stunned to find that the main square is the Walter von der Vogelweide Platz, with a large statue of Walther in the centre. Why, we pondered, was it that the great German

Minnesänger travelled this far south of the Alps? Did Richard Wagner stay here whilst writing *Tannhäuser*?

Further research has revealed that Walther may have been born in Lajen, 30 km from Bolzen, and just 2 km off our route into the town. However this theory has since been disproved, and also that Wagner was never in Bolzen. It appears that Walther is there for political reasons. In 1901, a statue of Dante was erected in nearby Trento, and the Germanic response was to build a monument in Bolzen. These two statues symbolise the various claims of the German and Italian nationalists to the region.

Back to the trek, through the Dolomites and down to the Piave, an area important in World War I as the Austro-Hungarian Italian front, and the subject of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*.

We finally arrived at Piazza San Marco, and changed our walking clothes for opera clothes to see *Tosca* at La Fenice and to further explore Wagner's Venice. In the Giardini, on the waterfront, in an isolated spot, we discovered two statues side by side: Richard Wagner, on a plinth embossed with a swan and cygnets, next to Giuseppe Verdi.

And finally on the Grand Canal is Palazzo Ca' Vendramin Calergi, where Richard Wagner died. Facing the canal there is a poignant plaque (below), translated as:

“In this palace, the spirits heard the last breath of Richard Wagner become eternal, like the tide which laps the marble stones.”

~ Jill Grogan



Walther von der Vogelweide



Richard Wagner in Venice



Plaque on the Grand Canal



NEW TICKETING ARRANGEMENTS FOR BAYREUTH

There has been a change in the way that tickets to the Bayreuth Festival 2020 will be ordered. The Richard Wagner Society (Vic.) will no longer be involved in the allocation of tickets. The Ticket Shop at Bayreuth will now allocate tickets to Society Members.

Any member wishing to purchase tickets as a RWS (Vic.) member should register with the Festival on the following webpage <http://ticketshop.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en>.

Members should register as individuals, checking and answering all questions (particularly which Wagner Society you belong to and confirming

that this Wagner Society is a member of the Verband RWVI). All tickets will be allocated in this way.

Members should receive an invoice from the Bayreuth Festival Office by the end of November 2019, which will be confirmation they have received tickets.

One of the pluses with the new method is that you will be able to order the category of ticket you want, the dates you want and the operas you want. These are considerable advantages.

If you decide to apply for tickets to Bayreuth in 2020 please do so immediately as the allocation will be done by the end of October.

It would be appreciated please if you sent me an email at president@wagnermelb.org.au to let me know that you have applied, and then also result of that application when it is available. The Society wants to provide input to Verband and the Bayreuth Festival Manager on the satisfaction level of this new approach.

We advise you to book accommodation immediately and also to take out travel insurance.

The year 2020 is certainly an exciting one for new *Ring* productions. Good luck in your Bayreuth Festival 2020 applications.

~ Susan Cumming

HONOURS: Congratulations to Chris Arnold and Gregory Reinhardt

CHRIS ARNOLD AM

A Wagner Society member who was appointed AM in the Australia Day Honours for significant service to community health through medical research organisations.

GREG REINHARDT AM

Longstanding member and former President of the Society was appointed AM in the Queen's Birthday Honours for his service as Executive Director of the Institute of Judicial Administration, a research and educational institute affiliated with Monash University.

VALE



David Bruce Valentine 23 July 1944 - 9 August 2019

Front row of the stalls, a broad welcoming smile on his face and a jumper stylishly slung across his shoulders, David Valentine loved music performances, in particular opera. Sadly David died in August after a long struggle with cancer.

We Victorian Wagnerites knew him through his love of Wagnerian operas. David's 'volly' (volunteer) performances in the 2013 and 2016 Melbourne *Rings* were recounted with infectious enthusiasm. He was active at member functions, most recently at this year's Wagner Birthday Lunch with his wife Linda McHugh. One has to admire his optimism and understand his passion, including David's buying Brisbane *Ring* tickets not long before his death.

An elegant and charming gentleman, he is remembered fondly. Deepest sympathy to his wife Linda and daughters Kaggi and Tina. ~ Susan Cumming
Left: David Valentine on his 75th birthday.



Jane Hamilton Matthews 19 December 1940 - 31 August 2019

The Honourable Justice Jane Matthews AO, died on 31 August 2019. She was the first woman appointed as Crown Solicitor in 1978, the first woman to be appointed judge in New South Wales in 1980, and the first woman to be appointed judge to the Supreme Court of New South Wales, in 1987.

Jane was president of the Wagner Society of New South Wales from 2010 until 2017.

Well-known to many Society members, especially those who travelled overseas for Wagner productions, her love and knowledge of Wagner's music was legendary. She had been to more than 60 *Rings*.

Jane was a very generous music benefactor, in particular to Opera Australia's 2013 and 2016 *Ring* Cycles.

Left: Jane Matthews at Bayreuth in 2006

Volunteer Needed for the Position of Honorary Auditor

Gordon Edwards, who has provided outstanding service to the Society over many years as Honorary Auditor, is retiring from that role. We are therefore seeking a volunteer to take on those duties.

We are looking for someone with an accounting background who is willing to meet with the Treasurer two to three times each year for about two hours each time to inspect the books, and to prepare a report to the committee after the end of the financial year.

Interested members should contact the President, Dr Susan Cumming, at president@wagnermelb.org.au.

If you have any questions, please contact the Treasurer, Tom O'Dea, on 0481 467 339 or at treasurer@wagnermelb.org.au

VALE

Dr David Peter Gale

13 DECEMBER 1929 - 16 AUGUST 2019
THE SOCIETY'S FIRST PRESIDENT



On Wednesday 26 August 1981, I attended a lunch at the Windsor Hotel, organised by the recently formed Wagner Society of NSW. I attended because the wonderful Wagnerian soprano Rita Hunter, in Melbourne for a concert, was to speak.

Dr David Gale, known to me slightly through medico-legal circles, was the only person I knew among the six or so people at my table. Sitting next to me was Robert (Bob) Salzer whose name I recognised as a prominent builder.

During the proceedings, the President of the Sydney Society suggested that he would like to hear from anyone present who would be interested in forming a Melbourne branch of his Society.

My memory is that David, Bob and I instantly showed interest. We arranged a meeting with the Sydney folk on the following Sunday after which we three were in agreement that a Melbourne Society would work better as an independent body.

We felt that a female member should join us on the Committee to assist in particular with social arrangements. David invited Mrs Tess Barrett, well-known in Melbourne's operatic circles, to join us. We thus formed the 'Gang of Four' and set out to find interested members who shared our view that Wagner's operas, being probably the greatest of all, should be known and performed in Australia.

Our endeavours were successful and the first meeting of the Richard Wagner Society, attended by about 40 persons, was held on 24 November 1981 at my home. Rita also graced the

meeting with her presence.

With a growing membership, David and I alternated from time to time as President and Secretary, Bob was the Treasurer for some years and Tess continued as 'the Member'.

Gradually other Committee members joined us to help. The Society was incorporated in 1985, I think, and two or three years after that we obtained an annual allotment of 15 tickets to the Bayreuth Festival, which had a waiting list of five or six years. This Bayreuth benefit undoubtedly boosted our membership.

David was just the right person to lead the Society. He was a fine pianist with a passionate love of music, especially the music of 19th century German composers and among them I think Beethoven and Wagner topped his list.

I understand that whilst studying and practising ophthalmology in Europe he was able to attend sometimes during the Golden

Years at Bayreuth during the late '50s and '60s.

On returning to Melbourne he became one of our most highly-respected ophthalmologists, practising at his Collins Street rooms until not long before his death.

Well-known in Melbourne's musical and medical circles, he was good company and enjoyed his food and wine — much fun was had during the early years of the Society. On his retirement from the Committee, he became a Life Member.

In recent years David became increasingly unable to walk without a wheelchair, but in the constant care of his friend Rex Magallanes he managed to travel once or twice a year to Europe to hear his beloved music and opera and indulge at favourite restaurants.

David, whose son Peter died in a tragic accident in April of this year, is survived by four daughters and their children.

~ Aubrey Schrader



From left Stan O'Loughlin, David Gale, Tess Barrett, Rita Hunter, Greg Reinhardt, Pat Gordon and Aubrey Schrader, at a Wagner Society meeting in the early '80s.



Pietari Inkinen to conduct 'Ring at Bayreuth 2020

Bayreuth has chosen the Finnish conductor Pietari Inkinen to lead the new *Ring*, directed by Valentin Schwarz in 2020.

He has been chief conductor with the Deutsche Radio Philharmonie Saarbruecken Kaiserslautern since 2017, as well as chief conductor of the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, and from 2008 to 2016 was music director of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

He is well remembered for conducting Opera Australia's first full *Ring Cycle* in 2013 in Melbourne, which he repeated three years later. In 2018, he led the production of *Die Meistersinger*, and he will conduct *Tristan and Isolde* for the Queensland Opera, with Simon O'Neill as Tristan, in 2020.

Catherine Foster: midwife turned soprano

I am indebted to Society member John Fawcett for providing an interesting article on British soprano, Catherine Foster, by Norman Lebrecht, which was printed in *The Spectator* on 20 July 2019.

Without any family history of a musical background, Catherine rose from nursing to midwifery, and found a singing teacher through her work.

Eventually, she got into the Birmingham Conservatorium in 1995, won an award, and sang at Northern Ireland, Welsh and English National opera. She had auditions, including

Covent Garden, and was repeatedly knocked back, and told she might try Germany. She must have impressed there because she made it to Bayreuth and sang Brünnhilde in Castoff's revolutionary anti-capitalist *Ring*.

Three top conductors, Petrenko, Janowski and Thielemann, insisted she return each year, and despite the regular booing of the director, Foster was hailed as the heroine.

Bayreuth is mad for the midwife-turned opera singer, so why can't Catherine Foster get a foot in the door at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden?

According to Lebrecht, her origin is part of the problem. She didn't go to the right schools, or to a Conservatoire with 'Royal' in its title. She was from the wrong side of the tracks and with the wrong kind of accent. The masters of British opera are more influenced by who's singing at the Met or La Scala.

Anyway, she will sing the leading role in *Elektra* on British soil next year, which has thrilled her. Still, it should not have taken this long for a great British soprano to get a gig on the national stage. What does she have to do to get a fair hearing in London?

Digital revolution and Opera

The digital revolution is making new inroads into opera's presentation, and may be the key to increasing the artform's appeal, or at least preventing its decline. It also has the ability to lessen some of the ever-increasing costs of production.

My first experience was the Lapage *Ring* at the Metropolitan in 2012. The staging was hugely expensive, yet in Act 2 of *Siegfried* projections of the forest were quite evocative and beautiful. The dreaded 'machine' was over-ridden by wonderful images of nature. Saving money??

Digital technology is seen as one possible way of making opera today more relevant. *The National Opera Review* recommended that Australian companies use digital technology to innovate the art form, appeal to more diverse audiences and lower produc-

tion costs. In Australia, there have been a number of recent productions that used entirely, or partially, digital sets.

Victoria Opera's *Flying Dutchman* (2015), *Four Saints in Three Acts* (2016), and *The Snow Queen* (2017) all used 3D scenery which required audience members to wear 3D glasses.

To date, most technology has been used to create background scenery, but, as advances occur, it will involve an integration between the digital and the live performance, and will become far more than just background.

~ Stan O'Loughlin

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