



A Tale of Three Cities: Dunedin, Alexandria, Paris

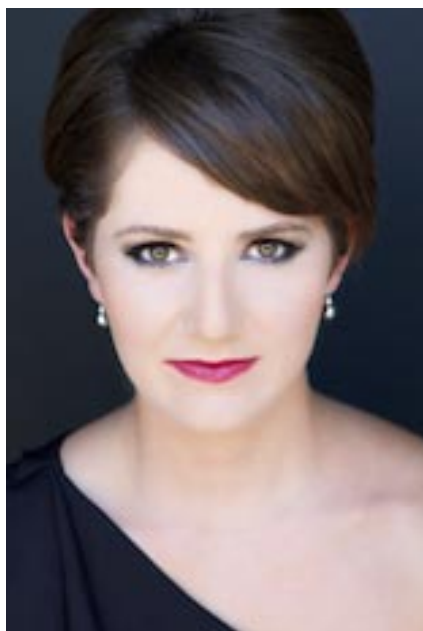
The Christmas Meeting of the Dunedin Wagner Society branch always likes to showcase a 'seasonal goodie', and the 2019 event featured American mezzo-soprano Tessa Romano, newly appointed lecturer in classical voice at the University of Otago in a virtuosic but rarely heard cantata by Berlioz.

Terence Dennis reports:

This special performance was both in honour of the 2019 Berlioz Year (2019 was the 150th anniversary of Berlioz' death) and to recall the connection between Berlioz and the young Wagner.

With pianist Terence Dennis, Tessa Romano presented Berlioz' early dramatic cantata *Cléopâtre*. Written in 1829, it is an extraordinary work, 25 minutes long, set in Alexandria and portraying the Egyptian Queen's farewell to life and her greeting to death in striking musical terms . . . as one would expect even from the young Berlioz.

Grandiose arias in the manner of a modernised Gluck were interspersed with an extended funeral scene within the pyramid tomb, and with tactile musical evocations of the fatal bite of the asp and Cleopatra's death agonies.



Tessa Romano, mezzo-soprano



Terence Dennis, pianist

Terence Dennis prefaced the performance with a talk on the music, and on the relationship between Berlioz and Wagner during the latter's

Paris period. Wagner was wide-eared at Berlioz's musico-dramatic innovations, but Berlioz' responses to Wagner were rather more distant.



Lights Go Out on the Chicago 'Ring'

On March 14th, Michael Sinclair had the unhappy task of writing to everyone booked for the Chicago *Ring* with the news that it had been cancelled. Here is part of his letter:

'I am very sorry to have to advise you that Lyric Opera of Chicago have today cancelled all performances of *the Ring* due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

'On Thursday 12 March, the Chicago Department of Health banned all events with over 1000 people for the next 30

days and encouraged organisers to also cancel or postpone events with over 250 people up to 1 May 2020. This left Lyric Opera of Chicago with little choice but to cancel all performances of *The Ring* plus associated events, and that was announced today.

'I know how much everyone was looking forward to this event and it saddens me that this has happened. However I am sure there will be many opportunities to hear Wagner's wonderful *Ring* in the future!'

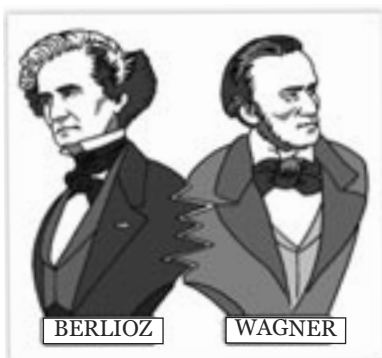
Stop-Press: WSNZ and COVID-19

In line with government requirements, all WSNZ meetings for the months of April and May are being cancelled.

It is hoped that the pre-arranged programme can go ahead from 1 June. Members will be kept informed.

Committee Changes

At the forthcoming AGM, there will be some retrials from the committee. Retiring members will be fully acknowledged in the newsletter following.



BERLIOZ

WAGNER

Image: François Lopinot / Wikimedia Commons

WSNZ 2020 Programme

NB: The information from June onwards is currently valid but may change with new developments

Auckland

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

Sunday, 5 April at 1.00pm (more afternoon time)

A four-hour session. **Heath Lees** guides us through *The Ring*.

Sunday, 17 May at 7.00pm

The Wagner Society's AGM, followed by a DVD treat:

The Making of the Chereau Ring.

Sunday, 12 July at 2.30pm

Return visit of **Antony Ernst**: *Parsifal*. (Four hour session).

Sunday, 20 September at 2.30pm

Parsifal: Full screening of the opera and optional catered dinner.

Sunday, 6 December at 7.00pm

Christmas fare of Wagner items, plus cake and wine.

Wellington

Venue: St Andrew's Hall, 30 The Terrace (except 10 May)

Sunday, 10 May at 11.00am

Venue: Te Anau (NZ's Last Full of Creativity), Dixon St.

Joint meeting with the Opera Society for a screening of the 2002 Mariinsky Theatre production of Borodin's *Prince Igor*.

Sunday, 21 June at 4.00pm

Documentary screening. Details to follow.

Sunday, 5 July at 4.00pm

Return visit of **Antony Ernst**: *Parsifal*.

September/October

Date and programme to be confirmed later.

November/December

End of year party. Date TBA.

Christchurch

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

Friday, 15 May at 7.30pm

Michael Sinclair looks at titles large and small, that have gone the extra mile to perform Wagner's operas.

Friday, 10 July at 7.30pm

Antony Ernst returns with a lecture on *The Ring*.

October Afternoon Meeting, time TBA

Siegfried: DVD screening, with a meal between the acts.

Sunday, December: Details TBA

Christmas Function

Dunedin

All venues will be publicised locally

Sunday, 3 May at 2.00pm

John Drummond discusses Wagner's revision of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* on the German stage.

Sunday, 14 June, time TBA

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa Viewing Room, 192 Castle Street

Das Liebesverbot on film. Wagner's second opera. A lively, colourful production from Madrid's Teatro Real.

Sunday, 13 September at 2.00pm

Wagner on Wagner: A guided tour with **Terence Dennis** of Wagner's *Opera and Drama*, with film and sound examples.

Sunday, 4 October, time TBA

Götterdämmerung, Act 2

The complete act from The Met, introduced by **Terence Dennis**.

Sunday, 29 November, 12 noon

Venue: Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row

Our Christmas lunch date followed by goodies à la Wagner.

Wagner Society AGM

17 May 2020

Formal Notice

THE SOCIETY'S AGM IS TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY 17 MAY IN ST HELIERS COMMUNITY CENTRE, 100 ST HELIERS BAY ROAD, AUCKLAND, AT 7 PM.

Nominations so far received:

PresidentTerence Dennis

Vice-PresidentKen Tomkins

Secretary.....Peter Rowe

Treasurer Jeanette Miller

PR/Liaison..... Jenny Lee

Committee:

John Davidson, Ashley Day, Juliet Rowe, Adrian Simcock

To make a nomination, phone Peter Rowe at 021 610 869,

or e-mail to: info@wagnersociety.org.nz, to be sent a form.

Nominations can also be made from the floor at the meeting.

Renewal of Memberships

Membership renewals are now due and your personalised renewal form is either enclosed with this newsletter, or being sent separately by post.

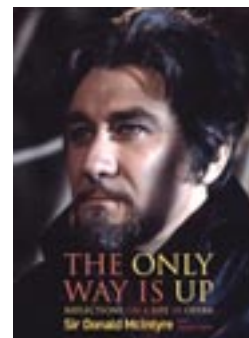
Kiwibank has now dispensed with cheques in favour of internet banking. If you cannot do internet banking, you will find information about other payment options at the foot of the renewal form.

Sir Donald McIntyre Memoirs

The Only Way Is Up

A lifetime in opera by Kiwi legend Sir Donald McIntyre. *The Wagner Society's 25th-birthday celebratory publication in 2019. Packed with fascinating insights and great photos.*

To buy a copy please contact Liz Lees (ph:022 163 0069) or email: handelees@xtra.co.nz.



New Members

A fortissimo Wagnerian welcome to:

Paul Bushnell.....Auckland

John Miranda.....Wellington

Leb' wohl

Helen Kirkman

15/2/59 – 24/2/20

Helen was the wife and partner-in-harness of WSNZ Vice-President Ken Tomkins. She died on 24 February after a long struggle with cancer.

A wonderful person, she authored many works of romantic fiction, some of them based on the *Nibelungenlied*. Her commitment and contribution to local and overseas Wagner Society events was every bit as strong as Ken's, and she will be much missed by all.



Wallace Ryan, 11/7/37 – 11/2/20

It is sad to announce the sudden death of Wallace Ryan who joined the WSNZ as a foundation member in May 1994. He was a quiet, sensitive man who travelled on most of our trips to Wagner events and almost never missed an Auckland meeting.

Wagner in Brisbane 2020

Well-known Australian Wagnerite Peter Bassett will be contributing a very high profile to the ambitious musical season in Brisbane towards the end of this year.

In this article, abridged from the newsletter of the Richard Wagner Society of Victoria, he sketches out the many Wagnerian delights that will be on offer.

Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Tristan und Isolde*, as well as Verdi's *Aida* will be performed in Brisbane this year between late October and mid-December by Opera Australia, Opera Queensland and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra.

It is a rare treat in any country to have professional productions of five of Wagner's mature works in such close

each of the operas, starting with *Das Rheingold*, which represents Spring, and ending with the Winter of discontent in *Götterdämmerung*. But he says he'll be careful not to impose too much visual baggage on the music, as Wagner should be allowed to speak for himself. 'When I listen to Wagner's music, I respond in my mind. I hope people will have a similar kind of

Down here, we remember him as the conductor of Opera Australia's *Ring* in Melbourne in 2013 and 2016.

The demanding role of Tristan will be sung by New Zealand tenor Simon



Peter Bassett

O'Neill, who has performed in the world's most famous opera houses and festivals with today's top-line conductors . . . Barenboim, Rattle, Gergiev, Thielemann . . .

American soprano Meagan Miller will sing *Isolde*, a role she has performed for Opera Leipzig. German mezzo Anna Werle will sing *Brangäne* in Italy before appearing in Brisbane. James Roser (*Kurwenal*) was recently heard as a splendid *Amfortas* in Victorian Opera's *Parsifal*, and Paul Whelan (*King Marke*) has performed this role *inter alia*, in the UK under Vasily Petrenko.

Editor's note: Peter Bassett will be giving free pre-performance talks at 10:30 am in the Concert Hall on each Tristan performance day. During the three cycles of The Ring, he and Professor Stephen Emmerson will hold talks and panel discussions on 11, 20 and 30 November in the Recital Hall of the Queensland Conservatorium. All details and bookings are at www.qtix.com.au.

Members of the WSNZ who are attending the afternoon sessions on 11, 20 or 30 November are warmly invited to join with Queensland members for drinks on the Conservatorium balcony, following the session attended.



Picture: Britta Campion

Caught in brooding pose on an empty stage, Ring director-designer Chen Shi-Zheng

proximity, and all eyes will be on the director and designer, Chinese-American Chen Shi-Zheng.

Chen was born in China in 1963 and lost both his parents during the Cultural Revolution. He developed a deep knowledge of Chinese opera before emigrating to the US in 1987. As well as staging traditional Chinese works, he has directed many Western operas in the US and Europe, including *Orfeo*, *Nixon in China*, and *The Flying Dutchman*.

Chen has been quoted as saying: 'Nowadays, Wagner productions are always trying to relate the story of *The Ring* to current Western society. But this story is fantasy, a myth. So, I want to take the myth as a platform to dive into, and re-imagine it in the 21st century, in Australia, in this very landscape.'

Chen has assigned a different 'season' to

journey, but I don't want to dictate every second of what they think.'

The Brisbane *Ring* will be under the baton of Philippe Auguin, who has conducted many *Ring* productions, including the first-ever staging of the complete cycle in China. Some may remember that he conducted *Tannhäuser* for Opera Australia in 1998 in the memorable production directed by Elke Neidhardt. The cast will be led by Vitalij Kowaljow as Wotan (recently seen in this role in the Salzburg Festival conducted by Christian Thielemann), Allison Oakes is Brünnhilde, and Stefan Vinke is Siegfried.

It all begins with *Tristan und Isolde*, semi-staged, on 28 and 31 October in the Concert Hall of the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. On the podium will be Pietari Inkinen, making his first stop in Brisbane immediately after conducting the new *Ring* at Bayreuth.

Wagner Murmurs

Keeping his ear to the ground, Michael Sinclair has heard about some forthcoming Wagner events:

- Kent Nagano will conduct a semi-staged performance of *The Ring* in Cologne from 2021, played on period instruments.
- Christine Goerke will sing *Isolde* at the Metropolitan Opera in October-November 2020, her first assumption of the role onstage. Stuart Skelton takes the role of Tristan.
- Covent Garden is planning a new *Ring* cycle to be directed by Barrie Kosky.
- Christine Goerke will no longer make her Bayreuth debut this year having cancelled her performances as Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*. She will be replaced by Irène Theorin.

WAGNER AND BEETHOVEN

*This year marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of Beethoven, a composer whose music and example had an enormous impact on Richard Wagner. In the second article in a series of four, **Heath Lees** explores this impact further, and reflects on what was genuine hero-worship on the one hand, and self-serving image-building on the other.*

The previous newsletter's

Backpage article in our *Wagner and Beethoven* series told how, as a boy, Wagner first felt the overwhelming impact of Beethoven's music, and then as a young man in Paris, went on to re-discover Beethoven's enormous musical stature and influence.

In fact, Wagner could hardly have avoided hearing Beethoven's music in the French capital. During the 1830s, the decade of Wagner's arrival, the city was in the midst of an astonishing musical awakening. Public concerts were spreading like a virus, with everyone being touched in some way by *la profunde musique*. Researchers have collected records that show that in 1827 the number of concerts given in Paris was 78, but twenty years later, in 1846, this had jumped to 383 — an increase of about 500%. Orchestras and conductors were becoming extremely skilful, and Wagner himself admitted that orchestral playing in Paris was a revelation.

And who was the composer who led the field? By more than a country mile, it was Beethoven. His symphonies appeared on most public programmes, his piano works were heard in just about every salon in the city, and his chamber music excited so much interest that a special Society was founded for the exclusive study of his late quartets. The Parisians had begun to listen to Beethoven as though he were the Voice of God.

Wagner and Beethoven's Mantle

Wagner was quick to see that one of the best ways of getting ahead as a German composer would be to identify himself with Beethoven. As a German outsider in a French city, he could easily take on Beethoven's mantle. After all, Beethoven had begun his career as a Rhineland outsider in aristocratic Vienna, and his deafness was to consign him to further isolation. Wagner knew there was special greatness about Beethoven's music — the huge support in Paris proved that — but might this greatness be proclaimed as a specially German quality? If so, then Wagner could present himself under the same banner, and have his music firmly

attached to the all-conquering tradition of Beethoven, to say nothing of Mozart, Haydn and Weber.

Nowadays, Wagnerians are having to ask: was this genuine devotion, or was it just the best way for Wagner to present himself? Are we talking about devotion or promotion? Up until ten years ago, no-one had dreamed of asking such a question. In 2010 however, Nicholas Vazsonyi, a formidable Wagner scholar, published what is in fact the first-ever book on the subject of Wagner's virulent self-promotion. Through his constant image-building activity, says Vazsonyi, it became clear that Wagner didn't want just the mantle of Beethoven, he wanted the whole package: his fame, his mighty reputation, and above all, his spiritual force.

For this though, Wagner needed to write his own publicity — spin-doctored of course to suit his own purposes (Vazsonyi enjoyed mixing 19th-century sources with 21st-century marketing-speak). So Wagner's first act of publicity in Paris was an arresting tale called *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven*, the fictional account of a visit by a composer called 'R' (no prizes for guessing who the 'R' stood for) to the old and crotchety Beethoven. The sly implication is that 'R's presence in the master's rundown apartment was like a privileged pass into a charmed circle.

Wagner's account goes on to claim that, in the presence of 'R', Beethoven opened up and revealed secrets about his music, especially the Ninth Symphony, which had not then been performed, but whose secret aims and impact were now being made known to 'R' and only to 'R'. The underlying message of course was that Wagner was uniquely privy to Beethoven's secret thoughts and his own music was following Beethoven's original, trail-blazing path. Clearly, Wagner's *Pilgrimage to Beethoven* was becoming less about Beethoven and more about Wagner. In Vazsonyi's no-holds-barred terms (borrowed, he admits, from Hollywood), Wagner's

Pilgrimage 'is a public relations vehicle, produced, directed and starring Richard Wagner, with a special guest appearance by Ludwig van Beethoven.'

Wagner the Conductor

But hang on. In the face of such full frontal scepticism, it needs to be remembered that Wagner embraced the cause of Beethoven not just as a composer, nor even just as a writer, but as a conductor as well. Indeed, Wagner's advancement of Beethoven's music was most effective from the podium, especially when it came to the symphonies. Chief among these was the Ninth Symphony, and those who heard him conduct it were united in their praise of the new meaning and emotional effect that Wagner could evoke from his orchestra, not for his own personal glory, but in service of the music. For one particular performance in Dresden, Wagner even wrote out a lengthy 'programme' for the symphony, an allegory of heroic victory over adversity that reinforced the foundation of heroism that became the rock of the 19th-century Beethoven myth, and remains so to this day.

So in the face of today's hard-nosed, investigative scholarship, Wagnerians have the task of striking a very clear balance. Yes, Wagner was an opportunist and yes, as a young man he blatantly hitched his wagon to Beethoven's star.

Nevertheless, his espousal of Beethoven's cause was genuine and deeply-founded, and as his life continued, his devotion even increased. This is the clear message from his 1870 centenary essay *Beethoven*, as we'll see in the next newsletter.

In 1872, when the foundation-stone was laid for the theatre of Bayreuth, the celebration concert did not feature any of Wagner's own music. The programme consisted of one single work. It was by Beethoven, and it was the Ninth Symphony. Surely that speaks volumes.

