

THE  
RICHARD WAGNER  
SOCIETY



Incorporated in Victoria, Australia

# WAGNER NEWS OF VICTORIA



NEWSLETTER OF THE  
RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY INC.

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Our year started with such promise, with an exciting program for members planned. In late February, Margot Costanzo gave an interesting and well-researched presentation on the mezzo-soprano Yvonne Minton. In early March, the Adelaide Festival, with its extraordinary Mozart's *Requiem*, directed by Romeo Castellucci, revealed hints of what was to come. Greeting hugs for old friends were being replaced by elbow rubs or toe taps and there were several no-shows of overseas artists.

### Coronavirus Cascade

*Life so often arrives all of a sudden.*  
(Andrew Greer)

Then in mid-March our Australian world, as we knew it, was swiftly and dramatically changed by the coronavirus pandemic precautionary restrictions. At the molecular level, it is a highly infectious respiratory disease with cascades of pathways. This cascade was replicated at the macro level in all our daily lives. The arts and artists are suffering enormously. At the time of writing this column, it is hard to imagine live opera, as we knew it,

returning in the near future. Will it be viable to hold operas, when there is need of social distancing? Will overseas artists want to travel when faced with quarantine probably at both the beginning and the end of their journey? The Society had to cancel its major 2020 community project, the Heath Lees pre-*Lohengrin* talks and its Tahu Matheson, Birthday Lunch and Maestro Negus member functions.

Additionally, the Bayreuth Festival has been cancelled. All these cancellations have generated considerable work, hence in particular I would like to thank Janice Carpenter and Miki Oikawa and the Committee who have had to face some difficult decisions.

### 2020 Virtual Richard Wagner Birthday Celebration

*What an imaginative event, wonderfully well done.* (Member feedback)

Each year since its inception, the Society has celebrated Wagner's Birthday. In recent years we have had a formal lunch on a Sunday near to his actual birthday, 22 May. We could not let the coronavirus preclude the continuation of such a tradition. Watching

isolated Italians singing from their balconies during their lockdown gave me the idea of us having a virtual Zoom Celebration.

It was a very happy members' function where the serendipitous highlight was the 'visit' from Wales of Maestro Anthony Negus who greeted members, playing on the piano, with the entry of the guests from Act 2 of *Tannhäuser*.

### Vocal Cords

*Isolde made me famous. Turandot made me rich.* (Birgit Nilsson on her favourite roles)

What five pieces of Wagner's music would you choose for a radio program and interview? An Anzac Day 3MBS invitation, another coronavirus casualty, caused me to ponder such. My starting point was the 'Liebstadt', which I have chosen for my memorial service. This made me reflect on my introduction to Wagner music. In 1971 (30 June) in London, I was totally transfixed by a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* at Covent Garden. At the time there was concern that I had spent scarce post-

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doctoral money on an opera ticket in the gods, which cost less than going to the rugby! My first experience of a live Wagnerian opera production has stayed with me all my life.

The Royal Opera House responded to my recent research query. My ticket in the upper slips had cost one pound, compared with the most expensive tickets at the time of almost £25. But no wonder I loved the performance: Georg Solti was the conductor and Isolde was performed by the magnificent Birgit Nilsson. Add for good measure New Zealander Donald McIntyre who performed the role of

Kurwenal, it is an experience I would appreciate more today. Yet I am grateful it unlocked a lifetime of passion for live opera, in particular Wagnerian and Bellini performances, and the Royal Opera house remains my favourite opera house.

### Farewell as President

By the time of the Annual General Meeting I will have served on the Committee for 10 years, three as Secretary and two as President. I would like to thank the many members who contribute to a vibrant Society. Obviously with COVID-19, this year has been extraordinary, with few member functions and no

live Wagnerian operas. Yet the membership camaraderie is an underlying positive.

My appreciation to the tireless Committee members and other volunteers who contribute to ensuring members have the opportunities envisioned by previous Committees as well as paving new paths. I wish the Society a flourishing future.



~ Dr Susan Cumming  
President

## EDITORIAL COMMENTS

The coronavirus pandemic has interfered with a significant number of Wagner productions and functions. Therefore, this newsletter will be slightly different to usual. Many thanks to those who have contributed pearls of interest. And, sincere thanks to Susan, Miki, Gavin, Janice and the team who put a memorable birthday celebration together on 22 May — Wagner's 207th.

### Did Tolkien borrow from Wagner?

J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy novels *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) share elements with *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, but Tolkien himself always denied that he had been inspired by Wagner's work, saying that, "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases."

In spite of Tolkien's protestation, there are various similarities in addition to roundness: a ring of power which curses its bearer; a powerful wanderer in a large hat carrying a spear (Wotan) or staff (Gandalf the Grey); magical invisibility; the reforging of a powerful sword; a riddle contest; Sméagol's murder of his cousin Deagol for possession of the ring and Fafner's murder of his brother Fasolt for the same reason; the slaying of a powerful gold-hoarding dragon, to name but a

few. Tolkien may have drawn, albeit partially, upon common source material, including the Völsunga saga and the Poetic Edda.

The crucial element of the storyline, that the Ring is evil, and will work of itself to the undoing of its possessor, is common to both, as is the lust for world domination connected with its power, and that the Ring has been stolen (Wagner) or captured (Tolkien) from its rightful owner(s).

Wagner mapped out a prose resume of his whole drama in October 1848, called 'The Nibelungen Myth as sketch for a Drama'. He read and took ideas from five main sources : The Poetic Edda, the Volsung saga, the Prose Edda, das Nibelungenlied, and Thidrek's Saga of Bern, and was influenced also by Greek drama, Grimm's sagas and mythology, and other fairytales. This sketch very closely approximated the final *Ring Cycle*. The sources he used were only loosely connected, and there was hardly any real continuity.

Wagner did an amazing job developing all these sources into a cycle that had continuity. Tolkien may have used similar sources, but it is highly unlikely he would have ended up with his cycle so similar to Wagner's without being influenced by Wagner. Tolkien appar-

ently had a dislike for people noticing superficial resemblances between his works and others.

Hitler may have had something to do with Tolkien's distaste for Wagner. Because of Hitler's perversion of Wagner's view of German mythology, Tolkien may have even been inspired to write his *Lord of the Rings* as a 'correction' or challenge to Wagner, and even though probably influenced by Wagner, objected to having it pointed out.

Tolkien and Wagner were opposites in most ways. Wagner was a 19th century German socialist, who believed in the apotheosis of man. He was a revolutionary, with a megalomaniacal desire to replace religion with his own art. Tolkien was a 20th century English monarchist, a devout Catholic, profoundly reactionary, with a strong belief in the limitations placed on humans by original sin. In my view, Tolkien's denial of similarities between the two is probably bound up with the 'Nazification' that

Wagner's works were unfortunately tainted with. But I feel that Tolkien was significantly influenced by Wagner's *Ring*.





# RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY TREASURER: THANKING TOM O'DEA AND WELCOMING CHRISTOPHER HURLEY



The Wagner Society is indebted to Tom O'Dea who has been Treasurer of the Society for just under 10 years. He has served on the Committee for 11½ years and has been a member of the Society since 2005.

Members are familiar with Tom's careful and detailed Treasurer's Reports which have been a feature of annual general meetings. In 2012, with then President Shirley Breese and the Committee, the Society's Rules and By-Laws were updated.

Tom has implemented many significant improvements in the Society's practices, including in virtual record-keeping and the Society's website, especially around the financial capabilities where members can book and pay for functions as well as for subscriptions. He has been rigorous with the Society's necessary fiduciary reporting.

In addition to his work as Treasurer, Tom was a valued member of the Committee and contributed to the planning and execution of Society events. Tom and Ruth O'Dea have managed the wine catering at functions

for many years, an important aspect of the bonhomie that Society functions engender for members.

Society member Christopher John Hurley was appointed Treasurer at the 8 June Committee meeting.

Christopher graduated in 1981 from the University of Wollongong with a Bachelor of Commerce, majoring in Accounting. He worked in business as a CPA for 35 years. He was Chief Financial Officer and Company Secretary, for over 20

years, in the Australian office of an international Belgian company. Aged 54, he had a complete career change, working in China teaching English as a Second Language, before returning to Australia in 2018.

Christopher will be working initially with the Executive to gain an insight into the Society's practices to ensure an effective changeover. The Committee is most appreciative of the additional responsibilities taken on by our Secretary Miki Oikawa who has been Acting Treasurer.

~ Susan Cumming



## Supporting Australian classical singers

I am a member of the Richard Wagner Society and an aficionado and keen supporter of all opera. I am also the former chair of Victorian Opera.

Like most of you, I was looking forward to 2020. It was to have been such a wonderful year for both Wagner singers and audiences, and now looks uncertain at best. We have already missed *Lohengrin* and may yet miss much anticipated *Ring Cycles* such as in Brisbane and Paris.

While this is incredibly sad for those of us who were anticipating attending, it is far worse for those who were to perform. In these uncertain times one of the hardest hit groups in Australia are freelance artists. Those wonderful singers, who bring us so much joy when they perform our favourite works, seldom qualify for Job-Keeper. This is only available for

casual workers who have been working for an employer for at least 12 months — and most singers only have short-term contracts. This leaves them terribly exposed when performances are cancelled with little or no notice.

And the outlook is bleak — it is far from clear when performances will be allowed again.

Recognising this situation, and determined to do something about it, Nicole Car has established Freelance Artist Relief Australia; specifically, to help Australian singers who have lost work because of COVID-19. Nicole, arguably Australia's leading soprano, has set up the Fund under the auspices of Music & Opera Singers Trust Ltd, a registered Australian Charity. I am very proud to have been invited by Nicole to serve on the Fund's Advisory Board, along with Maureen

Wheeler, Patrick Togher, Virginia Braden and Graham Pushee.

The aim of the fund is to support classical singers who have had performances cancelled or postponed on or after March 12, 2020 because of COVID-19.

Fundraising is off to a great start, but to help everyone who needs it, Nicole estimates that \$1 million will be required. Are you able to support this wonderful effort? If you are, I will match any Victorian Wagner Society member's donation up to \$50 and an overall total from Victorian Wagner Society members of \$15,000.

To enable your donation to be matched please send a copy of your receipt to president@wagner-melb.org.au

I hope you'll join me in ensuring a more certain future for our singers.

~ Jane Hemstritch

# WAGNER'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION COVID-19 STYLE



**A**s our Society's planned Member Functions had to be cancelled one by one due to the COVID-19 shutdown, our President Susan Cumming contemplated how we could celebrate Richard Wagner's birthday in 2020.

Inspired by the technical advances we have all had to make over the last couple of months, our President put a proposal to the committee for a Zoom Party. Her idea was to provide the camaraderie of the usual lunch and also to provide some of the usual rituals such as the spot prizes and entertainment. Our session held on Friday 22 May at 5pm certainly achieved all of those objectives.

The technical expertise of our Secretary Miki Oikawa and Committee Member Gavin Cornish was much appreciated. It is no mean feat to organise 48 members onto a screen, allow time for greetings, and produce the appropriate visuals and music at the scheduled times.

After on-screen greetings, Gavin (apparently speaking from within Neuschwanstein) introduced Susan who welcomed everyone and provided the first toast.

We were very impressed by the adherence to appropriate dress code of those who beamed in. Many men wore black tie and we even had a top hat. There were lots of beautiful tops purchased either for Wagner performances or at Wagner events. Nibbles and sparkling wine at the ready. Who knew that our president was a secret Valkyrie, minus horns because of her Coronavirus background, or that Miki would be in Bayreuth dressed in her dirndl costume?



**5** Thanks to Gavin Cornish for his Zoom production and attendee photo (left).

We noted large statues of Wagner and smaller items of Wagner memorabilia placed appropriately for us to appreciate on the screens of members. Shirley Breese, former President, was a vollie at the Melbourne Rings and she had her Rhine 'gold' prop for us to admire. Jill Grogan shared the story of her Valkyrie necklace (see next page).

Our surprise guest for the occasion was Maestro Negus and wife Carmen by video from Wales. Maestro Negus has been a frequent visitor to Victoria to conduct operas for Melbourne Opera. He is a Wagner expert who made his first trip to Bayreuth as an exchange student. Maestro provided us with some memories of his times in Bayreuth and then played from *Tannhauser* Act 2, 'entry of the guests'. We were all delighted by this performance. We were also delighted to hear a message wishing us well from a neighbour of Maestro Negus, Bryn Terfel!

Lucky prizes were drawn at various stages, and several Wagner Society members provided comments on their favourite Wagner experience. George Golvan introduced us to his statue of a fallen hero that he purchased from the selling off of the 1984 Adelaide Ring scenery (see next page). The perspex hero was delivered in two pieces and was not self-supporting so George had to have some work done before the hero was ready to welcome guests to his house.

Janice Carpenter described the thrill of lunching with Eva Wagner-Pasquier, the great-granddaughter of Richard Wagner, as the guest of the Wagner Society of New York last



Maestro Anthony Negus with his wife Carmen Jacobi.



*COVID-19 inspired Golden Apples prophylactic birthday cake*

year when she visited NY to attend the Lepage production of the *Ring*.

After another musical interlude from Siegfried Act 3 'love duet', Susan introduced us to a COVID-19 inspired birthday cake made from loo paper rolls, Freia's Golden Apples for retaining youth, surgical gloves, silk ribbon (for Richard) topped by a Valkyrie helmet and a mask. We all tried to sing in time to 'Happy Birthday', not the easiest via Zoom, but the tradition was maintained. We all toasted Wagner.

Screen shots of our members were taken and we all had time for a bit more chat which was great.

Susan thanked all the presenters and guests.

Congratulations to everyone who participated. A particular thanks to Susan for the idea, and for pushing us all along with her enthusiasm and to Miki and Gavin for sourcing the music and the visuals and running the meeting so successfully.

~ Janice Carpenter



Maestro Negus at the piano, playing 'entry of guests' from *Tannhauser*.



## A VALKYRIE NECKLACE ...

This much-loved Valkyrie necklace entered my life in 2003, in Adelaide. I acquired it at an auction at a dinner that was part of a weekend symposium which was held in preparation for the 2004 *Adelaide Ring*.

Peter Bassett, who was a speaker at symposium, told me he had purchased it in Stockholm at the History Museum. I believe it is a copy of a figure found in a Viking grave in Öland, Sweden and is on display in the museum.

It has accompanied me to performances of *Rings* in Adelaide, Bayreuth

and Melbourne, and many other Wagner operas, including Melbourne, Sydney, Hobart, Munich and Salzburg, and of course to our Wagner Birthday Lunches.

I also regard it as my 'strong woman' talisman, and wear it on occasions when some supernatural accompaniment could be needed.

I have no idea who I outbid for my treasured Valkyrie at that dinner, but if it is a member of our Wagner Society, may I thank you for the pleasure it has given me.

~ Jill Grogan

## HOW I ENDED UP WITH A SLAIN WARRIOR EN ROUTE TO VALHALLA IN MY FRONT ENTRY ROOM

The 2004 Adelaide production of the *Ring* (the first fully Australian production), directed in innovative style by the late lamented Elke Neidhardt, sets by Michael Scott-Mitchell, with the Adelaide Symphony conducted by the then relatively unknown Asher Fisch, remains one of my most memorable *Ring* productions. Unfortunately, there was no film or video made of the performances, but Melba Recordings eventually produced a highly acclaimed SACD set of superlative quality, which has won a number of recording awards and has been compared favourably to the famous Decca Solti recording.

I thought that *Die Walküre* was particularly spectacular, with a youthful Stuart Skelton singing the role of Siegmund and Deborah Riedel as a superb Sieglinde. The wonderful Lisa Gasteen, one of the great Wagnerian sopranos of our time, then at the peak of her voice, was a magnificent Brünnhilde. And John Bröcheler, the Dutch operatic bass baritone, an impressive and sensitive Wotan.

The Act which particularly stood out was Act 3, when the eight leather-clad Valkyrie sisters gather to rest en route to Valhalla with the dead warriors at the 'Wunder Bar' and are joined by Brünnhilde and we get the tremendous power and excitement of 'The Ride of the Valkryries'. The dead warriors happened to be reinforced see-through plastic reproduction statues of Michelangelo's 'David', but wearing aluminium horned helmets. The collection of dead warriors with lighting looked fantastic on the opera stage.

The South Australian Opera had hoped to revive the successful production again in Adelaide, and the Hong Kong and Singapore Operas had expressed some interest in acquiring the production but, alas, despite the triumphant reception which the opera cycle received and the favourable reviews, it was not to be, and the production was never restaged.

Some years later, I read in *The Australian* newspaper that the SA Opera had decided to dispose of the set. I recalled the magnificent dead warriors, and wondered if I could possibly acquire one of the warriors as a memento of a performance that I so fondly recalled.

A telephone call to the SA Opera informed me that they were indeed willing to sell parts of the set, including a dead warrior, for an acceptable price. We agreed on a price, which I was advised was well below the cost of making the statues, and a warrior, minus legs, would be delivered to my house in Melbourne.

A giant see-through statue of 'David', with horned helmet, eventually arrived in two halves and no stand. I had forgotten that the set was a sloping stage and the statues were made to stand on a sloping stage with the two halves stuck together with adhesive tape, not visible to the audience. A nice memento, but not good for display purposes.

After much searching I eventually located a tradesman who managed to glue the halves together as best he could, although the halves do not entirely match, and design and build a suitable metal rotating stand. And so a large naked noble hero now guards my front entry, no doubt wondering why he has not been transported to Valhalla.

~ George Golvan



# YVONNE MINTON, LITTLE-KNOWN MEZZO-SOPRANO AND INTERPRETER OF WAGNER



On Monday, 24 February an enthusiastic gathering of Wagner Society members heard Margot Costanzo talk about one of Australia's great mezzo-sopranos, Yvonne Minton.

Margot is a consultant specialising in legal training and planning facilitation, a radio broadcaster with 3MBS and a Wagner Society member. Margot came to know Yvonne when she made a program about her career and Yvonne willingly assisted her with the making of a second program on Yvonne's Wagner roles. Margot was ably assisted by Karen den Spall and Adam Miller in the preparation of her PowerPoint slides and in ensuring that the musical excerpts worked smoothly.

Margot generously provided members with two handouts, the first being a brief biography, including Yvonne's operatic roles, and the second being a list of Yvonne's Wagner roles, including opera house and year. To start the evening Margot provided some of Yvonne Minton's biographical details before focusing on three prominent Wagner roles that were in Yvonne's repertoire — Fricke, Brangäne and Kundry.

Given the long span of Yvonne Minton's career at Covent Garden and in German opera houses, and that she performed all the major roles expected of a mezzo-soprano, it is surprising that she is so little-known in Australia.

Yvonne Minton was born in Sydney in 1938 and moved to London in her early 20s. She sang in a number of operas in England prior to being taken on as a junior at Covent Garden in 1965. She slowly graduated from minor to larger roles, encouraged by conductor, Georg Solti.

In 1974 she performed the role of Brangäne in *Tristan and Isolde* in Bayreuth, and at the time was only the third Australian to perform there. In 1976 she sang the role of Fricke in the Centenary production of the *Ring* under Patrice Chereau. She also sang in many other German opera houses.

After providing us with information pertaining to Yvonne's background and career, Margot immersed us in the beauty of Yvonne's voice by playing a recording of her singing the fifth of the Wesendonck Lieder, 'Träume' (Studie zu Tristan und Isolde).

Margot's interviews with Yvonne, which she interspersed through her talk, brought Yvonne into the room with us. It was fascinating to hear Yvonne talk about the interpretation of the characters she played.

With respect to Fricke she talked of the change in Fricke's character between *Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. Whereas in *Rheingold* Fricke is young, immature and could be described as a complicit materialist, in *Die Walküre*, which takes

place many years later, Fricke is older, wiser and filled with cynicism.

Yvonne described how she sought to bring into the *Walküre* role all the resentment and disappointment of a wounded wife. As an illustration, Margot played Yvonne singing 'So ist es mit den ewigen Göttern' from *Die Walküre*, expressing the very acid start to her long and convincing argument with Wotan.

The second role discussed by Margot was that of Brangäne in *Tristan und Isolde*. Her character is that of the faithful friend, trying to do the best for her mistress and also realising that her action has unleashed problems.

We heard a recording of Yvonne Minton performing Brangäne's first warning to Tristan and Isolde where she expresses all her concerns and fears for the heedless couple.

The third role discussed was that of Kundry in *Parsifal*. Kundry expresses three different personalities in the opera and the role demands great acting skills as well as vocal stamina and skill. Yvonne managed to express all of Kundry's moods through superb singing.

Margot's insightful presentation was well appreciated by members. Over supper there was much spirited discussion of the operatic treats which Melbourne enjoyed in February and opinions were exchanged about the productions of *Fidelio* and *Salome*.

~ Libby Smith

# The Richard Wagner Society (Vic.) Young Artist Award 2020



Robert Macfarlane in *The Japanese Princess*, Lyric Opera of Melbourne

Once again, the Richard Wagner Society (Vic.) was able to offer a Young Artist Award, thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor from the Society's membership.

The award is for a young Australian person, under 35 years old, studying to be a singer or in another operatic métier (e.g. director, conductor, musician, designer) who would benefit from the experience and hopefully be involved in Wagner productions in the future.

This is a fantastic opportunity for the young artist to experience first-class productions of Wagnerian works at Wagner's Bayreuth Festspielhaus, and an opportunity to meet some of the artists and network with industry people and opera aficionados.

The past winners of the award were opera director Greg Eldridge (2018) and mezzo-soprano Sophie Burns (2019).

We received 11 applications this year. The adjudication was conducted by a panel of myself and industry professionals Suzanne Chaundy, Raymond Lawrence, Roxane Hislop and Helena Dix. Judging was based on the applicants' current skills, the potential to make a career in opera, demonstration of artistic aptitude, and willingness to learn and make the best of this opportunity.

As you would expect, the decision was not easy, as all of the applicants showed great talent and passion for their craft. If only we could award them all! But in the end, one applicant appeared at the top of the collated list: Robert Macfarlane.

A graduate of Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide with a Bachelor of Music, Robert spent several years in Europe studying singing and performing. His relationship with Wagner started when he was engaged as a chorister in

Elke Neidhardt's *Der Ring der Nibelungen* for State Opera South Australia in 2004. Recently he covered the role of David in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* for both the State Opera of South Australia and for Opera Australia.

Having previously worked with both director Valentin Schwarz and conductor Pietari Inkinen, Robert was looking forward to experiencing their interpretations of Wagner's masterpiece. Personally, I had the pleasure of directing Robert in Saint-Saëns' opera *The Japanese Princess* (originally *La Princesse Jaune*) for Lyric Opera in 2017.

In addition to being a singer, Robert debuted as a stage director in 2018 with *More Guilty than the Poet*, a non-narrative drama about mortality featuring circus acrobats and set to the lieder of Franz Schubert.

In 2019 Robert directed a production of Handel's *Radamisto* in Sydney using found lighting sources, and in 2020 a new work, *Arms of Love*, was to have been premiered and toured by the Song Company and Karul Projects.

Robert is also the Artistic Director of the Australian Bach Society.

Of course, the unimaginable has occurred and the Bayreuther Festspiele 2020 has been cancelled, which means that Robert will not be able to enjoy his award this year.

The RWS Committee has decided to give Robert the option to carry over the award to 2021, should he be interested and available. Robert was given until the end of October 2020 to make his decision, and his current thoughts are that he would like to take up the offer in 2021.

Here are Robert's own words about the award:

Dear readers of the Wagner Society of Victoria Newsletter,

I write this three months into the most extraordinary set of circumstances the world has faced since the Second World War. I currently live alone, and while in no danger of being evicted or becoming homeless, the effects of three months of ostensible solitude have made me profoundly aware of the richness of our cultural lives, what we stand to lose, and in these socially distanced circumstances the importance, to paraphrase Wagner himself, for imagination to create (and reinvigorate) our reality.

My name is Robert Macfarlane, and I am a professional Tenor and Director, recently returned to live in Melbourne after five years living and working in Leipzig and Berlin. When Miki Oikawa first wrote to me informing me that I was to be the recipient of the 2020 Young Artist Award, I fought back (joyful) tears. Wagner is one of the five composers (the others being Bach, Schubert, Britten and Bob Dylan) I feel inextricably linked to. They are ‘Zwillingsterne’ and guiding lights.

For the last five years of my career, the works of Richard Wagner have played an increasingly important role in my life, having first been told to start considering tenor roles in the Charakterfach (Mime, Loge and David in particular) while in Germany, to

making my Opera Australia debut as Eisslinger (and covering David) in 2018’s production of *Meistersinger*.

My (embryonic) work as a director has focused squarely on the synthesis of art forms across boundaries of time and culture, aspiring to the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ Wagner achieved so magnificently in his 10 mature music dramas. The ‘Grünen Hügel’ has therefore become a dream pilgrimage and I am profoundly thankful and glad to be afforded the opportunity to attend, and through observation, extend my knowledge base and understanding of the skill set required to summit these artistic Everests.

However, as the great John Lennon once said, “Life is what happens when you are making other plans.” As you will undoubtedly know by now, the Bayreuth Festspiele has been cancelled for 2020. This is a huge disappointment for all of us, and I was particularly looking forward to reconnecting with the director of the new Bayreuth Ring, Valentin Schwarz, who directed me in a production of Haydn’s *L'infedelta Delusa* in 2015 in Germany.

In any case, I remain firmly committed to whatever form my ‘Wagner Journey’ takes in the post COVID-19 world, and with the good graces of the Wagner Society of Victoria, will be equally delighted to take up the award in 2021. ~ Robert Macfarlane

Robert, like most of the performing artists I know, has lost gigs and employment for most of the year with no indication of what is to come. I extend my sympathy to them all, and hope that they as well as the arts organisations survive to bloom once more, to give us Society members the joy of music and other arts.

And regardless of what happens, I wish to congratulate Robert for winning the 2020 RWS Young Artist Award.

~ Miki Oikawa



Robert with Stuart Skelton in Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Peter Grimes (2019)



More Guilty Than the Poet, Adelaide Festival Centre, 2018

# ~ OPERA ARTISTS IN ISOLATION ~

Reaching out to artists, who the Society has supported in recent years, highlights the challenges they face in the coronavirus pandemic. The Australian Government's stimulus package does not include Australians based overseas or short-term contract artists living in Australia. All contracts for opera artists in Australia have been cancelled or suspended.

At the best of times, artists have to cover their own costs and finance the time to learn a new role, nor, if they are on contracts, do they get paid when sick. Additionally, whether they are paid for travel, accommodation and rehearsals depends on the opera company.

The general trend is that singers get paid a package, but if the production is not performed, the expenses which are paid depend on the company. Postponements are often not helpful to artists, as they may not be available at the rescheduled times.

Both in Australia and overseas, there is a widely varying situation due to the coronavirus pandemic, though most opera houses are not paying anything to singers and orchestras.

The situation in Germany appears to value artists better. For opera engagements involving more than a couple of days of rehearsal, or more than a certain number of performances, the law stipulates that the artist must be engaged as an employee and not as self-employed. A short-term contract (a 'Gastvertrag') is provided, in which the artist is paid for the number of performances involved. If the performance is cancelled through no fault of the artist, as in the pandemic, the artist is still paid.

Here are vignettes from four Australian opera singers, Daniel Sumegi, Derek Welton, Bradley Daley and Helena Dix.



## DANIEL SUMEGI

We were fortunate to experience the thrilling performance of bass baritone Daniel Sumegi, as Jochanaan (John the Baptist) in Victorian Opera's *Salomé* in February this year.

Our Society was planning to support his debut role of Heinrich in the now cancelled Opera Australia's *Lohengrin*. Due to the cancellation of *Lohengrin*, Daniel was not paid at all

for rehearsals and, importantly, he lost the opportunity to debut in a new Wagnerian role. A dilemma he faced in May was whether to return to New York, where the virus continues to be much more rampant than in Australia.

We can look forward to seeing and hearing Daniel as Hagen and Fasolt in the Brisbane *Ring*, roles he performed so menacingly and admirably in the 2013 and 2016 Melbourne *Rings*.

## DEREK WELTON



Congratulations to bass baritone Derek Welton for his recently announced 2020 Green Room Award as Best Male Lead in the Opera section. The award was for his February 2019 debut in Australia in a major operatic role, the role of Klingsor in Opera Victoria's *Parsifal*, which our Society supported. He says unexpectedly this has become his signature role, having performed it in Bayreuth 2018 and again in 2019.

Daniel is based in Berlin, where he is confident in how the pandemic has, and is, being managed. He has had two roles cancelled because of coronavirus but is excited about his upcoming plans for 2021. Significantly, he is performing his first *Walküre* Wotan in the new production by Peter Konwitschy at Theater Dortmund. He says he is very happy to be cast in a role of this magnitude, for the first time, at a regional 'A' house. 2021 also heralds Derek's debut with the Berlin Philharmonic (Le messenger in *Oedipus Rex* with Kirill Petrenko). Also scheduled are Wotan in *Das Rheingold* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Vladimir Jurowski, a return to Bayreuth as Heerrufer, a probable Wanderer in Act 3 *Siegfried* in concert in Basel, and a return to the Bayerische Staatsoper as Klingsor.



## BRADLEY DALEY

The 2016 Melbourne Ring heralded the Wagnerian debut for Brisbane-born helden-tenor Bradley Daley. The Society supported him in his role of Siegmund. He then spent three years in Germany where he progressed to the role of Siegfried, first singing this role for Opera Kiel. In 2019 he debuted in the role of Der Kaiser in Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

Bradley and his family are back living in Brisbane, once again enjoying Australian beaches and being back with family. He describes work prospects as quite gloomy because opera companies both in Australia and internationally are unable to finalise or even discuss future engagements. Bradley is doing some online coaching to help pay bills.

Bradley is covering the role of Siegfried in the Brisbane *Ring*.

## HELENA DIX



The Society also supported the Wagnerian debut of dramatic soprano Helena Dix, as Elsa von Brabant in Melbourne Opera's 2017 production of *Lohengrin*. She has been back to Melbourne every year, performing lead roles for Melbourne Opera. *Macbeth* is scheduled later this year, though it is uncertain whether it will be performed.

Helena has had a very tough time, as she contracted COVID-19 in London where she lives. She describes her time in intensive care as terrifying, as she developed a large blood clot on her lung. When she first returned home, she felt as if she had been run over by a bus and was unable to sing two-bar phrases. She is recuperating slowly and steadily. In her most recent communication, Helena says she is now able to sing four-bar phrases and to walk her dog.

There is total uncertainty with managers and opera companies about her contracts later this year. All work is cancelled until at least August. She is meant to be covering Devereux at The Met but, she says, with New York City so afflicted with the pandemic, she is uncertain as to whether she would even want to go even in the unlikely event it will be performed. Later in the year her debut as Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* is scheduled at Seattle Opera.

'High notes' is Helena's signature sign-off phrase. We all wish her a full recovery.

## A FINAL COMMENT

The current economic uncertainty for opera singers is much greater than for many professions. They need to travel for work, often internationally. More than most, they will be suffering from lost opportunities. The common thread of their stories is the uncertainty of the

plans of opera companies with coronavirus restrictions.

Opera companies will also have to be very mindful of the health and safety of their orchestras. The pit environment is contrary to social distancing practices. Patrons also will be wary of

attending theatres. It is not possible to socially distance in theatres, unless there are far fewer seats sold, which would affect viability.

The art form we all love, opera, will be one of the last to return, as it will be a long time before crowds can

return. We have been spoiled in isolation with so many streamed performances, including from the world's best opera houses. However, nothing compares with the sheer thrill of live performance!

~ Susan Cumming

# A PARSIFAL EXPERIENCE

My early opera experiences in Brisbane were almost entirely in the popular Italian repertoire with the occasional French experience. In the early 1990s, Brisbane was pretty much a Wagner-free zone and the length and scope of his music dramas were difficult for someone new to Wagner. In 1995, the Brisbane Biennial announced it was presenting a concert version of *Parsifal* and initially I did not intend to attend, being totally unfamiliar with the opera and Wagner's music in general.

However, a flyer arrived written by Jennifer McGregor, who was performing Cunegonde in *Candide*, urging support for the Festival and the premiere performance of *Parsifal* in Brisbane. Influenced by this I booked tickets and took my place in the Brisbane Concert Hall for the sole performance on 27 May 1995. A late change to the cast saw Isolde Elchlepp singing Kundry.

There were no surtitles, but a full

libretto was provided. I attempted to follow the libretto for most of the first act, but tired of it and, having read the plot synopsis, just sat back and enjoyed the performance. It was all very different from my Italian experiences, but intriguing. There was some powerful singing with a big sound from the large orchestra.

Donald McIntyre was impressive as Gurnamanz, as was James Maddalenna as Amfortas. The small but important role of Titurel was sung by Brisbane local Donald Shanks in fine voice. The large chorus for the revelation of the Grail was exciting. There was strong applause at the end of the first act and we went to the long meal break.

The second act began and after the flower maidens there was some amazing singing from Franz Mazura as Klingsor and Isolde Elchlepp. At this stage I knew I was experiencing something completely new. I had never heard bass and soprano voices like this, such power rising over the large

orchestra. Then, Arley Reece as Parsifal sang with Kundry and I was so astonished at their performance that I almost had to remind myself to breathe.

After the dramatic climax, the music died down and I wondered if it was only me who was totally intoxicated with the performance. There was a short moment of silence, then this incredible roar rang out from the auditorium and suddenly we were all on our feet. In all my opera-going to that time, I had never heard such a reception. The ovation seemed to last forever.

After that, the third act seemed a little tame and with virtually no more singing by the talented Isolde Elchlepp a little anti-climactic.

Several *Parsifals* later, I do now have more appreciation for the whole opera. Needless to say, this experience turned me and my partner into ardent Wagnerphiles, seeking out performances here and overseas.

~ John Elliott

## Useful links for musical entertainment in these difficult times

- <https://bachtrack.com/search/events/medium=2>
- <https://www.acmi.net.au/ideas/acmi-at-home/>
- <https://www.metopera.org/user-information/nightly-met-opera-streams/>
- <https://www.berlinerphilharmoniker.de/en/titelgeschichten/20192020/digital-concert-hall/>
- [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=mso+live](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=mso+live)
- <https://www.radiotimes.com/news/tv/2020-04-03/free-national-theatre/>
- Digital Concert Hall: <http://melbournedigitalconcerthall.com/> established to support performers during these difficult times, costs about \$24 per concert performance.

Also, look for these archival performance streamings:

- Deutsche Oper Berlin. All performances are accessible from their home page
- OperaVision provides free live and archival video streaming of opera performances from all over Europe, in venues large and small. For more info, and to add your email address to their email list visit <https://operavision.eu>
- Copenhagen Ring by Kasper Holten. Konglige Theater (Danish page only)
- YouTube has many offerings, including entertaining listening from WSNY's own library of programs and interviews
- Opera America: Something for everyone, plus their 2020 Opera Conference sessions are streamed: <https://operaamerica.org/applications/schedule/index.aspx>

## 2020 Queen's Birthday Honours

Congratulations to two colleagues well known to the Society who were awarded Honours. David Kram presented to members in 2018 and Peter Tregear last year. Those of us fortunate enough to experience Peter's *Jonny Strikes Up* production last October will remember it with a smile. The Australian premiere of Ernst Krenek's 1926 opera in the Weimar tradition was a delightful blend of cabaret, jazz and theatre.

### DR DAVID IAN KRAM AM

For significant service to the performing arts, to opera and chamber choirs, and to education.

### DR PETER TREGEAR OAM

For service to music education, and to professional organisations.

# Whispering Woodbird

COMPILED BY  
STAN O'LOUGHLIN



## Not a good year for opera

Apart from all the disappointments here, with the cancellation of *Lohengrin*, and associated entertainment, and *Rheingold*, the whole world of opera has been turned upside down by the COVID-9 pandemic. The Metropolitan, Royal Opera, and most of Europe are not presenting any live performances. Watching and listening live seems the only option (see Page 11).

## Deutsche Oper Berlin closed for 2020

Deutsche Oper Berlin team expressed deep regret over the cancellation of their May and June events, which were to include the hotly anticipated launch of the *Ring of the Nibelung Cycle*, conducted and directed by the formidable duo of Donald Runnicles and Stefan Herheim. Notification of a new date will eventually be provided.

The Bayreuth Festival has been cancelled and the new *Ring* has been postponed to 2022. There are many reasons inherent in the system, mostly because of the coronavirus pandemic.

For example, a poorly ventilated, aisle-free festival hall, in which a group of youngsters from 60 upwards squeezes onto narrow wooden seats and immediately the lights go out there is coughing from tuxedo jackets and stoles. And when it rains, because of the lack of foyers, there is crowding and jostling in tight quarters. The orchestra, meanwhile, is crouched in a hidden ditch close to each other, mostly experienced and therefore mostly not very young musicians, not necessarily fully clothed.

In Bayreuth, hopefully the normal schedule will run, with a new *Dutchman* in the summer of 2021; this year's *Ring* singers will be required elsewhere in May and June 2021 and will also have to earn back any money they have just lost. So we will have to wait two years until we experience a new *Ring* from Valentin Schwarz.

## Katharina Wagner stands aside

For the time being, the Bayreuth Festival has to do without its boss. The festival announced on Monday

April 27 that Katharina Wagner was "long-term ill" and would not be able to carry out her post as director of the Wagner Festival "until further notice". The former commercial managing director, Heinz-Dieter Sense, is to represent Wagner temporarily.

"In order to ensure the business viability and the operation of Bayreuther Festspiele GmbH", Sense had been appointed as the third managing director by the board of directors and the shareholders' meeting.

How long the 41-year-old Wagner will be out is unclear. "Until further notice," said a spokesman when asked. "The employees of the Bayreuth Festival sincerely wish Ms Wagner a speedy recovery, lots of strength and an early recovery," said the Festival announcement.

The great-granddaughter of Richard Wagner and daughter of the long-time festival director Wolfgang Wagner had taken over the festival management in 2008 together with her half-sister Eva Wagner-Pasquier, and since 2015 she has been the sole boss on the Green Hill. It was only in November 2019 that she extended her contract until 2025.

So far, 2020 has been anything but a good one for Wagner. First, due to the spread of the coronavirus, she had to cancel her long-planned *Lohengrin* premiere in Barcelona. A few weeks later it became clear that the festival on the Green Hill cannot take place this year because of the pandemic.

## Miriam Gordon-Stewart in operatic experiment

Australian Miriam Gordon-Stewart, who you will remember as a wonderful Sieglinde in the Melbourne *Ring*, is artistic director of the Victory Hall opera Company in Charlottesville USA, and has embarked on a novel project.

Alek Lev understands that he's not exactly a member of the deaf family, but he feels comfortable enough calling himself an 'in-law'. As a student at Wesleyan University, he took a sign-language class on a whim and subsequently dated a deaf person. Over the past two decades, the writer, director, actor and American

Sign Language interpreter has largely worked in the deaf community on films and stage productions.

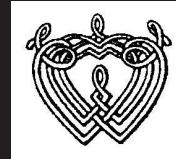
"As someone who is fluent in sign language and has done this for such a long time, just seeing people sign onstage isn't particularly thrilling now," Lev says. "It needs to be thrilling for some other reason."

One such reason arose in 2018, when Miriam Gordon-Stewart and Brenda Patterson of the boundary-pushing Victory Hall Opera in Charlottesville pitched Lev on a production of Francis Poulenc's 1957 opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites* but with deaf performers.

We shall report the result of this novel experiment in due course.

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