



# wagner news

No: 212 January 2014

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Winners of the 2013 Wagner Society Singing Competition. (See: page 38)

Left to right: Catrin Aur, Sir John Tomlinson, Victoria Stanyon, Paul Carey-Jones

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## EDITOR'S NOTE



*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

In this issue we celebrate the profoundly creative influence of Patrice Chéreau upon the development of opera with his direction of the Centenary *Ring* at Bayreuth from 1976 to 1980. We have received tributes from people who worked with Chéreau on this production, both as performers and colleagues as well as from others he inspired to enhance their appreciation and understanding of Wagner's art.

First among those who were at the centre of the Chéreau project is Dame Gwyneth Jones who performed the role of Brünnhilde throughout its five year run. She tells us that she was privileged to work with him, an experience which she describes as “wonderfully inspiring. We understood each other from the first moment.”

Sir Donald McIntyre sang Wotan and recalls how it took three years for the changes to the sets to be made which Chéreau required. “Only then was the greatness of the production discovered. With a production like this an audience becomes aware of the greatness of Wagner's works.”

Directing the TV recording, Brian Large found working at close quarters with Chéreau to be an unforgettable experience. “He was a giant who worked vigorously to join music and drama with beauty and purpose.” Humphrey Burton, responsible for the BBC's screening of this history-making recording, writes: “we would never have transmitted the series had it not been for the magisterial quality of Chéreau's vision. Chéreau and his team transformed opera theatre for ever.”

Keith Warner has directed nine of Wagner's works, including *Lohengrin* at Bayreuth and *The Ring* in Tokyo as well as at the Royal Opera House. He describes Chéreau as a game-changer, thanks to whom “we weren't any longer sitting in an opera house to listen to voices; we were there to witness the full complexity of the human condition.”

Author of the Royal Opera House book *The Power of the Ring* and series editor of the Overture/ENO opera guides, Gary Kahn describes the astonishing contrast of audience reactions which he witnessed at Bayreuth during the first and the last years of the Chéreau *Ring*.

These and a dozen more authors illustrate in these pages the story of how, in the words of Heath Lee, “the man and the production became mythological in our time.”

*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*  
**HOMAGE TO PATRICE CHÉREAU**  
Dame Gwyneth Jones



1974 was the year of the three Brünnhildes in Bayreuth, when I sang Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung* for the first time, after which Wolfgang Wagner invited me to be the Brünnhilde in the Centenary *Ring* in 1976. He also decided to bring *The Ring* back in 1975 (which normally would have been a year without a *Ring*) in order to give me the opportunity to sing all three Brünnhildes before the new production. This was when I first met Patrice Chéreau, who came with his entire team to Bayreuth in 1975 to see Wolfgang Wagner's production of *The Ring*.

After the performance of *Die Walküre* there was a premiere party, during which Wolfgang Wagner came to my table and asked me to go with him to meet Chéreau and his team, who were sitting like outcasts at a table far away from the other guests. I will never forget the looks of sheer horror and disbelief on the faces of the elegant premier guests watching us cross the room. That I would actually go and sit with “those” people, who were dressed in jeans and had apparently been sitting in the front row of the Festspielhaus and had actually dared to put their feet up on to the “Deckel” (the cover to the orchestra pit) during the performance!

People tend to forget that originally it had been announced that Peter Stein and Klaus Michael Grüber would direct the Centenary *Ring*; but there were problems and they backed out and were snapped up immediately by Rolf Liebermann, Director of the Paris

Opera. This became the ill-fated *Ring*, which Sir Georg Solti conducted and which discontinued after the disastrous *Die Walküre*. I actually stepped in at the last moment to sing Brünnhilde in this performance, an unforgettable experience! I think that Bayreuth was incredibly lucky that they got Patrice Chéreau to do *The Ring* in Bayreuth instead, because Stein and Grüber planned to do *The Ring* as four separate operas which had no connection with each other.

The rehearsals for the Centenary *Ring* started in May; but because the invitation had been late, my calendar was already very full and I only had 5 days free in May between performances in Munich, Vienna and Hamburg, so the second cast started rehearsing *Götterdämmerung* first. When I arrived for my first rehearsal with Patrice, he seemed to be extremely nervous; but after a little while he started to relax and told me that he had had a lot of resistance from the other Brünnhilde who disagreed with all his wishes and he was afraid that I might be even more difficult.

We understood each other from the first moment and working with him was a wonderfully inspiring experience. I had to be rather hard with him about smoking during the rehearsals because he was a chain smoker and always came much too close to me with his cigarette. He was also constantly biting his fingernails because of his incredible concentration whilst working. He worked with great intensity in a gentle, loving, persuasive manner. His understanding of the text was excellent and he had a wonderful sense of humour. I remember so well how he asked me to back away with tremendous fear in Siegfried Act III, when I sang “*Nahe mir nicht mit der wütenden Nähe*” (approach me not with your furious nearness) in saying “Isn’t it wonderful how scared she is of him and he is just sitting peacefully on the floor looking at you”.

In the first year of the Centenary *Ring*, Brünnhilde’s Rock looked like the Matterhorn and was quite tricky to climb up and down. It had a very narrow space for me to be put to sleep and wake up on and one had to be quite an athlete to cope with this. It was also planned that I would have a live horse “Grane”; but this had to be scrapped because it refused to walk and caused all sorts of problems.

The vehemence of the protests and booing of the public, during and at the end of the performances, were really quite unbelievable and surpassed by far the scandal which I had witnessed at the performances of Götz Friedrich’s production of *Tannhäuser* in 1972. People were even screaming during the performance because they were so shocked by the violence shown when Siegmund was killed and other such incidents. In the past the brutality was hidden. The Gods were magnificently regal in their beautiful leather costumes and golden wigs, feelings were contained and the movement of the singers was rather static and grand, so one was unaware of the evil deeds which were being committed, but Patrice now exposed the other, darker side of their characters: the greed and ruthlessness. It was very interesting to see that the public were now carrying texts in their hands and heated discussions were taking place during the intervals and also afterwards in the restaurants.

At the end of the first year of the Chéreau/Boulez *Ring* when I sang three cycles, Patrice and I flew together on a small aeroplane from Bayreuth to Frankfurt to catch our connections home. It was a very turbulent flight and we were both feeling quite sick. I remember Patrice laughing and saying “This is Bayreuth’s last vengeance!” I was so totally exhausted by the impact of such negative emotions that I decided to cancel my planned holiday and just stay at home peacefully as I simply couldn’t face seeing people for a while.

In the second year of the Centenary *Ring* we discovered that we had the beautiful new Böcklin’s “Isle of the Dead” set to work on, which was a great improvement upon the

Matterhorn. Chéreau worked as intensely as ever during the rehearsals and then on the morning of the 20th August 1977 I received a telephone call from the Festspielhaus telling me that René Kollo had broken his foot whilst having a couple of days sailing holiday between the *Ring* cycles and would be unable to act the part of Siegfried, so he would sing behind the set, with his foot in plaster, whilst Chéreau would act for him. I was extremely nervous about this, as the last scene of Siegfried is very exposed, so I decided to go to the Festspielhaus to watch the beginning of the performance from the side of the stage.



When Patrice entered the stage there were shouts and screams from the public who tried to stop the performance, but after a while they calmed down and I went for a long walk in the nearby woods looking for mushrooms (my favourite pastime in Bayreuth) to try to calm my nerves. It was a unique and wonderful experience performing with Patrice. He didn't move his lips; but his sensitive face and body movements were so expressive that it didn't seem at all important that the voice was coming from somewhere else. His eyes spoke the text to me and the atmosphere we created was simply magic.

The performance was a triumph for Patrice and it put an end to the rumour that he didn't understand German or know the text. It was quite obvious that he knew every single word. Not only that, he was involved in all the performances throughout the entire summer. One never knew if you would find him crawling around the stage to make sure that the steam was functioning properly, or mingled in the chorus. One evening, whilst taking the Ring from the finger of the dead Siegfried who was being carried off, I suddenly realised that Patrice was one of the men carrying him.



We managed to persuade Patrice to buy a dinner jacket for the curtain calls in which he looked very elegant; but this didn't deter the public from their incredible protests. One noticed however that, slowly, more and more people were changing their minds and in fact at the end of the last performance of *Götterdämmerung* in 1980 there was 1½ hours of applause which continued for another 20 minutes, although the artists no longer appeared.



I am extremely grateful that I was privileged to work with Patrice and to have him as one of my dearest friends. He made his dedication and love for his work visible to us and has left us a wealth of beauty in the many films and productions which was his life's work. It is truly a blessing that so many of his fantastic products are captured on film, as is The Bayreuth Centenary *Ring*, which I treasure. I am deeply saddened that he had to leave us too soon and I will miss him dreadfully; but he will always remain alive in my heart.

*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

## PATRICE NEVER STOPPED ASKING QUESTIONS

Sir Donald McIntyre



I first met Patrice Chéreau in Bayreuth one year before he worked on his 1976 *Ring* production. That meeting was a most memorable occasion for me. Soon I discovered he had a completely different attitude to nearly every other producer I had ever come across.

As soon as we were introduced he asked me where we could talk without being disturbed. I made several suggestions, such as a small rehearsal room at the back of the stage or a quiet restaurant five minutes walk away with a cosy garden. We had coffee there. But when he saw the beautiful surrounding area, he decided a walk through the woods would be more helpful. We walked for at least two hours in the cool air under the trees.

I soon discovered that Patrice, like Wagner, was most interested in asking questions. He encouraged me to ask questions as well. At the end of our long walk, he suddenly asked me, “How would you produce the *Ring* if you were doing it?” I was flabbergasted and couldn’t think of anything to say. But he persisted, and he wanted an answer. He reminded me that I had already sung Wotan in a few productions, and I should know something about the *Ring* cycle: “Go home and ponder over it!”

I went back to Haus Siegfried, where I was staying with my family. Winifred Wagner was my landlady. When I told her that I had been with Patrice Chéreau she stated that he was a Communist. I doubted that, but instead of being sidetracked by delving into her convictions I decided to keep my eyes and ears open. In any case, I needed time to think over how I would produce the *Ring*. Next day I had 20 minutes or so with Patrice. I told him that, for me, the most important thing was that an audience could see and hear easily what was happening on stage. Chéreau put it in a nutshell: “The goings-on should be put into the audience’s lap, and not hidden from them.”

In almost all productions I had witnessed until then I had seldom been able to see the action and hear the singing over the orchestra. Sets and singers were usually too far back on the stage, or too darkly lit. Sets were often not acoustically good, as they were often covered with soft materials like felt, which failed to resonate the sound. I think Patrice was horrified when he heard what I said. He told me that the sets were mostly already built, but that he would talk to Wolfgang Wagner to see what could be done.

The next year, before rehearsals commenced, Chéreau told me that he had tried to make alterations, but had only got his way on some things. Wolfgang had told him how much it would cost to throw everything away and start rebuilding the sets again. It was, I think, not until the third year of his *Ring* production that Patrice managed to get his way. Only then was the greatness of the production discovered. When you can see and hear it, you can feel and taste it, too. With a production like this an audience becomes aware of the greatness of Wagner's works.

The third-year staging brought the revelation. As soon as I arrived in Bayreuth, I went straight to the canteen, which is the meeting point for everyone working at Bayreuth. I saw Patrice there and he saw me. He rushed past me, calling me to follow him. I ran hard, but he beat me to the stage and was waiting for me as I arrived. Patrice was standing in front of a huge horseshoe-shaped sound shell that reached to both wings of the stage. It replaced the Matterhorn of the previous two years. One short glimpse at the sound shell convinced me that this year the *Ring* set would be revealed as a masterpiece, and this is exactly how it turned out. In my opinion, asking questions is far more effective than dictating. Even in the theatre, democracy works better. Patrice Chéreau and Wolfgang Wagner were great leaders of this democracy.



Recently I was thrilled when Chéreau asked me to participate in his new production of *Elektra* at Aix-en-Provence. That production was scheduled to go on to La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera, Helsinki, Berlin, and Madrid. I hope that these performances will still take place.



## WITH MESMERIZING FORCE HE GAVE EVERYTHING HE HAD

Brian Large



I first met Patrice Chéreau in Bayreuth in the Spring of 1976 when he was preparing Wagner's epic *Ring* Cycle, but it was only in the Summer of 1978 that discussions to televise his Centenary *Ring* production brought us closer together. The Premiere in 1976 became one of the biggest controversies in the history of opera, but nonetheless, it made a statement even though it was clearly a work in progress.

Encouraged by Wolfgang Wagner and Pierre Boulez to rethink certain scenes, Chéreau spent the next two summers developing his concept and it was only in the Spring of 1979 that funding from Bayerischer Rundfunk and Unitel, the Munich-based production company, was found to proceed with capturing, not the entire *Ring*, but by way of experiment, *Götterdämmerung*.

Working at close quarters with Chéreau was an unforgettable experience. The man's energy was endless, his attention to detail amazing. At 35 this slim, chain-smoking, witty French man worked like a demon. He was without a doubt a workaholic and a force of nature. He was a perfectionist, using every moment to fine-tune details in a spellbinding way, urging his singers to delve deeper into their roles and questioning and re-questioning the meaning of his own concept.

By the time the sessions ended in July 1979 we realised that the so-called "experiment" was no longer an experiment but the real thing: a remarkable, stunningly beautiful and powerful document. With funding now guaranteed for us to continue, we returned to Bayreuth in June 1980 to face the challenge of *Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and a remake of the *Götterdämmerung* Gibichung scene which we had failed to complete the year before because of a singer's indisposition. Now the pressure was on all of us. The pace became intense. Chéreau was like a man possessed.

The rehearsal sessions were long and tiring and Chéreau worked with a kind of dramatic incisiveness and precision that I had never witnessed before. With mesmerizing force, he gave everything he had in his quest for excellence, and in return he expected the level of commitment of everyone around him – singers and television technicians – to equal his own input. His deep understanding of the *Ring* text and his musicality were inspiring. Working with him touched a nerve in me and allowed me as a director to become richer for the unforgettable experience and pleasure of knowing him.

Although the Wagner family invited him to stage new productions of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, he declined and never returned to Bayreuth. He was a giant who worked vigorously to join music and drama with beauty and purpose. His *Ring*, the first ever to be televised, is a unique and lasting testimony to the genius that Patrice Chéreau was.

*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

## THE MOST INFLUENTIAL DIRECTOR OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Humphrey Burton**

I met Patrice Chéreau only once, when I went over to the Paris Opera to see his excoriating production of *Lulu* in advance of the live relay on BBC 2. Appropriately it was Eva Wagner, a great champion, who introduced me. A few years later the BBC made history by screening her great grandfather's *Ring* Cycle, as re-thought by Chéreau, in ten weekly episodes and in early evening prime time slots. The change of locales from Valhalla to Nibelheim was compared to the *Downton Abbey* of its day, *The Ring*, it was said, had been transformed into an operatic *Upstairs and Downstairs*!

My TV director colleague Brian Large did a tremendous job in capturing the stage atmosphere on the small two-dimensional screen, but we would never have transmitted the series had it not been for the magisterial quality of Chéreau's vision. The incongruities in his concept can be summed up in the image I recall to this day: Hagen in a double-breasted business suit carrying a spear with which to despatch Siegfried.

Chéreau and his designer team transformed opera theatre for ever and his dramatic training and communicative power turned opera singers into real people. Who will ever forget the love scene between Jeannine Altmeyer and Peter Hofmann in Act I of *Die Walküre*? Not even Luchino Visconti could match Chéreau's visionary power in an opera house. I would go so far as to suggest that he was the most influential director of the 20th Century.

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## WHY CHÉREAU'S PRODUCTION RANG SO MANY BELLS

**Richard Carter**

There are two obvious courses in producing any Wagner opera: stick to his original concept or reinterpret the whole thing. Rigid traditionalists argue that only the first course is right, whilst others are more open to the idea that, since so much has changed since Wagner's time, new ideas are needed

The first productions of *The Ring* that I saw (the ENO Koltai cycle and the ROH Friedrich/Svoboda version in the 1970s) stuck relatively closely to the original concept so that the Chéreau production came as a complete surprise – the more so as it seemed instantly and intuitively 'right'. Re-imagining the gods as Victorian high capitalists and the Rhine as a hydroelectric plant, set not in prehistory but contemporaneously with Wagner's writing of the *Ring* and drawing on Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* was a stroke of genius, precisely because the gods in Wagner's version behave towards the mortals in exactly the same arrogant, exploitative way as the greedy capitalists did towards their workers - exactly as they do today, in Britain at least.

I think that's why Chéreau's production rang so many bells then, and why so many since have failed. Keith Warner's recent attempt at a unity, with its little red lines and that damned propeller failed. So there are two central requirements of any reinterpretation of *The Ring*: a coherent overall concept, and one that is comprehensible to the viewer. Just as Warner's didn't seem to have either, Chéreau's had both – and in spades. Bravo, Patrice Chéreau!

*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

## HERE TO STAY

Keith Warner

The death of the great Patrice Chéreau marks the end of an era. He was part of a determined new movement to put drama back into the centre of opera. Along with Kupfer, Herz, Friedrich, Ponnelle and Pountney he took the art form, kicking and screaming, away from the bewigged and bejewelled school of production avoidance into a dynamically rich hyper-theatrical world where text, vocalisation, histrionics and cultural theory contributed equally to the 'event'.

It was no accident that this found its focus in his work on Wagner's *Ring* because this, of course, was also the composer's true aim. And so fortunate for both him and us that television and video were able to bring his work into most of our lives. Any young director at the time who cared about the opera art form would have been affected by his uncompromising adherence to the basic Wagnerian principles of music drama. What seemed to many to be an outrage was in fact the very same outrage that Wagner advocated. That's why the production was ultimately so strong.

Chéreau's contribution was to make acting in opera the central business, and his inordinate skill was to focus an audience's attention so that they were forced to read the meaning of his production in a singer's physical and psychological performance. He was a game-changer. Not all of the performers of that milestone *Ring* were up to the task but those who were showed us, through him, a breathtaking new way. We weren't any longer sitting in an opera house to listen to voices; we were there to witness the full complexity of the human condition.

Everything any director worthy of the name has done since: every move, every psychological character trope made manifest by a singing actor, has been bobbed along by the ripples that he set in motion in that summer of 1976. He was an extraordinary talent and a universal influence and inspiration to both practitioners and purveyors alike – a very rare thing in the world of opera.

What we mustn't forget at the close of his era, an era in which he changed so much through just one or two productions (the Paris *Lulu* must not be forgotten), is that his greatest work was almost universally vilified and opposed at first, by press and public, by singers, conductors and opera gurus alike. Surely we as Wagnerians owe him, at the end of his too brief contribution, a determination to put paid to such philistine, ignorant attitudes and finally go with or at least accept his revolution rather than still continue to oppose it. Chéreau is here to stay. Opera will never now turn back to the badly lit days of stand and sing.

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## UNCOVERING DORMANT ASPECTS OF THE WORK

Meirion Bowen

Chéreau's approach to staging of the *Ring* was thoroughly in keeping with the innovatory spirit of the work. The essence of music theatre is in re-creation afresh, not novelty for its own sake that is, but seeking to uncover aspects of a work that had lain dormant.

## **THE *RING* WHICH CHANGED THE COURSE OF OPERA PRODUCTION**

**Barry Millington**

Patrice Chéreau's staging of the *Ring* for the 1976 Bayreuth Centenary Festival was revolutionary in two ways. First, he attempted and successfully achieved a daring interplay of the mythological and contemporary planes on which the work is constructed. Chéreau's production unerringly captured the ideological thrust of Wagner's tetralogy: the degradation of love and of humanity's finer instincts in a modern age dominated by industrial innovation, materialism and profit-making. Thus the curtain went up on Scene 1 of *Das Rheingold* not on the traditional flowing waters of the Rhine but on a hydro-electric dam (rusty and disused by the end of *Götterdämmerung* as the Rhine, deprived of its gold, had dried up). Siegfried's forging of the sword was later to be assisted by a steam hammer.

The second revolution brought about by Chéreau was in the degree of naturalism he brought to the acting style (as opposed to the non-naturalistic modes of production evident elsewhere in the staging). His staging of the incestuous love scene of *Die Walküre*, for example, with Peter Hofmann and Jeannine Altmeyer as the stunningly attractive libidinous twins, was sexually charged to a degree not previously experienced on the opera stage. Since then new generations of directors have built on this advance with the result that audiences have come to expect dramatic conviction as well as vocal expertise from casts.

The theatricality of Chéreau's production was of an astonishingly high order: scene after scene has imprinted itself on the memory. In *Die Walküre*, in addition to the thrillingly erotic love duet, there was the ineffably tender scene of Brünnhilde (Gwyneth Jones) kneeling in front of Wotan (Donald McIntyre) before their contretemps in Act II, the unforgettable image of Wotan as he looks into his own soul, whispering his innermost thoughts to his reflection in a full-length drawing-room mirror, and his deeply moving embrace of the son he has just caused to be killed. Heinz Zednik's Mime was a virtuoso comic performance. Neurotic, terrified, but pathetically ambitious, he resembled a Daumier caricature. In a gloriously comic climax to Act I he mounted his ladder, with a wooden cooking spoon as sceptre, draped himself in a red, quasi-monarchical robe and crowned himself with his cooking pot. Shuffling and slinking round the stage, with upward palms and histrionic gesticulations, this Mime registered the anti-Semitic undertow of Wagner's characterization long before it was generally recognized.

Chéreau's own considerable acting skills were drawn upon in this production on one occasion in 1977 when René Kollo, playing Siegfried, broke his leg and was obliged to sing his part from the wings. Chéreau acted the role on stage, a performance that few who witnessed it will forget. By the time the production was filmed at the end of its run in 1980 its status was already assured. When the DVD was screened at the Barbican in May in the presence of Dame Gwyneth Jones, who starred as the Brünnhilde, many marvelled at how fresh and undated the production still seemed more than three decades later.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Patrice Chéreau's staging of the Bayreuth *Ring* changed the course of opera production. By any standards it was a landmark production, but looking back at it in a historical perspective it is possible to see that, for directors, singers and audiences alike, things would never be the same again.

*With thanks to Opera magazine and The Guardian*

## **BAYREUTH 1976 AND BAYREUTH 1980**

**Gary Kahn**

Perhaps one of the most astonishing features of Patrice Chéreau's Centenary *Ring* in Bayreuth was how the audience's reaction to it changed so radically during the five years of its run. The outrage with which it was initially greeted in 1976 by many regulars at the Festival was, even by the standards of Bayreuth, emotionally charged almost beyond belief. Rumour had it that a death threat had been sent to Chéreau if he dared take a curtain call at the end of one of those first cycles, and a not altogether fanciful suggestion spread through town that ticket-holders might be searched for firearms before entering the auditorium. In the event, the most violent physical expression of disapproval to occur was an elderly lady vigorously hitting with an umbrella two people behind her whose cheering she felt threatened to drown out her own booing at the end of the first *Rheingold*. Passions ran high.

Yet by 1980 and its final performances, the work was being near-universally recognised as a masterpiece. At the Festspielhaus, people spent large parts of the intervals bemoaning its imminent going and insisting on how much they had admired it from the very start. It had attained classic status. At the end of the last *Götterdämmerung* in 1980, the silence that hung in the air after the final bar faded, with the chorus motionless and staring out at us in the auditorium, seemed to last forever. When the applause did eventually begin, it went on for over an hour and a half, breaking every one of the records for length of applause that Bayreuth (so very typically) keeps and lasting longer than the entire third act of *Götterdämmerung* itself.

How wonderful it is that, thanks to television broadcasts, VHS and DVD, Chéreau's revelatory work is able to enthral and enrich audiences beyond those five seasons in Bayreuth.

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## **DAME GWYNETH: A RARE ABILITY**

**Robert Fisher**

My view is that the true recent masters of the *Ring* are Otto Schenk and Stephen Wadsworth. I expect that in time others who understand Wagner well will produce the work as Wagner wrote it.

Many knowledgeable Wagnerians doubtless disagree with me. After the last year of Chéreau's production, Dame Gwyneth Jones was at San Francisco Opera and I had the happy opportunity to speak with her, asking if she had not been upset with Chéreau's staging. I do not recall her exact words, but it was clear that she had few, if any, reservations. Her judgment did not change one bit my view that she is near the top in all history of those very few who mysteriously are able to communicate the emotion that the composer sought: it is a rare ability, combining the mastery of singing, acting and something else. I wonder what Stewart Spencer's thoughts might be about all of this.

## THE EPIC GRANDEUR OF OPERA WITH THE MASS APPEAL OF CINEMA

Heath Lees

My appreciation of Wagner was already well in place before the Chéreau *Ring* arrived. Yet I could hardly be called a ‘seasoned Wagnerian’ because, until the moment when I confronted this production (or rather, when it confronted me) I had only a tiny grasp of what Wagner opera could be. Chéreau changed that. With a single stroke he magnified to the *n*th degree my vision of *The Ring*, of Wagner opera, and of musical theatre in general.

After nearly forty years, what remains in the mind from such an unforgettable experience? Two things principally:

- i) The crashing, chronological gear-changes that Chéreau forced upon his audience every time they came back to the theatre during the cycle, and
- ii) The jubilant conviction that at last, someone had wrenched opera from the hands of the élite (the “bored Italian princes” that Wagner scorned in *Opera and Drama*) and restored it firmly to the domain of Everyman: the ordinary opera-lover and theatre-goer.

To call Chéreau’s time-travel “gear-changing” is to share in the production’s obsession with self-accelerating technology: a massive, soul-less, world-embracing technology that had begun even before Wagner’s age, but which grew inexorably through the 19th Century. In the hands of evil and short-sighted humans it was set on a path towards universal oppression and by the dawn of the 20th Century it was already threatening to become self-consuming and world-destructive.

At the start, as the creepy *Rheingold* world of cogs and cranks gave way to the ambivalent menace of fire in *Walküre*, and steam-driven pistons in *Siegfried*, we found ourselves finally in a world whose technological obverse – the inevitable flight into soul-lessness – was disguised by a new technology of business contracts and corporate, market-driven conformity that produced, before the final curtain, a mindless Siegfried in a dinner suit.

Since 1976 every director has fed off Chéreau’s vision: his time-travel, his progressive confrontation with the audience, his scrutiny of the 19th Century as “our mythology and our past, containing our dreams”, and his fondness for the Romantic, old-fashioned stage-picture, now shot through with modern images of financial greed, political corruption and psychological manipulation.

My second, most lasting memory of this centennial production was that it freed opera from the longstanding stranglehold of the rich and ‘cultured’ to become a shared art-form for everyone, regardless of background or upbringing. (Wagner himself had dreamed of this.) Chéreau took possession of the huge stage of Bayreuth and joined the epic grandeur of opera with the mass appeal of cinema. Yet, following Wagner (Chéreau always insisted on his loyalty to Wagner’s wishes) he made his singers act every moment, as though they were always on camera, and thus achieved an unprecedented emotional intensity for opera.

Of course the medium and the moment helped enormously since the production was brilliantly filmed for TV and rode the huge, breaking wave of the domestic video market, where it made opera mainstream almost overnight. The Chéreau *Ring* transplanted its cinematic effects effortlessly onto the small screen thanks to frequent close-ups, a certain

two-dimensional flatness in the stage pictures that suited the home TV screen admirably, and a stereo soundtrack that had depth as well as dazzle.

Chéreau's concern for realistic detail produced myriad unforgettable moments: Wotan's violent amputation of Alberich's finger to get at the ring; Sieglinde and Siegmund circling around each other like two wolves about to mate, the moving, 'wounded albatross' effect of Brünnhilde's Act II entry, the blank, downtrodden faces of the passing public who look on the murdered body of Siegfried... And yet there was comedy too. Think of the stand-up-comic's delivery where Mime tells the Wanderer, who has just wandered on, to wander off again. Or the moment when Siegfried blows his horn to call up the dragon, then plays to the audience in the best pantomime tradition, seeking applause for his fine playing as the mechanical monster looms up behind him and everyone wants to shout out "Look behind you!"

Through sheer genius and directorial flair Chéreau conquered the criticism, especially from the German corner that suspected a French 'revenge'. In one of my memorable New Zealand get-togethers some years ago, Sir Donald McIntyre told me of the general amazement when the *sitzprobe* for *Siegfried* came and Heinz Zednik (*Mime*) had fallen ill. Chéreau himself stepped in to speak and act the huge part virtually without a script. Amazing. Like the work itself, the man and the production became mythological in our time. See *A Ring of our Time*, page 52.

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## SOMETHING FOR ALL TIME

Tash Siddiqui

It is indeed the case that Patrice Chéreau's staging of the Bayreuth *Ring* changed the course of opera production – so much so that when I recently saw it again on screen there seemed nothing particularly radical about it. The 'Marxist' socio-political interpretation, the time-bridge between the burgeoning industrialisation of Wagner's 19th century and the late capitalist world of today, the deliberate anachronisms, even that famous hydroelectric dam ... these have all become staples of present-day operatic stagecraft (and of Victorian steampunk, perhaps).

What did strike me with all the force of Donner's hammer-blow however was the realistic acting style which Chéreau coaxed from his cast. The sexy Volsung twins – Peter Hofmann as Siegmund and Jeannine Altmeyer as Sieglinde – who literally can't keep their hands off each other; Donald McIntyre's Wotan, whispering his anguish to his image in the cheval glass; Brünnhilde's entry as Gunther's reluctant bride, a dying albatross. I sometimes wonder whether it was the utterly convincing acting rather than the left-wing interpretation or the settings that really shocked the Bayreuth audience back in 1976. It's still all-too-rare to see such thrilling acting on the operatic stage, and the production does not seem to have dated. Grappling with the ever-timely *actualité* and timelessness of the *Ring*, Chéreau and his designer Richard Peduzzi produced something for all time.

As part of Wagner 200 in Barry Millington's and Mark Eynon's celebration of the Wagner Bicentenary we were treated to a highly entertaining interview with Dame Gwyneth Jones – Chéreau's Brünnhilde, of course – before a *Götterdämmerung* screening. Patrice Chéreau, she said, chain-smoked in the rehearsal room with the singers throughout. Now that, I thought, really does sound like a bygone era.

## **THE 1980 *RING*: A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE, NEVER FORGOTTEN**

**Kevin Stephens**

Stunning stage images, real fire, sublime acting and singing and an interpretation that appealed immensely, what was not to like about the Centenary *Ring* Cycle at Bayreuth? This was the fifth year of the Chéreau *Ring*'s run, with some of its little problems ironed out, the version that was later aired on TV, act by act, by the BBC. For a young *Ring* enthusiast brought up on Solti and Goodall, it was a revelation.

None of this prevented the objectors, eager to hand out pamphlets on every street corner, hating almost everything about it, with special vitriol reserved for Pierre Boulez's conducting and almost equal venom for the political stance of Patrice Chéreau. But for me the *Ring* Cycle was conceived in a revolutionary age and was both an example of the new operatic art that Wagner wanted in a better age and a story about how the aristocratic powers that controlled his world would be overthrown. Or so I had declared in my graduate dissertation about the *Ring* Cycle in the 1960s, also a time of upheaval and social change.

Wagner's politics were hardly revolutionary in the sense that we associate with his contemporary, Karl Marx. He certainly did not think that the working class masses would rise up and overthrow their masters. His rather naïve view of the revolution, at least as outlined in his speech to the Vaterlandsverein on June 16th 1848, was that in the heat of revolution the King of Saxony would voluntarily give up the throne and hand over power to the people who would then, in a gesture of magnanimity, give him back his crown in a form of constitutional monarchy. Perhaps some of this survived in Wotan's surrendering of his own power, albeit under some duress, in the Cycle as we know it.

As we know, the revolution in Dresden (as everywhere in Europe) was overthrown and a new period of reaction set in. So Wagner had to write his revolutionary operatic cycle in a most un-revolutionary world. The ironic result was that this allegory of the overthrow of the powerful in society was watched at Bayreuth by many of the crowned heads and leading political figures of Europe.

The new, more democratic society that Wagner envisaged was not to be, not for a hundred years or so. And yet the miracle is that his works became among the most popular operas of the world, the more revolutionary the more popular. And his Bayreuth Festival, which limped into being in 1876, eventually became a financially secure and independent event attracting audiences from all over the world.

Two world wars and the Nazi interval came and went and once again Bayreuth rose and fulfilled its purpose, but with the shadow of its Nazi past hanging over it. Wieland Wagner's new Bayreuth productions did something to dispel that shadow, but after his death in 1966, brother Wolfgang continued his head-in-the-sand direction of the Festival. So it seemed something of a wonder that this reactionary man had opened the doors of the Festspielhaus to one of the most radical productions ever seen.

Memories of the superb cast abound: Hanna Schwarz as an inspiring Fricka, Matti Salminen as both Fasolt and Hunding, Peter Hofmann and Jeannine Altmeyer as the most passionate Siegmund and Sieglinde I have ever seen, Heinz Zednik as the Mime in Siegfried, Franz Mazura making Gunther into a fully rounded character, Fritz Hübner as both Fafner and Hunding, Altmeyer again as Guttrune and the wonderful Gwendolyn Killebrew as the Götterdämmerung Waltraute. Reigning supreme over it all, the glorious Gwyneth Jones as Brünnhilde and Donald McIntyre in his pomp as Wotan.

A wonderful experience, never forgotten.



## I FORGOT ALL ABOUT WAGNER UNTIL *CHÉREAU* APPEARED

**Martin Graham**

The Chéreau *Ring* had a profound effect on Lizzie and me when it was on the telly in about 1982. (Weekly instalments I think, with an introduction from Humphrey Burton.) We saw *Rheingold* at ROH in the 70s and I remember getting anxious because there was no interval...could I concentrate for 160 minutes? Well I could, and I did. I then forgot all about Wagner until Chéreau appeared.

Although I had been thinking of building a theatre at that time I hadn't a clue what was involved but I was determined that Wagner should appear at Longborough. After Chéreau we went to Glyndebourne to see Mozart. There I paced the dimensions of the old theatre and fed them to an architect...I also measured the frontages of several West End theatres...all usually 14/20m frontage with variable depth.

I wrote to the two Georges: Solti and Christie. The first replied that I must be mad: "stick to Mozart". There's an old country expression by way of response to such injunctions: "let's have some news, not history." Valerie Solti became our Patroness in Chief and has been a terrific support. George Christie replied in a more measured way: "come and see me...I think you need help!" There are those who might place the same interpretation on both responses, but when I met George Christie I knew I had a good friend at court. So we hurled up a little building. We had no idea about pit size or depth, nor rake nor regulations nor anything. The only certainty was *The Ring*.

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## CHÉREAU AS SIEGFRIED

**Andrew Medlicott**

In 1977 Rene Kollo was scheduled to sing Siegfried, but he broke his leg water-skiing in the Baltic between the second and the third cycles. So that the performance could go ahead it was decided that he would sing the role offstage while Chéreau acted it. The local paper called it "a sensation" and it certainly was.

*[Editor: In the November 1977 issue of "Wagner" Andrew Medlicott wrote: "Visually Chéreau was a dream "young" Siegfried who could have stepped straight out of the pages of Arthur Rackham. Dramatically too, he was superb. He is obviously a gifted actor as well as a producer of genius and it was fascinating to see him act out his conception of the role, one which, by making Siegfried half aware of the fact that he is being manipulated, lends greater significance to the role than any other production I have seen. A remarkable and courageous achievement."]*

*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

## **SO MANY NEW THINGS WERE SEEN TO BE POSSIBLE**

**Alan Privett**

Chéreau's influence has been genuinely seminal because the release of new theatrical ideas that seemed remarkable for opera at the time has become embedded in our general consciousness. It seems surprising now to reflect that, as recently as 1976, his dramatic values were seen as innovative on the opera stage. My fascination with Wagner's work has grown through practice. I wasn't any kind of a Wagnerian when Chéreau's *Ring* inspired praise, alarm and controversy, and I got to know the *Ring* through the process of tackling the multiple problems of staging it.

One of the great gifts of a production like Chéreau's is that so many new things were seen to be possible. Theatre and opera now interrelate and cross-fertilise in so many different ways. We now have global access to different narrative traditions and we perceive and understand the context and purpose of narrative with increasingly sophisticated eyes and ears. Wagner might disapprove of modern theatre's constant need for novelty, but he would love its opportunities.

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## **MAKING A WAGNERIAN STILL-POINT OF THE *TODESVERKÜNDIGUNG***

**Keith Richards**

Readers of Wagner News will be well aware that the *Todesverkündigung* scene (Brünnhilde's annunciation of death to Siegmund in Act II of *Die Walküre*) is often noted as the turning point of the whole *Ring* cycle. Special attention must be paid to it by directors, singers and conductors and Patrice Chéreau made it a 'still-point' in the Wagnerian world.

Presumably Chéreau directed Gwyneth Jones and Peter Hofmann in their almost expressionless faces which form the background to their expressionist singing. Everyone remembers her washing him and then binding him in the white winding sheet. In this performance it is implied that even before hearing *Siegmund! Sieh auf mich!* he is aware of the implication of the fatal summons.

Wagner directs: "Siegmund raises his eyes to her" but this kind of contact is eschewed with enormous effect. Peter Hofmann was not particularly praised during the initial Bayreuth run (appreciation came after his recent death) but his performance was ground-breaking. Gwyneth Jones, superb throughout the cycle, is heart-breaking in this scene once, later in the episode, her humanity surfaces.

Looking back over the years I suppose that this staging is a development of the post war style with singers, far apart onstage, singing not to each other but to the world. But it is a development: the *Verkündigung* is given space for the full implication of this wonderful word to take effect. It is an 'annunciation' and so much else which we are permitted for once fully to realise.

*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

## **DVD DOCUMENTARY: THE MAKING OF DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN**

**Roger Lee**

When I ask Wagner enthusiasts how they discovered his work they generally divide into those whose interest was aroused before the 1970s (a proportion of these citing the Solti recording), those whose Wagner epiphany took place when they attended the Reginald Goodall *Rings*, those who watched the Chéreau *Ring* on TV or DVD and those who have discovered Wagner via some other stimulus. It is those who have never seen the Chéreau *Ring* but who may want to find out what the fuss is all about to whose attention it may be worth bringing the still available DVD set.

With those legendary performances from Gwyneth Jones, Donald McIntyre and the rest of the cast, you are of course guaranteed a *Ring* among the best you are likely to see as well as the fact that it ranks among the most historic of productions. I want however to draw attention to the “fifth” disc of the set: that titled: “The Making of *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*”.

This 1983 TV documentary of the first ever filming of *The Ring* in its entirety is introduced by Friedelind Wagner and features contributions from Patrice Chéreau, Gwyneth Jones, Donald McIntyre, Pierre Boulez and Wolfgang Wagner among others. It covers the time the orchestra threatened to strike against Boulez and includes much historical footage from previous Bayreuth productions.

It shows Patrice Chéreau working energetically on stage among the Nibelungs as well as with the then Gwyneth Jones. She was fully aware of what Chéreau was trying to achieve. Quoting Wagner’s advice “*Kinder, schafft Neues!*” (Children: do something new!) she said 30 years ago: “That’s what we are here for in Bayreuth: to make the pieces live, to make them actual, to make them fit into our time. This is a *Ring* of our time”

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## **OPENING THE FLOODGATES OF IMAGINATION**

**Chris and Joyce Argent**

When we watched the Chéreau *Ring* cycle on TV we could see how the traditionalists might well have hated the production. Our first reaction was surprise and yet the images were particularly striking – especially of the Rhinemaidens cavorting below the Rhine dam.

We disliked the caging of the Woodbird as, to us, that represented a contradiction of the idea of a free spirit that warned Siegfried of Mime’s machinations and evil intent as well as presenting the hero, in compensation as it were, with the prospect of a glorious companion. But that apart (a small matter in 16 hours of unadulterated pleasure) it seems that Chéreau opened the floodgates of imagination not only in Wagner’s oeuvre but through the whole world of opera, often to the good, even if sometimes with less than acceptable results – a price that has been well worth the paying.

## A WAGNER CONDUCTOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *THE RING*

Ben Woodward

In 2002 I was working in the USA, a fairly gentle organist's job, after finishing my undergraduate studies at Cambridge. Back then my Wagner knowledge, understanding and appreciation was in its infancy, but each time I acquired a new student I bought the next instalment of the Chéreau *Ring* and watched it avidly. It's easy to mention the opening of *Rheingold* and its complete cinematic quality as being absolutely gripping from the start.

I was always confused about the pendulum in *Walküre* Act II, but it is certainly a burning image from that set. As a musician, it is difficult not to be swept away by Boulez, Gwyneth Jones and Donald McIntyre. The *Leb' wohl* is just incredibly moving and overpowering. It was certainly these films (plus the Solti VPO recording which I regularly listen to as I cycle to rehearsal) that brought me in to this music.

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## A GREAT PRODUCER, BUT NOT THE ONLY ONE

Paul Dawson-Bowling

With his *Ring* Chéreau achieved epochal status, and its best elements were wonderful. The intensity of romantic passion in Act I of *Die Walküre* and the searing psychological drama between the Wotan and Brünnhilde in Act II had the stamp of greatness, especially as realised by Donald McIntyre and Gwyneth Jones. But what of *Siegfried* Act III with Erda bumping around the stage in a sealed sleeping bag? This was bathos, not mythos.

In general, the Chéreau *Ring* was not more revolutionary than certain others. Ruth Berghaus was more mould-breaking, and there were several like her and Chéreau who abandoned any attempt to put Wagner's mythopoeic intentions on stage. Chéreau instead approached *The Ring* with material representations of its metaphors, an approach exemplified by the vast Victorian foundry which suddenly materialised in *Siegfried* Act I. This was a metaphor for Chéreau's Shavian/Marxist slant on Wagner in *The Ring*.

Chéreau had an advantage over Ruth Berghaus and her peers however, because they did not have the luck to be showcased at Bayreuth, where every production has long been made manifest to the world, perhaps now more than ever. More people are reckoned to have seen it on television, followed now by DVD, than had witnessed it throughout its entire history onstage and it was the wide broadcasting of the Chéreau *Ring* which made him so specially influential as a Wagnerian. As far as I know, Chéreau's only other Wagner staging was *Tristan und Isolde* at Milan in 2007 (also available on a DVD) but unlike *The Ring* strangely drab and forgettable. (He makes even Waltraud Meier seem dull).

The Chéreau *Ring*'s wide availability is probably why he is now better remembered and admired than Wieland Wagner, who caused just as much of a rumpus in his day. Wieland Wagner was just as revolutionary, just as opposed to any strait-jacketing literalness, and just as determined to present an intense psychological drama. But whereas even Chéreau for all his greatness lit up different angles of *The Ring*, Wieland Wagner revealed deeper layers. Yes, Chéreau was a great producer but he was not the only one.

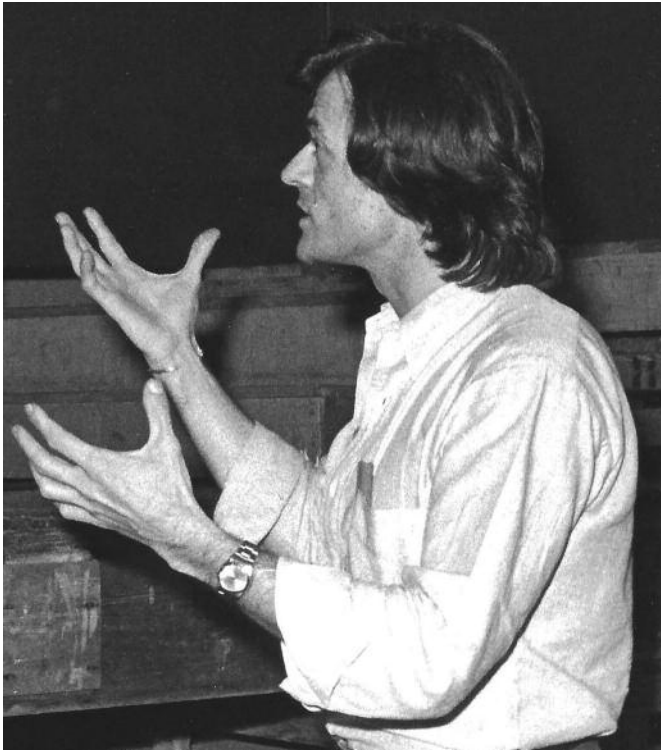
*Patrice Chéreau: 1944 - 2013*

## **THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF WAGNER'S DIRECTIONS ALL THERE**

**Katharine Chasey Turton**

When I first saw Chéreau's *Ring* Cycle from Bayreuth in the eighties, I had only seen two other productions previously, both Centenary cycles. My first was Reginald Goodall's at ENO closely followed by the ROH's Götz Friedrich production conducted by Colin Davis. I enjoyed them both so much and have been a great Wagner fan ever since.

I was so looking forward to seeing Chéreau's creation, but immediately the curtain went up in *Rheingold* I felt great disappointment and dismay. This feeling was with me throughout the cycle. As the years rolled on, however, I am pleased to say that I revised my opinion. The main reason is probably because I now know the work better, having seen several other productions and I also have undertaken several courses on this magnum opus. Apart from the superb singers and Boulez conducting, on re-visiting this production I can see that all the essential elements of Wagner's stage directions are there and I particularly like the interaction between the characters. There are huge dramatic qualities in the performances and it makes for exciting listening and viewing.



# WAGNER IN WESTMINSTER

Katie Barnes

St John's Smith Square: 5<sup>th</sup> September 2013 and 26<sup>th</sup> October 2013

In this bicentenary year, even St John's Smith Square, not generally known as an operatic venue aside from its Baroque festivals, is getting in on the Wagnerian act. The initial offering was a lunchtime concert on 5<sup>th</sup> September of *Die Walküre* Act I, en route for the Nuremberg International Chamber Music Festival. The singers were “on book”, but managed, with minimal means, to suggest the emotional tensions between the doomed trio. Siegmund's anger at the injustice of his life, Hunding's swagger as he took his place at the central music stand between the siblings, Sieglinde's bowed head as she tried to avoid attracting his attention, all created enormous atmosphere. The moment during the love duet when she moved to the vacant central stand, closer to Siegmund, demonstrated eloquently how she was yielding to her feelings for him. I especially liked the way Hunding knew, without looking at her, that Sieglinde was as curious as he about their unknown guest, and used that knowledge to extract information from Siegmund. Perhaps he knew her better than she realised.

Peter Selwyn who worked for three seasons as assistant conductor on the millennial *Ring* at Bayreuth, gave the piano reduction of the score its full value, though inevitably some detail at the beginning and the end of the act was lost. Roland Samm showed enormous promise but wanted finesse, emphasising the angry side of Siegmund's character at the expense of tenderness. His fine, strong voice rang through the church like a call to arms, but although he could turn exquisite lyric phrases, such as *Männern... und Frauen*, the voice could turn blustery. *Winterstürme*, more of an Arctic blast than a paean to Spring, took a toll on the accuracy of some top notes. Gweneth-Ann Jeffers, a more finished performer, was a stupendous Sieglinde, her lovely voice flowering from initial timidity to glorious rapture, especially in her deeply moving *Du bist der Lenz*. On this showing, she has the capacity to sing the complete role, and she should, soon. Simon Wilding, a natural creature of the stage, was superb as Hunding, singing with enormous bite and depth, commanding the platform throughout the whole of his scene. His strutting entrance, and his acute reactions to everything happening around him, said everything about the character.

On 26<sup>th</sup> October Opera Forge presented extracts from *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, very little of which overlapped with the selection presented by the same team at the Royal Festival Hall in May. The programme sheet described their mission as: “simple yet impressive. By applying our skills, acquired and developed over many years of working in theatre and opera, we intend to create an environment for training the next generation of world class Wagnerian opera singers.” The current focus of their endeavours is a production of *The Ring*, which will be developed, rehearsed and performed over the space of two years. Once complete, the cycle will be toured extensively, both nationally and internationally.

Kelvin Lim's brilliant playing not only gave the singers sterling support but was a virtuoso turn in itself, especially when he cut loose on the shimmering Magic Fire music and the Rhine Journey, where the notes sparkled like the river rippling in the sun. William Relton's sensitive semi-stagings, propless apart from Nothung and Wotan's spear, were fresh, original, and made performers and audience *think* without bludgeoning us over the

head with a producer's concept (and from me, that is high praise!) The space was used very imaginatively and made full use of the church's acoustic. It was a clever move to make the singers move to the back of the performing area for key phrases which might have needed extra support, as the rectangular apse proved to be an ideal sounding chamber. Lighting was used well to create atmosphere.

The evening began with the second half of *Die Walküre* Act I, beginning with *Ein Schwert*. Mike Bracegirdle's lean, wiry, muscular tenor has clear Helden potential, although the complete role might be a stretch for him at this stage of his career. He is canny enough to know when and how to save his voice at key moments so as to open it out to maximum effect when required, and how to make it all part of the vocal and dramatic presentation. He reduced almost to a tender whisper at *Ein Weib sah' ich*, to spine-tingling effect and then rose to a thrilling crescendo with *Wälse!* He conveyed Siegmund's mingled desperation and wonder, dazzled by his first glimpse of the sword, and his defiant rage, melting into rapture as his love for Sieglinde blossomed. Anna Gregory's sensuous, dark-toned Sieglinde was deeply damaged by her traumatic past, barely able to force herself to recall the despair of her wedding day, her wretchedness thawing into a wild joy so great that she could scarcely bear it.

Meta Powell and Paul Carey-Jones took up the story in the middle of *Die Walküre* Act III. Relton's production was especially successful here, with Wotan retreating within himself rather than confronting either Brünnhilde or his own wrongdoing, standing motionless, leaning on his spear while she pleaded with growing desperation, and even, shockingly, raising his arm and making to strike her as she collapsed into a terrified, whimpering heap. The audience gasped. Powell was triumphantly plausible in portraying Brünnhilde as a frightened victim while her gleaming voice left us in no doubt of her moral superiority.

Subsequently it was satisfying to see Wotan bested in his final encounter with Erda, in which the ever magnificent Rhonda Browne towered over the guilty god like an overwhelming force of nature, bitterly condemning his transgressions while that glorious voice seemed to roll out from the very depths of the earth. As in the staged reading of the *Ring* at the British Library in June (which Relton also directed) this scene became a fierce quarrel ending in a measure of reconciliation and forgiveness. I was hugely impressed by Carey-Jones, whose power and authority marked him out as a natural Wotan and whose rich, resonant singing was utterly superb. I look forward to seeing him develop the role as Opera Forge's two-year project to produce a complete *Ring* progresses.

Between these two scenes Neil Cooper, who has hitherto been known mainly for Siegfried's more exuberant music, took the opportunity to explore the character's gentler side in a beautiful, introspective Forest Murmurs scene, tender and lyrical as Siegfried mused on his unknown mother and joyously humorous as he fulminated against the absent Mime. In more familiar, heroic form, he was wonderfully manly and noble in a radiant account of *Zu neuen Taten* (touchingly, Wotan remained onstage after dismissing Erda to hear the first few bars of the Dawn music before stealing sadly away, his power broken), in which he was joined by the glorious Powell. Even though the audience had only just met this couple, and, unlike the slow burn of the *Wälse* twins' duet, had so little time to get to know them, the singers made us care deeply about them.

To bring the evening to an epic close Powell overwhelmed us all with a triumphant rendition of the Immolation. The way she used her three extracts throughout the performance to trace the development of Brünnhilde's character and the strength and authority she brought to this scene were masterly, her soprano darkening in her final

farewell to Wotan – *Ruhe* was terribly moving – and shining like the sun as she confronted the pyre. I long to see her perform all three operas complete. At the end she slowly collapsed as though the flames had consumed her, and as the Valhalla theme sounded for the last time in all its majesty, Wotan entered, leading Erda by the hand, and side by side they slowly ascended the stairs to the apse, where they stood, facing away from the audience. Behind them came Siegfried, who gently helped Brünnhilde to her feet. Together again, they followed her parents, with his parents, Siegmund and Sieglinde, bringing up the rear. The final Redemption motif sounded with all six standing in a row amid a golden glow of light, gazing away from us into the future.

Opera Forge's aims may be lofty, but if this evening is any criterion, they appear to be eminently achievable. It is wonderful that these young singers are receiving such support so early in their Wagnerian careers. I await future instalments, and the complete cycle, with the deepest impatience.

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## MY PASSION FOR WAGNER'S MUSIC AND FOR TACKLING PREJUDICE

Trude Silman



My father's first love was opera. My lasting memory is of him sitting by the radio in our dining room in Bratislava listening to Wagner, Verdi, Strauss and much else besides. My ears became attuned and my lifelong love of music established. For me Wagner's music (or any music) cannot have any political and hence anti-Semitic connotations. The sound of beautiful music arouses a host of feelings, which envelope me in the emotions which it creates and leads to great enjoyment. Just as I loved the Grimm brothers' fairy stories as a child so now as an adult I love Wagner's operas, which to me are just musical fairy tales.

Life changed soon after Hitler came to power in the 1930s and the persecution of the Jews began. My father realized that it was no longer safe for Jews in Czechoslovakia. His first concern was to get his three children to safety, to England. My sister arrived in the UK in January 1939 followed by me in April and my brother in the May. Unfortunately my parents did not make it. Father was killed in Auschwitz in 1942 and Mother was taken to Sered concentration camp in December 1944. There has been no trace of her since. The Holocaust destroyed our family.

For its survivors the Holocaust has produced deep trauma which lasts a lifetime and continues to affect their children and grandchildren. I fully respect the feelings of those who do not want Wagner's music to be performed in public in Israel, but I think that they are missing out on some wonderful music.

From my own experience I feel passionately that there is need of education, especially of the young to make them aware of the prejudice, bigotry and all persecutions such as anti-Semitism, that mankind has inflicted in the past and still is inflicting worldwide. I give talks in schools, universities, prisons and to many organisations in the hope that, in due course, cruelty and conflict will be eradicated and there will be justice and peace in the world.



You can read Trude Silman's life story at [www.holocaustlearning.org](http://www.holocaustlearning.org)  
Email: [enquiries@holocaustlearning.org](mailto:enquiries@holocaustlearning.org)



## RHINE GOLD DISCOVERED IN SOUTHWARK

Das Rheingold Scenes 3 & 4, Rehearsal Orchestra, Henry Wood Hall, 27<sup>th</sup> October,

Katie Barnes

Photography: Richard Carter

There is always an especial magic about the Rehearsal Orchestra's annual Wagner weekend. There is the revelation of hearing his music performed by musicians, most of whom are amateurs in the best sense of the word, of sharing their sense of discovery as they play it, many of them for the first time, and of hearing how the performance is assembled, section by section, instrument by instrument. The listener has a sensation of being part of this seething cauldron of music making, not least when the *fortissimi* make the wooden floor vibrate and we feel the music through the soles of our feet. The surging tide of music engulfs performers and audience alike.



As always, the musical standard was incredibly high, and yet again I was overwhelmed with astonishment and admiration that they could reach such a high level of achievement in such a short space of time. These are players who always communicate the joy of playing. David Syrus was an expert conductor-coach who knew how to let his musicians know exactly what he wanted from them and brought the best out of his lavish forces. They launched themselves into the Descent to Nibelheim with superb panache, all slithery chromatic and howls of pain in the brass as the love theme was distorted almost out of recognition. The highly effective anvils were played by the percussionists on lengths of scaffolding pipe, reinforced by two double bass players on saucepans and spoons. The instruments mocked Mime and danced like flames for Loge, and the Tarnhelm motif was truly eerie.

Alberich's first transformation was so gloriously snarly and vivid that one could almost see the great clumsy dragon lumbering into the Hall, swishing its tail. The brass snarled again as the oppressed Nibelungs brought the gold to the surface, and although the music screamed their oppression, for the first time I felt that it also suggested what they wanted to do to Alberich, and the huge, cymbal-crashing climax died away in horror. Alberich's exit music blazed, succeeded by soft, consoling strings, like the wind blowing away a poisonous cloud. The orchestra plodded doggedly as the gold was heaped in front of Freia, while a single beautiful, plaintive oboe soared above. Donner's conjuration of the storm evoked lovely, light violins like wisps of cloud, building to a mighty climax before the orchestra let itself go in its first glorious, majestic statement of the Sword motif and the mighty grandeur of the Finale.

One of the greatest joys of these occasions is the opportunity of hearing individual sections of the orchestra rehearsing separately. Without the singer's voice above them, the swirling strings for *Heda! Heda! Hedo!* were beautifully light, and the tremolo accompaniment to *Abendlich strahlt der Sonne Auge* surprisingly simple. Hearing the dotted trumpet rhythm beneath Mime's narrative makes one realise how it underpins the orchestra at this point, and the light, pattering, mocking flutes, following an independent line beneath *Wen doch fasste nicht Wunder*, were deliciously delicate.



As always, the Mastersingers assembled a top-notch cast who took full advantage of the opportunity to work with an orchestra. In these two scenes, Loge and Alberich carry much of the heaviest workload. Mike Bracegirdle, fresh from singing Siegmund for Opera Forge at St John's Smith Square the previous night, gave Loge's music lightness and flexibility coupled with heldentenor heft. He had great facility with the text, flicking out the mocking words like so many little knives.

Martin Lamb simply threw himself into Alberich, especially in the final run-through, and had huge vocal and dramatic force but nobly resisted the temptation to over-sing despite the massive competition from the orchestra. His *mezza* voce as he tested the Tarnhelm was bloodcurdling and the opening of *habt Acht!* was almost lyrical but grew to enormous strength, passion and rage, culminating in a horrifying snarl at *Schwelger!* The power with which he delivered the Curse fairly blew the audience away. He clearly relished Wagner's vivid use of words, especially the alliteration *krrrrieche Krrrröte* was a joy. Even his glances at the conductor were in character, conveying Alberich's desperate insecurity even at the height of his power. This is a name to watch, and I will.



Jeremy White's Wotan had a great rapport with these two, and after a slow start (hardly surprising, as he has little to sing in Scene 3) he became forceful and authoritative in Scene 4. His orotund voice suggested a self-satisfied Victorian paterfamilias, oleaginous and treacherous. Adrian Dwyer, doubling Mime and Froh, differentiated his lovely tenor well between the two characters, the former characterful, sweet, plaintive, but not whiny or neurotic, the latter light and charming. Sarah Pring made the most of Fricka's few lines, especially *Böser Mann!* which said much about her relationship with Wotan.

Paul Carey-Jones, who had sung Wotan for Opera Forge with such success the previous night, sounded almost too good for Donner. He radiated star quality, and *Heda! Heda! Hedo!* riveted the audience. I stopped making notes and absorbed every moment. Oliver Hunt's deeply moving Fasolt was most beautifully sung, especially in his lament *Freia, die Schöne, schau' ich nicht mehr* and contrasted well with the very different vocal and dramatic qualities of Julian Close's Fafner, whose voice was clear, cutting and authoritative enough for a god, and whose narrow, shifty glance at *An Wotans Finger* conveyed all the giant's avarice.



Sylvia McWhirter's Erda sounded mellow in the lower register but I disliked the vibrato in the higher reaches of her voice. Sarah Jane Lewis sang Freia's few lines in an appealingly creamy soprano, and she and Pring joined forces with Rhonda Browne to sing the Rhinedaughters, standing behind the harps so that their voices were filtered through the ripples of the Rhine.

The value of the opportunities that the Rehearsal Orchestra offers to young musicians cannot be overstated. It wasn't just Rhine gold that we discovered at the Henry Wood Hall, it was the treasure of our Wagnerian future. We must nurture it.



# THE WORLD'S END IN FULHAM

## *Götterdämmerung*, Fulham Opera, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2013

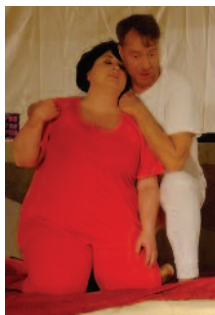
Katie Barnes

Photography: Richard Carter

If anyone had told me two years ago that I would be bowled over by a performance of *Götterdämmerung* in a small church in Fulham I would have found it hard to believe. The very idea of *The Ring*, the grandest of all operatic works, being performed on an intimate scale seems like a contradiction in terms. But make no mistake, this was one of the most astonishing events I have seen in this bicentenary year, as Fulham Opera's unlikely but heroic enterprise reached its triumphant conclusion. This performance, with the singers and musicians all around us, engulfed the audience in the music and the drama in a way that a staging in a proscenium theatre could not achieve.

The accompaniment was underpinned by the indomitable maestro, Ben Woodward at the piano joined by Nick Fletcher in a four-hand arrangement for the Rhine Journey, Funeral March and Immolation. Additional texture was provided by flute, harp and three horns. Unfortunately the effect was sometimes spoiled by the waywardness of the horns, which could veer alarmingly off-key, but overall this was a successful, if unusual instrumental combination, with the flute particularly effective in providing atmosphere. There were occasional problems over contact between conductor and singers, especially when the singers were at the far end of the church.

As Woodward has pointed out, this is the cycle which took the *Ring* to America before Frank Castorf got there! Fiona Williams, working on a budget which would probably not buy a single costume in Bayreuth, has produced a concept which is both convincing and consistent, without ever once being offensive or provocative. Having started the tetralogy in Texas, she concludes it in Washington DC, where the Norns are aged residents of a rest home, two wheelchair-bound and the other using a walking frame. First Norn is almost blind and close to dementia, but the others are younger and more alert. They and their attendants are all clad in massive, colourful jumpers, and they knit and wind wool obsessively. The American setting is hinted at by the fact that Third Norn carries a copy of *The Enquirer*. Their rope is formed of different colours of wool which they join together and wind into a ball as they sing, and at "*Er riss!*" the wool runs out.



The central curtain rises to reveal a cosy bedroom, with Brünnhilde, resplendent in scarlet pyjamas, thrashing the sleepy Siegfried with a pillow to awaken him as she urges him to new adventures. The altar forms a shelf behind the bed, loaded with various detritus including (surely a Wagnerian first) a small, lilac teddy bear. The whole scene takes place on and around the bed, emphasising their intimacy. One has a sense of how they have both been surprised by love and how this makes them surrender all the more completely to unexpected emotions – and how this could make Siegfried vulnerable to the Gibichungs' manipulation. He wears the ring tied to a leather thong which he binds around her neck, and I'm sure I saw her passing him a set of car keys when she alludes to Grane (a Ford Bronco, obviously). He leaves along the walkway, and, while most Brünnhildes are inconsolable at their loss, this one happily tucks into a tub of Häagen-Dazs ice cream. The brand name is surely no coincidence!

No attempt is made to depict Siegfried's Rhine Journey, but while the music plays, we see a series of fleeting images of life at the Gibichung court which establish it as a militaristic enclave. Vassals in fatigues pass in and out, discussing and handing on messages. Hagen, in black and white camouflage gear with black jacket and beret, is a hardened professional soldier while Gunther and Gutrune are “top brass” in uniforms loaded with braid and medals. In a very effective moment, they are first seen in silhouette behind a curtain, indulging in a *tête-à-tête*. Gutrune at first seems unsure of herself, but the knowledge that Hagen's potion will entrap Siegfried transforms her into a pouting, man-eating, possessive, bitchy predator.



Siegfried's arrival is as momentous for the Vassals as it is for the Gibichungs: he enters at the back and before he can even approach the walkway he is surrounded by excited Vassals eager to see him, shake his hand, photograph him, even simply to be near the great man for a few moments. He is embarrassed by all the attention, and it takes him some time to get clear and make himself known to Gunther.



When we return to Brünnhilde she is sitting on the bed, an open workbox by her side, sewing at a wedding veil. Wotan's prophecy that she will "sit by the fire and spin" has come nearly true. The image is deeply poignant to those who know that she and Siegfried will never marry. She gazes up into the air above the audience's heads as she sights Waltraute, who rushes in along the walkway as though it were her landing strip. The drama of Waltraute's narrative is conveyed entirely through the words and music, with both sitting very still, very intent. But whereas Brünnhilde is often shown to be disregarding her sister's warnings almost from the start of the scene, here she hangs onto every word. She understands from the first what she will be asked to do, and that knowledge causes her intense pain. I felt that she might even consider the possibility of relinquishing the ring, yet every time she thought of it, the prospect of losing Siegfried's token of love overrode all other feelings. But it was only at the end of the scene that the curse inevitably kicked in and she defied Waltraute, shrieking at her sister until Waltraute walked out, angry and despairing yet managing to retain her dignity.



Every production I see seems to have a different solution to the problems of the Tarnhelm scene. Here it is Gunther who enters along the walkway, wearing the Tarnhelm and carrying Nothing in a leather sling across his back as Siegfried does, but with his face obscured by a photographic mask of his own face, while Siegfried sings behind the scenes. This makes the point that the Tarnhelm is disguising the wearer as Gunther, but made it less clear to the uninitiated, who is wearing it – I overheard audience members asking questions about this during the first interval (I suspect that the scene may have been staged in this way to avoid the additional cost of a duplicate uniform for Siegfried!). The struggle over the Ring is very effectively staged as a slow-motion fight, which ends when Siegfried/Gunther snaps the thong holding the ring from her neck. At his command she stumbles into the bedroom and he follows, holding his sword high as the curtain falls to hide them from view.

The relationship between Hagen and Alberich is presented in an unusual and interesting way. Alberich is usually presented as a nightmare vision who, like the ghost in *Hamlet*, is forced to retreat by the healing light of dawn. Here he swaggers in along the walkway, twirling a shooting stick (which nearly clouted an audience member over the head), very substantial and alive. Hagen tries to ignore him by reading a copy of the *New York Times*, but Alberich beats the paper aside with his stick. Father and son address each other directly, even conversationally, the former insolent and demanding, the latter barely able to disguise his contempt and hatred. Yet again, one is moved to wonder why such a vital character as this Alberich vanishes from the action after a single scene.

Alberich exits along the walkway, his final cries of “*Sei treu!*” fading away as he disappears. Almost at once Siegfried enters just where Alberich vanished, as though they had changed places. Gutrune's insecurity emerges again as she angrily questions Siegfried and is so mistrustful of him that she even slaps his face. The summoning of the Vassals is thrillingly staged, with the first group singing at the rear of the church, behind the audience, answered by the second group onstage. The sound swirled around the audience, making us a part of the drama. It was overwhelming.

Gunther and Brünnhilde enter at the back of the church. Two gum-chewing secretaries join the Vassals, now lined up onstage, and present Gunther with a wreath of roses to crown his bride. He duly places it on Brünnhilde's head, silently ordering her to wear it, but while he steps forward to receive the Vassals' plaudits she removes it, looks at it, remembering the veil she had made (a heartbreaking moment seen by very few people, as the audience's attention was concentrated in the opposite direction), and throws it away. She does not see Siegfried until Gunther names him because he is in a prolonged and passionate clinch with Gutrune.



What follows is, for me, one of the most tremendous scenes in the *Ring*, and was all the more overwhelming in this production because of its close proximity to the audience. Brünnhilde's utter loneliness, rejected and disbelieved by all around her, were especially moving and her rage and grief were so powerful that, after taking the oath on Hagen's spear, (here a Bowie knife), she snatched it from his hand and tried to attack Siegfried, whereupon two Vassals disarmed her, hauled her away, and dumped her in a heap at the foot of the walkway. Zoë South was so in character, Brünnhilde's grief and pain so evident, that an audience member, sitting by the gangway beside her, said he ached to reach out to comfort her. The end of the act was very effectively presented with further use of silhouettes projected on to the white curtains, with the three conspirators watching while on one side Gutrune's attendants attire her in her wedding veil and on the other, Vassals prepare Siegfried for the wedding.

For Act III the set is augmented by a low, fenced-off area to one side representing the Rhine, curtained off with blue-green fabric richly embroidered with fish and other watery symbols, similar to the cloth used so effectively in *Rheingold*. The Rhinedaughters range freely about the stage, constantly moving as though they are formed of rippling water, and at “*Lasst uns beraten!*” they kneel behind the fence, hold their noses, and duck down as though diving, a deliciously witty touch which was repeated several times during the scene without ever outstaying its welcome. The production allows them to come into close proximity with Siegfried, flowing about him in a way which is partly seductive and partly menacing. The hunting party enters along the walkway, the Vassals carrying crates of bottles, and relax, sprawling over the stage and walkway, to drink and listen to Siegfried's tales. As his weapon of choice is a short knife rather than a long spear, Hagen is able to stand close to Siegfried to distract his attention by pointing out the ravens, then holds him and plunges the knife into his back.



Too often in modern productions Siegfried is left to die alone, but here, as Wagner prescribes, the Vassals surround him. One supports him while the others stand or kneel, removing their caps, one weeping openly. Siegfried dies among friends, sustained by his vision of Brünnhilde. As the funeral march begins, one vassal transmits an order on his radio and signals for two of his fellows to bring in a stretcher. They all help to lift Siegfried on to it and bear him out, walking along or beside the walkway, all helping to support their precious burden. The repentant Gunther is left alone. Just as the Sword motif sounds for the first time, he finds Nothung propped against a pillar, raises it on high, and solemnly carries it out in the wake of the funeral procession. This scene is beautifully staged, yet it is only the prelude of the glories to come.

Gutrune enters, wrapped in a dressing gown. Her sexy confidence is all gone and she is a quivering wreck long before Hagen's brutal revelation that her husband is dead. In a stunning *coup de théâtre*, at “*Siegfried, dienen toten Mann*”, the central curtains part to reveal Siegfried lying in state on the altar slab, his arms folded, his hands clasping Nothung with four Vassals standing guard at the corners of the altar. In the ensuing struggle Hagen cuts Gunther's throat and the Vassals arrest him before he can seize the ring. Then, in the production's crowning moment, Brünnhilde slowly enters along the walkway, wearing a long velvet dress with a long velvet coat of darker red. The lace veil covers her head, but now it is crimson. About her shoulders is an immense red mantle sewn with glistening gold flames, stretching behind her almost the length of the walkway, with two Vassals holding the end. She is already a creature of fire.



As Gutrune learns the truth she confronts Hagen with blackest hatred and spits in his face then crumples and lets her attendants take her away. Brünnhilde lets her heavy mantle slip to the floor and the Vassals gather it up and cover Siegfried's body with it, as though he is already wrapped in flames. The Vassals take Hagen away and disperse to carry out Brünnhilde's orders, leaving her alone for the Immolation. Dry ice wafts up from below and deep red lights shine through the curtains as the pyre ignites. She covers her face with the veil and backs into the curtained alcove, her arms raised, the curtain descends, and the opera ends with her silhouette projected onto the curtain amid the flames. Hagen, despairing, plunges into the Rhine, but his demise goes almost unnoticed in Brünnhilde's apotheosis.

Zoë South's Brünnhilde would grace many stages far, far larger than this. Her singing was phenomenal and her portrayal of the goddess turned into a fallible, vulnerable woman was captivating, heartbreaking and, when she rose to her full power in Acts II and III, awe-inspiring. She is surely destined for a significant Wagnerian career. This is a name to watch, and when I see her play Brünnhilde in larger venues in years to come, I will be proud to know that I saw her here first.

All of the others were excellent, but none of them were quite on the same level. Best of the rest was Oliver Gibbs' bluff, smiling, grim, Iago-like Hagen. The programme included a note thanking him for taking on the role at the last minute, but he took the stage with as much assurance as if he had been performing it for years. His voice is rather baritone for this deep role (he has sung the *Rheingold* Alberich, and it is rare to find the same singer playing both father and son), which could be a disadvantage in a larger auditorium, but in this venue his vocal and physical command of the stage was exemplary.

Jonathan Finney's voice sounded light and dry for Siegfried, but he had all the notes (aside from one notorious trap in Act III which has caught out many a more experienced tenor) and his acting of the innocent who is corrupted by the big city was very touching. Steven John Svanholm's Gunther was mellifluous of voice and weak and shifty in persona, and made his moment of repentance as he bore the sword away truly moving. Laura Hudson's Gutrune, as luscious of voice as of figure, made the transitions from uncertain woman to huge-eyed, predatory bitch to final emotional breakdown absolutely convincing.

Mark Holland's butch, bullying Alberich promises big things for next year's cycles. Jemma Brown's beautifully sung, urgent yet dignified Waltraute created a few moments of grave stillness amid the action and left a lasting impression. Her commanding Second Norn was clearly the ringleader of the trio. Janet Fischer's Third Norn, youngest and angriest of the three, sang her grim prophecies in a searing soprano. Lindsay Bramley combined a pathetic, fearful First Norn with a sexy Flogshilde, and Emma Peart and Alexa Mason sang deliciously as the seductive, witty Woglinde and Wellgunde, doubling up as Gutrune's relentlessly gum-masticating attendants.

Last but by no means least, fifteen members of the London Gay Men's Chorus thrilled us all as the Vassals. Given that many of them can have had little if any previous experience of opera, let alone of Wagner, it was astonishing to find how readily they took to the medium and reacted to the music. Some simply stood there and sang, watching the conductor's beat and nothing else, while others threw themselves completely into the production, acting as sceneshifters and attendants to the Norns and reacting to every turn of events. The immediacy and deep dignity of their response to Siegfried's death was especially moving. Bravo, gentlemen!

Whatever you do, hurry to St John's Church for the cycles next spring – but leave a seat for me!

# WAGNER AT THE PIANO

## Royal College of Music, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013

Robert Mansell

One of the most interesting programmes for me in this 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year so overfilled with Wagner's music was Julian Jacobson's sold out concert of Wagner at the piano. 12 works from the College musical archives, some of which had never been performed before. Starting with Carl Tausig's transcription of the *Meistersinger* Overture for four hands on one piano (sounding a little ponderous), then Wagner's cheerful *Polonaise in D*, a piano duet dating from 1832 which has a native vigour hinting at his future greatness.

The beautifully constructed programme included some of Liszt's transcriptions, including *Elsa's Dream from Lohengrin*, beautifully played from memory by Jacobson himself, and the *Bridal Procession* from the same opera, exquisitely played by Emmanuel Tardy with complete mature understanding of the romanticism in the music and a masterfully graduated crescendo and diminuendo.

The programme continued with the fascinating *Souvenirs de Bayreuth*; an unlikely collaboration of Gabriel Fauré and André Messager who had travelled together to performances of *The Ring* in Cologne and Munich in 1878. A fun-filled, witty and irreverent four-hand *Fantaisie en Forme de Quadrille*.

The elegant Lucy Wang performed beautifully from memory the *Sonata for Frau Wesendonck*; which I always think is a surprisingly uninteresting work considering it was written in 1853 when Wagner was also working on the music of *Das Rheingold*!

Engelbert Humperdinck's beautiful transcription of the Good Friday Music from *Parsifal*, rarely heard and long out of print, was played with great restraint and musicality by college professors Andrew Ball and Julian Jacobson. Among the several other transcriptions was a rarity lurking on the extensive shelves of the RCM music library: Heinrich Rapp's version of Siegfried's Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung* – not a particularly interesting transcription except for the fact that Richard Wagner noted on the score that he had himself played it in Rome with Giovanni Sgabati.

Julian Jacobson's final contribution was Wagner's rarely performed *Elegie*, probably dating from 1858, which Jacobson played beautifully from memory. It is not widely known, nor was it ever published, but its main interest lies in the fact that Wagner is said to have played the piece himself on the piano in Venice only the day before he died.

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## A TALE OF TWO TURKEYS

Jeremy D Rowe

This year's brilliant set at Bayreuth for *Die Walküre* of Hunding's oil exploratory camp and farm included a lone turkey silently wandering around in a cage. Originally Castorf wanted two turkeys, and they were there for the first technical dress rehearsal. Unfortunately a fox caught one of them in the night and killed it. The dead turkey was replaced by three baby turkeys who constantly chirped for their mother. At the next dress rehearsal Johan Botha as Siegmund attempted to sing against this constant bird noise and finally lost his cool and stormed off the stage saying that if the birds continued to make this noise, he'd quit. The turkey chicks were hastily removed. For the first performance the lone turkey was silent. The stage crew tell us it was mourning for its lost lover.

# OXFORD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA WAGNER BICENTENARY CONCERT

Oxford Town Hall: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2103

## Bill Bliss

The Oxford Symphony is a high class, long-standing amateur orchestra and what they do not have in professional accuracy and polish they make up for with great commitment and enthusiasm that only amateurs can bring to their performances. The hall has a church-like acoustic, over friendly to the large brass section and less sympathetic to the slightly attenuated strings.

The concert started with a slightly lugubrious *Meistersinger* overture. This was followed by a brilliant *Prelude* and *Liebestod*, the orchestra excelling but never overwhelming the radiant and beautiful Rachel Nicholls. She looked a dream, her shimmering blue dress as gleaming as her voice, singing as she did from in front of conductor and orchestra.

After the interval we heard four extracts from *Götterdämmerung*, the Rhine Journey, Hagen's Watch (sine Hagen), Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music, all brilliantly played but for the non-Wagnerians in my small party a little confusing; the audience was not quite sure when to applaud.

But then, the *pièce de résistance*: Brünnhilde's Immolation scene. Rachel Nicholls sang and acted so well that we were all transported, disbelief entirely suspended. Siegfried's ring appeared dramatically held high in her hand: "*Verfluchter Reif*". As we moved to the climax so inspirational was her performance that I half expected Grane to appear as per the Sofiensaal, Vienna, 1964<sup>\*\*</sup>. No such luck. But one of the best Immolation scenes I have heard, and they include Rita Hunter, Anne Evans and of course our own famous president. A memorable concert that half converted me to bleeding chunks. All for £15. Sometimes you get much more than you pay for.

<sup>\*\*</sup>[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=GI1F7ziJIEo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=GI1F7ziJIEo)

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## CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW WORKING PARTY

### Ray Godson

As most of you will know, 2013 saw an unfortunate disagreement between the Committee and the President about their respective constitutional roles and certain other constitutional issues more generally. This was a catalyst for the appointment of a Constitutional Review Working Party whose remit, as the name suggests, is to review the current constitution and propose a new draft constitution to the Committee with a view to the Committee then proposing it to members for approval, in all likelihood at the 2014 AGM.

As someone who was neutral in the Committee/President debate, I have been asked to chair the Working Party (comprising myself, David Pope, Michael Hamilton and Edward Hewitt). We have started undertaking our review and are due to meet at the end of January. I would like all members of the Society to be able to share any views they may have with the Working Party as part of the review process. So if you have any views, comments or suggestions you would like to share with the Working Party, please send them to me by Wednesday 15th January 2014 (so that they are received in advance of the meeting) to [rgodson@godsons.co.uk](mailto:rgodson@godsons.co.uk). (If email is a problem, you can also post them to: 5th Floor, 13/14 Hanover Street, London W1S 1YH, but please use email if possible). I look forward to hearing from those who would like to share their views with the Working Party and I take the opportunity to wish you all a very merry Christmas and a happy 2014.

# WAGNER INSIGHTS WITH SIR JOHN TOMLINSON

Linbury theatre, Royal Opera House, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2013

Robert Mansell

First was the statuesque mezzo-soprano Rhonda Browne singing from Erda's two scenes in *The Ring*. Starting with her appearance in *Rheingold* Sir John said that he struggled to find fault with Rhonda's splendid performance. However, he helped her to breathe better to sing lower in the stomach (where he amusingly enjoyed holding her to demonstrate). In the extract from *Siegfried* he spent time emphasising the mental and physical preparation required to obtain the maximum impact from the phrasing and also to let the jaw open wide to let the vowels 'roll out' and achieve the maximum projection, even from a short quaver.

Neal Cooper tackled Parsifal, which he is currently understudying. Sir John spent time encouraging him to spread out his legato to fill the musical line. Neal's main problem was to overcome his tendency to sing out to the audience instead of communicating properly with the other performer(s). Sir John encouraged Neal, who has a lovely voice, not to be too shallow with vowels, including high notes, and to think through the whole phrase before starting to sing, in order to make a longer musical event rather than just singing individual words. He emphasised that Neal needs to concentrate more on the humanity in the character so that his powerful voice was not consistently too loud.

The second half of the programme was a most interesting interview of Sir John by Suzy Klein. Singing hymns at school assembly, he regularly noticed everyone looking at him, being one of the smallest children but making the loudest noise! He discussed how it takes a lot of strength and experience preparing, maybe as much as fifteen years, towards eventually singing a role.

He recalled that Barenboim telephoned him out of the blue to ask him to sing Wotan at Bayreuth. Neither of them had done it before so they learned it together. Now, at 67 years old, it is wonderful to work with new singers and bring them along. He regards it as his duty to pass on the knowledge gained by so many years performing major roles. He explained that it seems so simple to sing a vocal line, but it is not! The best is the simplest, which for him is like singing Bach.

Asked his opinion of Wagner the man he stated that, while knowledge about him may certainly be interesting, he concentrates on the music itself. He always tries not to listen to other performers in order to find his own interpretation only from what Wagner actually wrote. The warm humanity of Sir John Tomlinson was readily apparent to the audience who acclaimed him with a standing ovation.



*Pencil sketch by Jürgen Rohland, who works from photographs.  
Postfach 10 18 30, D-47718 Krefeld, Germany*

# **GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG IN AMSTERDAM**

27<sup>th</sup> November 2013

**Robert Mansell**

I was fortunate enough to obtain a splendid seat for a sonically and visually magnificent production of the last part of *The Ring* in Amsterdam, majestically conducted by Hartmut Haenchen with the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, which included one of the most shatteringly emotional performances of Siegfried's funeral march I have ever heard.

Our own Catherine Foster sang Brünnhilde commendably, even though it was announced before the performance that she was suffering some unspecified illness. She only displayed any vocal weakness in the trio at the end of Act II, but happily had recovered completely before the final Immolation Scene. She was joined by an excellent Siegfried from the American tenor Stephen Gould, and a superb Alberich by the Belgian bass-baritone Werner Van Mechelen, but for me the great excitement was the extraordinarily powerful Hagen by the Austrian bass Kurt Rydl, who regularly bared his healthy chest to maximum advantage!

Although set in a spectacularly large staging by George Tsypin (in the middle of which was the sunken orchestra) in the splendid Amsterdam Muziektheater, the production was to me often incomprehensible. Particularly the identically-dressed, robotic, cloned vassals with stupid choreography (by Amir Hosseinpour) and a disappointingly uncataclysmic and almost fireless close of the opera, where the stage dramatically opened to allow an immense pile of what appeared to be illuminated fluorescent lightbulbs to rise up – and then sink back down when a huge arrow-like projectile forcefully penetrated through the backdrop from above, shuddered, slightly withdrew and then stayed there until the end. I have no idea what that was supposed to mean!

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## **ALWYN MELLOR: FROM JAMES BLACK MANAGEMENT**

**James Black**

In Wagner News 211 Howard Sowerby writes: “Alwyn Mellor was expected to sing in the 2012 *Götterdämmerung* and 2013 complete cycles” at Longborough. She was engaged for the Seattle *Ring* in February 2010, and was never contracted to sing in the 2012 *Götterdämmerung* at Longborough, let alone the complete cycles.

Ian Strange was disappointed with Alwyn Mellor after her performances at Longborough having seen her “in *Götterdämmerung* there recently.” This is completely impossible, given that she has never sung *Götterdämmerung* at Longborough, nor was she ever contracted so to do.

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## **2013 AGM Minutes**

**Ryma Howard**

In Any Other Business I am quoted, apropos the discussion on the Bayreuth Bursary, as saying “Ryma Howard enquired if there was any formal duty for the committee to inform the President of its decision”. I said no such thing. My exact words were “Did the Chairman inform the President of the decision?”

Howardr@parliament.UK

# THE WAGNER SOCIETY SINGING COMPETITION 2013

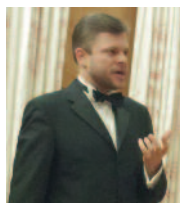
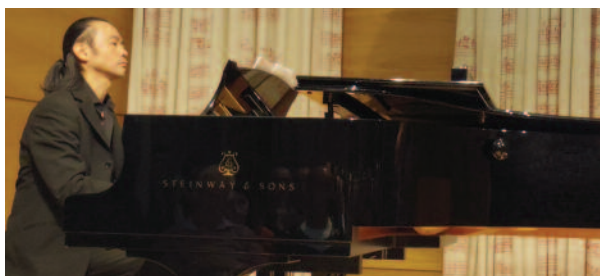
Royal Academy of Music, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2013

Katie Barnes

Photography: Richard Miles

The small David Josefowitz Hall was packed for the first year of the Society's singing competition in its new format. Welcoming the audience, Richard Miles explained that the winning singer this year would receive £1,500 for specialised coaching for a Wagner role or in the German language and that the age limit had been raised slightly from 35 to 40. He defined the task of the three judges, Sir John Tomlinson, Keith Warner and Elaine Padmore, as being to find the singer most likely to succeed in the future in a major Wagnerian career. In addition, the Ludmilla Andrew Audience Prize would be awarded to the singer who received most votes from the audience.

The standard of the singing from the eight contestants was incredibly high. At 35 and under, it is not always possible to tell whether a singer's voice will develop to Wagnerian proportions, but this competition demonstrated that the years between 35 and 40 are when a Wagner voice begins to mature. The overall sound quality was quite different, and vastly superior, to that often heard from younger contestants. Virtually all of these singers had clear Wagnerian potential. As ever, Kelvin Lim, the man who keeps an orchestra hidden inside his Steinway, was their heroic accompanist.



Tenor David Danholt boldly opened the proceedings with the ending of Wagner's last opera, Parsifal's "*Nur eine Waffe taugt*", followed by Siegmund's "*Winterstürme*". The voice is tremendously strong, if a little hard and colourless, and the Parsifal aria betrayed a break between registers. He differentiated well between Parsifal's redemptive ecstasy and Siegmund's tender joy. I would be happy to hear him in any heldentenor role.

Anna Burford was a royally raging Fricka. Her voice has a wonderful depth and richness in the lower register, of the kind usually associated with Erda (which I would love to hear her do), but the depth of the voice increased Fricka's dignity and saved her denunciations from becoming shrill or hectoring. No Wotan would stand a chance against her! This Fricka was at boiling point, with all the slights and infidelities of untold years channelled into her fury against the Walsungs. The goddess' biting sarcasm contrasted well with the serenity of the First Norn, dreamily recalling the days when her songs were holy.





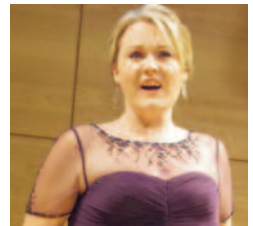
Rhys Jenkins' voice is astonishingly powerful and mature. Amfortas' "*Mein Vater*" was a tough nut for him to crack, as the intensity of the character's suffering and remorse can be hard to convey in a concert format, and despite the strength of his singing I found it uninvolving. For Telmarund's "*Erhebe dich, Genossin Meiner Schmach*" he went to the other extreme, pulling out all the emotional stops, raging at his imaginary Ortrud, snarling, sinking to his knees, but in the process taxed his voice a little too hard, cracked at one point, and sounded tired at the end. In course of time this could become a Sachs voice, but he needs to learn how to channel his immense natural resources to best effect.

Beforehand I thought that Mark Chaundy was taking a risk in staking his all on one aria, Parsifal's "*Amfortas*." but the gamble paid off. He involved the audience in the emotion of Parsifal's transition from pure fool to redeemer and was dramatically and vocally riveting. The voice was not always beautiful, but he was completely inside the character, which counted for much. This was not a finished performance yet, but again the potential is enormous.



Victoria Stanyon is a mere slip of a girl with a high, pure, bright soprano, who captivated the audience with two "opening arias", Elsa's "*Einsam in trüben Tagen*" and Elisabeth's "*Dich, teure Halle*". Before her first aria she appeared to be intensely nervous, but this proved to be Elsa's nerves, not the singer's, as she collected herself before appearing before the King, on trial for her life. Elsa's reserve thawed into Elisabeth's ecstasy as she surveyed the Hall of Song. Yet I wondered whether this lovely singer is destined for a Wagnerian career, or whether these early heroines will prove to be the limit of her vocal resources. Time will tell.

Catrin Aur's soprano, far larger and more generous, is definitely a voice of Wagnerian proportions which made the hall's wooden panelling vibrate. Eva's "*Selig, wie die Sonne*" soared with ease, followed by a radiant "*Dich, teure Halle*". This is a voice which, if suitably nurtured, could well mature into the major Wagner roles. She must beware a tendency to press it too hard – she really doesn't need to! – which creates a rapid vibrato, which could cause her problems later on.



Paul Carey-Jones, who has already impressed me enormously this year as Wotan and Donner with Opera Forge and the Rehearsal Orchestra, was magnificent in Wotan's "*Abendlich strahlt die Sonne Auge*" (and it must have taken some courage to sing this aria when Sir John was judging the competition!). He has not only the voice, but the majesty and indefinable quality which announces a Wotan in the making. He commanded the platform, not like a singer, but like a god, evoking Valhalla and Fricka with effortless ease. Amfortas' "*Ja - Wehe!*" was light years away from Jenkins' mournful

rendition – this was never mere emoting, but intense, painful grief which he shared with the unseen knights and with the audience. Unlike Jenkins, he continued the extract through the Knights' demand to uncover the Grail, bringing it to a thrilling conclusion with “*die offene Wunde hier!*”, so deeply in character that he dragged his jacket aside to reveal and touch an imaginary wound, holding out his fingers to the audience as though they were bloodstained. This was truly Amfortas' “terrible ecstasy” as Wagner describes it.

Jonathan Stoughton launched into Siegfried's “*Nothing!*” with superb confidence, and his ringing, bronze tones filled the hall. One could feel the audience's excitement levels rising by the moment, it was simply thrilling. Walther's “*Morgenlich leuchtend*”, a song written for a singing contest, brought the competition to a rousing conclusion. There is nothing like a fully fledged heldentenor for arousing audience enthusiasm. But there was little or no differentiation between the two roles, whereas his fellow contestants took care to create the character for each song they sang.



While the judges deliberated, Christopher Ball, Chair of the Friends of Welsh National Opera, gave an engrossing lecture on “How perceptions of the ‘ideal’ Wagner voice have changed and developed between Wagner's time and today”, illustrated by vintage recordings which were subsequently made available on the Society's website. He pointed out that there is little objective evidence of how voices sounded in Wagner's day, as when recording began at the very end of the nineteenth century the techniques were primitive and not all voices recorded well, with larger, Wagnerian voices faring worst. Only three creators of Wagner roles made recordings: two cast members of the first *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth in 1876, Marianne Brandt, the first *Götterdämmerung* Waltraute, and Lilli Lehmann, who sang Woglinde, Ortlinde and the Woodbird; and Hermann Winckelmann, the first Parsifal. All three recorded many years after their work with Wagner and their voices must have changed in the meantime. Winckelmann's lacklustre “*Morgenlich leuchtend*”, recorded in 1909 when he was 56, shows a voice past its sell-by date, but Lehmann's “*Or sai chi l'onore*”, recorded in 1906 when she was in her mid-60s, shows an impressive technique with plenty of tonal focus, and her “*Du bist der Lenz*”, despite an atrocious orchestra, shows Brünnhilde-like range and breadth. She was a singer for whom the fach system did not exist, regularly performing the likes of Violetta, Brünnhilde and Norma on successive nights and continuing to sing Mozart throughout her long career.

Few examples of the infamous “Bayreuth bark” have been recorded but there is much written evidence of it, notably from George Bernard Shaw, who blames it on Cosima's attempts to maintain her perception of “Bayreuth tradition”, and WJ Henderson, who heard both Lehmann and the young Kirsten Flagstad. Lehmann was of the opinion that one should not sing Wagner too soon and Flagstad's advice to young singers consisted of three words: “Leave Wagner alone!” More recently, René Pape has sagely observed that “You should sing with the voice you have, not with the voice you wish you had.”

In the early twentieth century Wagner's later works were still regarded as new music, but during the inter-war years a new generation of singers emerged who had grown up with it and knew how it should sound. With improved recording techniques, this was a golden age of Wagnerian singing and recording. Ball has an affection for the 78 format, which was, in effect, a live performance, as any error would result in the whole four-minute side being re-recorded.



Frieda Leider, arguably the greatest Isolde of her generation, was heard singing Brünnhilde's war cries with a *genuine* trill despite the size of her voice; Lauritz Melchior, who unbelievably started his career as a baritone, was heard in a 1929 recording of Siegmund's "*Ein Schwert*" which not only displayed his amazing voice but also his facility with words. As a comparison, we heard a phenomenal recording of the same aria sung by the unjustly neglected Dutch tenor Jacques Urlus in 1910, a year before his Bayreuth debut. Herbert Janssen was heard in a lovely, lieder-like "*O du, mein holder Abendstern*" from 1930, before his voice paid the price for singing a too-heavy repertoire at the Met. Friedrich Schnorr was represented by a majestic "*Abendlich strahlt der Sonne Auge*" from 1927, when he was only 39, showing his steady, legato flow of tone. Ernestine Schumann-Heink, singing Erda's warning in 1907 at the age of 46, showed a wonderful richness and evenness of voice throughout her range, with a wonderful chest register. Finally, Kirsten Flagstad was heard in three recordings spanning her career: "*Home Sweet Home*" in Norwegian(!), possibly as early as 1914; her Met debut as Sieglinde in 1935, in which she already sounds like a Brünnhilde; and Grieg's "*Jeg elsker dig*" at a Royal Albert Hall concert in 1957, in which her technique still sounds as firm as a rock.

Acting as spokesman for the judges, Sir John observed that for old and new singers, similar things apply: the use of text and legato, vocal health, musicianship and immersion in character. The judges' discussions had focused upon which contestants were great material for the Wagner repertoire and which would respond best to coaching over the next few years.

The judges had appreciated things from all the contestants, but all three had agreed on four singers at the top of their list to be named as winners or highly commended. The two to be highly commended were Rhys Jenkins and Jonathan Stoughton, who were described as "wonderful material for further development." As the judges could not agree on the actual winner, they had taken the unusual step of naming two joint winners, described as "high quality voices that would benefit from coaching": Paul Carey-Jones and Catrin Aur. All of these decisions were evidently popular with the audience, who had awarded their prize to Victoria Stanyon.



To end the event, the two winners were each called upon to reprise one of their arias. As Sir John wittily gave the theme of reprises as "Hall", Aur once again hailed the Hall of Song and Carey-Jones greeted Valhalla. We look forward to following the development of their Wagnerian careers.



# GOETHE'S THEATRE IN BAD-LAUCHSTADT

Where Wagner first conducted an opera

John Crowther

Bad-Lauchstädt is a small, beautiful town in Saxony-Anhalt some 13 kilometres from Halle. In Wagner's day it attracted visitors in the summer because its spa water was claimed to be medicinal. Visitors were entertained in the evening with plays and operas in the adjacent theatre. This theatre was designed by Goethe and built in 1802 amidst landscaped gardens. It was a summer outpost of the theatre in Weimar where Goethe was the Director. In the summer of 1834 the theatre witnessed two seismic events which occurred almost simultaneously in Wagner's life. Firstly, Wagner conducted an opera, *Don Giovanni*, for the Magdeburg Theatre Company where he had just been appointed Music Director. He was only 21 and although he had been Choirmaster in Würzburg and had conducted some of his own instrumental pieces, he had never before conducted an opera. Secondly, Wagner met Wilhelmina (Minna) Planer, an actress with that Company; he was immediately infatuated by her beauty and the rest is troubled history.



The theatre is simple in design both outside and inside and has been restored as Goethe designed it – except it now has electricity. The stage is a replica of that in Weimar at the time so sets could be used in both theatres with minimal adjustments. The auditorium has plain wood floors, wood pew-style seating, a few boxes opposite the stage and a single gallery on three sides. The ceiling is made of ribbed canvas in marquee-style and this may have given Wagner the idea for his Festspielhaus in Bayreuth. The orchestra “pit” is just a part of the auditorium separated from the audience by a wainscot such that the audience can see the heads and shoulders of the musicians.





We attended a concert of works by Wagner and Liszt performed by some highly talented Bayreuth Bursary students including a soprano, a clarinet player and a pianist and the acoustics were warm and clear. The under-stage machinery is primitive in comparison with that at Drottningholm, built in 1766. In Wagner's time the theatre was run from Magdeburg; nowadays it is still used during the summer but the visiting company is Opera Halle. Their schedule for 2013 included Mozart operas and Weber's *Der Freischütz*, all of which would have been performed in Wagner's day.

To mark the bicentenary, an exhibition of memorabilia from Richard and Minna's time in Bad-Lauchstädt was curated in a small house nearby. It focussed as much on Minna as on Richard and included the famous portrait of Minna in 1835 which shows her real beauty and explains why Wagner fell for her. There were exhibits about Minna's background, her theatrical career and her daughter. There were also letters exchanged between Richard and Minna and the wedding ring with which they were married. There is a story that whilst Wagner was conducting in the theatre he accidentally broke his baton. He wrote to his friend Theodor Apel asking him to send another, which he did. This replacement baton was displayed in Bad-Lauchstädt – but the cheque which Wagner sent in payment was not.

We thank Thomas Krakow, Vice-President of the RWVI, for his superb organisation of the visit.

Portrait by Alexander von Otterstedt

Photo credits: Deutsche Welle

# INSPIRED BY WAGNER AND BRITTEN

Jonathan Harvey at the Aldeburgh Festival 2013

John Crowther



Wagner and Britten share not only an anniversary year but also an ability to inspire future generations of artists to write original music, including operas. The list of composers inspired by Wagner is long and well known, whilst the list inspired by Britten is a hundred years shorter and growing. But who has been inspired by both Wagner and Britten? Jonathan Harvey (1939-2012) is one such composer, and his opera *Wagner Dream* was featured in Wagner News 206.

He was a son of the English musical establishment: a cathedral chorister, an orchestral cellist and a music scholar at Cambridge. His early influences were Britten, Messiaen, Berg and Boulez, all of whom, like Wagner, could create distinctive sound worlds with voice and orchestra. But whilst Wagner and Britten sometimes had to invent new instruments to create landscapes of sounds, Harvey lived in an age where electronics could produce musical palettes not available to previous composers. He wrote for ensembles in which electronic music was played alongside voices and conventional instruments (sometimes played in unconventional ways) so together they wove a novel musical tapestry. Some pieces were written for cathedrals or churches whose acoustics would diffuse a mediaeval mood onto modern technological innovation. Like Wagner, Harvey was drawn to Buddhist scriptures, as depicted in *Wagner Dream*.

At this year's Aldeburgh Festival Harvey's *The Summer Cloud's Awakening* was performed in Blythburgh church, which is a mediaeval cathedral in all but name. The work was brilliantly sung by the 25-strong Latvian Radio Choir conducted by Kaspars Putniņš\*. The principal text is built around six words sung by Isolde in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* at the point where the couple enjoy blissful rapture in the garden at night, just before they are rumbled by Melot and King Marke: "*Doch der Tag muss Tristan wecken?*" In Harvey's piece Wagner's words are slowly stretched over many minutes. They are then followed by citations from the scriptures of Buddha Shakyamuni, either chanted in Sanskrit or sung in English. There is an inescapable parallel with Britten's War Requiem in which the Latin text of the Mass is sung alternately with the English words of Wilfred Owen's war poems.

The choir sometimes sings onomatopoeic sounds akin to those Wagner wrote for the Rhinemaidens (Weia! Waga!), or for Brünnhilde (Hojotoho!). Harvey's orchestration is unique: one flute, one conventional cello and one "prepared" cello (in which two strings are tuned to C and two to G but an octave lower than usual), electronics and synthesiser. The percussion comprises a concoction of Eastern and Western cultures: Tibetan brass ritual bells and monkey-drums overlaying deep bass bells that are almost identical in pitch to the cylindrical steel bells which Wagner invented for *Parsifal* (imitated electronically by Harvey). Britten's inspiration here is unmistakable too. He used many different types of bells: handbells in *Noye's Fludde*, processional bells in *The Church Parables*, tubular bells to imitate Balinese gamelans in *The Prince of the Pagodas* and a myriad of bells to evoke the sounds of Venice for his last opera, *Death in Venice*. Wagner boasted that he had created "the music of the future". It is no surprise that he has inspired some highly innovative and dramatic music at the start of the twenty first Century.

\*(This ensemble has recorded the piece on Hyperion with Harvey playing electronics.)

*Photo credit: Maurice Foxall, Faber Music*

# RAYMOND FURNESS: *CRITICAL LIVES: RICHARD WAGNER*

Book review by Chris Argent

Raymond Furness displays a wonderful virtuosity in laying out the development of Wagner's genius by describing succinctly, informatively and with a marvellous turn of phrase the various influences that shaped his music dramas. From his flight from creditors, the long-term support of the unregarded Minna Planer, the adulation emerging from King Ludwig II, his adoration of Matilde Wesendonck, his voracious reading of Grimm, Aeschylus and Schopenhauer, each of these catalysing remarkable transformations in the composer's imagination and conceptual approaches to his incredible capacity for imaginative creations rendered in the language of music and leading to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is a hallmark of his genius.

This remarkably intelligent book is written with such verve and spirit, exploring some unusual avenues of information, retailing stories (some old and some new) with a razor sharp wit and beautifully scored prose, and describing in quite sufficient detail how a panoply of influences led to the design of all Wagner's operas.

A supplementary joy was to discover a variety of topics that seized Wagner's imagination as possible nuclei for exploration musically and dramatically such as *Die Sarazenin*. Furness scores with historical tidbits that are perhaps unknown even to the devoted Wagnerite. For example I was unaware that the press in 1845 spread the rumour that Wagner had been paid by the Catholic party to propagate the doctrine of redemption (doubtless aware of Senta's fate). Not surprising, perhaps, given Wagner's preoccupation with redemption, renunciation, transfiguration and transformation, but unlikely even given Wagner's quest for funds.

The author devotes the final 20 or so pages to a denunciation of that procession of egotistical directors who ignore the underlying themes and subtexts of Wagner's works by imposing their own shallow agendas. He emphasizes how much this diminishes the compositions that a whole host of individuals devote much of their lives to realize on stage, from the musicians in the pit and on stage to all those hard working stage hands behind the scenes and a multiplicity of support staff in offices and workshops. It is thus that opera lovers of the 21st Century are denied the messages enshrined in Wagner's use of myth to throw light on human nature and the importance of love as a concept which should and could be central in all human affairs. He quotes Roger Scruton's assertion that "myth acquaints us with ourselves." He states as a given that the Wagnerian music dramas are suffused with a distinctive spiritual glow, a religious feeling (that has nothing whatsoever to do with organized religion) and an exalted nobility. These important and significant communications from beyond the grave to his friends, the lovers of Wagner's music dramas, cannot emerge when what is presented on stage is nothing but a rag-bag of pseudo-intellectual posturing from supposedly avant garde savants whose principal objective appears to be to demonstrate their ability to subvert Wagner's own messages. Few of us are given that sort of intellectual power, and to see non-entities perverting what could be so influential in these troubled times is heart-rending. Furness cites the first Seattle *Ring* of the 21st century as the paradigm of how, arguably, Wagner's greatest creation can best be put before the public. (I for one would not quarrel with that conclusion. It is itself a creative miracle, especially in this world of ours where everything has to be debunked.) It is easy to recommend this brilliant book as it is so thoroughly enjoyable and as difficult to put down as a good novel.

## **FRIEDELIND WAGNER: WAGNER'S REBELLIOUS GRANDDAUGHTER**

**Kevin Stephens**

Eva Rieger's scrupulously researched book tells the story of a woman who was hugely talented, widely travelled, who knew everyone who mattered in the music world across seven decades, who was on the right side regarding the Nazis, yet who was ultimately unfulfilled. Friedelind's overriding passion was to be an opera director, especially directing the works of her grandfather and her father, Siegfried Wagner, whose work she felt was undervalued. Yet in the 350 pages of this book I could find only one production that was successfully carried through, a *Lohengrin* in Bielefeld in 1968. There were many other plans and schemes but most foundered through over-ambition and a failure to control costs.

Her greatest achievement was running a series of masterclasses at Bayreuth from 1960-66, which became a seminal influence, not only on the careers of many students, including the likes of Michael Tilson Thomas and Lawrence Foster, but also on the future of opera production in the western democracies. She had many contacts in the German Democratic Republic and brought Walter Felsenstein and his radical interpretative ideas to Bayreuth each year.

The masterclasses were scrapped by Wolfgang Wagner after his brother's death, ostensibly because of the debts Friedelind had run up, but underlying this was the ongoing family feud in which the two brothers and their mother, Winifred, conspired to keep their two sisters, Friedelind and Verena, out of festival affairs. Somehow Friedelind, who alone had the courage to quit Hitler's Germany at the age of 20, became suspect in post-War Germany, as were many others who had fled the Third Reich.

In the 1970s Friedelind was encouraged to approach the authorities in Teesside, where there were plans to build a radically different kind of theatre, a notion which had huge attraction for her. She decided to restart her masterclasses in the North East. It was at this time, as music officer of the regional arts association which subsidised the classes, that I met her. She was nicknamed Mausli, but there was nothing mousey about her. She was imposing (she always had trouble with her weight, not surprising judging by the size of the steak she served me) with a formidable intellect and considerable charm. But local authority changes, budget cuts and the usual problems of over-ambition and lack of control over finances meant that first the theatre project, then the masterclasses ground to a halt.

From 1973, when the Wagner Foundation was set up, Friedelind became relatively wealthy with her share of the 12.4 million Deutschmarks realised for the family. She was generous with this money, helping many of her friends to achieve long-held ambitions. But the deal also welded Wolfgang Wagner in place as lifelong director of the festival and he spent the next 35 years preventing any younger members of the family from having any role in the festival.

Friedelind supported her nephews and nieces (having no children herself) and would have loved to see Eva, Gottfried (Wolfgang's children by his first marriage), Nike or Wolf Siegfried (two of Wieland's children) involved in the festival management. She died in 1991, long before the decision in 2008 that Eva and Katharina (Wolfgang's daughter from his second marriage, born in 1978) would take over his position. Eva Rieger tells a compelling story in a vital and fascinating way, and although much of it is familiar ground, fresh perspectives are provided by new archive and personal material.

## BOOK REVIEW: *WAGNER'S PARSIFAL* BY WILLIAM KINDERMAN

Hans Rudolf Vaegt

Most Wagnerians, amateurs and professionals alike, are sick and tired of being reminded of the darkly embarrassing links that connect their hero to Adolf Hitler. For many, the very name of the German dictator constitutes a disquieting irritant that thoroughly spoils their appreciation of Wagner's music dramas. They argue, not without reason, that the creator of the *Ring* tetralogy, of *Die Meistersinger*, and of *Parsifal* cannot be held responsible for what his heirs and adherents made of his work. Would that it were so simple!

Admittedly, there are good reasons to believe, with Thomas Mann, that the Dresden Kapellmeister and the anarchist revolutionary of 1848/49, had he lived to see it, would have opposed National Socialism and gone into exile, as Mann himself did in 1933. Mann left Germany because, ironically, he was viciously attacked for having besmirched the reputation of the composer, the supreme cultural icon of the opponents of the Weimar Republic on the Right and, as luck would have it, the idol of the Führer. But it cannot be denied that the nationalist and racist spin put on *Parsifal* is not entirely delusional and that such an interpretation was advanced well before 1933. Wagner's "last card," as he jokingly described it, does indeed contain a number of mystifying elements which, with a little bending of the evidence, do lend themselves to ideology-driven appropriation, especially given his many vehement pronouncements about both Germans and Jews. We are dealing here with a case of "sow the wind and reap the storm."

It is to the great credit of William Kinderman, the distinguished musicologist and pianist at the University of Illinois who is an eminent authority on Beethoven, that he tackles the many problems associated with *Parsifal* head-on. Marshaling a broad array of scholarly tools and methods, Kinderman takes particular aim at two questions that have long shaped the perception of this work – positions that may now definitely be assigned to the dustbin of history.

First: Does *Parsifal* have a racist agenda? The Bayreuth Circle and its guru, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, certainly thought so. And even today, a number of eager iconoclasts make a great deal of hay by arguing, following Chamberlain, that Wagner's hostility towards Jews was the driving force behind the creation of this highly auratic work and that its aura is deceptive because it masks its underlying sinister purpose. As early as 1924 Chamberlain, at that time a cultural institution, proclaimed that Adolf Hitler was the new Parsifal, Germany's redeemer, for he alone had not only the desire but also the will and the nerve to rid Germany of its Jews. Kinderman observes correctly that Bayreuth "not only aided and abetted Hitler but helped *create* the future dictator" (p25). In order to better clarify the vexed Hitler-Wagner connection, however, it would be useful to distinguish between the notions of self-fashioning and projection. Hitler may be said to have fashioned himself after Lohengrin, Rienzi, and Wotan (alias Wolf, his nickname in the Wagner family). But the role of Parsifal was first projected upon him by Chamberlain and then embraced by Hitler's followers because of their deeply felt collective need for a healer of the many ills that beset Germany after World War I.

In order to show that such a reading is untenable, Kinderman examines in great detail the long process from the conception of the drama to the composer's final touches, concluding plausibly that "the religion of racism [...] was not a prominent feature in the genesis of the work" (p36). His careful review of the evidence establishes clearly that the notion of compassion represents the work's philosophical core. Rejecting the notion that heroism is what preoccupied the composer, he points to a rarely invoked piece of evidence: the fact that Parsifal unlike his predecessor, Amfortas, uses the holy spear not for combat but for healing.

The second question to which Kinderman brings his scholarly search and destroy campaign is Alfred Lorenz, the conductor turned musicologist who set down a highly influential theory about the musical structure of Wagner's works. He argued that Wagner's huge musical tapestries are held together by a pervasive pattern of "Bar" forms (known from *Die Meistersinger*). Lorenz also spearheaded many of the Wagnerians' early enthusiasm for Hitler, stressing Parsifal's heroism and will to power, and concomitantly welcoming the arrival of the Führer, by explaining to the faithful that – miracle of miracles! – the new National Socialist Germany was the very Germany that Wagner himself had envisioned.

Following in the footsteps of the pioneering work of his teacher, the late Robert Bailey, Kinderman examines in minute detail (paper type, ink, cut profiles) the sketches and drafts of the music, of which there are a great number: Wagner's work on *Parsifal* is exceptionally well documented. In light of the composer's manipulation of musical architecture and tonality, Lorenz's strained effort to press Wagner's music into the Procrustean bed of "Bar" forms loses even the semblance of probability, and his much touted "Geheimnis der Form" collapses like a house of cards (or like Klingsor's magic garden). In a perceptive aside, Kinderman suggests that Lorenz's compulsive "segmentation" (p198) of Wagner's music may simply have had its origins in the conductor's need to find his bearings in what is a mighty sea of seamless music.

The very last music Wagner composed for *Parsifal* is that for the so-called transformation scene in Act I. When he discovered during rehearsals that he had miscalculated the time needed for the scene change, he not only supplied – watch in hand – the required number of bars but he also strengthened the structural function of this grandiose orchestral interlude. In order to highlight the "narrative continuity," Kinderman argues, Wagner recalled the trombone passage (articulating the communion theme) from the outset of Act I and thus established a "correspondence with the final cadence of the entire work" (p185f), thereby creating a monumental arch supported by the temple scene. Wagner also underlined the sheer power of the music that leads to the first Grail scene by bringing back the mighty Temple bells. Surely, in the rankings of Wagner's musical miracles, the Act I transformation scene is very close to the top. In the end, Kinderman agrees with Alfred Einstein's observation that in *Parsifal* "with a minimum of effort, Wagner achieves a maximum of spiritual effect" (p271).

Kinderman admits to a "passion for uncovering forgotten sources and connections" (p327). This book, a volume in the "Studies in Musical Genesis, Structure, and Interpretation" series, offers a number of them, such as the insufficiently recognized influence of Liszt. Here Kinderman takes up the plausible argument that Wagner adapted the "Excelsior" theme from Liszt's "The Bells of Strasburg Cathedral" to create the central "communion" theme of *Parsifal*. Since Liszt's cantata was inspired by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – the two men met in 1868 in Rome – there is even an obliquely American connection. Kinderman also points out that the associative use of tonalities, so prominent in Wagner's last work, is present already in his very first opera, *Die Feen*. And following Katherine Syer, he points to echoes of some of Theodor Körner's patriotic songs, several of which were known to Wagner through the settings of C. M. von Weber.

With only four pictorial illustrations, and with over 90 musical examples, this book was obviously not intended for beginners. But it is an enormously enlightening book for all who wish to move beyond the beginner's stage.

*This review first appeared in the December 2013 issue of Wagner Notes and appears here with permission of the author and of the Wagner Society of New York*



## CD SET: *WAGNER'S VISION*

Wagner's Big Ten from Bayreuth

RRP £50.00. Approx. 57½ hours

Paul Dawson-Bowling

This is an unbelievable bargain, 50 CDs at a pound each or less, of Wagner's major works in performances from Bayreuth's choicest vintages. Some even come in two performances. Additionally there are 12 CDs of fascinating excerpts, some substantial, some from the earliest era of microphone recordings, and some from even earlier, the 1900s, and these were made not at the Festspielhaus but at the Hotel Sonne.

First some warnings. Today's enthusiasts can sometimes get irritated when old-timers go on about the better singing of the past, but if they acquire this set, they may find that *it's all true!* Just listen for instance to radiant, glorious, ravishing Maria Müller as Sieglinde or Elisabeth, and it is only by going to Gwyneth Jones that people can find a post-war Sieglinde from Covent Garden to match her. The other warning is about something not true: the claim that some of the recordings were conducted by Furtwängler or Strauss. These claims were originally fraudulent but adopted mistakenly by the anonymous creators of this set. There are some other mistaken attributions, but what is absolutely true and wonderful is the inclusion of a good half an hour from *Die Walküre* Act I with Müller and Völker under Heinz Tietjen. Best known as the sinister arm's-length opera house controller of the Nazis, he nevertheless stands revealed as a very great Wagner conductor, immense, fiery, emotionally vibrant, creating much of the massive and glorious sound associated with Hans Knappertsbusch, but more tensile. For the affluent, this set is worth acquiring for this extraordinary item alone.

Some of the set's sound is better than on other presentations of these same recordings; some of it not so good, but it is always good enough to add an attraction, and even the crackly old records from the 1900s come up pretty well. Bayreuth was one of the first places where microphones were used, in 1927, liberating the performers from making music together in the mouth of an enormous horn. The astonishing thing is that these early live recordings, which allowed no possibility of a playback, turned out so well. It is precious to have so much of Karl Muck who was then nearing the end of his 30-year reign as principal *Parsifal* conductor at Bayreuth, and whose blazing intensity in the first transformation scene is only matched by Knappertsbusch. This excerpt also provides an unparalleled opportunity to hear the original *Parsifal* bells, what they sounded like, before they were looted by American armed forces after the capture of Bayreuth (and never recovered). In the Good Friday Spell of Act III there is a rare chance to hear Kipnis as Gurnemanz, Fritz Wolff as Parsifal, and Siegfried Wagner in the pit. As far as I know this is Siegfried Wagner's only Bayreuth recording, and he sounds more relaxed and expansive than the mighty and highly strung Karl Muck.

The entire set has been compiled with deference to copyright, which means that none of the performances come from later than 1960. Many of them set standards by which all others are judged, although I would not always agree with the common choices. Karajan's much lauded *Meistersinger* of 1951 was vitiated by his egotistical re-seating of the orchestra and by Walther Legge's over-control of the recording, and he completely mis-represented the Bayreuth acoustic. In this he was, alas, the first in a long line continuing with Karl Böhm's Deutsche Grammophon *Tristan*. Karajan's personal favourite, Otto Edelmann, makes a dour, dreary Sachs, constantly under the note and

quite unlike the special version he produced for Knappertsbusch the following year. Karajan's own performance itself is his least convincing Wagner on record.

Vastly finer is the earlier *Meistersinger* under Hermann Abendroth, the one opera present in two complete performances. Abendroth alternated with Furtwängler as Meistersinger conductor in 1943, and his performance, which has a different cast from Furtwängler's in all the major roles, is happily complete, whereas Furtwängler's is not, as it lost the quintet and a stretch of Act I. The individuality of Abendroth is established already in the prelude, which sets off at a noble stride without undue haste, but then maintains a passionate forward surge throughout the central sections which are often taken slower and more relaxed. As a result Abendroth's overture still comes closer than many other versions to Wagner's own 'a few seconds more than eight minutes'. Ludwig Suthaus is his Walther, and disconcertingly he sounds a good deal more mature and warbling than he was on the incomparable Furtwängler *Tristan* made nine years later. Hilde Scheppan made a slim-voiced Eva of extreme youth, and Paul Schöffler presents his earliest complete Sachs, an assumption available now in almost as many versions as Hotter's Wotan. This Sachs is both energetic and centred, with none of the deep personal divisions which Sir Donald McIntyre unearthed in the character. My own favourite Schöffler Sachs is the one on Hans Knappertsbusch's drastically underrated studio version (Decca) from Vienna. The incomparable Eric Kunz brings plenty of personality to Abendroth's Beckmesser, and he repeated the role for Karajan.

Karajan's *Tristan und Isolde* came from the year after his *Meistersinger*. It was his last year at Bayreuth, and this performance is very different in its stellar quality. Karajan had reverted to Wagner's positioning of the orchestra, and produced something of towering greatness, tumultuous, far-flung, and immense, with the meticulous and ardent Ramón Vinay as Tristan, the impulsive, no holds barred Martha Mödl as Isolde, and Ira Malaniuk as a quite outstanding Brangäne. Hans Hotter, no less, is the gruff, moving Kurwenal, and Ludwig Weber pours a lifetime's wisdom into King Mark. The sound transmission was extraordinary for its era; this really is Bayreuth from the front of the stalls as I remember it, although I only occupied these star-seats once.

Equally great is the *Parsifal* from 1951, the great and famous Decca recording which likewise captured the essence of Bayreuth. Although it might have been more interesting to have one of the Knappertsbusch's less famous versions from later on, this account was the one described by Ernest Newman as 'not only the best *Parsifal* I have seen and heard but one of the three or four most moving spiritual experiences of my life'. The sound, vintage Decca, is probably more sheerly beautiful than on any Knappertsbusch version, and it too boasts Martha Mödl, the totally involved Kundry. Perhaps Knappertsbusch's stereo version for Philips from 11 years later and his Orfeo d'Or from 1964 have even greater cast lists, and the Orfeo d'Or has a special quality as the last performance of anything that Knappertsbusch ever conducted anywhere. (It is very special for me because I was there).

It was a somewhat strange decision to present *The Ring* from four different years with four different conductors. There are those who regard the solitary unique *Ring* from Clemens Krauss as the best of all versions, and its status has been endorsed by its reappearance on Orfeo d'Or. To my ears his *Das Rheingold* has some of the qualities of Heinz Tietjen's, emotionally vibrant and excitingly fast in the same way as Keilberth, but more immediately responsive, more impetuous and less structured than Keilberth's. The names of the principles, Hotter and Neidlinger, speak for themselves and I enjoyed Ira Malaniuk's Fricka as much as her Brangäne. For *Die Walküre* this set offers Hans

Knappertsbusch 1958, a performance of epic breadth that is quite simply such stuff as legends are made of. Again the incomparable names of Hotter, Varnay, Leonie Rysanek, and John Vickers speak for themselves, and of the three Knappertsbusch Bayreuth versions of *Die Walküre* this is the most intensely dramatic, above all for Act III, helped by the fact that the brass are more prominently recorded than from the previous two years. On the other hand, it was a mistake to choose 1953 for a Keilberth *Siegfried*, because this performance is in fact a mish-mash together with the solitary Clemens Krauss *Siegfried*, whereas later years, 1954 and 55, offered *Siegfried* performances that were pure Keilberth. Keilberth and his gifts in Wagner were overshadowed by Knappertsbusch, but the coursing vitality and dynamic verve of his *Ring* performances means much of this *Siegfried* are treasurable in their own right.

*Götterdämmerung* comes from Rudolf Kempe, then (1960) in his first year at Bayreuth. Kempe is generally lighter and swifter than most others and creates the impression of a Wagner who is more succinct and less prolix than is generally the case. This whole Kempe *Ring* performance is worth owning, not least for giving us two stalwarts from Covent Garden. Ottakar Kraus as Alberich was even more tremendous onstage, and his portrayal here reveals interesting insecurities in his character unknown to Gustav Neidlinger's version. Gottlob Frick's black tones were half way between coal and coke, and as always he mysteriously conveyed the reality that however great the menace, Alberich is not a great bruiser but meagre in build. Birgit Nilsson was singing her first Brünnhildes at Bayreuth, but the shining certainty and power are all blazingly there, never more so than at *Helle Wehr! Heilige Waffe!* where she dices with a first trumpet that Kempe has spitting fire – and wins.

One oddity of the set is the random order in which the operas have been presented, which is my excuse for a random order in this review. When we eventually arrive at the first work which Wagner included in his canon, *Der fliegende Holländer*, we meet one of the latest performances, from the young Sawallisch in 1959, headlong and tempestuous, yet a stickler for precision, a new Toscanini as he was then hailed. His performance is also special for George London's Byronic Dutchman, and his rock-like steadiness adds to his stark appeal. The *Lohengrin* conducted by Lovro von Matačić represents a transitional stage for Wieland Wagner's *Lohengrin*. His staging of this opera in 1958 was hailed as the quintessential Wieland Wagner production, utterly stylised, but of a remote, fantastical beauty, and André Cluytens in the pit partnered it with an extended, dreamlike account of the music that seemed unattached to the world of time. By the time the production was committed to commercial records, under Sawallisch in 1962, Wieland Wagner had altered his ideas, tightening up this ultimate romantic opera into an early music drama, even though his scenic conception did not change. Wieland Wagner helped the change with a number of cuts and tucks which he made in the score, and by bringing onto the podium Sawallisch with his 'taut bowstring' style. Von Matačić's version is halfway between Cluytens and Sawallisch, and like Cluytens he still had Sándor Konya in the title role, one of the most satisfying exponents of *Lohengrin* ever documented. Konya's voice was one of exceptional beauty, and he seemed quite especially to project the peculiar, otherworldly radiance of the character.

When I was 17 I worked three weeks of the summer holidays as a farm labourer (useful experience in itself) for a wage which was just enough to pay for one act of the Furtwängler *Tristan* which was then on two LPs. 16 hours work today at the minimum wage would buy this entire set of *Wagner's Vision*. I cannot commend it too highly as a treasury of exceptional performances available at a crazy-cheap price. Buy it if you can.

# DVD SET: *WAGNER'S RING – A TALE TOLD IN MUSIC* BY HEATH LEES

Roger Lee



Retired Professor of Music and Wagner specialist Heath Lees is a well-known broadcaster in Australia and New Zealand. These four 40 minute TV programmes were filmed in Melbourne, Bayreuth, Lucerne, Zurich and Munich with the musical examples played by Lees himself on the piano and the Clemens Krauss recording of the 1953 Bayreuth *Ring* when a full orchestral sound is required. Clever animation brings illustrations by Arthur Rackham and Hugo L Braune to life to provide very effective visual effects.

For a music lecturer there is nothing quite like being able to demonstrate your point on the Steinway, and as well as using the instrument to give his explanations clarity for all viewers he provides a number of singers with a most able accompaniment. Prominent among these is the very versatile Merlyn Quaipe who can perform in all three female voices, singing as Brünnhilde, Fricka, Sieglinde, The Woodbird, Guttrune and, yes, Erda.

We get no dead-eyed autocued delivery from Heath Lees but a genuine sparkle of enthusiasm throughout, and the chuckles are quite obviously spontaneous too! We move rapidly from the Melbourne Recital Centre recording studio to the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and so on, enjoying those animated images when it is our job just to listen. Lees' aim is to deliver a synthesis of education and entertainment which shows how Wagner brought language and music together to tell his story.

This is quite simply the best account of the motivic architecture of *The Ring* since that of Deryck Cooke. He had the benefit of the Solti / Vienna Philharmonic recordings whereas Lees' viewers have the advantage of his playing the illustrations live in a medium which provides images as well as sound.

Let us right away address the question as to whether this set offers as much to Wagner lovers who make no claims upon musical literacy as for those who do. Terms such as “chromatic scale” or “diminished chord” need be no problem for any viewers because they are all clearly demonstrated on the piano. Musical terminology is used sparingly so as to be *nae bother* (as they say in Heath Lees' native Scotland) to any viewer.

Other musicians are brought in such as conductor Asher Fisch and cellist Zoe Knighton. To illustrate the change in musical style from that of *Das Rheingold* to the more emotionally expressive “human music” which draws you into *Die Walküre* she shows how Siegmund's sorrowful descending theme becomes completed by Sieglinde's, as though they were two halves of the one personality, fusing into that love theme on the solo cello. From the point at which Siegmund and Sieglinde have fallen in love, instead of just telling the tale, the music has now *become* the tale.

Lees loves to show how the integrity of the music of the *Ring* is maintained from the beginning to the end by means of its motivic development. When we come to that “love theme” for example, he explains how one reason we are seized immediately by that music is because we have heard it before. It is derived from Freia's music in *Das Rheingold*. “The

reason we immediately associate the theme with falling in love is that Wagner has planted the idea in our minds already.”

We go to Zurich to be appraised of the influence of Mathilde Wesendonck. “One reason why this music is emotionally tingling is because Wagner had fallen in love.” We are shown some of the coded messages to Mathilde which appear on Wagner’s manuscripts such as *LDMM?* (*Leibst du mich, Mathilde?*) which Lees sings to demonstrate how well it fits with the love theme at that point in the score. He argues that the significance of the fact that the piano sonata which Wagner wrote for her begins with a tune almost the same as that of the *Todesverkündigung* theme is that, deep down, he knew that, like the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde, his love for Mathilde was doomed. Among the musical inventions which appear in “Wotan’s Farewell” we are shown a new type of cadence whose two chords carry the three-note “Destiny” motive on their backs. For Lees the fascination of this musical scrap is that it is linked back to Mathilde Wesendonck. Mathilde becomes Isolde and the “Destiny” chords of *Die Walküre* are embedded in the opening chords of *Tristan und Isolde*. (Of course this needs to be demonstrated at the piano to become convincing.) So, according to Lees, Wagner’s renunciation of Mathilde stands behind Wotan’s renunciation of Brünnhilde: “This utterly personal involvement is what moved Wagner into writing such amazing music for Wotan’s Farewell and indeed for the whole of *Die Walküre*.”

The “*Siegfried*” programme starts with “Forest Murmurs” which Lees describes as “the crossroads of *The Ring*.” We go off to Lucerne to discuss that 12 year hiatus in its composition from 1857 to 1869. One of the reasons which Lees suggests for this is that, at the peak of his infatuation with Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner was desperate to write *Tristan*. Among the influences which helped Wagner to restore his libido for the *Ring* job was Schopenhauer’s idea that, of all the arts, music is the richest, the most direct and the most transforming, taking immediate possession of one’s imagination. For him music is not the representation of an idea but the idea itself. Wagner was beginning to let the music be the story and was ready to free his music from absolute obedience to the drama. Instead of themes as signposts they would now become more independent, more obviously musical. From this point on he allowed himself to write passages of symphonic music.

And so we are guided through the first *Ring* music for 12 years: the Prelude to Act III of *Siegfried* with its dozen themes arising from the “galloping” motive from *Die Walküre*. Lees demonstrates how Wagner underlays this with “Erda”, grafts on top the theme for “The Need of the Gods”, yielding place to a desperate form of Wotan’s “Spear”, turns the “Rhine” music around to become “The End of the Gods”, introduces the crushed “Rheingold” semitone, brings in a bit of Brünnhilde’s sleep motive, and so on.... It may not mean much here on page, but it all becomes wonderfully apparent when those links which you will have intuitively recognised are made abundantly clear as Lees demonstrates his points at the piano in support of his argument that no-one had previously written such a complex symphonic picture to begin an act of an opera: “It’s a new, liberated music and Wagner uses it with enormous skill and exhilaration right through to the end of *The Ring*.”

We discover how, in the closing pages of *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner finds a way of elevating his themes so that they gain, according to Lees: “a mythic, almost supernatural power.” Finally, we are shown in detail how the composer reaches back into the four operas and plucks out all the themes that, by now, we know so well. “They provide a majestic summing up of what has happened and the final closing of the circle of the Ring.”

Available from: [www.wagners-ring.com](http://www.wagners-ring.com)

## WHEN WAGNER INSPIRES

Wagner's artistic vision is a key influence in the work of sculptor Vanessa Pooley

Liz Hollis



Fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors Vanessa Pooley knew little of Wagner three years ago when friends bought tickets for a Met production at the cinema. By way of preparation Vanessa played *Das Rheingold* repeatedly in her studio. The music required effort at first, but slowly, progressively its rich texture and complexity ensnared her and permeated her own creative focus. “Wagner was new to me and I certainly had no intention of becoming a fan when I forced myself to listen. But after several weeks it transmuted into a pleasure instead of a chore and I was hooked. Now I find it impossible to play anything else – all other music falls short for me,” says Vanessa. “I love to listen to Wagner as I work on my clay sculptures. Hidden away in the studio is the best place to concentrate on his operas because there I can play it loud.” “What could be better than the prelude to *Tannhäuser* full blast? Or Siegfried’s funeral march? Or any of it, frankly! I feel this deep emotion in Wagner and this has encouraged me to work on a series of sculptures based on characters in his operas, including Brünnhilde, Siegfried, Kundry and Tristan and Isolde.”

Vanessa, who lives and works in Norfolk, is best known for her representation of the female form with its curves and flowing lines. *The Sunday Telegraph* has described her work as: ‘A world apart, a full stop: a portrayal of intimacy so strong that you catch your breath.’ Not wanting to hurry the process of becoming acquainted with Wagner, Vanessa has worked slowly through all of the operas, starting with the *Ring* Cycle. “This summer I was lucky to experience *The Ring* live at Longborough, which was a huge treat. Now I am getting to know and love *Tannhäuser*. I’m excited about its promised performance here in Norwich at the Theatre Royal in 2014 alongside *Parsifal*.”



Most of the existing sculpture relating to Wagner is in the form of busts of the man himself. However, Vanessa is more interested in exploring the themes and imagery. “I am moved by the strength and passion of his characters – the strong women and the many lovers, including Brünnhilde waiting on her rock surrounded by fire.

“It would be easy to signify the Wagnerian quality of the sculptures by adding all the accoutrements like spears, shields and breastplates, for example. However, I don't want to take that route. I would like the sculptures to be more about internal feelings provoked in the music than the naming of prop accessories. I feel my full and fluid forms suit the Wagnerian character neatly and with the passion I feel for the music I will be able to make sculptures worthy.”

“I use clay to create my sculptures because its responsiveness of the material allows me to play with the forms until they feel right.” The finished form is then cast in bronze or silver at a local foundry. Sculptures can take up to a year to complete.



One of the first works is a small silver-plated bronze Siegfried and Brünnhilde curled around one another. “The figures are separate so can be parted but look best in an embrace.” “I feel so strongly about Wagner it seems natural to try to bring him into my sculpture,” says Vanessa.

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# MUSIC, MUSIC ALL THE WAY!

Siegfried study days with David Stannard

Charles Ellis

*The Ring* presents a vast range of perspectives: dramatic, philosophical, sociological, political, mythic and familial. Everyone agrees however that, without the music, all of its aspects have no traction or purpose. At the Midlands Institute in Birmingham for two days in March 2012 and in February 2013 it was just the music. David Stannard spent 6 hours each day playing (on piano and CD) and explaining just how the music of *Das Rheingold* (2012) and *Die Walküre* (2013) is put together.

The dramatic purpose of the music was not overlooked but, even so, such music-centred study days have always been rare. The procedure is for David to examine the music of each episode (shorter than the scenes around which Wagner devised the drama) on the piano, followed by the CD recording of the same passage. It is simple and systematic. There is sufficient time for discussion of why a leitmotiv is changed here or pops up there, and many observations made by David or from the floor are revealing and new to many who were there. For example: Why does Brünnhilde ‘pleading’ theme in *Die Walküre* Act III recur whilst Wotan is responding to and even arguing against her?

The auditorium is welcoming and the sound system first class. The twenty people (some local and some who made the journey from other counties) who attended through the full two days on *Die Walküre* for example will have come away with their understanding of Wagner’s prodigious score enhanced and deepened.

We look forward now to the session on *Siegfried* to be held in Birmingham on Friday and Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014. It is a commonplace that the music of Act III, composed after the 13 years break in which Wagner completed *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*, is of greater ‘weight’ and density. But David cannot find truth in the view – also commonly held – that the first two acts show an overall failing of musical invention.

Cost for the two days: £60.

Contact Steve Chetwynd (stevec32@hotmail.co.uk) for details.



Some Society members with David Stannard at the *Die Walküre* event in 2013.

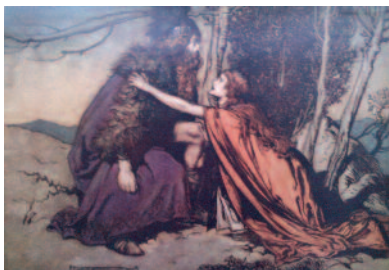
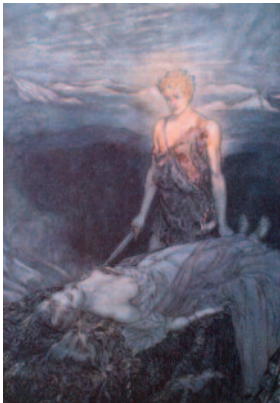
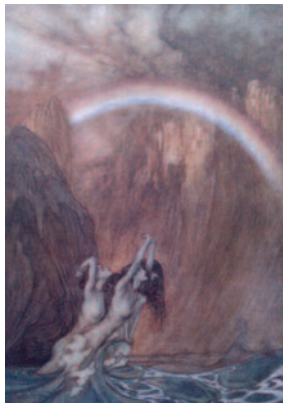


## COLLECTION OF ARTHUR RACKHAM ILLUSTRATIONS FOR SALE



Mastersingers alumnus bass Julian Close (Hans-Peter König's cover for Fafner in the New York Met *Ring*) is looking for a good home for two first edition books which include pristine collections of Arthur Rackham lithographs. "The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie" translated by Margaret Armour is illustrated with 35 plates and published in 1910 by William Heinemann and "Siegfried and Twilight of the Gods" with 30 lithographs was published in 1911.

Contact [julianclose@hotmail.com](mailto:julianclose@hotmail.com) or 01462 486 996 07889 050 161 166 Pixmore Way, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 1QS.



# THE PRESIDENT OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY AND ITS CONSTITUTION

**Paul Dawson-Bowling**

I refer to the letter from Mr Ian Strange in Wagner News 211 about the constitution of the Wagner Society. He quotes rules 13 and 14, outlining the roles of the Committee and the President, and comments that there is nothing in the rules giving the President powers to run the Society or to try to overrule, countermand or disrupt the operation of the Committee. This is plainly true, and there is nothing contentious about this, but what is contentious is the implication that the President has in practice overruled, countermanded, or disrupted the operation of the Committee. I and others have asked repeatedly for any evidence to support this notion, but nobody has ever provided any, and Mr Strange himself has provided none. The situation leaves the impression that the President is subject to a process of Chinese whispers, a continuing process of vilification by stealth. Mr Strange describes with justifiable pride his eminence in the Institute of Chartered Accountants as credentials for his views, but it would be surprising if during his successful professional career he ever allowed such unfounded factors to influence his actions.

Although I had long admired the President as one of the most distinguished Wagnerians ever to come from the British Isles, a figure of towering greatness, feted from Tokyo to Toronto, I had never met her until the SGM, and again at the AGM. If her responses to the unwarranted attacks made upon her were somewhat intemperate, then this was scarcely surprising, as her circumstances would have tried the patience of a saint. My brief encounters with this lady have indicated that she is someone who deserves the most profound respect. The chairman of the Wagner Society likewise deserves respect for his apology at the SGM, and the way forward appears now to be through accord and collaboration. We should await with keen interest what new constitution is now proposed, and I hope that all concerned will register the point I made at the SGM that, for a new constitution to be acceptable, the members of the Society have to be engaged in the sense of participating in its creation and not simply expected to rubberstamp the end product.

There is one other constitutional point raised by Mr Strange, and that concerns the de facto status of a committee decision made at a time when so many of its members are co-opted. If there have been resignations on a disputed point of principle, and that point of principle is then carried by a rump committee with a majority or almost a majority of co-opted members, then whatever the constitutional position, the credibility of its decisions is open to question. No Committee of the Wagner Society has ever before made such unpopular decisions as last year's Committee, and it needs to be said that the Committee is not an oligarchy which can simply do as it likes, once appointed. To take an extreme example, if the Committee were to decide that henceforth all meetings were to take place in the Cayman Islands and all assets transferred there in the long-term interests of Richard Wagner, then I doubt whether even Mr Strange or any one would expect the ordinary members to submit with bowed heads. So yes; we do indeed need a constitution so as to define the authority of our hard-working Committee, for which all due praise, but also to define the proper limits to that authority.

# *the wagner society*

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Vice President: Sir John Tomlinson

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Registered charity number 266383

# FORTHCOMING WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

Peter Leppard, Events Manager

2pm Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January

## **TENORS MASTERCLASS WITH RICHARD BERKELEY-STEELE**

Highly regarded in the heldentenor repertoire, Richard will coach some aspiring tenors in this interesting venue. Tickets £15/£7.50 students  
St Olave's Church, 8 Hart Street, London EC3R 7NB (near Fenchurch St station)

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> January. 6.30 for 7pm (recital), 8.30pm (dinner)

## **DINNER WITH RECITAL**

### **A joint event with the Alkan Society, the Berlioz Society and the Liszt Society**

The recital will be of works by all four composers. Tickets £45  
This event proved highly successful when held for the first time in 2013.  
The Forge, 3-7 Delancey Street, London NW1 7NL (near Camden Town tube)

7.30 pm Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> March

## ***WAGNER AND THE DREAM KING***

### **A presentation by David Edwards (joint event with The Mastersingers)**

With the help of several singers stage director David Edwards explores in sound and images Wagner's relationship with King Ludwig of Bavaria.  
Tickets £15/£7.50 students  
St Botolph's Church Hall, Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3TL (near Liverpool St station)  
A new and attractive venue for Society events, which we feel sure you'll like.

7.30pm Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> April

## ***FRIEDELIND WAGNER, RICHARD'S REBELLIOUS GRANDDAUGHTER***

### **Professor Eva Rieger**

German musicologist Eva Rieger has lectured internationally and published many articles and books, the latest of which (2013) is about Friedelind.  
Tickets £15/£7.50 students  
St Botolph's Church Hall, Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3TL (near Liverpool St station)

7.30pm Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> May

## ***WAGNER PRODUCTION STYLE FROM THE 1960s TO THE PRESENT DAY***

### **Professor Anthony Ogus CBE**

Emeritus Professor at the Universities of Manchester and Rotterdam, Anthony Ogus is the author of the book *Travels with my Opera Glasses*. Tickets £15/£7.50 students  
St Botolph's Church Hall, Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3TL (near Liverpool St station)

Tickets for Wagner Society events are available from Peter Leppard, Sickleholve Cottage, Saltergate Lane, Bamford, Hope Valley, S33 0BE. Please send cheques payable to The Wagner Society, enclosing an SAE. Tickets are also available at the door (not 23rd Jan)

More details of forthcoming events are available at [www.wagnersociety.org](http://www.wagnersociety.org).

Monday 12 May, 7.30pm: **SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

St Botolph's Church Hall, Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3TL (near Liverpool St station)