CONTENTS

3 An eightieth birthday letter to the President  John Crowther
4 Johan Botha 1965-2016  Karen West
6 A message from the Chairman  Richard Miles
7 Editorial  Ray Godson

Bayreuth 2016
8 Review Parsifal  Alan Ridgewell
11 Review Tristan und Isolde  Andrew Brannon
13 Wagner’s bells  John Crowther
16 Interview with Catherine Foster  Michael Bousfield
19 Bayreuth 2016 – two diaries  Anthony Spooner Neil King
27 Review Die Walküre Saffron Walden  Paul Dawson-Bowling
29 Review Die Meistersinger Munich  Jeremy Rowe
32 From the Archives
34 Katie Stevenson at the Proms
34 Gwyneth Jones Masterclass at Royal College of Music  Paul Dawson-Bowling
35 Wagner at the Proms 2016  Katie Barnes
36 Paul Dawson-Bowling talk on “Wagner the Man”  Ray Godson
38 Book Review “The Ring of Truth” by Roger Scruton  Richard Miles
40 Correspondence
41 Wagner Society Contacts
42 Forthcoming Events

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Dear Dame Gwyneth,

Please allow an ordinary member of the Wagner Society to pay tribute to you on this your special birthday. I greatly admire the way in which you have supported the Society for many years, but especially in the three years since Wagner’s bicentenary. Since then, the Society has sailed through some troubled waters and you have helped to hold it all together by your attendance at our meetings and singing competitions, with your wide-ranging articles in Wagner News and by sharing your wisdom with young singers in your masterclasses. Thanks to your efforts, some stability is now re-emerging. In short, I have seen you as a graceful swan gliding serenely in command whilst there has been confusion all around.

My thanks extend to Adrian too, for the way he has supported you in meetings, for his occasional articles of support in Wagner News, but most of all for his delicate accompaniment on the piano. I first heard him a few years ago during that excellent weekend in Aldeburgh when his soft touch was in complete contrast to the way in which some Wagner accompanists bang the keys as if they were playing the anvils in the Nibelheim scene.

So, Dame Gwyneth, I sincerely wish you a happy and healthy birthday with many more to come.

DAME GWYNETH JONES CELEBRATES HER EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY
IN CONVERSATION with HUMPHREY BURTON
Tuesday 8 November 6.30 for 7pm
Princess Alexandra Hall, Royal Over-Seas League, Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James’ St, London SW1A 1LR. Nearest tube station – Green Park.
Tickets £25/£5 students (wine and light refreshments on arrival)
Tickets are available online at www.wagnersociety.org and can be paid for using a credit or debit card, or PayPal. Tickets may also be reserved online and a cheque sent to the Treasurer, The Wagner Society, 15, Gibson Square, London N1 0RD. Tickets will also be available on the door.

Photo credit: “Wagner and Symbolism” Iconsofeurope.com
Hands up, I’m a self-confessed nut about all kinds of passions – Wagner’s music - of course! - also the Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Burne Jones and Waterhouse and, maybe with less of an obvious link, for many things South African. Conduct a straw-poll about great products of what could easily claim to be the most beautiful country in the world and for sure most people would likely name Nelson Mandela, juicy blackcurrant Pinotage and maybe the Springbok rugby team - but a world class opera star who scaled the heights of great Wagner and Strauss roles such as Tannhäuser, Lohengrin and the Emperor in Die Frau ohne Schatten? Surely not? And yet here we are once again in 2016 mourning the passing of yet another great interpreter of Wagner and Strauss – in this instance, Johan Botha who, like Alberto Remedios, has recently been transported to Valhalla and in Botha’s case, sadly well ahead of his allotted span of three score years and ten.

Often, it is only when someone dies that you learn more about their early life. For me that was true – apart from the country of his birth, I had to admit to knowing next to nothing about Botha’s background. Just how could someone born in a rural district outside of Johannesburg end up singing some of the most famous roles in Western European classical music? It was only when I read various obituaries that I realised for the first time that we had far more in common than I could ever have known. Whilst I don’t have any connections to the Post Office beyond an undergraduate Christmas holiday job (Johan’s parents were the local post-master and post-mistress and he himself described himself as having ‘grown up among the mail bags’), he spent part of his childhood in Rustenberg, near Sun City, where I too spent a happy month in the mid-1990s training South African civil servants. Not that Johan and I would have bumped into each other, since in 1995 he was making his Covent Garden debut in the role of Rodolfo in Puccini’s La Bohème – the first of 81 performances in the House.

Johan’s professional debut came just six years before this Bohème performance, in the role of Max in Weber’s Der Freischütz in Johannesburg. Already the Wagner gene must have been apparent, since in best romantic tradition, he was heard by Norbert Balatsch, the famed chorus master at Bayreuth, who invited him to join the Wagner chorus the following summer. This experience was followed by a number of minor engagements at smaller German opera houses, but his big breakthrough came when he stepped in to sing more Puccini – this time Pinkerton in Madama Butterfly at the Bastille in Paris in 1993; learning the Italian part in two days. “Within two weeks I had signed contracts with Covent Garden, the Met, Vienna Volksoper and Berlin Opera,” he was later to recall. And the rest, as they say, is history – until cancer robbed us of his marvellous talents.

By no stretch of the imagination do I qualify as a legitimate music critic. You might have
guessed by now that I listen to Wagner (and indeed much of the music of Strauss) with my heart and not my head. So for this self-confessed romantic, what was it like to listen to Johan Botha sing those roles so dear to me and my lately departed father with whom I shared so many special magical evenings over the past 40 years? For sure this is an age in which looks seem to matter as much as voice – for male and female singers - so no wonder the likes of Jonas Kaufman and Klaus Florian Vogt are in demand by opera houses the world over; indeed I too am counted among their fans. I have every sympathy when I read that when criticised for his physical size, Johan Botha commented that he had “done every diet you can think of”; adding that he was hurt by suggestions that he was not believable as an on-stage lover. “I sing like one,” he insisted. However, in my book, like those glorious heldentenors of yesteryear, Johan’s voice and acting in some of my very favourite roles on the opera stage were just ‘the biz’.

It was 2001 when my father and I first saw Botha on the stage at Covent Garden as Strauss’s Emperor, singing alongside Deborah Voigt in a magical production of Die Frau. He made a big impression in every sense of the word in a role that isn’t huge, but one that is critical to the outplaying of that fairy tale opera with its rich, gorgeous music. Ironically, some fourteen years later it was also to be in this same role that we had our last hearing and seeing of Botha in what the Independent acclaimed as the ‘ideal cast’, alongside the likes of the great Johan Reuter singing Barak, another favourite role of mine. Kasper Holten’s own tribute to Botha made mention of this production too - ‘the memory of this performance will long stay with us’ - it was indeed the perfect performance - and no matter how many performances of our favourite operas we have seen can we ever claim to have seen one of those? But perfect it was and Botha’s lyrical and empathetic Emperor played an important part in making that so.

And then there was Lohengrin... for both my father and I, the ultimate desert island disc, the one that we’d rush to save from those crashing waves, without hesitation. If you go to the Covent Garden website and find their tribute to Botha you can link to a rendition of ‘In fernem Land’, Lohengrin’s farewell to Elsa - surely one of the saddest and most reluctant, yet beautiful goodbyes in all opera, penned by a young Wagner with the writing of Tristan still many years aheads. I am sure you will be as moved as we were in 2009 when, once again at Covent Garden, we were privileged to see and hear Botha in what for me was probably the rôle best suited to his voice. We were seated next to a young Australian woman who, overcome by the sheer magic that is Act 1, found herself sobbing into my father’s handkerchief, declaring herself hooked for life, as if to some dreadful narcotic - all three of us totally enthralled by the passion, beauty and drama of both Botha’s interpretation and Semyon Bychkov’s sympathetic musical interpretation.

As the Daily Telegraph noted of Botha’s Tannhauser in 2010, ‘that rare thing, a true Wagnerian tenor’. Gone too soon indeed. Who knows what other roles he would have tackled with equal ease? He died with a full diary of singing engagements to the end of 2017 and beyond; including another date with Lohengrin, this time in Berlin. But now rest in peace Johan Botha and thank you from this Wagner nut for so many precious musical memories.

He is survived by his wife, Sonja, whom he married in 1992, and by their two sons.
A message from the Chairman
Richard Miles

Since the last edition of *Wagner News* when I wrote about some of the changes we have had on the committee since the spring, there have been a few more changes in responsibilities and in committee membership. I have summarised the main role and responsibilities of the committee below and all their contact details can be found at the end of the magazine:

**Richard Miles, Chairman** – responsible for chairing committee meetings, the external relations of the society with other Wagner societies, with Bayreuth, with the RWVI, with the President, and also the promotion of the society generally

**Cormac Cawley, Secretary** – Cormac took over as secretary from David Pope, who has resigned, with effect from the last committee meeting, and is responsible for all formal record keeping of the society, producing agendas and minutes of the committee meetings and also for organizing the AGM, for reporting to the Charity Commissioners, and other correspondence and communications. Cormac also manages the website and sends out the email bulletins to members.

**Neil King, Treasurer** – responsible for all financial matters including the preparation of the monthly and annual accounts, managing our bank accounts and investments, banking of takings from events and prompt settlement of all invoices etc. Since the departures of Margaret Murphy (former Membership Secretary) and Mike Morgan (former Ticket Secretary), Neil has also taken on these roles as well as continuing to work on the accurate migration of paper-based records to the online database.

**Raymond Godson, Editor, Wagner News** – responsible for the production of this magazine, managing contributions from members and other sources, and selling advertising space etc.

**Jan Leigh, Events Secretary** – Jan manages the events that the society arranges including room hire, booking speakers, catering and the management of the forthcoming Singing Competition where she has taken over from Andrea Buchanan. She is responsible for the marketing of the society and its events and manages our external advertising.

**Geoffrey Griffiths, Archivist** - Geoffrey holds the archive at his home and regularly adds to it; he is also responsible for managing members’ access to it and provides Ray with the ‘from the archives’ copy for *Wagner News*. The longest-serving member of the committee, he is a mine of useful and historical information.

**Jan Rynkiewicz, Committee Member** – Jan was co-opted onto the committee at the last meeting, partly volunteering to ensure that the committee numbers remain at least at the minimum level required by the constitution, but also to bring his wealth of knowledge of corporate governance and risk control to the committee ensuring that we follow best practice in all things.

All members are reminded that we urgently seek further committee members with relevant skills to serve on the committee and so spread the workload and ensure that a wide range of views and opinions are heard at committee meetings; a society will only thrive if members are prepared to commit their time and expertise to its management and so if you are interested in joining us, please contact me directly by email, post or phone - details at the end of the magazine.
Another, this time sadly early, death of one of the greatest living Wagner heldentenors casts a sad shadow over the triumph of Gwyneth Jones not only in reaching her eightieth birthday but in continuing to play such a major role in the cultural life of the world. I wish I had been able to see her still on stage in March of this year making her role debut as the Countess in Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* in a new production of the opera at the Staatstheater, Braunschweig: almost 50 years after I was lucky enough, admittedly after spending a night on the Floral Street pavement, to see her glorious Sieglinde so rapturously described by Victor Gollancz in our last issue.

The original main focus of this edition was intended to be Bayreuth 2016 but Botha’s death and the discovery of the significance of 7 November 2016 have led to its prominence being diluted somewhat. However, we do still have a miscellany of reviews of performances and related reminiscences which I hope you will find stimulating.

In the October 2015 edition of Wagner News, Roger Lee, following the Wagner Symposium, suggested that we would welcome your suggestions for thought-provoking topics which can provide us with opportunities to set up a publishable exchange of ideas by picking the brains of our readers.

There may be a field of enquiry which you feel that you can open with a discursive, polemical or interrogatory introduction to probe, to challenge or to bring a fresh approach to prevailing assumptions or just to put out feelers for responses to an original proposal. I would like to reissue this invitation. Roger has kindly offered to moderate any such exchanges. He writes: “by raising a query, challenging something published in Wagner News or taking a fresh approach to a topic, you might encourage others to join the discussion”. I look forward to hearing from you if you would like to start this ball rolling.

The archive items in this edition are both reminders that some things never change. The booing at the first performance of the Chéreau Ring forty years ago are a reminder that a similar reception for the Castorf Ring in 2013 and subsequent years was not unique. One does however doubt whether the last performance of Castorf’s production will engender a similar response to the 45 minute standing ovation that greeted the final performance of the Chéreau Ring. Similarly the circumstances of Reginald Goodall’s retirement from the presidency of our Society arouse a certain sense of *déjà vu*.

These exchanges also prompted our Treasurer to suggest that we might invite our members to describe the worst productions that they have ever seen … I have mixed feelings as I happen to believe that the Chéreau Ring (see archive article) was a magnificent achievement and am sure that, in 1976, it would have qualified as a “worst production” for many of the audience.
By the time Uwe Eric Laufenberg’s new production of Parsifal opened in July the questions of security, and artistic in fighting, seemed to have died down. Even though the state gala had been cancelled and there was increased security at the foot of the Green Hill, during the festival itself there seemed little threat. Even the questions as to the sudden departure of Andris Nelsons and replacement by Hartmut Haenchen seemed to have subsided, and we were left with the production itself, about which we could now make up our own minds.

By the end of the evening there were very mixed feelings about the production, the orchestral performance and the vocal and acting skills of the cast. Did the result deserve the media attention and the security fears? How offensive, or critical of Islam was the production in reality? And how satisfying was the performance as a meaningful theatrical experience? Ultimately the message of the director was a conciliatory one: that of putting aside all religions, but the practical result was a mixture of world class Gesamtkunstwerk, and what appeared to be provincial directorial decisions detrimental and distracting to the performances on stage.

Ultimately it is through our individual interpretation of the symbols and representations of what we see on stage that brings us the meaning of a production. Much had been made prior to the first night of the potentially offensive anti-Islamic references in the production. These references concerned the comparison of the obviously Christian Knights of the Grail, with the world of Klingsor, which seemed very much the world of Islam. This directorial choice immediately has associations for an audience, between the ‘good’ of the Grail knights and the ‘evil’ of Klingsor, and therefore Islam. In reality, the staging proved to be more complex, but this was the basic criticism the production faced. The director expressed the wish to set the kingdom of the Grail in a land where Christianity was under threat, and Act I took place in a war torn Middle East. The knights of the Grail were a religious order, dressed as monks or priests, with a specific task of helping refugees from a conflict in the setting of a rundown church. This interior church set was to be the basis of each act, modified accordingly, which resulted in confining the action to a series of interiors. In Act II this single set was transformed into Klingsor’s Islamic realm by representing a Moorish tiled bath house. Here the Flower Maidens initially appeared in burkas but to seduce Parsifal, changed into the clichéd orientalism of belly dancers.
However, the production was more complex than this basic opposition against which offence could be taken. Kundry, in a burka in Act I is the obvious outsider when she comes into the church and is hounded by the refugees at her entrance, later hiding from the security forces that enter the church. And we feel compassion for her in her position. Parsifal also joins these Western security forces in the attack on Klingsor’s kingdom to take back the spear. Having taken the spear from Klingsor and breaking it in two to form a cross, he processes out of Klingsor’s kingdom and his troops fall in behind him, mission accomplished. How ‘good’ are these troops and their military aim? And how Muslim is Klingsor himself? Although master of this realm he taunts a bound Amfortas in Act II that, once a Grail knight, he will now use a prayer mat, but he has to use a compass to find in which direction to pray. He also has a collection of crucifixes (taken from the knights he has captured?) and still punishes himself through flagellation. The relationships are not as clear cut as we were thought to believe.

But by the end of Act III, set again in the church setting of Act I, the redemption that Parsifal is to bring is not the acceptance of one religion, but the rejection of all religions, and the ultimate coming together of not only all people, but of all things in a unification of time and space. In Act III the Knights of the Grail enter for Titurel’s funeral but this becomes an argument not between themselves, but between representatives of different religious factions. Parsifal’s redemption is through calming these arguments. He places the broken spear in Titurel’s coffin, inspiring all religions to leave the symbol of their religion behind in the same way. Not only does the opera end with this act of rejection and reconciliation, but the Church set itself breaks apart as if dissolving in time and space. At first this concept sounds pretentious but ties in philosophically with Wagner’s influences: the nature of realism and matter, the connectedness of all things, and the notions that follow from this, i.e. love for the fellow man because of that interconnectedness. It is a valid concept when, carried out clearly in theatrical terms, and this end to Act III saved the production from the criticism of the first part of the act that will be discussed below.

The dissolving of the set at the end of Act III also is the culmination in a series of directorial choices, some successful, and some not so, contrasting a detailed, realistic approach, which that of an abstract representation. In Act I the direction of the production is one of extreme realism and detail, with attentive, nuanced performances from the performers. Act II rejects this realism and moves to an abstract representation to externally represent the internal thoughts and motivations of the protagonists. Finally, the third act became an awkward mixture of both worlds, before culminating in the dissolving of the stage reality and stage set itself.

But first a note on realism. The realism of Act I is not the staged realism of doggedly followed stage directions of an almost religiously experienced work, but a creation of a world on the stage by the performers in which we can wholly believe. Within this world of the first scene of Act I this realism is created through directorial detail for all the characters. At the head of this is an extraordinary acting performance from Georg Zeppenfeld as Gurnemanz supported by detailed work from even the smaller roles, from the Knappe teasing each other, to the concern (of the Gralsritter) for Amfortas. Zeppenfeld treats each word with lieder like attention, and matches this with a detailed, nuanced and thoughtful performance. Countless
examples in his performance showed this: he is the leader of the community, although not treated with the greatest respect by the Gralsritter who bring in Amfortas and he sits, removes his glasses in tiredness and when asked who is the one that will save him, fidgets in agitation, replaces his glasses and moves away to avoid their questions; he forgets that he has the balm from Kundry, and only remembers as he is leaving that it is in his pocket, and he turns back to give it to Amfortas. It is in sympathetic details like this he builds an enthralling characterisation.

It is this level of detail that is lost in Act II to the detriment of the production and is replaced by an intellectually interesting, but theatrically clumsy attempt to externalise the thoughts of Parsifal and Kundry with the introduction of a silent Amfortas who engages and reacts through the scene. It is possibly this introduction that led the German press to describe the production as provincial. Amfortas was previously seen bound and gagged and taunted by Klingsor (this spectator hoped that this was in fact Gawan who had been captured after leaving without permission, in a narrative continuation of Act I.) As Kundry begins to seduce Parsifal, Amfortas watches from behind a grill and as Kundry kisses Parsifal, in an obvious association with his original crime, Amfortas enters and participates in Parsifal’s realisation in a clumsy, distracting series of entrances and exits, including both Amfortas and Parsifal having sex with Kundry on a table. These distractions led to too many changes of focus for an audience confused where to look on stage, meaning the motives in fact are not clarified, but even further confused.

Act III continues in this clumsy mix of these contrasting styles. The church where the knights had looked after the refugees has now become overgrown bizarrely with a tropical forest and what could have been a welcome return to the production values of Act I again turns to abstract representation. During the Act, Gurnemanz is repeatedly upstaged. Spring enters in the shape of the tropical forest shuddering forward into the church, (one of the problems for this act created by the internal only settings of the production): a waterfall appears at the rear of the stage: women in various states of undress cavort in the Eden-like spring setting, and Kundry, now aged and in wheelchair, is surrounded in peace and harmony by a perfect family group. Unfortunately, during all this, we have been trying to listen to Gurnemanz. Again, is the “provincial theatre” criticism justified?

We have deliberately discussed the production in terms of staging, semiotics and dramaturgy. The reasons for this are that musically the performance cannot be criticised as other than world class, without entering into the debate of singers past and present. We have already mentioned the achievement of Zeppenfeld as Gurnemanz in terms of his performance with a secure tone, expressive and attentive to every word. He was rightfully recognised as the star of the performance. Klaus Florian Vogt’s performance is limited by his acting abilities, especially in contrast to the detailed attention of Zeppenfeld, and we get only broad brushstroke acting, at times distancing the vocal expression from the practical action. His tone is of course clear, bright, and effortless with
no sign of tiring throughout the performance. As Amfortas Ryan McKinney delivered a concentrated performance in a firm, expressive tone as did Gerd Grochowski as Klingsor. Elena Pankratova as Kundry, again not as nuanced as Zeppenfeld, performed in a broader but sincere acting style and delivered an ‘und lachte’ to chill the spine. Under Haenchen the orchestra played at a modest tempo, but did not quite investigate the emotional depths of the score.

Was the performance ultimately satisfactory? For this audience member the answer had to be no, despite the high hopes at the first interval. The directorial choices of Act II may have been intellectually interesting, but ultimately handicapped the performances, not helped by smaller practical directorial choices of stage pictures, distracting entrances and exits to allow costume changes or to underline a concept, but within this framework the cast still provided fine performances. The directorial choices of Act III only began to make sense once we had returned to the Grail chamber, and the final concepts of religious tolerance, indeed compassion, again raised the production dramaturgy to international standards. Herheim’s success with the previous Parsifal set a standard which was very hard to follow. At times it did reach that level as a moving, original, thoughtful piece of work, marred by perhaps correctly described provincial theatre ideas.

Alan Ridgewell

Alan Ridgewell has a first class honours degree in Opera Studies and is currently preparing to begin a PhD in operatic performance semantics and aesthetics, and directorial practice. Having worked in support and development for the last 15 years for a global software company, he has also worked as an director, actor and singer. He has a bad back after having to carry Kim Begley across a stage, and mistimed picking him up.

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

Andrew Brannon

I vowed never to return to Bayreuth after the 2013 Ring Cycle….the antics with the woodbird, plastic crocodiles and more serious messing around with matters pertinent to the story. Examples such as the scene in Hunding’s cabin where Sieglinde recognises Siegmund whilst handing him a drink, but couldn’t even see him in the ludicrous three storey log cabin of Karstorf’s set, made me ‘long for Longborough’ and their productions which actually make sense of the story.

However, reviews of the new 2015 ‘Tristan’ persuaded me to apply for tickets and I was lucky enough to receive tickets for both ‘Tristan’ and ‘Parsifal’ the following night.

We made the pilgrimage to the ‘Green Hill’ via Munich, staying in 2 different hotels in 3 nights, noting that the town of Bayreuth seemed pretty much the same as ever. At the Opera House, no cushions or big bags/bottles were allowed in, although the cushions for hire were still available, thank goodness.

First thing we noticed on the hill was additional security, a one-way system for cars/buses etc, but being German, all this worked efficiently enough.

We took our seats for Tristan with great expectations ……. the curtains covering the doors
closed, all was dark…then stage curtain up to reveal - what looked like a series of interlinked fire escapes! The raising and lowering of one of these fire escape platforms was, I concede, redolent of a ship bridge or deck.

The opening was confusing as various characters were scattered amongst these fire escapes, most of them not singing Kurwenal’s costume made him look like an off-duty PC going out for an evening. Brangaene’s singing was very well received at the first interval.

The potion scene was rather silly as the lovers didn’t drink but held hands and poured what looked like soup over their hands.

Act II started with Isolde and Brangaene being brought on roughly by guards – why? The set now looked like upturned cycle racks or football turnstiles ….. the scene lit by searchlights, which were silly and distracting.

Kurwenaal climbed up the wall during the duet- noisy, distracting and, to my mind, pointless and damaging. Marke was very well sung. The duel was not a duel as Tristan was blindfold, hand-cuffed and kneeling.

Act III had an unusual opening, Kurwenal and three comrades sit round red bicycle lights which were the ‘camp fire’. Tristan moved around an awful lot, willing Isolde to come. Isolde kept appearing in triangular shapes as illusory ships.

The closing scene was wonderful, the music sublime. Isolde almost succeeded in willing Tristan back to life.

Ultimately, the production worked because of the relationship between the two principals. There was major applause and multiple curtain calls. The booing matched the cheering when Katharina Wagner appeared on stage (this was the opening night of the season for this opera).

A heavy police presence overlooked us as we descended the Green Hill to return to our hotel.
When the Bayreuth Festival opened this year, not only did it have a new production of *Parsifal*, it also boasted a new instrument for the “Grail-bells” in Acts I and III of the opera. This new instrument can best be described as a large, vertical dulcimer that is played with wooden mallets tipped with felt like the hammers inside a piano. The design was based on a dulcimer built for Siegfried Wagner in 1926/7 and was made by a piano-builder in Bayreuth, Steingraeber & Söhne. When it was tested by Christian Thielemann, who is now the esteemed Music Director of the Bayreuth Festival, he exclaimed “*These are the best Parsifal bells I ever heard*”.

When Wagner was writing *Parsifal*, he could have had no idea just how difficult it would be for orchestras then, and even now, to reproduce the sound-world he envisaged for the
transitional music in Acts I and III. He wanted an *ostinato* theme played in the lower bass register on the four bells C, G, A and E, but not to sound like church bells. He asked the Bayreuth piano-builder Eduard Steingraeber to build an upright piano-like instrument with four wide keys and large hammers. This instrument is still extant and I was lucky enough to see it on display in Leipzig during Wagner’s bi-centenary festivities. However, Wagner was not satisfied with the sounds the instrument produced, so for the premier of *Parsifal* in 1882 he used it in conjunction with Chinese tam-tams to introduce overtones.

Astonishingly, Wagner’s own manuscript showing the four notes he wanted has also survived and it is shown below.

Siegfried Wagner faced the same problem as did his father and he resolved it in a most extraordinary, innovative, two-pronged approach. Firstly, he asked Steingraeber to build a vertical 4-note dulcimer to be played by hand with hammers. Secondly, he designed four
enormous steel drums, supported on wheels so that they could be moved around backstage. These “tone barrels” contained saw blades suspended inside them in order to produce brighter overtones. The barrels were were played with wooden mallets by four percussionists whilst a fifth played the vertical dulcimer; a backstage conductor was also necessary. Sadly, these majestic instruments were cannibalised for their steel during world war two.

In summary, this article explains that different kinds of acoustic “Grail-bells” have been used in Bayreuth since the premier of *Parsifal* right through to the present day. The photos show that the instruments differ markedly in design, appearance, size, shape, materials of construction, method of playing and manoeuvrability. Despite these differences, all were intended to produce the same four bass notes specified in Wagner’s score. Clearly, Wagner set a difficult task for instrument makers, conductors and percussionists alike.

When the new “Grail-bells” instrument is not being used in the Festspielhaus it can be seen and heard in Steingraeber Haus, Bayreuth. It can be rented by orchestras and theatres around the world so that wider audiences can hear an authentic “Grail-bells” sound. To my knowledge no Wagner Society has yet hired it for their Christmas party……………..

*Photo credits (apart from tone barrels): Steingraeber & Söhne, Bayreuth*
CATHERINE FOSTER
BAYREUTH’S SUPREME ENGLISH BRÜNNHILDE
Interviewed by Michael Bousfield during his recent visit to Bayreuth.

As one of the most renowned Brünnhildes on stage today Catherine has sung this role in all performances of the Frank Castorf Ring since its inception in 2013.

Nottingham born, Catherine qualified and practiced as a midwife before beginning her professional career. Since that time, Catherine’s voice has been completely silent in her own country. As a result she is, sadly, largely unknown in the UK.

MB: Please tell us about some of your earliest musical experiences and recollections.

CF: My mother was clearing out her attic some time ago and came across an old exercise book written when I was about ten. I had been asked what I wanted to do when grown up: I did not write “I would like to be” but “I am going to be a nurse and a singer” and alongside it I drew a picture of me as a nurse and another of me holding a microphone. And this I had known since age three! Everybody in the family used to say I sang before I spoke. One time when I was about five, in mid-July, my terrified mother lost me when I had wandered over the road and I was found singing Away in a Manger down the aisle of the church! At school I wanted to do acting but was always put into the choir.

After becoming a senior midwife, I met music teacher Pamela Cook MBE: she had a lot of repairing to do as I did not have a very good technique; we had to go back to ground zero. She took the voice right back and after 18 months said that to progress I must go to College. I had very little money and a mortgage – so had to take a leap of faith. I knew that I would always feel for the rest of my life: if I don’t do this would I always wonder what I could have been?

MB You joined the Birmingham Conservatoire. Where did this lead?

CF: Yes, I was there between 1995 and 1997 under the guidance and tutelage of Pamela, who remained my teacher until 2013. I was awarded a silver coin by the Worshipful Company of Musicians for my achievements in passing through the Conservatoire in just two years. In 1997 I received the Dame Eva Turner award to continue my studies at the Royal Northern College of Music and in 1997/98 I was sponsored by Sir Peter Moores for a year’s study at the Opera Studio in London in the 1998/99 season. I was awarded an honorary degree not long after moving to Germany and in 2014 became an Honorary Fellow of the Birmingham Conservatoire for my achievements as an opera singer - most notably for being the third British Brünnhilde to sing in Bayreuth.

My first professional engagement was as the Queen of the Night with Opera Northern Ireland in 1998 and then with Welsh National Opera - working with Anthony Negus – who is a very dear friend and the same role later for ENO in 2000 (many years later, Anthony asked me to sing Brünnhilde at Longborough, but by that time I was sadly unavailable).

Apart from the odd cover and small roles, I obtained very little work in the UK. Vast numbers
of auditions led to nothing. I did not want to mess around trying to get small parts so I thought I would see if I could find any work in Germany where there were so many more opera houses. My agent said: “But you don’t speak German” to which I replied “and - if I get a job I will learn it!” I had very little money but I was very determined, I hired a pianist, room and recording equipment to make a CD in London with what I had left and Pamela Cook came down to ensure the singing was good enough, printed and sent off 100 CDs and letters to agents in Germany, and from those I had three replies offering me an audition! I had one remaining audition in Dusseldorf and rang my husband saying “If I don’t get this job, I will come back and be a midwife”. I was of course at this point very wound up at the prospect of not getting any further, but, from that audition I was sent to Weimar and was immediately offered a fixed contract mainly for the role of Elizabeth in Tannhäuser by George Albrecht (GMD of DNT Weimar) –other firebrand ladies that I really like followed over the next few seasons: Tosca (which I would love to do again), Elektra, Turandot, Senta, Fidelio, Il Trovatore, and Isolde which is the hardest role I have ever learnt (not sung which are, of course, Elektra and Brünnhilde); I have spoken to a lot of sopranos about Isolde and it is almost unanimously agreed to be one of the hardest and time consuming roles to memorise.

MB: How did you first start with Brünnhilde – and why? And how did your career develop thereafter?

CF: At the opera studio, it was felt I should follow a coloratura career, Donizetti, Bellini and the like. Early on Pam Cook wisely wisely advised that choosing a role is not about learning the notes and being able to sing the part. I was told to look at the roles you are offered; look at the character and who that is - and are you that person and can you sing it?

When Weimar first planned the Ring Cycle from 2006 to 2008 I was due to do Freia, Sieglinde, Brünnhilde and Gutrune. I wasn’t 100% happy in doing Brünnhilde that early in my career. When I think back I had literally only been really singing on stage for five years since the beginning of my fixed contract in Weimar. Who starts to sing Brünnhilde that early I asked myself! Well I studied Sieglinde for six months but I kept thinking about Brünnhilde and how I felt she kept ‘calling’ to me till I decided to give her a try; it was just like butter on the voice! I loved her from the second I began to sing the role – I knew it was right and that I was doing the right thing. I have felt the same way about Elektra, Isolde, Abigaille and all the other big strong ladies I sing. I then went on to sing all three Brünnhildes and have never looked back.

I had one lesson with Dame Anne Evans – a wonderful lady - not long after having first taken on the role of Brünnhilde in Weimar, I was very happy to meet Dame Anne as she was one of the reasons I believed I could sing Brünnhilde. In studying the role I knew I was a lighter weight soprano in the middle and lower ranges having come down from a dramatic coloratura, but as my teachers pointed out the first Brünnhilde came from Rossini and a good example of a recent Brünnhilde was Dame Anne Evans. I bought her 1990s Bayreuth recording and realised I was able to sing the role. I still listen to Dame Anne during my car trips to and from Bayreuth! – as I have long since realised with these big roles one never stops learning they just keep maturing like a very good wine and at each new opening there is another new flavour to be examined and enjoyed.
I also asked her about Elektra and was advised to be really careful. Does it really ruin the voice or is it a role for singers whose voices are already on the way out? I have sung it every year since 2010 and Brünnhilde every year since 2006 – and people still say the voice sounds fresh – so it is clearly the right repertoire for me.

Back in 2003 I first studied Senta and had the good fortune to meet and study German with my present language teacher (who has been teaching singers for over 50 years). We often laugh about how I was then a complete novice. So much so that she felt that by simplifying the vowel sounds into five basic ones: we could get those right and then move on – this of course is now a standing joke! As experience has taught me – the technique of singing takes years to master and must be constantly adjusted and balanced. We sing with our whole bodies both physically and mentally, which requires fine tuning and constant adjusting to play our voices to their maximum potential I am now branching into masterclasses as the final realisation of myself and to pass on the great legacy of the two exceptional teachers I have had the privilege of studying with.

MB: In singing Brünnhilde are there any parts – particularly challenging or demanding - which you are relieved to get out of the way?

CF: I do not allow myself to think that way. When I step on the stage I am the character I am singing,. If, however, I am feeling slightly under the weather, if there were anything I would like cut it would be the Hojo tohos !!! which I find the most demanding entry because everyone is waiting for them: the voice has to be warmed up 110% even more than In Questa Reggia.

MB: Please tell us some of your future roles.

CF: Following the Ring here I sing Elektra in Sao Paulo. I have Senta in Valencia, Isolde and Elektra in Mannheim and am doing Turandot a couple of times next year (Cologne and Berlin) and the Loriot “Ring in einem Abend” in Munich with the Weimar orchestra. I also have the Mahler eighth next year. I will be returning for the fifth and final year of Frank Castorf’s Ring in Bayreuth – also a huge privilege being about the only protagonist in the Ring cycle to do all five years of a production.

MB: And roles you would like to sing?

Fundamentally I think my voice best suits Verdi, Wagner and Strauss but I would like to do Lady Macbeth (Verdi), Minnie, Rosalinde in Die Fledermaus, the Frau in Strauss’s fabulous work Die Frau ohne Schatten (I sang the Kaiserin in Dresden back in 2004), Arabella, and many others but in truth what usually happens is that, as offers come in, one decides whether it is a suitable role or not. Singers need a couple of years to learn a new role simply to fit in the learning process with their other commitments. I know if I am committed to a production of Elektra or a full Ring cycle there isn’t much opportunity for learning. I have a new role I am studying for the future and it is around the two years before I need to sing it.

MB: As someone who has sung about 40 Ring cycles to date in locations such as Weimar, Hamburg, Berlin, Shanghai, Cologne, Essen, Budapest, Tokyo, Riga, Barcelona – not to mention Bayreuth – how do you feel about your non-appearance in British opera houses?

I last sang in London in 2000 – and I fear that since then it has been out of sight out of mind; it
is amazing what that Channel does! There are not a lot of opportunities in Britain compared to Germany; I needed experience – and I gained that in Weimar – which I would not have done in Britain. You need a fest position and for longer than a year. I would obviously like to sing in my own country – and there are people who have said they would love to hear me.

MB: Thank you very much, Catherine, and may we wish you well for the rest of your career – and add the fervent hope that you will soon take your rightful place on the UK opera stage!

Michael Bousfield

Michael Bousfield is Chairman of the Music Club of London and a former Wagner Society Committee member.

BAYREUTH 2016
The diaries of two members
Anthony Spooner

A week of fluctuating emotions

We have attended nine out of the past ten Festivals and these are my recollections of this year’s experience.

Sunday 24 July. Our flight to Frankfurt is delayed at Heathrow, as two burly, armed police officers remove a passenger from the aircraft. We only just make our connection to Nuremberg … but our luggage isn’t so lucky. We face the unnerving prospect of attending a Bayreuth opening night in our travelling clothes. But we put this to one side when we safely reach the hotel Goldener Hirsch and are welcomed back as old friends.

Monday 25 July. Quickly off to an outfitters t. The possibility of a black tie and white tee shirt is not at all appealing, but fortunately the ever-efficient Lufthansa delivers our bags in good time.

Up the Hill to begin the security checks – five sets in all before we get to our seats. Passports and tickets thoroughly examined and the police presence very apparent. No red carpet this year as recent terrorist attacks in Germany have greatly increased security concerns. The auditorium fills and the audience turns to watch the dignitaries arrive in their boxes – but they don’t turn up. A great outcry in the local papers the following day.

The lights dim and Parsifal unfolds. No doubt more erudite reviews of the work will appear in this magazine, but setting the work in a war-scarred church in what, according to the giant map which unfolds on the screen, is currently IS-occupied Iraq, was provocative. But, as ever, the conducting and the orchestra are excellent and the voices sublime. Klaus Florian Vogt in the title role does a manful job, although I feel he is better suited to Lohengrin. The drama and the setting is powerful and effective and Georg Zeppenfeld, as Gurnemanz, is outstanding (even if he does wear a silly beanie hat).
All in all, a great opening night, topped off by an excellent meal and a bottle of Corvo Bianco provided by our friends Tina and Vincenzo at the Mediterraneo Ristorante.

**Tuesday 26 July** The Ring begins again today. We first saw this production at its initial outing back in 2013 and thought it dreadful: the orchestra and cast were outstanding, but we found Castorf’s half-baked creation frightful. Conscious, however, that one’s critical views can alter over time, we decided to return and to brave it again. Could it possibly be as bad as we remembered? No. It’s worse: a production which seems deliberately disrespectful towards the drama, the music, the audience and the composer. We can only hope this production might have persuaded the Festival’s powers-that-be that Regietheater extremism has its limits. Iain Paterson and Sarah Connolly are impressive and Denić’s stage designs are outstanding, here and throughout the cycle - what a waste.

Little or no security around the Festspielhaus tonight - almost entirely back to normal.

**Wednesday 27 July** We have a special birthday in the family today. So, celebrations, presents and gentle revelry here in Bayreuth and this evening is our most-loved episode of the cycle, Die Walküre. Leaving aside the offensive production already touched upon, and the silly running about of the “heroes” with their flags before they’re all gassed to death, the cast and the orchestra are remarkable and the evening is extremely enjoyable. Catherine Foster is outstanding. Needless to say, champagne with our dinner following the performance.

**Thursday 28 July** Today is a free day, so up to the Hofgarten with our books, and a visit to Wahnfried. The house has recently been renovated and now boasts a remarkable collection of scores and manuscripts of all types. While the museum is professional, bright and airy - and great efforts have been made to lay out a visual record of Wagner’s life and work - I missed the previous “feel” of the place. The duft of the Wagner residence has now completely vanished and we are simply left with a modern, well-lit, well-run, but somewhat anodyne, museum.

**Friday 29 July** Aah, Siegfried this evening. Possibility the most offensive element of the Castorf cycle. The communist leader Mount Rushmore lookalike and the inconsequential manservant kept in chains, who climbs in and out of a caravan’s back window, are the least of the irrelevancies. But it was good to note that the copulating crocodiles in this ridiculous staging of the final act have at least produced three small progeny over the intervening years. I shan’t bother to detail the preposterous and immaterial video footage, the oral sex, the Kalashnikov rifle, etc etc etc....

**Saturday 30 July** A break from the Ring today as we head up the Hill for Holländer. We were not particularly taken with it when first seen a couple of years back, but were surprisingly impressed with the production tonight. Leaving aside some of Hetzer’s more outlandish props and light displays in the opening act, the cast, chorus, conductor and orchestra performed wonderfully and all deserved the acclamation they received.

**Sunday 31 July** All “good” things must come to an end and Göttterdammerung brings this controversial production to a close. Siegfried is murdered just out of sight, behind the counter of a tacky kebab shop, and the offense caused by this, and all the previous instalments, boils over. With the final curtain, catcalls and boos ring out yet again from this knowledgeable audience. Whilst cheers and stomping applause greet the conductor, soloists and chorus (Conolly, Milling and Dohmen particularly impressive) this deliberately offensive production has not grown on us, nor, it seems, on Bayreuth’s discerning clientèle
Monday 1 August. Flights back to London today and sad goodbyes to our lovely friends at the Goldener Hirsch and the Mediterraneo. Bayreuth is simply redolent of the Wagner influence. His name, his family and his creations are seen everywhere even in building works. Whilst we may not have appreciated some of the more outrageous aspects of the performances we attended this year, we would not have missed any of them for the world, and greatly look forward to our return. Hopefully, next year.

BAYREUTH 2016
The diaries of two members
Neil King

The Treasurer goes to Bayreuth and sees the Ring Cycle

Friday 19 August, Hotel Goldener Anker, Bayreuth
After a night at the T5 Sofitel (where the nouvelle cuisine in the ludicrously-named Belle Epoque restaurant left me eyeing the fish and chips on the room service menu enviously), we fly to Munich on a plane packed with fellow Bayreuth pilgrims: Jane Matthews from the NSW Wagner Society was a couple of rows back whilst the man behind me was deeply engrossed in the second volume of Paul Dawson-Bowling’s recent excellent book¹, surely not a coincidence?

We get to Munich and I hire a car, which, somewhat unexpectedly, turns out to be a brilliant white Range Rover; my mother, who is travelling with me, says it makes her feel like a footballer’s wife, this itself something of a first I imagine. Anyway, we get to Bayreuth and receive the customary warm and genuine welcome from half the staff of the Hotel Goldener Anker². At dinner I am surprised to see the wine (Ch Canon ’86) already open at our table but vaguely remember telling Eva last year to take the last four bottles of this wine off the list and reserve them for me; it remains as delicious as ever.

After dinner find myself having an intemperate conversation about the merits of Trump and Clinton; coming from Islington, I don’t expect anybody to have a good opinion about Trump but realise that he counts his supporters in the millions and so I should not really be so insular. Conversation ended when I was congratulated on the Brexit result, with which I do not agree.

Saturday 20 August, Bayreuth: Das Rheingold

At breakfast we meet John and Jerry from the USA, friends and veterans of many previous festivals, and catch-up on a year’s worth of news. (Initial urge to call them Tom and Jerry is fortunately overcome.) Bayreuth life begins to settle into its normal relaxed routine and I walk down to the station to get the English papers, this turns out to be a singularly pointless exercise since they only have yesterday’s Guardian which I have anyway brought with me.

For me, the sublime moment in Das Rheingold is Erda’s warning to Wotan to give up the ring. And well sung it was too although the Earth Mother was dressed as a high-class tart in gold lamé and white fur, and Wotan, evidently unmoved by her dire predictions as to the end

¹Paul Dawson-Bowling The Wagner Experience And Its Meaning To Us, London 2013
²Hotel Goldener Anker, Opernstraße 6, D-95444, Bayreuth (Prop: Eva Graf)
of the world, offered her a cigarette once she had finished and followed this up, apparently, with a quickie in the shower. I probably should not have been surprised since Walhalla was a motel on Route 66, the Rhine Maidens squirted Alberich with ketchup and mustard and some rather dubious, but scantily clad, young men were collecting the gold from the motel pool. Temperatures in the 90s in the Festspielhaus but no crocodiles yet.

After the performance we went to a dinner in the restaurant organised by the Southern California Wagner Society where I found myself sitting next to the blissful Nadine Weissmann (Erda) who promises to come and speak to the Wagner Society in London if she is ever engaged in the UK, and we also met some lovely new friends from San Francisco. There is a certain anglophone tendency at the last Ring Cycle since this is when the American, Canadian, Australian etc. Wagner Societies are allocated their tickets and, whether intentional or not, it seems to extend to the waiters since having addressed our waiter in my best (schoolboy) German, he answered in perfect English and, on subsequent enquiry, turned out to be from Woking.

**Sunday 21 August, Bayreuth: Die Walküre**

Being Sunday, it was an even quieter day although I did pop over to the main (indeed, seemingly now the only) decent bookshop, Markgräfin Buchhandlung. Maybe it was because the festival was drawing to a close, but their range of Wagner publications seemed subdued compared to previous years and they have unaccountably closed their English section. But there wasn’t really much time for reading anyway before needing to get ready for Die Walküre.

Wotan’s disinterest in the proceedings is still evident as he flicked through the paper (Pravda) during Fricka’s remonstrance (Fricka seemingly dressed as Cleopatra, Wotan now sporting a luxuriant beard) and, as Brünnhilde pleaded for her life Act III, he was wolfing down caviar before starting on the vodka straight from the bottle (know how he felt by this stage); he’d have had a cigarette too if she hadn’t ripped them out of his hand in an effort to get his attention. This may possibly be understandable since Die Walküre was set in the Ukrainian oil fields of the 1900s; the Walkuries being well-fed peasants in ethnic costume whilst the scantily clad dubious boys from last night now appeared to be recreating an anarcho-syndicalist version of Battleship Potemkin as a sideshow to the main proceedings.

Frankly, none of this made any sense whatsoever but it did make a glorious sound and there was Ch Pichon-Longueville ‘98 at dinner as a treat for Andrea Buchanan (our former secretary) who joined us for dinner since our visits slightly overlapped and we spent a long time putting the (Wagnerian) world to rights.

Still no crocodiles at all but there was a live turkey in Act I, which could be a metaphor for the whole production perhaps.

**Monday 22 August, Bayreuth: Tristan und Isolde**

This is an astonishing hotel; it is waiter service at breakfast but so far I haven’t ordered anything for myself since they not only remember what one had the day before but also the
year before. We’ve also resorted to taking iPads to breakfast since the station bookshop has still got no further than Friday’s papers, hoping for better tomorrow although once in Bayreuth the rest of the world seems rather remote and, being August, there is not much news anyway.

Saw this Tristan last year when new and approached it with great trepidation since I also saw the same director’s Die Meistersinger in 2008 but I was pleasantly surprised, and this year it seemed better still with tremendous cast (Stephen Gould, Petra Lang, Iain Paterson, Georg Zeppenfeld), with Thielemann on superlative form, and with a lot of bright yellow overcoats. I’ve never thought of Act II as anything other than a garden previously myself but here it was more a prison or laboratory and, far from being surprised, König Marke watched the all proceedings from the observation deck throughout. Odd.

John and Jerry joined us for dinner; the Bayreuth taxi arrangements having been disastrously reorganized, they easily beat us back to the hotel on foot whilst we waited for a cab these now having to be hailed somewhere in the park of the Festspielhaus such is the terrorist threat they represent. We all rather over-indulged on a Gevrey-Chambertin ‘98 at dinner as we try to work our way through the hotel wine list. I’ve even been promised a tour of the (presumably now depleted) cellars.

Tuesday 23 August, Bayreuth: Siegfried

Crocodiles, crocodiles, at last we got the crocodiles without which no Ring Cycle is complete3. Despite three years of speculation, I finally found an explanation for the crocodiles that was convincing. Apparently East German mothers used to warn their children not to venture to the west as there are crocodiles there. There is even a children’s book to this effect. Mystifying to us who would never have been brought up on such tales but imagine if it had been a bear wearing Wellington boots and eating marmalade sandwiches at a London station? The Germans would have been likewise mystified but we’d have found it crystal clear. Less
Admittedly they were infesting the Alexanderplatz Bahnhof in Berlin and one ate the woodbird but such is Bayreuth these days. And Erda was back, less high-class this time in a fur coat (and no....well, you get the picture) and far from descending into eternal sleep, she found the time to pleasure Wotan before he finally sent Siegfried on his way to wake Brünnhilde (she was sleeping under a tarpaulin at a Mount Rushmore-esque location with US presidents’ faces replaced by Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao). The director had done everything he conceivably could to disrupt the final love scene with its ravishing music but the happy couple sang on regardless whilst throwing rolls at each other. Not sure what we were meant to read into all this and it was booed more than last time.

Michael Bousfield and Margaret Murphy (our former membership secretary) joined us for dinner at the hotel and we had two bottles of the hotel’s miraculous (and astonishingly well-priced) Cos d’Estournel ‘93. Lovely to catch-up with Margaret who I hadn’t seen since the spring as well as getting to know Mike and his guest better. He, lucky fellow, was off to interview Catherine Foster in the morning for Wagner News and so we’re now all agog since she too is mystifyingly seldom engaged for roles in London.

Oh yes, and my mother has said that she wouldn’t come again to this Ring even if she were offered tickets. Hmmm...interesting to put this to the test…

Wednesday 24 August, Bayreuth: Parsifal

I don’t know if anybody remembers the small statues of Wagner dotted about the Festspielhaus gardens a year or two ago? Well, the sculptor now has a little shop in Bayreuth during the festival, also in Opernstraße, from which patrons may select from his extensive range (he didn’t just do Wagner - Goethe, Schiller, Charlemagne etc. are also there along with a bewildering array of gnomes, hares, snails, and frogs). My mother has got into the habit of buying me one to mark each visit to Bayreuth, and, as I already have a Wagner in the garden, I decided to opt for Weltanschauungsmodell III (2008), basically a man peering through field glasses into the distance. Not certain what the neighbours will make of this.

I expect Parsifal will be reviewed elsewhere in this Wagner News and so I shall say little of it here other that it is a truly magnificent creation and vastly moving as well as so faithful to the Parsifal message with a brave Ryan McKinney showing us, very graphically, the pain that uncovering the grail means for Amfortas. Klaus Florian Vogt was utterly wonderful as was the Kundry of Elena Pankratova (the first time I have seen Kundry aged as is required by the libretto) but Georg Zeppenfeld (Gurnemanz) was again on fine form too.

Another bottle of the Ch. Canon ’86 to celebrate at dinner and Eva took me on the long-promised tour of the cellars. The red wine cellar is deepest of all, with a temperature that barely fluctuates between winter and summer, it was where the family sheltered in the last days of the war. The stock there shows me just what a task I have ahead of me although even Eva acknowledged I had done my best!

Thursday 25 August, Bayreuth: Götterdämmerung

John and Jerry are leaving early in the morning to continue their holiday in northern Germany and so very kindly asked us to dinner to say goodbye with an injunction for me to order any wine I liked. Hardly need asking twice after last night.

*Ottmar Hörl Skulptur, Kembacher Straße 9, D-97877 Wertheim, Germany. www.ottmar-hoerl.de
And Götterdämmerung? Well, frankly, whilst still a jumble of irrelevant and pointless political notions, I think the director gave up on being really contrary by this stage, possibly feeling that having destroyed the whole of the last act of Siegfried there was little more he could achieve at Bayreuth short, I suppose, of actually burning the place down.

The Norns were bag-ladies shuffling about the stage although why the second Norn was repeatedly stabbing a dead turkey with a knitting needle I couldn’t really explain unless, of course, she was thinking of the director whilst doing so. Brünnhilde and Siegfried are now living happily in a silver caravan parked outside the New York Stock Exchange (you’d think they’d be moved on in the interests of homeland security) whilst Hagen has a mohican, Gunther appears to be a leather queen running a kebab stall at the Berlin Wall and Gutrune was initially in flamenco attire although she kept borrowing new frocks from Brünnhilde’s caravan. Add to this a chorus who appeared to have interrupted a stag night to sing for us and that Siegfried was done to death, not with the spear on which he had sworn his eternal oath, but with a baseball bat by some dustbins. Oh yes and there was a bloke in high heels and wedding veil pushing a pram full of potatoes that he subsequently emptied down the stairs - the symbolism of which is, sadly, just a bit beyond me.

All that said, in sequinned gold lamé, a sumptuous Catherine Foster in miraculous voice, was left to sing the immolation scene unmolested by the production and she returned the ring to the Rhine Maidens as required and for all this, we were all truly grateful.

Eva was also there tonight and we took a taxi back together, she pointing out a large villa at the bottom of the green hill that has been for sale for years: “Why don’t you buy it?” she suggested, “since it is so cheap.” Am seriously tempted but that might be the wine. I’ll wake up in the morning worried I have signed something but just think of it…..

Lovely dinner again – this hotel operates a set menu system and so every evening is a surprise (and usually a very pleasant one) and also takes away the chore of ordering when we were saying goodbye to friends we shall not see for almost a year. This system does not appeal to everyone: one evening a couple came in for dinner and made a tremendous fuss about there being no proper menu; the poor waitress even asked them what they might like so that the chef could prepare it for them specially but sadly not even this appealed and they left the restaurant delivering a torrent of complaint and sarcasm. Sad to report they were English.

**Friday 26 August, Bayreuth: Der Fliegende Höllander**

Beautiful sunny day and a late start tonight, so we decided to visit the town cemetery this morning since it is mentioned in many guidebooks as being interesting and so it proved to be. The Wagner family graves eluded us for a while since the signage didn’t seem helpful but there they all are along with the Liszt chapel. Worth a visit and lovely tranquil place, and a good walk too.

I didn’t like this production in earlier years and found it confusing and disjointed; I’m not quite sure what, if anything, is different this year, but I found myself swept up with it this evening and really enjoyed it finding all the scenes followed each other logically, that the factory setting worked, the characters were true to the libretto, the acting was good and the ending poignant but also amusing. Unfortunately I think tonight was the last outing of this production so I cannot recommend anybody to go and try it for themselves.
Our new friends from San Francisco joined us for dinner at the hotel and tried to persuade us to come to the San Francisco Ring Cycle in 2018; we shall see, very tempting to visit that lovely city once again. At one stage, being in business, I was asked to explain the 2009 financial crisis and its causes; if only it were so simple that I could understand it.

Saturday 27 August, Bayreuth

After seven operas in a row, quite a challenge for the most hardened Wagner fans I would think, we get a day off and decide to visit Nuremberg since we’ve only ever really passed through the city in the past. The weather, whilst sunny, had also cooled off a bit and so made sightseeing a little more palatable.

Thus to the Dürer house mainly because it made a good destination for a walk around this lovely city; it is interesting and atmospheric but was heavily restored in 1949 and so the furniture is replica and houses none of his original works. However, there is a curious display of all the copies that have been made of these works over the last two hundred years or so, often by artists famous in their own right. Inevitably, I think, one is left only able to remember one painting: the self-portrait in which the artist depicts himself as Christ.

After this, and a delicious and very Bavarian lunch at Heilig Geist Spital, we drove over – negotiating only partly successfully a fiendish one-way system some of my manoeuvres around which I feel are likely to land me with a ticket – to see Courtroom 600 where the Nuremberg trials were held and which is now open to the public along with a large and detailed exhibition explaining the legal process the actual trials, and the historical context. My mother, who remembered it all from the newsreels, was rather less gripped than me having experienced the war and its aftermath first hand but I found it extremely well done and absorbing if rather sobering.

Back to Bayreuth for dinner and an early night; for some reason all my trousers all seem to be getting tighter this week, cannot imagine why.

Sunday 28 August, Bayreuth: Parsifal

Realise we are almost at that stage of saying goodbye to Bayreuth for another year and so we spend the morning walking thought the park behind the Neues Schloss ending up at Haus Wahnfried where we pay our respects at the grave of Wagner. The house, finally reopened last year, is a tremendous museum with some technical innovations combined with traditional furnishings and a very good exhibition but we don’t go in preferring to walk back to have lunch outside the hotel for the last time – Franconian wine soup once again for me.

It is so lovely to stand outside the Festspielhaus on the last day of the festival as the sun sets and listen to the fanfares. I think everybody stayed outside for the last set of three announcing the beginning of the last act, certainly much grumbling inside as we all had to scramble in at the last minute. Parsifal just as good the second time although the magic of the transformation is lessened by knowing what is coming but is was the perfect opera with which to end the trip; I think every festival should end with Parsifal.

5Albrecht-Dürer-Straße 39, D-90403 Nuremberg, Germany
6Spitalgasse 16, D-90403 Nuremberg, Germany
7They did; €25 for something I cannot translate.
8Memorium Nuremberg Trials, Bärenschanzstraße 72, 90429 Nuremberg, Germany
Saw Eva at dinner; she hopes we are coming back next year. So do we although my mother says she might be told old by next year. “Nonsense”, says Eva, “you have to keep coming here until you die.” My thoughts entirely.

**DIE WALKÜRE.**

_Concert performance_

Saffron Hall, Saffron Walden

Sunday 9 October 2016.

Michael Bracegirdle (Siegmund) Elisabeth Meister (Sieglinde) Julian Close (Hunding) Andrew Greenan (Wotan) Elaine McKrill (Brünnhilde) Sarah Pring (Fricka) Cara McHardy (Helmwige) Melanie Lodge (Waltraute) Emma Curtis (Schwertleite) Catrin Aur (Ortlinde) Emma Carrinton (Siegrune) Mae Heydorn (Rossweisse) Magdalen Ashman (Grimgerde)

Saffron Opera Group Orchestra (conductor Michael Thorne).

Saffron Opera Group (directors Paul Garland and Francis Lambert).

It was remarkable that it could happen at all, this performance of *Die Walküre*; but it was even more remarkable that it was so fine. The members of the orchestra could not have had the chance to develop a collective stamina for four hours of concentrated playing, and there were occasionally some glitches and some evidence of fatigue. What mattered more, and very positively, was the strength of commitment that Michael Thorne and his forces demonstrated. They dug deep and generated an emotional conviction which can elude more polished ensembles. In point of fact the solo cellos at the beginning of Act I had nothing to fear from comparison with world’s most famous, and how many Ring orchestras manage Wagner’s six harps for any instalment of the cycle except *Das Rheingold*. Equally there was nothing niggardly about the motive power and the wellsprings of transcendental euphoria, that peculiar Wagnerian quality, which this performance released.

As for the cast, I have to reach back to memories of Karajan’s days at Vienna, with Vickers and Nilsson and Hotter, for a *Die Walküre* that was overall as well sung as this. The big individual surprise was Elisabeth Meister. With this performance she enters the same stellar league for Sieglinde as Gundula Janowitz, Waltraud Meier and even Gwyneth Jones. Voices are notoriously difficult to describe, but Meister has some of Janowitz’s purity but sweeter, less minty, and with more warmth in the lower registers. Her soft singing - and she was not afraid to sing very softly - still filled the hall, and it was a model of tenderness; her *mezza voce* was cause for joy; and at “O hehrstes Wunder!” she opened out thrillingly, easily riding the tumultuous orchestra. She is also a real ‘Podium-Pferd’, a natural stage animal, in that her body language and facial expressions never ceased to express the gamut of Sieglinde’s feelings. Much the same could be said of her very personable Siegmund, Michael Bracegirdle, who alternated an engaging gentleness with heroism at its most tremendous (but let him beware of the faintest hint of a knödel developing). “Schwester, geliebte!” was one of his many beauties; and not since Jon Vickers has this phrase touched the heart with such affection and compassion. Together this light-filled pair generated a voltage that was palpable. How good too that Julian Close brought a certain balancing magnificence to Hunding. A timbre of charcoal and a strong presence gave a minatory force to this often thankless role.
Andrew Greenan has likewise a particular advantage as Wotan; he is a genuine high bass with a timbre of dark chocolate, whereas most of today’s front-runners in the role are not. He scored particularly in phrases like “Endlose Grimm” which lie well up in the treble clef, where a normal bass can sound thin and strained, but then he scored again in the lower extremities, at “Untreue übt ich”, where a baritone can miss the weight and authority which are part of Wotan. It is frustrating that we cannot hear Andrew Greenan or any of the singers of this performance in the main houses of British opera, but is it a surprise? After all, we cannot hear James Rutherford and Catherine Foster who have both taken centre stage at Bayreuth; British Managements of today, stultified by an inverted chauvinism, always seem to prefer any semi-competent foreigner to the huge talents of our own nationals.

In no other work by Wagner do the ladies outnumber the men as they do in Die Walküre, and as Fricka, Sarah Pring outmanoeuvred her Wotan just as decisively. This was a strong woman, legally and morally impregnable, exploiting her creamy timbre to deliver a succession of diatribes and broadsides, and do it exquisitely; no wonder she left her estranged spouse deflated. The eight Valkyries were not a uniform ensemble but a line up of striking individuals. Collectively they bore out Siegmund’s initial acknowledgment to Brünnhilde, that she and by extension the other Valkyries are beautiful. It was good to hear how our Brünnhilde, Elaine McKrill, had extended the amplitude of her timbre, although her vibrato had also widened a little. Elaine McKrill encompasses the whole of Brünnhilde, the girlish Amazon, the daughterly concern for her father’s broken spirit, the crushed confusion at the raging tyrant she never imagined he could become, the sibylline austerity of her address to Siegmund, the overwhelming compassion that leads her to break her father’s orders, her extraordinary courage as she argues her point, and her ecstasy when he ultimately converts her punishment into glory. How good that she and Andrew Greenan really acted out their cathartic reconciliation. How good that they embraced exactly at the sounding of Wagner’s ineffable 6/4 chord. It would also have been good if Wotan had additionally turned to gaze at her sleeping form, one last look, and then departed, leaving the stage to her - alone with the magic fire, flashing and flickering as it did in Michael Thorne’s orchestra. For the seeing ear, no visual representation could add anything to this.

Yes, there were imperfections; but what did they matter in the face of such greatness as we were privileged to witness, we who were there at Saffron Hall on Sunday 9th October 2016?

Paul Dawson-Bowling
DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NURNBERG,
Bayerische Staatsoper,
Monday 3 October 2016.
Jeremy Rowe

Hans Sachs: Wolfgang Koch, Pogner: Georg Zeppenfeld,
Walter von Stolzing: Robert Kunzli, David: Benjamin Bruns, Eva: Emma Bell,
conductor: Kirill Petrenko

In this theatre, with its special relationship with Meistersinger, a new production is a notable event.

Unfortunately, it was disappointing. I was puzzled by the orchestra which seemed sluggish and mechanical in the overture, but gradually improved and started to have some real passion by Act III. I generally like Petrenko, but his style was at odds with the orchestra at first. It was as if, like a singer, they both, orchestra and conductor, took some time to warm up. By the end they were both flying, as they came together for act three, and got the biggest ovation of anyone at the end.

The singers were all OK, but there was not much “wow”. We liked Benjamin Bruns, who was especially impressive in Act III, and got a well deserved ovation. We thought Wolfgang Koch was very underwhelming in act one, but liked him especially in act two. He seemed to have got very tired by the final scenes of act three. Unfortunately I didn’t like Emma Bell – too much vibrato for me, and it seemed she was making too much effort to be loud without enough variation in her voice. We had cover Martin Ganter as Beckmesser – lots of overacting, which is not a fault in this role, but not much evidence of a good voice. And regrettably, I didn’t think Robert Kunzli would win any singing competitions.

Unhappily, I was very disappointed by the quintet, which should be one of the highlights of the opera: it simply didn’t work. With Sachs pushed away to the side of the stage, unable to relate to the others, and ragged, uncommitted performances from them all, it was, like much of the evening, very muddled.

I didn’t like the staging. The curtain rose to reveal a down-at-heel grey concrete housing estate. Costumes were 1950’s, as were cars and Eva’s moped (!), but there were satellite dishes which confused the period. It seems to me that if the curtain rises to reveal an essentially depressing scene, the singers have an uphill struggle to move the action along. It was all too grey and bleak for this most happy of operas.
I hated the gratuitous violence – this was a repeated theme, with a gang of baseball bat wielding toughs beating Beckmesser almost to death, and threatening the nightwatchman. This was presumably to emphasise the depressing scenario, but again felt unnecessary and inappropriate. Clearly the whole audience hated the suicide of Beckmesser, by shooting himself, at the end. The final moments brought very muted applause – there was a feeling of “that just about finished off a glum and gloomy version of Meistersinger”, and instead of being uplifted, we were simply cast down.

I’m sorry, but I also didn’t much like the chorus, who had no heft in act one, and were very muddy in act three. Perhaps because of the muddled choreography, they couldn’t see Petrenko or any TV screen, but despite the large numbers of them, they had little impact. All chorus sections seemed to have mediocre production values. From the parkett, we could hardly see many of them, and they lacked impact. We were surprised at the curtain call to see there had been a large on-stage band, which we had hardly seen, and not heard!

In the glorious Munich opera house saloons during the intervals, there wasn’t much evidence that anyone was enjoying it, and during supper afterwards we talked to a couple who had never seen the opera before and were downcast that it was such a depressing work. What’s happening in German opera houses? Are they deliberately setting out to alienate their audiences?

Jeremy D Rowe

Jeremy is a former programme director and chair of the Wagner Society, now retired to Spain (near the Liceu Opera House) and a director of Jones-Rowe Opera Tours.
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From the archives -  
Forty years ago - 1976  
The Chéreau Ring at Bayreuth

“Patrice Chéreau had had very little experience of directing opera when he was invited in 1976 to stage a new Ring at Bayreuth, conducted by Pierre Boulez, to mark the centenary of the first production there. The result, though deeply controversial at the time, proved to be a landmark in the history of Wagner production.

Two aspects of the staging deserve particular attention. In the first place, Chéreau attempted, and successfully achieved, a daring interplay of the mythological and contemporary planes on which the work is constructed. He set the action in an industrialised society, with a hydro-electric dam taking the place of the free-flowing Rhine; there were also occasional 20th-century costumes and props. He was not the first to invoke a modern setting for the action – roughly the century framed by the history of the work to date, 1876 – 1976 but the incisive social critique of Chéreau’s production was regarded by some of the ultra-faithful as an outrage, and created a scandal of unprecedented proportions. Performances were disrupted by jeering and whistling, and confrontations between supporters and opponents spilled over from the foyer to the grounds of the Festspielhaus and even to local guesthouses.

The second revolution initiated by Chéreau lay in the degree of naturalism he brought to the acting style. His staging of the incestuous love scene of Die Walküre, for example, with Peter Hofmann and Jeannine Altmeyer as the stunningly attractive libidinous twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, 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 singers.”

Part of obituary for Patrice Chéreau written by Barry Millington and first published in Opera Magazine - reproduced here by kind permission of the author and Opera Magazine

Barry Millington

“a near-riot”, due to its controversial setting of the saga in the Industrial Revolution, with the Rhinemaidens as prostitutes.

“a thoughtful allegory of man’s exploitation of natural resources”.

Winifred Wagner.................disliked the production but asked rhetorically “isn’t it better to be furious than to be bored?”.

After its final performance in 1980 the production was celebrated in a 45-minute standing ovation. It set a standard for productions of the Ring Cycle to follow.

“ called the beginning of Regietheater (director’s theater), the production influenced directors and designers”
TWENTY FIVE YEARS AGO
THANKSGIVING SERVICE IN MEMORY OF SIR REGINALD GOODALL
1901 to 1990
3 May 1991 at the Parish Church of St. Alban the Martyr.

This was a very different occasion from the Memorial for Dame Eva. For one thing, the location: the Abbey has been the setting for so many formal ceremonial occasions through the centuries that one is bound to feel somewhat overawed when there. However, at St. Alban the Martyr, one did not feel overawed. The atmosphere was more relaxed and the occasion was one of many old friends getting together to celebrate the life of one who had given us so much pleasure and so many unforgettable musical experiences both in the Opera Houses and on the concert platform. It was particularly appropriate to hold the service at St. Alban the Martyr as this was where the young Reginald Goodall began his musical career as Assistant Organist in 1925 and from 1929-36 was Organist and Choirmaster.

The service was conducted by Fr. John Gaskell and supported by Fr. John Knight, Honorary Assistant Priest and Actors Church Union Chaplain. Before the service the Prelude and Fugue in B Minor, JS Bach, and Cortege et Litanie, Marcel Dupre, were played by the Director of Music at St. Alban, Michael Fleming.

Then we all stood to sing the ‘Chorale’ from Act One of Die Meistersinger von Numberg arranged by Vaughan Williams, words by Percy Dearmer. This seemed so fitting in view of those never to be forgotten Sadlers Wells Opera Mastersingers performances that were the beginning of such a glorious period in the history of Sadlers Wells Opera and English National Opera.

Following an introduction and opening prayer, the Choir sang Psalm 150. This was followed by two readings from 1 Corinthians xii 1-13 read by Alberto Remedios and an excerpt from Thomas Mann’s essay The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner read by John Tomlinson. This was then followed by Traume from the Wesendonck Lieder sung by Anne Evans accompanied on the piano by Lionel Friend. John Tooley then gave the address which, like that he gave at the Dame Eva Memorial, was just right with some anecdotes about “Reggie” showing all sides of his character but the over-riding feeling was one of great love, affection and respect for what this one man had done for Wagner in particular and also for the many singers who had passed through his hands and benefited enormously from his guidance.

There then followed the anthem Libera me, Domine, de morte eterna by Bruckner sung by the Choir and, after some further prayers, there was a Meditation which consisted of the Siegfried Idyll with members of the orchestra of the Royal Opera House conducted by John Barker. After the Blessing and Dismissal, the organist played, as the Voluntary, the Prelude to Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg.

This was not a sad occasion but a gathering of a group of friends and it was nice to see so many familiar faces from over the years, some of whom had helped to bring about those glorious performances and some who, like myself, had just sat there and enjoyed every note of them. But all were there with one purpose - to celebrate and give thanks for the life of one man whose contribution to Wagner and Wagner performances was immeasurable and is still contributing via the new young singers he trained. It will be many years before “Reggie’s” contribution will really be able to be assessed and put into its proper historical/musical perspective.

Rosalind Leitch
KATIE STEVENSON

The Wagner Society’s 2016 Bayreuth Scholar Katie Stevenson was selected, along with other gifted young artists, to sing at the world-famous Last Night of the Proms on Saturday September 10, 2016

Katie Stevenson, a 24 year old mezzo soprano, who won the Wagner Society’s Singing Competition 2015, and who participated this August in the 2016 Stipendiatenwoche in Bayreuth, was chosen, along with 15 other expectionally talented young singers to perform at the world-famous BBC Last Night of the Proms which was televised and broadcast in many countries around the world.

The group sang Ralph Vaughan Williams’ Serenade to Music - a tribute to Henry Wood, whose name is synonymous with the Proms. This piece is for 16 vocal soloists and orchestra and was composed in 1938. The text is an adaptation of the discussion about music and the music of the spheres in Act V, Scene 1 of The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare. Vaughan Williams later arranged the piece into versions for chorus and orchestra and solo violin and orchestra.

Each singer had a solo line or two and Katie performed hers with poise and great beauty. Naturally, we are all very proud of this achievement.

Article originally published on RWVI website and reproduced with their kind permission

GWYNETH JONES MASTERCLASS

Royal College of Music, Britten Theatre
21 September 2016

What a wonderful masterclass! A capacity audience were treated to three packed hours of instruction from Dame Gwyneth at her most sparkling. It proved a feast of hard-hitting wisdom for five rising stars, covering every aspect at every level, of singing, music and performance. She presented constructive analysis of their breathing technique, expression, phrasing, diction, meaning, resonance, voice production, mouth-shaping, word-pointing, timbre, the vital contribution of feeling, of empathy with the text, of how to avoid fatigue, and so much more. She was always positive and supportive; this was the very opposite of the ‘teaching by humiliation’ of Schwarzkopf. Perhaps this was the ultimate reason why she brought the young people on so far; she made then feel better and made them sing better - audibly so, and in so short a time. In the context of such overall excellence it may be invidious to be specific, but particularly good things seem certain for the New Zealand baritone and the Welsh girl, Gwyneth’s compatriot.

The scandal of Dame Gwyneth’s long neglect at the RCM has at last been convincingly addressed, but one masterclass is not enough. The question many of us are now asking is this: how soon can the RCM invite her back?

Paul Dawson-Bowling
The second half of *Die Walküre* Act III opened Mark Wigglesworth’s concert with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales on 23 July. The concert version of the Ride of the Valkyries was stern, brisk and menacing (clearly they meant business) - segueing into the *diminuendo* as the Valkyries fled to leave Wotan alone with Brünnhilde. The size and magnificence of the orchestra, spread out over the platform, would surely have gladdened Wagner’s heart. Wigglesworth played them like a single instrument, drawing the best from his glorious forces, especially the succulent strings, whose playing of the interlude between *der freier als ich, der Gott* and *Der Augen leuchtendes Paar* carried all of Wotan’s grief and regret, and whose caressing of the Magic Fire music was a sheer delight. The brass, snarling the Spear motif and exuding menace, were likewise outstanding, as were the six rippling harps.

The soloists were both well known to London audiences. It was impressive that they were “off book” although, so far as I know, neither had sung their role before. There was no production: they stood either side of the conductor and sang with their only point of contact a single grim glare, but they successfully conveyed the essence of the characters and their conflict. Tamara Wilson, whose *La Forza del Destino* Leonora created a sensation at the Coliseum last year, already has Brünnhilde well within her grasp. She was utterly in command of her role, both vocally and dramatically, and even with little contact with her Wotan, we could see how she was playing him like a fish on a line, alternately cajoling and berating, even wheedling him to gain her protective ring of fire. The poor god didn’t stand a chance. But if Wilson’s Brünnhilde was well on the way to being the finished article, James Cresswell’s Wotan was a work in progress. The tessitura of the role sounded high for his glorious bass, and he was singing cautiously, even in the Farewell. It remains to be seen whether this was a one-off, or whether he will persevere with the role.

On 17 August Daniel Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra paired Wagner’s music with his father-in-law, Liszt’s piano concerto, matchlessly played by Martha Argerich; then an unexpected bonus as Barenboim joined her for the Schubert Rondo in A - an enchanted ten minutes where we all held our breath lest anything should happen to spoil the perfection of the moment. I felt that I was watching history being made. The second half began with the *Tannhäuser* prelude, a familiar piece which Barenboim and his young players made us hear anew. The opening had a great sense of onward movement, of an urgency to reach the pilgrims’ goal. The Venusberg music was filled with irresistible sexual urgency, and Elisabeth’s Prayer soared heavenwards. The ending was nakedly triumphant.
The Götterdämmerung sequence opened with a dawn so soft that one scarcely heard the first few rays of sun before the orchestra expanded into Wagner’s mighty dawn, shot through with Brünnhilde’s tenderness. Siegfried’s horn sounded in the organ loft while the Rhine sparkled, gradually darkening as it was overshadowed by the curse. Barenboim broke the mood by bringing the music to a stop, inviting and receiving applause, but it meant that the ensuing Funeral March was isolated in its uncompromising bleakness, and its force was shattering.

A sense of humanity was restored by the Meistersinger prelude, in a gloriously expansive interpretation with waves of music rising above one another as though every citizen of Nuremberg had left their home to follow the Meisters, Pied Piper-like, in their procession. Officially, that was the end of the concert, but after aeons of applause, Barenboim announced to the audience that “We are not going to play the rest of Act I, we also are not going to play the second act, but we go directly to the prelude of the third act!” How like him to follow up the openness and radiance of the Act I prelude, a tribute to a whole city and its Mastersingers, with the hushed, introspective Act III prelude, which explores the heart and soul of one man. I felt that this was a very personal reading, as though, through Wagner’s depiction of Hans Sachs, the great conductor was telling us something very deep and private about himself.

That would have been an appropriate, if unusual, way to end the concert, but after oceans more applause, Barenboim sprang nimbly onto the podium and, without announcement or preparation, launched the orchestra headlong into the prelude to Lohengrin Act III, rushing the audience along to the doomed wedding, the music defiantly bright but with an inescapable sense of unease.

On 28 August the Wesendonck Lieder, in the Mottl orchestration, formed the centrepiece of the BBC Symphony Orchestra’s programme, with Semyon Bychkov at the helm and Elisabeth Kulman making a notable Proms debut as the soloist. Even in its orchestral version, the Wesendoncks can be hard to bring off in the vast spaces of the Royal Albert Hall, but Bychkov and his superb musicians managed it, especially in the swirling urgency of the beginning of Stehe still! and the lovely, desolate ascent of the strings in Im Treibhaus. Kulman was outstanding, an experienced Fricka, and I would love to see her as Brangäne. A warm, generous performer, she engaged with the audience immediately, abandoning herself to the music and sharing the Lieder with us as an emotional experience. She made them a song cycle which traced the progress of love from its beginning in Der Engel to the rapturous, Tristan-inspired consummation of Trauume. Sandwiched between two massive, noisy symphonies, the Lieder were an oasis of passion, peace and beauty.

Katie Barnes

Katie Barnes is a Civil Servant by necessity and an opera lover by choice. Since buying her first word processor in 2002, she has written over 90 reviews for Wagner News. She can be sighted at Wagnerian events, hammering away at her trusty HP Jornada 728.
“that in Richard Wagner we have more than a great, - a profoundly good man”
Talk by Paul Dawson-Bowling
8 November 2016

A full gathering of members and friends attended our first meeting to be held at a new venue for us - the Farmers Club in Whitehall. Paul had chosen to use his talk to emphasise the human side of Richard Wagner and its title was taken from a quote from the biography by Dr William Ashton Elliss in stark contrast to the “characterless ogre rampaging up and down Europe” described by his Jewish American biographer, Robert Gutman. or, the “frightening. amoral, hedonistic, selfish, virulently racist, arrogant, filled with gospels of the superman” person as described by Harold Schonberg. Paul emphasised that no one is always good and felt that we should take Wagner’s weaknesses as not nearly so frightful as those of the canonised Sir Thomas Moore (as a former student of Tudor England, I am not sure that, by the standards of those days, Paul was not being a little unfair to the martyr). Paul went on to say he was not intending to give a balanced portrait but to concentrate on just the good points and would ignore things like the ghastly indefensible anti-Semitic rant. He called in defence Macaulay who said “There is scarcely any delusion that deserves to be so indulgently treated as the delusion of ascribing every moral excellence to those who have left imperishable monuments to their genius”. We then moved on after analogies with Hamlet and Mozart to Hans Keller and his “The man has been destroyed by friend and foe and critical referee alike, and an objective picture has been created of his personality by critic after critic which is indistinguishable from the image of a phantom. It is not here suggested that there was nothing wrong with Wagner; nor is it suggested that there is nothing wrong with you or me. But you and I luckily can’t compose like that and so we are safe.”

Then from the soon-to-be soured relationship with Nietzsche to what Paul felt was the overwhelmingly tender association with Judith Gautier (Theophile’s daughter) which gave rise to the memoir “Richard Wagner chez lui”, Paul didn’t mention that “Wagner was so incensed by it that he expected a total break” with Judith and her husband. However he did eventually invite her to be godmother to Siegfried.

Next Paul invoked Wagner’s appearance for the defence when his servant girl’s boyfriend was incarcerated for stealing from the Wagners: his efforts to secure a benefit performance of Der Freischutz for Weber’s widow; the “noble enterprise” (Paul’s words) of the Dresden uprising: his belief, shared with Marx, that “mutualism” would lead to the disappearance of poverty and unemployment and could only be achieved through revolution; and, an invocation of Jesus Christ in defence of his views on the horrors of factory work: and his dislike for the Prussians with their contempt for the “lower orders”.

Paul then retailed Wagner’s advocacy of the initially reviled (“widely regarded as the raving of a madman”) Beethoven choral symphony and his efforts to mount a charity performance in Dresden on Palm Sunday 1846. These efforts were rewarded by “the greatest profit in its history” for the musicians pension fund despite Dr Schladebach’s
description of it as “formless, savage, unintelligible and fatiguing”.

The next shibboleth attacked by Paul was the misconception (shared by me) that, like many other reputedly generous prominent figures, Wagner’s generosity was funded not by him but by rich supporters. “The whole sum” given to him by the King was “less than the cost of the bedroom fittings” at Herren Chiemsee. He received just 700 francs for his nine months in Paris preparing Tannhäuser when Niemann received 36,000 francs for singing the lead.

Then on to psychiatrist Theodor Puschmann and his diagnosis of “moral insanity” and “megalomania”. Paul’s medical background enabled him to state that the quite common incidence of megalomania always developed in the last stages of syphilis and that Puschmann’s claim was libellous as well as untrue.

Lastly he invoked with considerable conviction the love of Siegfried for his parents and his happy childhood with their care for him and his sisters. Paul finished by reiterating his conviction that “Wagner was, ultimately, a profoundly good man”.

The fascinating talk was followed by a very interesting question and answer session which revealed to me the existence of a hitherto unknown not quite (sic) masterpiece commissioned by the Daughters of the Revolution in 1876 to celebrate the centenary of the American Declaration of Independence. I think it was Cormac Cawley who told me that he had a recording of it which was dull and monotonous and not worth the $5,000 Wagner received for it. (Another example of Wagner’s humanity??)

Ray Godson

THE RING OF TRUTH BY ROGER SCRUTON
Book Review by Richard Miles

Roger Scruton starts with the proposition that The Ring is one of the greatest works of art produced in modern times, accurately and acutely describing the human condition through music. He sets out to show its meaning and relevance to the world, but also – more intriguingly and ambitiously – how it achieves its effects musically.

On the way, he debunks Wagner’s various detractors, including Adorno and the ‘Frankfurt’ school of Marxism; Nietzsche; and many others, especially in France, but also in Germany and elsewhere, who have focused excessively on the composer’s avowed (but inconsistent) anti-semitism as the key to understanding his work. (In the case of Nietzsche, Bryan Magee has argued that his criticisms of Wagner represent a violent reaction to former feelings of deep reverence, and against what had formerly been close to a father-son relationship. He also suggests an ingenious explanation for this…but this is not a review of Magee’s book).

Scruton also criticises the ‘satirical’ or subversive approach to the text and the music adopted in the Bayreuth (Chéreau/Boulez) production of 1976, and followed in subsequent productions, which he sees as robbing the work of its mythical aspects and, by reducing
everything to the quotidian, depriving the audience of a large part of its meaning. It is this meaning that the book aims to explore.

In the first chapter’ History and Culture’, he examines the work from a philosophical starting point (it is perhaps due to him and to Bryan Magee that this seems a particularly natural and useful way of approaching matters). He places The Ring into its historic and philosophical context - but he also understands politics, history and musical theory.

The next chapters describe each of the four operas scene by scene, analysing what is happening and how the music describes it. Juggling between the text analysing the leitmotifs and their development; the appendix containing the leitmotifs in musical notation; and my recording of the music (Bayreuth / Barenboim / Tomlinson / Evans) was fiddly but highly rewarding.

Then ‘How the Music Works’. For one originally seduced by those marvellous, evocative orchestral sounds, but - given the abstract nature and inherent indescribability of music - at a loss to understand why, this is particularly intriguing. This chapter will be a tough - though not impossible - read for anyone not versed in musical theory, but it never shaded into incomprehensibility and it is very well worth persisting. To the previous juggling act, I had to add frequent reference to various online ‘idiot’s guides’ to explain terms such as ‘flattened submediant triad’. But often just listening to the passage in question made everything clear.

Scruton shows how some of the music works metaphorically, or by ‘synaesthesia’ – for example, the ‘flowing’ music of the Rhine, the ‘sparkling’ Fire Music or the ‘hammering’ of Nibelheim. But the music can also work in more abstract ways, a good example being the description of the Tarnhelm motif, which ‘alternates unrelated triads – A flat minor and E minor – before settling on an open fifth that could belong to either key, the note of C flat having sounded throughout, magically transformed from C flat back to B and back again while remaining the same’. Another illuminating passage shows how the Ring motif ‘makes a closed circle in the music, disconnected from the music either side’.

For someone who knows the music well, but is not versed in musical theory, this is at once deeply interesting and hard to grasp: but I was pretty much on the edge of my seat as I read the key by key description of how Wagner’s music subtly and elegantly expresses the intricate moral implications of Wotan’s and Brünnhilde’s actions in the last Scene of die Walküre.

The next chapter, ‘Understanding the Story’, explores what the Ring really means, examining the various philosophical, political and psychological interpretations offered by Feuerbach, Shaw, Heise and Donington - renunciation of the will to power; Marxism; Jungian psychology - but ultimately rejecting each of them as either incomplete, simplistic or misguided.

In the chapter entitled ‘Character and Symbol’, Scruton explores the characters of the main protagonists, principally Wotan and Alberich, followed by Brunnhilde, Mime, Siegmund and Sieglinde, and briefly some others (Siegfried is left to a chapter entitled ‘Siegfried and Other Problems’).

The study of Alberich and resentment is particularly interesting. Wotan and Loge blithely
dismiss Alberich’s claim to the ring, on the basis that his possession is founded on theft. However, in Alberich’s view he has paid a huge price for it, and has given ‘his freedom, his hopes and his self’ to own it. This fuels (but is not the origin of) his implacable resentment, which began, not with the theft of the ring, but with the forswearing of love which enabled him to command it.

Scruton views resentment as a state of mind even more corrosive than envy because it is not satisfied by possession of whatever has caused it, but only by the destruction of the person who possesses it. This resentment is not only at the heart of the drama, but for Scruton has played an important part in shaping the modern world. He cites ‘the absolute negativity masked as idealism, that was to regard all people as instruments’, that was a feature of the various kinds of totalitarianism that arose in the twentieth century, and presumably remains a feature of those which have survived into the twenty first century.

Finally Scruton deals with some problems and holes in the plot. Why is Siegfried so unsympathetic / unconscious of self, and what is the meaning of his apparently somewhat futile career? Why is Brünnhilde so bewildered by the plot to abduct her, & then so ready to join in the plot to murder Siegfried, in collaboration with people she can only despise? And what does she achieve by her self-immolation? If the Ring is returned to the Rhine, why does the reign of the Gods have to end?

And finally, what does The Ring mean? Primarily, it is a work of art, not a legal document – it doesn’t have to be watertight to do its job of conveying truth. Like Greek drama, it ‘captures what was once the prerogative of religion…a purifying ritual, in which life is remade as a vehicle of the ideal’. The audience was to see through death to the heroic grandeur of the free being who confronts it.

The book is highly recommended for anyone wanting to engage with The Ring and gain a deeper understanding of its context and workings – especially its musical workings, in (just about) layman’s terms. As the music is the core of it, the book is especially valuable.

Richard Miles  

October 2016

Published by Allen Lane – available from most bookshops - £25.00
Correspondence

From Keith Richards

Dear Mr. Godson,

It seems that your reviewer, Robert Mitchell, is often offended in the opera house ‘in an age of Regietheater’. I have to record that I have encountered nothing in the theatre as revolting as his reference (p27 Wagner News 222) to ‘happier times’ when some directors ‘might have been consigned to concentration camps for a spot of re-education’. I hope you will invite him to apologise in a future issue for the offence he has caused not only to the unnamed directors but to, at least, one reader.

Keith Richards (address supplied)
The referenced article has also attracted other complaints. When I asked Mr Mitchell to comment on these reactions, he said

“I am very sorry if my terminology has offended your reader. I do not like most modern Wagner productions, especially Herr Castorf’s RING, but I can see with hindsight that my attempt at humour might be considered in poor taste. “

From Francisco Diego

Please, please, would it be possible to talk to someone in the society about the ongoing destruction of sacred works like The Ring and Parsifal by arrogant and egotistic producers that believe themselves superior to the genius of the composer? I really hope that something can be done. I am sure I am not alone in this. Please let me know.

Francisco Diego (address supplied)

From Jeremy D Rowe

Dear Editor,
The great and the good of the opera world, including Lady Pamela, Angela Merkel and her husband, and Jones-Rowe Opera Tours, gathered at the Schiller Theatre in Berlin on Sunday 23rd October for the posthumous premier of Patrice Chéreau’s last production, Elektra. The programme promised us a starry cast with Waltraud Meier (Klytamnestra), Evelyn Herlitzius (Elektra), Adrianne Pieczonka (Chrysothemis), and Donald McIntyre. Wait a moment - did we read that correctly? Surely not Donald McIntyre, our Sir Donald?

Sure enough, the biographical notes confirmed that Sir Donald was indeed singing in the production. He was the “old servant” with a handful of words to sing, and when the moment came, he stared hard at Daniel Barenboim, and belted out the six notes, with all his old heft and volume.

It transpired that Chéreau, in his last days, had wanted his old friend to have this tiny part in what would be his last production. Also singing was Franz Mazura, who is ten years older.

In the final curtain calls, Sir Donald received much warm and affectionate applause, grasping the hand of the much younger “young servant” (a non-singing role). How wonderful to witness Sir Donald’s obvious pleasure, back on stage, in the environment he loved, with the audience delighted to see him again.

Incidentally, I am sure there will many reviews of this brilliant production, which had earlier been seen at Aix. Many declared it to be one of the “productions of the century!”

Jeremy D Rowe (address supplied)
FORTHCOMING WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

DAME GWYNETH JONES CELEBRATES HER EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY
IN CONVERSATION with HUMPHREY BURTON

Tuesday 8 November 6.30 for 7pm
Princess Alexandra Hall, Royal Over-Seas League, Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James’ St, London SW1A 1LR.
Nearest tube station – Green Park.
Tickets £25/£5 students
(wine, others drinks and light refreshments are included in the ticket price, and will be available before the event begins, which will be followed by a small celebration).

THE WAGNER SOCIETY SINGING COMPETITION 2016
Sunday 27 November 2.00 to 6.00 pm

Kirstin Sharpin who will sing in the interval
The finalists
Georgia Mae Bishop, Samantha Crawford, Mae Heydorn
Louis Hurst, Ben Thapa, Mari Wyn Williams
with judges, Sir John Tomlinson, Professor Eva Märtson, Peter Spuhler and Anthony Negus
in the presence of
Dame Gwyneth Jones and Eva Wagner-Pasquier
with an interval recital by Kirstin Sharpin
Princess Alexandra Hall, Royal Over-Seas League Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James’ St, London SW1A 1LR.
Nearest tube station – Green Park.
Tickets £25/£5 students (including light refreshments)

WAGNER SOCIETY CHRISTMAS PARTY
Wednesday 7 December 2016
at the invitation of Neil King
15 Gibson Square, London N1 0RD
6.30 pm. Members only.
Tickets (must be purchased in advance) £25 each (no concessions)

COMBINED SOCIETIES’ DINNER
Tuesday 17 January 2017
6.30 for 7.00 pm
The Forge Music Venue, 3-7 Delancey Street, NW1 7NL
Nearest tube; Camden Town or Mornington Crescent
£48.00 per person
Further details on page 31
FORTHCOMING WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS CONTINUED

ILLUSTRATED TALK BY JONATHAN HASWELL,
TELEVISION OPERA DIRECTOR
Thursday 9 February 2017
6.30 for 7.00 pm

FROM STAGE TO SCREEN: FILMING OPERA
at the German Historical Institute
17 Bloomsbury Square, London WC1A 2NJ
Nearest Tube: Holborn
Tickets £15- students free on production of ID (includes light refreshments)

Jonathan Haswell is one of this country’s leading directors of opera for the television and cinema screenings which are now an established part of the worldwide operatic scene. Among many other assignments, he has for the last thirteen years been directing the cameras for the Royal Opera House, where his work has included its most recent productions of the Ring and of Parsifal. Selections of scenes from these, as well as from other operas he has filmed, will be shown in his talk about the process and aesthetics of transferring a stage performance to the screen.

STUDY DAY WITH ANTHONY NEGUS
Date and venue to be arranged

DINNER TO CELEBRATE THE PERFORMANCES OF DIE MEISTERSINGER AT COVENT GARDEN
Friday 24th March 2017
7:00 pm - 11:00 pm
Royal Over-Seas League, Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James’ St, London SW1A 1LR.
Nearest tube station – Green Park.

To mark the new production of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg at Covent Garden
Tickets £95 each to includes drinks reception, three course meal with wine and after dinner entertainment.
Members and their guests are most cordially welcomed to this dinner and we also extend this invitation to members of the other United Kingdom Wagner Societies as well as those in Europe and around the world.
[If you are unsure of your plans, you can reserve one or more tickets until 2nd January 2017 at no cost by emailing the treasurer at treasurer@wagnersociety.org.]

Tickets for all events are available online at www.wagnersociety.org and can be paid for using a credit or debit card, or PayPal. If you do not wish to use these methods, then tickets may be reserved online and a cheque sent to the Treasurer, The Wagner Society, 15, Gibson Square, London N1 0RD. Tickets are also available on the door at all events (apart from Christmas Party). Free tickets for students may also be reserved in advance via the website or are available on the door on presentation of the appropriate identification.
## CONTACTS

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Wagner Society website: www.wagnersociety.org
Registered charity number 266383

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**GIFT AID**

The government’s Gift Aid scheme allows the Wagner Society to reclaim basic rate tax that may have been paid on members’ subscriptions. This is worth £7.50 per annum for an individual member and £10 per annum for joint members and is a very valuable additional source of income for the Society.

Unfortunately, only about 45% of members have completed the declaration necessary to allow us to make this claim to HMRC for repayment of this tax. Naturally we quite accept that some members are resident overseas whilst others might not be tax payers at all, but we would urge every eligible member to make the declaration and allow us to access this additional source of revenue.

A new form (the wording necessary has been slightly changed) has been sent to every member who has paid a subscription or made a donation so far this calendar year together with a reply paid envelope; so even if you have previously filled in this form, do not ignore then new one but complete it and return it to the Treasurer in the envelope provided.

Thank you