**Dame Gwyneth Jones**

**Statement for the AGM of the Wagner Society London on 16th May 2018**

I feel sure that most members have by now become aware that the Committee’s cancellation of my Masterclass with the two young singers who won the “President’s Award” at the Wagner Society’s Annual Singing Competition last year, has been brought to the notice of the Press and has resulted in my having to make a statement in order to defend my good name and reputation.

As reported in The Sunday Telegraph on 29 April 2018, I have been informed by the committee of the Wagner Society (of which I am, and have for 28 years been President), that it wishes to cancel the President's Award public masterclass which was awarded to the two winners of the Society's annual singing competition.

There are a number of points I wish to make on this issue.

First, and most importantly, this is no way to treat the two young singers who won this award at the singing competition in November, Michelle Alexander and Adam Music. Michelle and Adam were told by the Wagner Society that part of their prize was a masterclass from me. This prize has been awarded annually for several years. I, and my husband who accompanies the masterclass, donate our time and services free, by way of support for up and coming opera singers. It is a great pity that the committee appears to have seen fit to let down these young singers in this way.

Secondly, the main reason given for cancellation of the masterclass, namely that the equivalent event lost money last year, does not hold water. While it did make a modest loss (of marginally over £1,000), it was certainly not unique in that respect.

Indeed, I note from the accounts for the year ended 31 December 2017 that, of the 11 events staged by the Society last year, all bar three lost money. By far the biggest loss was in fact incurred by the singing competition itself, but I have heard no mention of cancelling the competition.

So the committee's reported assertion that "all the events we stage break even, but the masterclass didn't last year" is not in fact correct.

Further, and in any event, it has never been the view of the committee that events which do not make a profit should not be held. This is recorded in the minutes of the committee meeting of 17 October 2017.

Thirdly, it is clear from the minutes of recent committee meetings that certain committee members are seeking to misrepresent the reason why last year's masterclass made a loss. They seek to blame me for insisting that the event take place at the Royal Over-Seas League’s Princess Alexandra Hall.

The truth of the matter is rather different. Until last year, the ROSL had kindly provided the Princess Alexandra Hall free of charge. Last year, after a rather upsetting incident, where a member of the committee badly upset the Arts Director of the ROSL Geoff Parkin, I received an E-mail from Geoff Parkin on the 3rd November 2016 saying: “We are obviously wanting to partner with the Society in good faith and honour what you started with dear Roderick before he died, but I will not be spoken to like this and I have to warn that bridges are fast burning with the ROSL”. The Wagner Society was then informed that we would be charged £1,200 to hire the venue in future. The committee suggested St Botolph's Hall, which I found unsuitable for a Masterclass; because there is no stage and it had a bad piano and acoustics. I therefore proposed, and indeed provisionally booked, a venue at the London Welsh Club at a charge of £405.00 which would have been one third of the cost of the ROSL. I informed the Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary in my Email of 28th February 2017, but on 6th March I received an Email from the Treasurer concerning the booking of the Princess Alexandra Hall at the ROSL, saying that the Committee wants the 23rd June booking (the date of the Masterclass) to be confirmed as soon as possible and that I should stress that again to the ROSL”. So, ultimately the committee decided to return to our usual venue at the ROSL and I had to cancel the provisional booking at the London Welsh Club.

This is not reflected in the minutes of the committee meeting of 19 June 2017, which falsely stated: "Neil King said … if we had St Botolph's for the MC it would have broken even, but Dame Gwyneth said we needed the ROSL". I am at a loss to understand why certain committee members would be seeking to re-write history in this way. Had the event been held at the London Welsh Club as I had proposed, it is unlikely that any loss at all would have been suffered.

Additional catering costs were also unfairly incurred, when the £500.00 which I was told that Ray Godson had promised to donate, as payment for the wine, was withdrawn and given instead to the Audience Prize of the Singing Competition.

However, I paid £600.00 for the sandwiches in addition to Adrian and I giving, as usual, our services and paying all our expenses. In fact we travelled from Zürich and Moscow (where I was adjudicating the Bolshoi TV Singing Competition) at our own expenses three times last year, on two occasions for the adjudication of the Preliminary (where Adrian and I spent a very long day in the ENO Chorus Room) and the Final of the Singing Competition, for which I had done the Lion’s share of the organising, including designing the Application Forms, which also meant translating the Bayreuth Bursary Forms from German, writing three times to all the nine Music Colleges and Jetty Parker Young Artists, assembling the wonderful Jury, adjudicating the DVD’s and the following two stages of the competition etc. Unfortunately, the official thanks for this work was given to others.

The Committee seems to ignore the fact that the previous year, when we received the ROSL free of charge, my two events the “President’s Award Masterclass” and Birthday Interview with Humphrey Burton made a gain of £1,351.00 for the Society.

Fourthly, on 28 February 2018, I was given another reason by the Chairman for the intended cancellation, namely that "Masterclasses seem to have fallen out of favour with members." Again, that explanation does not bear scrutiny.

Attendance at last year's event was in fact up by about a third on the previous year (43 attendees, as compared with 33 the previous year). Far from having "fallen out of favour" with members, it is in truth increasing in popularity.

I am well aware that a small minority of committee members are unhappy with the fact that a few years ago I uncovered accounting issues at the Society, and that last year I raised concerns about the Society's book-keeping and custody of its records, particularly its financial records. Despite the fact that those concerns proved to be well-founded, certain committee members responded by asking me to resign and then, when I did not, threatening me with legal proceedings for defamation. Fortunately, the matter was settled when they had to make a public apology to me and my husband.

In his statement to the Sunday Telegraph, the Chairman said “The Committee does not recognise the version of events put forward. As far as the Committee is concerned there is no “agenda” against our much- revered honorary President”.

This is contradictory to his e-mail to me of 7th June 2017 whilst I was organising the Singing Competition, where he asked me to consider whether my continuing Presidency would be in the best interest of the Society and although he knew that he could not force me to stand down, he proposed my honourable retirement which he assured me would be 100% amicable on behalf of the committee. However, my continued involvement and support for events like the Singing Competition would be welcome.

I know that this is not true, because I have been told by one member of the committee that she refused to sign papers about me and another knew nothing about this.

Another example of what I can only describe as a wider agenda against me is a letter which I received on 26th August, 2017 from the Treasurer. He wrote the most ghastly letter, after a performance of Parsifal in Bayreuth to Paul Dawson Bowling, Roger Lee, Paul Duffy and myself, in which he accused us of moan, moan, moaning about the Wagner Society and never lifting a finger to help. Therefore, he suggested that we all should put up and shut up as the time had come for us all to consider whether we wish to remain members of the society.

In his opinion the Society would be better off without us. As for me, he thought it would be time to resign with dignity also. My influence on the society is anything but helpful – and if my reaction to a disagreement with the officers is to threaten legal action against them, I have no place being an honorary officer of a charity such as ours and should go.

He seemed to ignore the fact that my husband and I had been threatened in a most dreadful, three paged letter, written in bold print, on behalf of the Secretary, the Chairman and himself, accusing us of possible defamation and inviting us to take legal advice, which left us no option other than to do so, resulting in their accusations being proved wrong and their having to make a public apology.

With regard to the fact that they have now refused to present my Masterclass to the two young singers who won “The President’s Award” at the Wagner Society Singing Competition and in so doing have, in my opinion, broken their agreement and neglected their responsibility, I would like to clarify how the President’s Award was created. On 24th July, 2014 I received from the Chairman an e-mail where he proposed to me the President’s Award, which would be a Masterclass, organised by the Society and to which I would be willing to donate my time.

On 2nd August 2014 I agreed and accepted his proposal in writing.

This makes it quite clear that my Masterclass “The President’s Award” with Finalists from the Wagner Society Singing Competition has been a Wagner Society Annual Event, ever since; but this year after it being announced by the Society in the Application Forms and in the Finals of the Singing Competition, they have refused to honour the Society’s obligation.

In light of all of that, and given my long-standing support of the Wagner Society over the last 28 years, I am frankly surprised and dismayed that certain committee members should continue to conduct themselves in this way.

I very much want to honour my commitment to give the masterclass to the competition winners – it is a real shame that the committee appears determined, on the flimsiest of pretexts, to prevent me from doing so.