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THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM? – WAGNER'S VISION FOR THE *RING*

By Dr Robert Mitchell

In August 1876, when Wagner premiered *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, his achievement redefined the way future audiences would experience opera. He was breaking new ground on all fronts to achieve his vision of *Gesamptkunstwerk* – the 'total work of art'. Having conceived and developed the libretto from 1848 and composed and orchestrated the score between 1853 and 1874, Wagner managed, with royal patronage and a hand-picked cast and group of assistants, to present the 'cycle' under his own stage direction in a purpose-built theatre. Wagner's 28-year-long dream was finally realized. Or was it?

Wagner included both stage directions and scenic descriptions in his published score – in the case of *Rheingold* alone there are around 2,500 in English translation. To achieve his vision, he embraced new technology. Predating electric lighting by 10 years, his gaslight system outshone that in the new Paris Opera. The gaslights were supplemented with conical reflector floods, whose beam could be altered, and limelight spots, that could be focused and used to produce realistic effects like sun and moonlight as well as to project moving effects like clouds, water and fire – just what Wagner needed for the *Ring*. Colour was added using dyed cotton, wool, and silk cloth. And a recycled steam engine was installed in the basement to deliver one of the most used effects in the production. For the opening scene he wrote:

Greenish twilight, lighter above, darker below.
The upper part of the scene is filled with

moving water, which restlessly streams from right to left. Towards the bottom the waters resolve themselves into a fine mist, so that the space, to a man's height from the stage, seems free from the water which floats like a train of clouds over the gloomy depths.

And later, when the Rhinemaidens have taunted Alberich:

Through the water from above breaks a continuously brightening glow, which, on a high point of the middle rock, kindles to a blinding, brightly-shining gleam. A magical light streams from this through the water.

After Alberich steals the gold, the stage transforms before the audience's eyes:

The rocks disappear in thickest darkness; the whole stage is from top to bottom filled with black water waves, which for some time seem to sink downwards. Then the waves have gradually changed into clouds which little by little become lighter, and at length disperse into a fine mist. As the mist disappears upwards in little clouds an open space on a mountain height becomes visible in the twilight. ... The dawning day lights up with growing brightness a castle with glittering pinnacles which stands on the top of a cliff in the background.

Wagner was stretching the capabilities of both gaslight and his steam engine to the limit.

The Viennese landscape artist Joseph Hoffmann was commissioned to design the 12 separate sets, several of which appear more than once. They consisted of painted canvas cloths, gauzes and ground rows, staircases and platforms. Let's consider the descent into Nibelheim. Loge goes first and, as Wagner describes:

disappears at the side in a cleft from which, immediately afterwards, a sulphurous vapour arises. Wotan descends after Loge into the cleft. The sulphurous vapour issuing therefrom spreads over the whole stage and quickly fills it with thick clouds. Those remaining on it are soon hidden. The vapour thickens to a quite black cloud which rises from below upwards, this then changes to a dark rocky chasm which continues to rise so that the theatre seems to be gradually sinking into the earth. A ruddy glow shines from various places in the distance.

Engaged by Wagner as early as 1875 to assist with the stage movement, choreographer Richard Fricke kept diaries which have been translated and published under the title 'Wagner in Rehearsal'. They give some interesting insights into the process. His June 8 entry tells us:

The entrances and exits of the gymnasts [Nibelungen] are greeted with applause every time, and the whole scene is so straightforward. The changes of scene, with the help of the steam, are working well; however the movements and disappearance of Alberich through steam and trap doors leave much to be desired.

Even today stage smoke can be wayward. Wagner was asking a great deal of it when he wrote: 'Alberich places the Tarnhelm on his head. His form vanishes; in its place a column of mist is seen. Mime writhes under the blows he receives, whose sound is heard without the scourge being seen. Then the column of vapour disappears in the background.'

Once Wotan and Loge have captured Alberich, they return to the 'open space on a mountain height. ... The prospect is shrouded in pale mist, as at the end of the second scene.' That steam engine was working overtime. And steam condenses into water that must surely have made the stage floor very slippery and the heavy costumes somewhat damp.

Musician and writer Heinrich Porges was also engaged by Wagner, specifically to record the *Ring* rehearsals. His notes were published as newspaper articles and then in book form, eventually translated by Robert L Jacobs as 'Wagner Rehearsing the *Ring*'. Porges quotes 'the Master's' words extensively. Early in the volume he makes some introductory remarks:

Wagner took pains to ensure that those not actually participating in the dialogue should indicate their involvement by characteristic gestures and motions. His underlying principle was that stage action should have the quality of *living sculpture*. ... The relationship between acting and sculpture should not mislead the performer into making sheer beauty of physical movement his first and foremost aim. That would be utterly self-defeating. ... Stage action copies reality. Since the condition of life is a state of perpetual flux it must be a matter of principle never, except in very rare cases, to transform scenic effects into purely pictorial ones. ... We are looking not for 'living pictures' but for a faithful, deeply felt *representation of life* as we experience it.

Of the Nibelheim scene, Porges was more specific. Quoting Wagner, he writes:

Before Alberich murmurs his secret command to the Nibelungs he must have prepared the movement of raising the ring to his lips in the previous bar. Wotan must stride towards Alberich and take two more energetic steps when he rounds on him. Alberich's passionate reply, charged with impotent fury, must be retarded somewhat in tempo, so that the words can be dwelt upon. Thereby the daemonic power of the passage is enhanced. Wotan, unmoved, must already be beside Alberich the bar before he orders him to yield the ring.

During subsequent scenes in *Rheingold*, there are more mist and light shows. When the giants return Freia, coming to collect the gold, Wagner states that: 'the misty veil, however, still covers the background so that the distant castle remains invisible.'

Eventually, it is time for the gods to enter Walhalla. The score is very specific about the mist, lighting and scenic devices:

Donner swings his hammer; during the following [33 bars] the mists collect around him. At the stroke of Donner's hammer falling heavily on the rock, a vivid flash of lightning comes from the cloud; a violent clap of thunder follows. Froh has also disappeared in the clouds. Suddenly the clouds disperse; Donner and Froh become visible; from their feet a rainbow bridge stretches with blinding radiance across the valley to the castle which now glows in the light of the setting sun. Froh points with outstretched hand to the bridge as the way for the gods to cross the valley. Wotan and the other gods contemplate the glorious sight, speechless, but soon Wotan takes Fricka by the hand and walks slowly with her towards the bridge. Froh, Freia and Donner follow. The Rhinemaidens are heard from the valley and Wotan, preparing to set his foot on the bridge, stops and turns round. But the gods laugh and begin to cross the bridge.

The stage action above is accompanied by some of Wagner's most glorious and moving music. But Eduard Hanslick was unmoved. His extensive and detailed criticism of the first Bayreuth *Ring* made specific mention of the rainbow bridge: 'The rainbow, over which the gods proceed to Walhalla, was set so low that one could have taken it for a painted bridge in a flower garden.' Wagner's dream was not his reality.

In her insightful essay titled 'From Page to Stage: Wagner as Regisseur', Katherine Syer suggests that several core issues 'engrossed Wagner as he began to develop the innovative ideas that would lead to the "music drama", including new ideas about acting and stagecraft.' ... Wagner began to compose 'gesturally or mimetically significant music, whereby stage action and musical gestures are interconnected. ... He unstintingly demanded that things incredible to our rational minds should be acted, designed, and carried out onstage persuasively, expanding the aesthetic horizon.' Wagner's radical approach was that the psychological experience of his characters becomes so vital as to challenge our perception of reality. This is evident in Mime's soliloquy after the Wanderer's visit in Act I of *Siegfried*; and in Hagen's twilight dream scene with Alberich and Siegfried's death scene in *Götterdämmerung*. As Syer puts it,

Wagner became acutely aware that such psychologically distinctive characters and their altered states of consciousness were not readily transparent or comprehensible to others, including the singers he required to bring these characters to life onstage. Wagner's many plans for operatic reform in Germany included better dramatic training opportunities for opera singers, and his expectations for his own works were on an altogether different plane from anything he encountered in contemporary theatrical practice.

How did Wagner's ideal translate into his stage directions? In Act I of *Die Walküre*, which is divided into three scenes, all set *chez* Hunding, Siegmund is transformed from exhausted, unarmed fugitive to ardent lover wielding a magic sword; Sieglinde is transformed from abused wife to enraptured lover; and Hunding remains an implacably brutish thug. Wagner paces the transformations with delicate slowness. The following extracts from his detailed stage directions demonstrate the demands he placed on his singing actors:

- Siegmund appears exhausted with over-exertion, his dress and appearance show that he is in flight. Seeing no one, he walks, as with the last efforts of an exhausted man, to the hearth, and there throws himself down on a rug of bearskin.

- Sieglinde enters from the inner chamber, thinking that her husband has returned. Her grave look shows surprise when she finds a stranger stretched on the hearth.
- Siegmund takes a long draught, and, still gazing, removes the horn from his lips and lets it sink slowly, whilst the expression of his features expresses strong emotion.
- Hunding looks keenly and with surprise at Siegmund's features, which he compares to Sieglinde's. He hides his surprise and turns unconcernedly to Siegmund.
- With anxious gestures Sieglinde steps between the two men. She hesitates but then turns slowly and with hesitating steps walks towards the store room. ... With quiet resolution she opens the cupboard, fills a drinking horn, and shakes some spices into it from a box. She then turns her eyes on Siegmund so as to meet his gaze, which he keeps unceasingly fixed on her. She perceives Hunding watching them, and turns immediately to the bed chamber. On the steps she turns once more, looks yearningly at Siegmund and indicates with her eyes, persistently and with eloquent earnestness, a particular spot in the ash-tree's stem. Hunding starts and drives her with a violent gesture from the room.

All this subtle interplay took place in dimmed gaslight supplemented with firelight effects. Under those circumstances, just how subtle must the acting have been?

Fricke was convinced, however, that: 'The finale of the second act should produce a good effect. The fight between Siegmund and Hunding takes place high up in the mountains, amid the clouds; lightning flashes illuminate it now and then. Wotan appears at a critical moment, the sword is splintered, Siegmund is killed. Brünnhilde flees to get Sieglinde, who remains below. Grane appears with Brünnhilde. Everything disappears in clouds and steam.' Of this scene, the unimpressed Hanslick wrote: 'The struggle between Siegmund and Hunding, and Wotan's intervention, took place in such a remote darkness that none of the listeners got any idea of what was going on.' Here, then, is yet another example of the dichotomy between Wagner's dream and reality.

For the opening of Act III of *Die Walküre*, Wagner employed the newly-constructed magic lanterns, 'by means of which they can not only project the passing Valkyries in the background, but also through a simple contrivance they can create some very realistic lighting. The images of the flying Valkyries are not yet ready. I am anxious to find out what kind of effect they will have.' During the ride, Wagner writes almost 500 words of

staging instructions: points of entry and exit and when the voices should be heard through a speaking trumpet, etc. At one point he specifically states: 'In a bank of clouds passing from the left Rossweisse and Grimgerde appear, illuminated by a flash of lightning. Both are on horseback and each carries a slain warrior on her saddle.'

But according to Hanslick, 'The Valkyries never appeared on horseback – they simply moved across the horizon in ineffective and indistinct dissolving views.' In 1870, against Wagner's wishes, King Ludwig II had ordered *Die Walküre* to be produced in Munich. The composer did not attend. Hanslick continues: 'In Munich they had young stable boys dressed as Valkyries jumping back and forth on thick carpets; their riding, uncannily rapid and noiseless, was remarkably effective. What was possible for such a humble court theatre should certainly be possible for the model stage at Bayreuth.'

Of the magic fire, Wagner is specific:

Wotan strikes the rock thrice with his spear. A flash of flame issues from the rock, which swells to an ever-brightening fiery glow. Here flickering flames break forth. Bright shooting flames surround Wotan. With his spear he directs the sea of fire to encircle the rocks; it presently spreads toward the background where it encloses the mountain in flames. He stretches out the spear as a spell. He gazes sorrowfully back on Brünnhilde. Slowly he turns to depart. He turns his head again and looks back. He disappears through the fire.

But again Hanslick expressed disappointment. 'The wall of fire which should surround Brünnhilde was visible only behind her; on three sides she was perfectly free and approachable. The Munich Theatre, years ago, showed how this too should be done.'

Angelo Neumann, an ambitious impresario who would later take the *Ring* on extensive international tours with many of the original cast, saw it differently:

To be sure, I had already learned to admire Richard Wagner as a stage director in Vienna, but through the performance of *Rheingold* it became clear to me that new and unprecedented challenges had been posed by the greatest of the world's stage directors [and] that from then on a new epoch of reform was under way.

The four scenes of action in *Siegfried* constitute a series of duets, culminating in the great scene between Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Fricke reports:

We are having unbelievable problems with the first act of *Siegfried*, because Siegfried must forge the sword Nothung out of a glowing red-hot bar, in a real fire. ... Much work, much effort, however it finally looks most true, most natural, and another cliff has been scaled.

Interestingly, Heinrich Porges reveals insights drawn from Wagner's ideas concerning Act I in more general terms:

Regarding the stage action it remains to add that when Mime recoils in terror before the bear which Siegfried drives at him he must not give the impression of having lost his self-control. Musically and dramatically, the only way to deliver Siegfried's youthfully exuberant utterances is with complete spontaneity and naturalness of expression. The performer however should guard against portraying this naturalness simply by letting himself go in a carefree, indifferent fashion. That would completely fail to solve his problem. Siegfried should not create the impression of a character drawn with the conscious intention of violating the standards of civilized society; everything he says and does – even the rather crude aspects of his genuine boyishness – must be presented as the natural expression of an essentially heroic personality who has not yet found an object in life worthy of his superabundant strength. If heroic energy is brought out as Siegfried's predominant trait then, even at moments when apparently quite ordinary events are being enacted, we shall always feel ourselves in the presence of elevated art. This is the soil from which springs that new style, in which the ideal is permeated by fidelity to nature – that new style which constitutes the originality of the Nibelung trilogy in the history of art.

According to Syer, 'For the role of Siegfried Wagner chose a singer whose vocal technique was rather immature, as was his acting technique.' In the environment of Bayreuth Wagner thrived as "schoolmaster Mime" in coaching this raw talent. Munich singing teacher, Julius Hey, yet another assistant, wrote:

This rehearsal of the first act of *Siegfried* was unforgettable! Wagner marked not only Mime's key words, but he sang the part *through the entire act* with full voice!! And how he sang his "schoolmaster Mime." ... The master teacher offered an incomparably characteristic expressive rendering (although he did not at all possess a trained voice in the normal sense); he created without caricatured awkward physical gestures a character of such sharp, strongly etched depiction, the likes of which one would perhaps never experience on the stage!

As the action is reasonably straightforward, little appears in any of the literature for *Siegfried*, with one exception. And the less mentioned about the dragon the better. In 'The Real Wagner' Rudolph Sabor relates:

A formidable dragon has been commissioned from a London firm specializing in pantomime beasts. It can

shuffle, writhe and rear up, it can roll its eyes and breathe steam and fire. Front, rump with tail, middle section with space for interior personnel, and neck are being transported by Channel steamer. ... Separate sections arrive, several parts are missing. ... The neck is nowhere to be found. Perhaps it went to Beirut! For the opening performance head and body are hastily stitched together. ... Berlin critic Paul Lindau described it as a cross between lizard and porcupine. ... Wagner struck a fatalistic note: 'Our dragon was judged a bungled job.'

For Act III, scene iii, however, Porges is at pains to report Wagner's thoughts:

Throughout Brünnhilde's explanatory speech, shot through with moments of spiritual illumination, there should be 'little action'. At two points Wagner gave specific directions: Brünnhilde must put her hand to her forehead at the words, 'weil ich nicht ihn dachte' (because I'm not he) and then clutch her heart at the antithetical 'und nur empfand' (and only felt). ... Brünnhilde is still 'sublimely innocent', but in Siegfried the blood of the Wälsungs is stirring. His passion awakens and this must manifest itself in his gestures.

While Fricke had had to work hard to rid the Sieglinde of 'her customary meaningless arm gestures', Wagner was encouraging the Brünnhilde to 'put her hand to her forehead' and to 'clutch her heart' – gestures that are familiar from early photographs of singers but that are generally regarded as risible today.

According to Wagner's instructions in the opening pages of the *Götterdämmerung* score:

The curtain rises slowly. The scene is the same as at the close of the second day, on the Valkyrie rock: night. Firelight shines up from the valley at the back. The three Norns, tall women in dark veil-like drapery. ... Gloomy silence and stillness.

Porges begins his notes on this scene with: 'The performance of the Norns' scene was characterized by a sense of grand objectivity. Here, where personified types, not individuals, are being portrayed, the basic expressive element must be one of sublime calm.' He goes on to write that this scene is the counterpart to that of the Rhinemaidens in that here it is the 'dark side of nature' that is being revealed.

Eventually the Norns disappear and, in Wagner's words, 'The red glow of sunrise grows; the light of the fire from below gradually fades. Siegfried and Brünnhilde enter from the cave; he is fully armed. She leads her horse by the bridle.' Having given

Brünnhilde the ring, Siegfried 'disappears with the horse' and thus begins one of the greatest orchestral interludes in all opera.

In the following scene, according to Porges, 'we now enter a new world, pass from the boundless realms of nature into a settled, ordered society governed by strict laws of custom.' The drama then progresses through another nine scenes to its conclusion – Brünnhilde's immolation and the destruction of Valhalla and the old world order. Following her final words: 'See, Siegfried, Brünnhilde greets thee in bliss' Wagner writes more than 450 words of stage directions, including 'Brünnhilde perceives her horse which has just been led in by two men. She has sprung towards him, seizes and unbridles him; then she bends affectionately towards him. She has swung herself on the horse and urges it to spring forwards. She makes her horse leap into the burning pile of logs.'

The reality was somewhat different. According to Hanslick: 'She led her miserable Rosinante calmly off into the wings. There was no thought of leaping or vaulting.' He continues: 'Hagen, who should throw himself as if crazed into the river, strolled into the wings on the right, and turned up a few seconds later in the middle of the Rhine. And finally, the Rhine, which should "burst its banks in a mighty flood", wobbled – like the Red Sea in a provincial production of Rossini's *Moses*.' As Oswald Bauer concluded in his 1975 'Richard Wagner, the Stage Designs and Productions':

There is no doubt that the chief technician Carl Brandt brought off a great many very highly sophisticated effects. The opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, with the rather unsafe swimming contraptions for the Rhinemaidens, together with the magic fire in *Die Walküre*, must have been highly poetic, whereas the coloured steam during the transformations, the use of spotlights to pick out individual characters or the magic lantern used to project the Ride of the Valkyries, while being technically innovatory, were not always felt to be successful solutions. But not even the best stage technology of his day was equal to Wagner's theatrical vision.

There had been much hype in the press about the innovative production. Despite his eventual misgivings, Eduard Hanslick wrote:

Never before has an opera had such an accumulation of scenic miracles to offer. Feats that have previously been thought impossible or, more correctly, that have never before entered anyone's head, follow one upon the other without pause. ... But, is it right that the highest ambition of a dramatic composer should be to provide a musical accompaniment to a series of magical effects produced by

machines? ... The decidedly material effects deployed in it stand in a curious contradiction to the pure ideality which Wagner boasts for his work. Wagner strives at every point to make the strongest impression on the senses, using every kind of means.

The critic Wilhelm Mohr concluded that Wagner 'has won the battle. His work has won it, even if his artistic theories may not all have proved valid in practice. ... He is the victor, even though his "Work of Art of the Future" has been laid low and emerges as an exaggeration or perhaps a premature idea.'

'A premature idea'? From a staging point of view, what 21st-century audiences would see as traditional was for Wagner cutting edge, pushing the boundaries. It took until after the deaths of Wagner's widow Cosima, and son Siegfried, and the post WWII officially imposed sidelining of his daughter-in-law Winifred, for Wagner's elder grandson, Wieland, to strip away the literal representation of physical locations. In doing so, Wieland was able to strengthen both the storytelling and the underlying meaning for which Wagner had striven. By being so specific about settings and action, perhaps Wagner had hampered his own intentions.

But he had an extraordinary imagination and persuasive talent to create what has become one of the greatest works of art in the history of western civilization.

He wanted to abandon the period of 'medieval chivalry' in order to 'show *man* without all these conventional attributes'. Wagner found designer Carl Emil Doepler's costumes and personal props reduced his myth of the 'purely human' to the realms of the 'historically conventional'. They reminded Cosima 'of Red Indian chiefs': apart

from 'their ethnographical absurdity' they bore in addition 'all the marks of provincial tastelessness'. Wagner's faithful assistant Fricke realised that the criticism and the mocking of the dragon and the rainbow, as well as the disappearance of Alberich with the Tarnhelm in the steam in *Das Rheingold*, were not entirely unjustified. Even Wagner did not remain closed to this realisation. Thus Fricke was able to write: 'Wagner realises daily how the work could be presented differently, he recognises how much should be omitted and rejected. In fact, the very first performance only narrowly avoided being turned into a fiasco.' In private, he told Fricke, 'next year we shall do everything differently.'

Wagner was never to stage another cycle at Bayreuth. But 137 years on, theatre practitioners are still dreaming of ways to 'do everything differently' in order to unlock the *Ring's* meaning. Wagner was well aware that he had dreamed the impossible dream. And that impossibility is the key to our continuing fascination with the *Ring*.



Dr Robert Mitchell

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Dr Mitchell is the longest-serving current member of the Opera Australia Chorus

http://www.melbournerringcycle.com.au/ring_cycle/behind_the_scenes/news/the_impossible_dream?Source=24944

John Wegner pulls out of Melbourne Ring

By [Clive Paget](#) on Oct 30, 2013

The respected helden baritone falls victim to Alberich's curse giving Warwick Fyfe a chance to steal the Rheingold.



John Wegner: the latest victim of the curse of the Nibelung's ring?

German-born Australian baritone John Wegner is the latest to fall victim to the curse of the Nibelung's ring, withdrawing from Opera Australia's Melbourne

production due to ill health. The company announced the cast change on Twitter yesterday.

The loss of the popular Wegner will be a particular blow to his fans, many of who missed out on seeing him in OA's *Tosca* earlier in the year when flu forced him to pull out of the latter part of the run.

With three weeks to go until opening, the role of Alberich will be sung by Warwick Fyfe who was last seen in sterling form as Verdi's Falstaff earlier in the year. Fyfe was due to sing the role of Donner but has been covering the part of Alberich (the dwarf who causes all the trouble in the first place) from the start of the project.

Melbourne-born baritone Andrew Moran steps up to fill Fyfe's shoes as the god of thunder and storms in *Das Rheingold*. Moran was last seen as Fra Melitone in *La forza del destino*. In addition, Wegner was covering Terje Stensvold in the role of Wotan. Shane Lawrencev has been covering the role admirably at rehearsals but it is not yet clear whether he will become the official understudy.

Fans of Fyfe should have a treat in store. The baritone has been in excellent voice of late and will doubtless relish the chance to tackle a major Wagner role. When *Limelight* interviewed him earlier in the year he

was rather glum about playing Donner. "That's a sort of loser's role really," he said. "I'm covering Alberich but I should have liked to have had a greater involvement in *The Ring*, because Wagner's my number one man. Alberich suits my voice. Lyndon [Terracini] says 'Oh, you'll definitely do Alberich one day'. In the meantime I'll have to wait for John Wegner to be gathered up in the rapture or something." Prophetic words as it turns out.

<http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/362340.john-wegner-pulls-out-of-melbourne-ring.aspx>

Susan Bullock: Lady of the Ring

By [Clive Paget](#) on Nov 5, 2013



Susan Bullock: Opera Australia's Brünnhilde and Wagnerian soprano extraordinaire

Opera Australia's Brünnhilde talks about her rise to fame and fortune and Ring cycles old and new.

How did you first know that you wanted to be an opera singer?

I went to watch my brother in the chorus of the *Pirates of Penzance*. I was still in primary school but I loved it. I really wanted to get on the stage. I didn't decided there and then but it obviously sparked something off in me. I didn't really decide I wanted to do it until I was about 17. I grew up in the northwest of England and the Royal Northern College of Music has a Saturday morning school. I went along as a pianist and I had to have a second study. I didn't play any other instruments and my brother said, "Oh you can sing in tune. You just have to sing a couple songs to fulfil the requirements." So I pitched up, sang my songs and then they said, "Would you mind coming back this afternoon and singing to the Head of Voice?" Well, I said, "Wait a minute I'm here as a pianist". They said, "We want you to do singing, but you can still have piano lessons." Even then I didn't actually go on to study singing full time. I went to London University and did a music degree.

You won the Kathleen Ferrier Prize in 1984. What kind of opera repertoire were you singing at that point?

Well, you know, it's crazy because in those competitions people sing stuff that they should never be singing. They give you a list of things and you've got to sing certain songs and arias and you've got to have three different programs as well. I sang *Senza Mamma* from *Suor Angelica* and *Leise, leise, fromme Weise* from *Freischütz*, both of which I ended up

singing years after. But yes, in those competitions you sing all sorts of stuff.

Were you performing as an opera singer then?

I was at Glyndebourne. I was in the chorus for two seasons and two tours and then I started at English National Opera. So I was very much still a fledgling. I was covering stuff at Glyndebourne, things like Drusilla in *The Coronation of Poppaea*, singing a bridesmaid in *Figaro*, that kind of thing. It was very, very early days and I sort of rolled with the punches. I was doing Pamina, Gilda, Yum-Yum, and then I moved up to Micaela, Tatyana.



So did it come a point where you realised that you might be a Wagnerian soprano? Did somebody tell you?

Well, I've had the same coach for 30 odd years. His name is Phillip Thomas and he's got the best pair of ears I've ever met. He knows my voice probably better than I do, to be honest. And he would hear sounds as I developed and as different repertoire brought out different things, different colours. And he would say, "maybe we should look at this now, maybe you should look at that." And then I was asked to do *The Egyptian Helen*, which had never been done in England. It was for Garsington Opera. Only in England do we have these crazy places that are like someone's back garden but it's really a mansion where they've built a theatre. It was by far the biggest thing I'd ever done in terms of length and difficulty. A lot of people came to that,

because they were curious about the piece, apart from anything else. And a lot of people came up to me and said, "You should start looking at some Wagnerian stuff." And Keith Warner, the director, who's been an old mate and great friend, called me and said, "Right, I'm doing a *Ring* in Tokyo and I want you to look at Brünnhilde. And I'm doing a *Tristan* in Germany and in England and I want you to look at Isolde. And I said, "Aren't you meant to start with a Rhinemaiden or something?" He said, "Well, yeah, yeah... have a look." I remember going to my coach Phillip, and also to Tony Legge, and saying, "Right, I want you to be human traffic lights. I'm just going to sing this stuff to you It's very raw. Red is 'don't touch it'; amber is 'possible'; Green is 'go for it.'" And they both said green, so I had a go.

Did you have role models in the Wagnerian repertoire back then?

I've never tried to model myself on anybody. And I'm quite a good mimic and that can be very dangerous. I don't want to start taking on other peoples' sounds, because that won't be me. I do listen, obviously. My role model then, because Isolde was the first Wagner I ever did (crazily) was Margaret Price. She came to it from a lyric background, which is exactly where I was coming from. There was no point in me listening to Birgit Nilsson. I mean, there's no way! Birgit Nilsson's a one-off. No-one else can be Birgit Nilsson, it's impossible. So I thought, right, Margaret Price. Good Welsh girl for a start, and with Kleiber – perfect combination. She sang it all so beautifully and so lyrically – just like extended lieder – and that's what sparked me off. It's not all about yelling and screaming. It's about colours and textures and emotions, and very intimate as well as being impressive. I met her several years later and we chatted about it, and she said, "Well I just sang it like Strauss songs, you know."

I remember when I heard her Isolde for the first time. I heard some of the narration and the colour she would bring to phrases. You have that sense that she's taking on a whole character.

You understood who this person was, because she sang it as an actor.

And the top notes are thrilling. And it's almost more thrilling because they're not spitfire.

Yes. It's an extension of that beautiful lyrical sound. And at the end of the day, when Wagner wrote, there were no such things as Wagner singers. They were *bel canto* singers. We've created this phenomenon of the Wagner singer. Phillip told me right at the beginning, when I said, "Oh this is going to ruin my voice". He said, "No, it's not Wagner that ruins singers. It's singers that ruin Wagner." And you know, it's all on the page for you. And Margaret Price actually sang what he wrote. And how beautiful and touching it was, and how exciting!



With Bryn Terfel at Covent Garden

Brünnhilde and Isolde are the pinnacles of the Wagner canon. How did you know you were ready to do them on stage?

When I was asked I looked at them very seriously. And it's not like it was next week. With the Tokyo *Ring* we were only going to be doing one piece a year. I was asked to look at it in 1998, knowing that I wouldn't do *Die Walküre* until 2002. Similarly with Isolde. I had a couple of years to really study it properly. You're always studying, it never stops. But a long preparation time is absolutely essential. Also because it was Keith Warner, who I trust as a director, I knew he wasn't going to compromise me in any way. And he really cares about the piece, and the music. It's not just what he can put on stage, it's about making the people live – to be touching and true. There was masses to learn, and in no way did I get anywhere near it then. Vocally I could sing it, but all the emotional levels – it's like peeling an onion. It goes on and on and on. You have to feel safe when you do these things for the first time and I certainly felt safe in those situations.

You've been singing Brünnhilde for 12 years now. Can you put your finger on how your understanding of the role has changed?

I think, funnily enough, it's more about having a deeper knowledge of everything else that's going on around you. The first time you do it, you just hang in there. It's so terrifying. It's like standing at the foot of Everest. I remember the first time I sang a single act – I wanted to go and lie in a darkened room. But I thought, "Hang on mate, you've got another 16 hours of this – hours and hours of it to come!" But your interpretation automatically deepens as you become more familiar with everything else. You've got to know every word that everybody else says – you can't just stand there and sing your stuff. It's adding layers all the time. It's funny, even now you go to an orchestral rehearsal and suddenly something hits you for the first time.

People have said that vocally Brünnhilde is like singing three different parts. Did you find that?

It's certainly a massive vocal challenge. The first time you come out in the second act of *Walküre*, you've got to ping out top C's and top B's. Then you talk to Siegmund and you're singing at the bottom of your

voice, it's almost a mezzo role. And the third act is a mixture of both – it's a massive vocal range. *Siegfried* lies much higher all the way through. The tessitura is around the upper middle and above, so you've got to crank it into a different gear. And then *Götterdämmerung* has the lot – everything from top C's to bottom G's, and every range of emotion, volume and colour in-between.

And in *Siegfried*, you must have to take into consideration that there's some poor chap who's been singing for three hours before you even start?

Oh god yes. And it's very hard as Brünnhilde because not only is the music tricky vocally, but the audience have been there for quite a while by the time you show up. You've got to engage them for 45 minutes from the moment you open your mouth. They've got to think: "Oh that's Brünnhilde – she's been asleep – I wonder what state's she's in?" You really haven't got long to make an impact.

And it's another killer entry – like the opening of *Walküre* – where everyone knows how it goes.

Yes they've been waiting for it. The story is all about Siegfried developing to such an extent that he can make it through those flames and get to her. Everyone's on edge waiting for this moment to happen. And of course it's at the end of the evening. I can't sit at home, I have to come in. I have to be in the dressing room because I couldn't just waltz in an hour before, get my makeup on and go on – I couldn't do it.



The Frankfurt Ring

How many productions have you worked on of the *Ring*?

I think this is about my ninth.

And how many of those were new productions?

Oh, Tokyo, Lisbon, Frankfurt... Covent Garden wasn't...

So that's about a 50/50 split. How much more work is involved in creating a new production, as opposed to going into a production that's happened before?

Well, both are quite challenging. If you go into an existing production, hopefully you're not just being asked to step into the shoes of the person who's done it before. In the last Covent Garden *Ring*, 80% of the cast were new, if not more. We almost started again because the chemistry between people was completely

different. What works with one group of people won't necessarily work with others. There's a lot of work, because it's a revival slot and there's not as much time. Things like lighting and that sort of stuff can be flexible but not massively so. You've got to try and make something work for you. In a new production you're starting from scratch with a blank page. And that's challenging too because things get thrown up that you've never thought of in that way before. You've got to clear your brain out and start completely afresh which is hugely difficult.



Last Night of the Proms

The Melbourne *Ring* is a new production. How different would you say that Neil Armfield's take on the story, and your character in particular, is from other productions that you've been in?

The directors that I love to work with are those who treat you like an actor, not just a voice on legs. To me it's all about acting and character. Singing is just the way that we express it. We just have a wider vocal range than an actor, that's all. What I love about Neil is that he treats us as actors, and every thought and every emotion is talked about and is very clear. And it's very personal and intimate. These epic conversations are actually going on between two human beings and he's very keen to make it that way. It's all about the people. We're not relying on some crazy set that's all

singing and dancing with flashing lights – turning itself upside down or whatever. That way we don't get swamped. It's all about us. I mean Wagner is such a man of the theatre. He's written clear instructions in the score, even about how you're feeling, let alone the colours and dynamics of the piece. He wanted actors, and I think Neil's really going for that.

Is there something specific about the character journey for Brünnhilde in this particular production? Something new that you've found?

Neil's not fallen into the trap of having just heroic figures on the stage. Sometimes you've got to come on and be sort of 'heroic' but on the whole we're just telling the story and the heroic elements come out because that's the way it's written. For me that's great. It's a wonderful way of developing a character from the crazy naughty girl at the beginning to the totally destroyed (but very strong) woman, who's gone through all of this torment, at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. The journey is huge and Neil is saying the minute you show up in *Walküre*, "Oh this isn't Brünnhilde the heroine. No, this is Brünnhilde the girl."

You've worked with the Siegfried, Stefan Vinke, at Covent Garden this year.

Yes, and in Lisbon and in Venice.

And you've worked with Terje Svendsfold, who's playing Wotan.

Yes, we did it in Frankfurt together.

Presumably that all helps in a new production?

Yes. Stefan, Terje and me, we're old pals. We know how each other ticks, which is lovely.

And is there a particular moment that you think you'll be looking forward to in performance?

Without giving it away, I love the way Neil's staged the scene with Siegmund. Very often the 'Annunciation of Death' is quite static. The music slows right down and suddenly Brünnhilde changes because she's doing her job as the Valkyrie now. Often you lose Brünnhilde a bit – you lose who she is. What I love about this production is that you see the dilemma in her. You see that she doesn't want to do this – she doesn't want to tell Siegmund he's going to die. You see her reaction to what she sees between him and Sieglinde. And you see the wheels in her head thinking, "What is this that they feel towards each other? What is all this human kissing and touching of each other?" It sets her alight. She's not just standing there, delivering the message. You see that she too is becoming more human. With Neil it's always about the human dimension.

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Wagner and Us – The Ring comes to Melbourne

Zoe Nikakis, November 7, 2013



Albumen silver print of Richard Wagner, 1870, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Thousands of Wagner enthusiasts will soon descend on Melbourne as Opera Australia stages a production of Richard Wagner's masterwork, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*.

Colloquially known simply as *The Ring*, the work is four operas spread over 16 hours, beginning with *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhine Gold*) then on to *Die Walküre*

(*The Valkyrie*), *Siegfried* and finally the mammoth *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*).

Staging *The Ring* is a mammoth undertaking for any opera company, and this Melbourne production promises to be no exception.

To celebrate this rare event and complement the performance, the University of Melbourne is hosting a conference in early December called Wagner and Us.

Written over a period of 16 years, from 1853 to 1869 *The Ring* and its progenitor caused major changes to opera and music more broadly, particularly with his use of the leitmotif – a short, recurring musical phrase, in association with particular situations or characters. Wagner's music drama is a comprehensive art form: he joined poetry, music, costumes, scenery and drama in a presentation of myth.

The operas are based on German and Scandinavian folk tales as well as Norse sagas and 12th century German poetry. They tell the story of a magic ring with the power to rule the world (JRR Tolkien maintained his *Lord of the Rings* books were not based on Wagner's operas, but rather they both drew on the same source material). The operas explore themes such as the relationship of humans to the natural world, power and the abuse of power, love and redemption.

Head of Musicology at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and symposium organiser Professor Kerry Murphy says the symposium, with its scholars drawn from around the world, demonstrates the Melbourne Conservatorium's international leadership in musicology.

Professor Murphy says Wagner "explored characters' emotions and inner workings, but that the deeper meaning of the drama is to be found in the music. The enduring appeal of *The Ring* lies in the multiple interpretations it evokes and its extraordinarily powerful music."

The symposium will include some of the top international names in Wagner scholarship. Speakers including Eva Rieger, one of Germany's most distinguished musicologists, will examine Wagner's subversion and affirmation of gender in his musical practice. Wagner's great-granddaughter, Dagny Beidler will deliver a free public lecture in conjunction with Professor Rieger.

Keynote speaker Patrick Carnegy is the first person to be appointed dramaturg (literary and production

adviser) at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, and his paper will consider why modern productions of Wagner's operas are so unlike the ones he himself envisaged.

The symposium will also include papers on other topics: Wagner and film, Wagner and politics, Buddhism and Wagner, Wagner and Shakespeare, Wagner in Australia, and even Wagner and heavy metal.

"We are very pleased to also have two round tables, one on Wagner and anti-Semitism chaired by University Vice-Chancellor's Fellow Maxine McKew, and the other on Wagner production chaired by Michael Shmith, Senior Writer and Opera Critic for *The Age*," Professor Murphy says.

The round tables will be open to the public, free of charge.

There is also an exhibition drawn from items in the University's collections curated by the MCM's Dr Jennifer Hill which runs until 19 December.

Called "Becoming Wagnerites: Richard Wagner and Australia", the exhibition's starting point is an original letter written by Wagner in 1877 when told of the first staged performances of *Lohengrin* in Australia.

The exhibition includes memorabilia from performances of Wagner's music in the concert hall and of the staged performances held here by visiting opera companies that culminated in the first complete *Ring* in 1913. Also featured are items relating to expatriate singers of Wagner's music, Nellie Melba, Marjorie Lawrence and Florence Austral, and rare scores from the Music Library.

The Melbourne Richard Wagner Society is partnering with the University to present this symposium. Founded in Victoria by a small and dedicated group of enthusiasts in 1981, the society encourages the performance of Wagner's music, provides a focus for lovers of his music, and opportunities to meet and talk with those of a like mind. The Society is a member of the International Wagner Society, the headquarters of which are in Bayreuth, Germany.

The Symposium gratefully acknowledges the support of the Faculty of the VCA and MCM Master Teachers Fund and the Robert Saltzer foundation.

<http://wagnerandus.com.au/>

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/voice/wagner-and-us--the-ring-comes-to-melbourne-20131107-2x3ak.html#ixzz2jxThzBrX>

Wagner and Us

A symposium to be held during the Melbourne 2013 Ring

SYMPOSIUM "WAGNER AND US"
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE 5-8 DECEMBER 2013



Scheduled to coincide with the performances of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Melbourne, 18 November–13 December 2013, the symposium "Wagner and Us" will explore and critique Richard Wagner's continuing cultural, political, and historical importance to contemporary society. The symposium, convened by Professor Kerry Murphy, is jointly hosted by The University of Melbourne and The Richard Wagner Society in Melbourne.

Topics to be covered include Wagner in Australia, Wagner and Anti-Semitism, Wagner in the Theatre, and the 'Wagner Industry', and others.

Invited Keynote Speakers include [Patrick Carnegy \(UK\)](#), [Eva Rieger \(Germany\)](#) and [John Deathridge \(UK\)](#).

FREE EVENTS

Free Public Lecture: 'What happened to Richard Wagner's first offspring Isolde?' An insider look into the Swiss branch of the Wagner dynasty, presented by Wagner's great-granddaughter [Dagny Beidler](#) and [Eva Rieger](#). Thursday 5 December, 5pm (bookings are not required, but if you intend to come please RSVP by clicking [here](#) and providing your details).

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS: Two panels of experts will discuss and debate issues relating to the following topics:

1) Wagner Production (Saturday 7 December, 6pm). Chair: Michael Shmith. Panel: Patrick Carnegy, Peter Bassett, Michael Ewans, Cameron Menzies.

2) Wagner and anti-Semitism: (Sunday 8 December, 2pm). Chair: Maxine McKew. Panel: John Deathridge, Leah Garrett, Peter Tregear, Peter Craven.

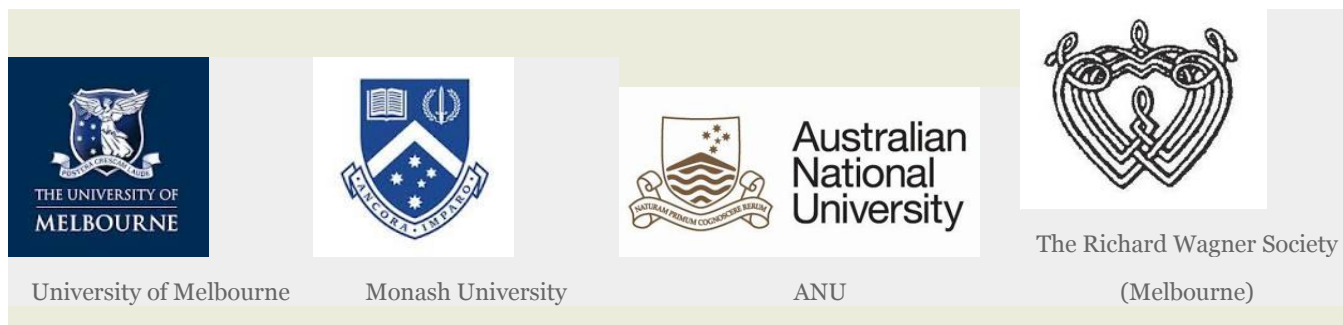
It is anticipated that a Conference Proceedings will be published. For updates and other interesting things, you may wish to visit our [Facebook page](#).

With grateful thanks to: [The Mariann Steegmann Foundation](#)

Part of the Melbourne Ring Festival presented by Opera Australia and the City of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne has a second event in the Melbourne Ring Festival: the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library exhibition, 'Becoming Wagnerites: Richard Wagner and Australia', Ground Floor, Baillieu Library, until 19 December 2013 (admission free).

http://library.unimelb.edu.au/wagner_exhibition/wagner_exhibition



Wagner and Us – Melbourne – 5th to 8th December 2013

Symposium Programme

Please note that the Symposium Programme is subject to change and the Organising Committee may have to make changes to session times, speakers or venues at short notice for operational reasons.

Thursday 5 December 2013

Start Time	End Time	Session	Presenter(s)	Activity
17:00	18:00	Public Lecture	Eva Rieger and Dagny Beidler	Keynote: Public Lecture - "What happened to Richard Wagner's first offspring, Isolde?" - An insider look into the Swiss branch of the Wagner dynasty, presented by Wagner's great-granddaughter.
18:30	20:00			Registration
18:30	20:00	Reception		Welcome Reception

Friday 6 December 2013

Start Time	End Time	Session	Presenter(s)	Activity
11:00	11:30			Registration
11:30	13:00	Wagner and Landmarks	Michael Ewans	Two Landmarks in Wagner Production: Patrice Chéreau's Centenary <i>Ring</i> (1976) and Nikolaus Lehnhoff's <i>Parsifal</i> (2004)
			Michael Christoforidis	Wagner, fin-de-siècle Spanish music and the Moor's last sigh
13:00	14:00			Lunch
14:00	15:00	Keynote 1	John Deathridge	Waiting for Wagner
15:00	15:30			Afternoon Tea
15:30	17:00	Wagner and Politics	Robert Gibson	Building (and Rebuilding) the Wagner Brand
			Sophie Boyd-Hurrell	Composing Sovereignty: Modern Political Formations in Wagner's Music
			Luke Berryman	Wagner's anti-Semitism in the Third Reich
19:00	21:40	The Melbourne <i>Ring</i>		<i>Das Rheingold</i>

Saturday 7 December 2013

Start Time	End Time	Session	Presenter(s)	Activity
09:00	09:30			Registration
09:30	10:30	Wagner and the Antipodes	Peter Tregear	Post-Colonial Tristesse: Fritz Hart and Wagner
			Sue Cole	G.W.L. Marshall-Hall and radical Wagnerism in late nineteenth-century London and Melbourne
			Kerry Murphy	Thomas Quinlan and the All Red <i>Ring</i> : Australia 1913
10:30	11:00			Morning Tea
11:00	13:00	Wagner and Film	David Larkin	'Do you not hear and see it?' Wagner's <i>Tristan</i> in Lars von Trier's <i>Melancholia</i> (2011)
			James Deaville	Not beyond Good and Evil: Ken Russell's Wagner
			James Wierzbicki	From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: The Long, Strange Ride of Wagner's Valkyries
13:00	14:00			Lunch
14:00	15:00	Keynote 2	Patrick Carnegy	Productions of the <i>Ring</i> from Wagner to the present day
15:00	15:30			Afternoon Tea
15:30	17:00	Wagner and Germany	Solomon Guhl-Miller	Towards a New Understanding of the Wanderer in <i>Siegfried</i> Act III: Wotan's Voluntary Moral Step Backward
			Daniel Sheridan	A German in Paris: The Parisian <i>Tannhäuser</i> and Choral Monuments
			Katherine Syer	1813 and the <i>Ring</i> : Echoes of the Wars of Liberation
17:00	17:30		Heath Lees	A Challenge for Today: Bringing Wagner's Music to Life on Film
17:30	18:00			Drinks
18:00	19:00	Round Table	Chair: Michael Shmith Panellists: Patrick Carnegy, Michael Ewans and Cameron Menzies	Round table discussion on Production.

Sunday 8 December 2013

Start Time	End Time	Session	Presenter(s)	Activity
09:30	10:00			Registration
10:00	11:00	Keynote 3	Eva Rieger	Music and Masculinity: Wagner's subversion and affirmation of gender in his musical practice (Erik, Tristan, Siegfried)
11:00	11:30			Morning Tea
11:30	13:00	Wagner and Others	Michael Halliwell	"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks": Shakespeare and Wagner
			Peter Bassett	The use of Buddhist and Hindu concepts in Wagner's stage works
			Charris Efthimiou	Heavy Metal meets Richard Wagner
13:00	14:00			Lunch
14:00	15:00	Round Table	Chair: Maxine McKew Panellists: John Deathridge, Leah Garret and Peter Tregear	Round table discussion - Anti-Semitism.
15:00	15:30			Afternoon Tea: Conference finish.

<http://wagnerandus.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Symposium-Programme-24-Oct-2013.pdf>



List of Speakers and Papers

<http://wagnerandus.com.au/list-of-speakers-and-sessions/>

List of Speakers and Papers

Speaker	Title of Paper
Peter Bassett	The use of Buddhist and Hindu Concepts in Wagner's Stage Works
Dagny Beidler and Eva Rieger (Public Lecture)	What happened to Richard Wagner's first offspring, Isolde? An insider look into the Swiss branch of the Wagner dynasty, presented by Wagner's great-granddaughter.
Luke Berryman	Wagner's anti-Semitism in the Third Reich
Sophie Boyd-Hurrell	Composing Sovereignty: Modern Political Formations in Wagner's Music
Patrick Carnegy	With Helmet, Shield and Spear? How Wagner Himself Staged his Works, and a Brief History of their Subsequent Landmark Productions
Michael Christoforidis	Wagner, fin-de-siècle Spanish music and the Moor's last sigh
Sue Cole	G.W.L. Marshall-Hall and radical Wagnerism in late nineteenth-century London and Melbourne
John Deathridge	Waiting for Wagner
James Deaville	Not beyond Good and Evil: Ken Russell's Wagner
Charris Efthimiou	Heavy Metal meets Richard Wagner
Michael Ewans	Two Landmarks in Wagner Production: Patrice Chéreau's Centenary Ring (1976) and Nikolaus Lehnhoff's Parsifal (2004)
Robert Gibson	Building (and Rebuilding) the Wagner Brand
Solomon Guhl-Miller	Towards a New Understanding of the Wanderer in Siegfried Act III: Wotan's Voluntary Moral Step Backward
Michael Halliwell	"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks": Shakespeare and Wagner
David Larkin	"Do you not hear and see it?": Wagner's Tristan in Lars von Trier's Melancholia (2011)
Heath Lees	A Challenge for Today: Bringing Wagner's Music to Life on Film
Kerry Murphy	Thomas Quinlan and the All Red Ring: Australia 1913
Eva Rieger	Music and Masculinity: Wagner's subversion and affirmation of gender in his musical practice (Erik, Tristan, Siegfried).
Daniel Sheridan	A German in Paris: The Parisian Tannhäuser and Choral Monuments
Katherine Syer	1813 and the Ring: Echoes of the Wars of Liberation

Wagner and Us: A Symposium

Scheduled to coincide with performances of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, this symposium will explore and critique Richard Wagner's continuing cultural, political, and historical importance to contemporary society. For full program details and keynote speakers visit:

<http://wagnerandus.com.au>

VENUE

Melbourne Conservatorium of Music
Gate 12, Royal Parade
Parkville, Victoria 3052

PLEASE NOTE:

- * No bookings are required for the free Public Lecture on 5 December, 5pm.
- * Concession prices are available for holders of valid concession cards and students only.
- * Only "Full Symposium Package" tickets include attendance at the welcome reception, 5 December, 6:30–8pm; tickets to the welcome reception can otherwise be purchased separately.

Theatre A, Old Arts Building, University of Melbourne

Professors Walk Parkville, VIC 3052 Australia

- See more at: <http://wagnerandus.com.au/event/symposium-thursday-night-only/#sthash.vby2NYqO.dpuf>

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Stephen Moss: *A to Z of Wagner* – continued from *Newsletter No 723 & 717*:

S is for Schopenhauer

The philosopher's worldview was a key influence on Wagner's mature work



A Schopenhauerian renunciation of earthly love and striving for something more transcendent... Nina Stemme as Isolde in Glyndebourne 2003's production of *Tristan und Isolde*. Photo: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian.

S is for **Schopenhauer**, a key influence on the mature Wagner. The composer was introduced to the work of the German philosopher [Arthur Schopenhauer](#) by the poet Georg Herwegh, a friend of Wagner's, in 1854, and later called this the most significant event of his life. "The impact was extraordinary and decisive," he wrote.

From Schopenhauer's pessimistic worldview, Wagner derived the ideas of subjection and redemption that are apparent in *Tristan und Isolde*, the *Ring* and *Parsifal*.

Human desires and actions are largely futile and destined to lead to suffering. Only by sublimating our will can we achieve peace. Hence the [Liebestod at the end of *Tristan*](#), with its renunciation of earthly love and striving for something more transcendent. Brünnhilde, too, must die in order to redeem the world, and [Parsifal](#) – the pure fool and Christ-figure who saves the brotherhood of Guild knights – has to reject physical love in order to save Amfortas and free Kundry.



Philosopher Artur Schopenhauer
Photo: Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Wagner shared with Schopenhauer an interest in Buddhism - he sketched an [opera](#) about the Buddha called *The Victors* but did not live to complete it - and came to reject western materialism, which is why the *Ring* lends itself to both environmentalist and anti-capitalist readings. Wagner, through Schopenhauer,

became preoccupied with making the world whole; with escaping from the trivialities and torments of mortal life; with achieving something close to godliness. Schopenhauer also reassured him that music was the supreme artform and could itself encapsulate meaning - Wagner's soundworld can always be trusted even when the text seems to go off the rails - and taught him that compassion should be at the centre of the human experience. Only by suppressing the self - embodied in

the individual will with its desire for sex, money and power - and showing compassion for your fellow man can the individual free himself. That's the theory, anyway.

S is also for **Siegfried**, **Siegmond** and **Sieglinde**, key characters in the Ring and rather too intimately related for their own genetic good.

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/oct/23/a-to-z-of-wagner-s-for-schopenhauer>

T is for Tannhäuser

An early - and subsequently revised - opera that has corking tunes and a very silly plot. Staged with tongue firmly in the cheek, it can be magnificent

T is for [Tannhäuser](#), an earlyish [opera](#), premiered in 1845, but one that prefigures many of Wagner's later themes. Knights, pilgrims, a singing contest, a man torn between sexual and spiritual love, bit of paganised Christianity - Tannhäuser has the whole Wagnerian shooting match, as well as some wonderful tunes - the [pilgrims' chorus](#) has to be close to the top of the Wagnerian pops.

The young knight *Tannhäuser* has gone off to Venusberg for a dirty weekend with the goddess of love. Sated, he heads back - after a quick prayer to the Virgin Mary requesting release - to rejoin his old singing chums at the Wartburg Castle. Elisabeth, the pure-as-the-driven-snow daughter of the Landgrave, is in love with him and happy to see his return, but no one else is when, at the next song contest, he sings a ditty in praise of sexual love. "Poor wretches who have never tasted love / away! Hasten to the hill of Venus!" he instructs his horrified fellow knights.

They round on him and draw their swords, but the Landgrave intervenes and sends him on a pilgrimage to Rome instead. The pilgrimage is outwardly unsuccessful - the Pope is not in a forgiving mood - and he comes back intending to head off to Venusberg for good - or, more likely, ill, but stops when he sees the body of Elisabeth being borne to her funeral, having died of sorrow for her lost love.

He collapses and dies beside her, and a minor miracle involving some sprouting greenery occurs indicating that, whatever the Pope thinks, God has forgiven Tannhäuser. A young woman may have died of a broken heart, but the key thing is the lustful bloke's soul is saved.

Wagner was never really satisfied with Tannhäuser and revised it throughout his life: as well as the 1845 version, there is an 1861 version made for Paris - its premiere ended in one of those audience riots in which

Paris specialised - and another for Vienna in 1875, the version most often performed today.



Johan Botha as Tannhäuser in the Royal Opera House's 2010 production. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

It won't be to everyone's taste, but played with the necessary degree of campness can be magnificent. The overture, the pilgrims' chorus and Tannhäuser's friend - and rival - [Wolfram's Act III aria, "O du, mein holder Abendstern"](#) - *Song of the Evening Star* - are all corkers.

***See: Bayreuth Festspiele: Conductor Sir Colin Davies; Directed Götz Friedrich -**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8du71AE0h6o>

***Bryn Terfel - O du mein holder Abendstern**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISTxySMgw8o>

T is also for [Tristan und Isolde](#), Wagner's [most perfectly realised opera](#) - long but without any of the longueurs you might experience in the Ring and Die Meistersinger. "Despite all the misery and distress," Wagner wrote to his muse Mathilde Wesendonck in 1859, "[the end should be so beautiful and persuasive](#) that the audience's heart is touched without them noticing what terrible stuff it is."

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/nov/05/a-to-z-of-wagner-t-is-for-tannhauser>