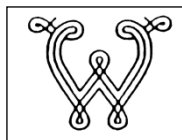


# THE RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY OF W.A. Inc



## MARCH 2012 NEWSLETTER



### Robert's Ramblings:

The Chinese have a saying “may you live in interesting times”, an euphemism for being in a state of chaos of your own making, and so don't expect too much sympathy. Although not entirely of our own making, the Society is in the midst of comprehensive change that will affect our future. As a result we need to steer a safe course, maintain equilibrium and keep our goals in sight.

Although the omens have been discernible for some time, we have recently received confirmation from The Supervisory Board of the Bayreuth Festival that there will be no more preferential allocations of Festival tickets, which of course includes the allocations to Wagner Societies throughout the world. As I pointed out to members at the July 2011 meeting, preferential allocations amount to 60% of all tickets issued. An investigation by the Federal Audit Office found that the Supervisory Board's actions, **“do not conform with the government's subsidy goals”**, bearing in mind that the German taxpayer subsidises 40% of the total Festival costs (as well as bailing out the Greeks!). The German Culture Minister, Bernd Neumann's office later issued a statement, **“Where appropriate, the practices will be corrected”** and now they have been! It is important to realise that The Supervisory Board of the Bayreuth Festival has been directed to take this action by the political force and determination of the three levels of government in Germany, so there is little point in venting anger at Bayreuth, although Katharina Wagner did say upon being appointed that one of her priorities was to free up ticket allocations to the general public. We have been incredibly privileged since 1985 to have received our annual allocations and members have been enriched by the opportunity. Alas, the era has ended. Every cloud has a silver lining (I don't think that one is Chinese!) and so with a 60% increase in the number of tickets available for individual applications, then the waiting period will be lessened appreciably. Much talk is made about waiting 12 years for tickets but from information I've gleaned over the years most people do not wait nearly that long and I received a full set of tickets on my second try as an individual.

This confirmation means that the Society will no longer be able to sponsor a UWA student to attend the Festival, thus ending a particularly successful and generally, greatly appreciated gesture by the membership. I think we all got a warm, fuzzy feeling to see the life changing effect this sponsorship has had on some recipients.

Over the years this sponsorship has been promoted as a contribution the Society has made to the Music Department in lieu of fees for the use of G5 and the Common Room, although for some years before this arrangement, the Society had free use of the facilities. Times have changed and the new user pays and accountability regime we live under means just that and it seems that we could well be charged rental in the future. There have already been intimations of the fee issue over the past two years but we have managed to escape untithed. That we should pay is not unfair to the Society as even the voluntary choirs and other affiliated University groups are charged these days. Again, a case of the Society having been lucky to be so well treated for so long. All is not doom and gloom however, as the cost of the student sponsorship forgone will meet any rental charges that we incur.

While on the subject of fees, the committee has decided to hold subscriptions at current levels for the coming year. All in all, the Society currently offers great value for members.

The AGM will be held on 28<sup>th</sup> March and again, there is change afoot. Several committee members are not renominating and I come to the end of my term as President. This will

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# THE WAY WAGNER INTENDED

*Michael Grebla is a UWA student who was the recipient of the 2011 Bayreuth scholarship awarded by the Richard Wagner Society of WA. The following is a summary of the presentation Michael gave at the Society's Christmas evening in December 2011. He is outside the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in the picture below.*

Dear members of the WA Wagner Society,

I would like to start by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to attend the Bayreuth Festspiele. Attending the festival was eye opening, in every way. It required me to strike out on my own for the first time outside of Perth by myself. I took the opportunity to make the entire trip somewhat of a pilgrimage. My journey started in Bonn, the home of Beethoven and the composer who inspired me to pursue classical music and composition. Then to evensong and Vivaldi at St Martin-in-the-Fields (as well as Les Mis at the West End), to Berlin, to Prague for some Smetana and Mozart, to Vienna and Salzburg where I met the clarinettist from the Vienna Phil (he invited me to attend a rehearsal in Salzburg with Pierre Boulez but it didn't work out). To Munich and then finally to Bayreuth. Home of Liszt and Wagner. Everything before this was an appetiser.

It was a relief to make it to Bayreuth. For the entire trip I was somewhat on edge that I might get mugged for my tickets as I came to learn they were dearly sought after.

I found in Germany that people were very friendly to Australians- an exotic rarity from what I've come to gather. In Bayreuth however, people seemed to go out of their way to see if I needed assistance. In the city centre I had paused for not even 15 seconds with a map in my hand and an old man approached me to offer his help. With my bearings set I made my way to my hotel. No more than 2 minutes had passed and another man on a bike stopped to help me. He was so excited to meet an Australian. He explained how his friend's son was going to Australia to study and insisted I have a chat with his friend, a shop owner. So I meet his friend, a late-middle age German man, and he says "Australia! You must come to have dinner with us!" We all have dinner after the university sports competition, please come next Friday. I politely declined however as that night I would no longer be in Bayreuth. So it could not be helped that my first impressions of Bayreuth were indeed of its quiet town charm.

When I arrived at the opera house for my first opera, Das Meistersinger I remember being impressed by the class of patrons. There was indeed an abundance of fur coats, grey hair, fake eyebrows, bowties... it was immediately apparent this was a high profile event. Despite being in a tie and suit I felt a little out of place seeing as a brought a recycled coca cola bottle filled with water and there were also not many people in my age group in attendance.

It was not long before the trumpets sounded and it was time to enter the theatre. The theatre was impressive to say the least. Extremely beautiful, yet despite the ornateness of the theatre expense WAS spared on the seats. Miserable, cramped flaps of wood with a modest coating of foam, especially for someone of my height. My neighbouring



concert goers explained that they have not changed as they believe it to preserve the 'authenticity of experience'. I came to learn quickly that Germans were very much people of traditions. For example the theatre doors were locked during and between acts, there was no air-conditioning and it was summer. The theatre gets really warm and makes you feel sleepy fast. I can think of at least a handful of times where I had to give the lady next to me a nudge to wake up. Admittedly the seating and the heat didn't bother me all too much as the operas were quiet amazing.

The first opera I was Die Meistersinger. Wow. That was all I could say. It was amazing. How were these things happening on stage? How did a cast of over 200 rise from beneath the stage on tiered seating? Why were shoes falling from the sky? Is that a pe...? Yes it is. Why is that guy naked? Is that a naked girl? Yes it is... where did these naked people come from? Why is this guy's guts spilling on the floor? Why is he splashing paint everywhere? Given occurrences like this in the following opera as well, I got the impression that European opera might be somewhat inclined to frequent prescribed nudity.

In summary- It was spectacular, amazing, and I had no idea what had just happened. I met with an opera critic afterwards and he explained how Bayreuth is renowned for its 'terrorist directors.' Having being completely overwhelmed with symbolism and metaphors from Die Meistersingers, I tried to do even more research for the following operas, but there were still plenty of times where I was just left scratching my head.

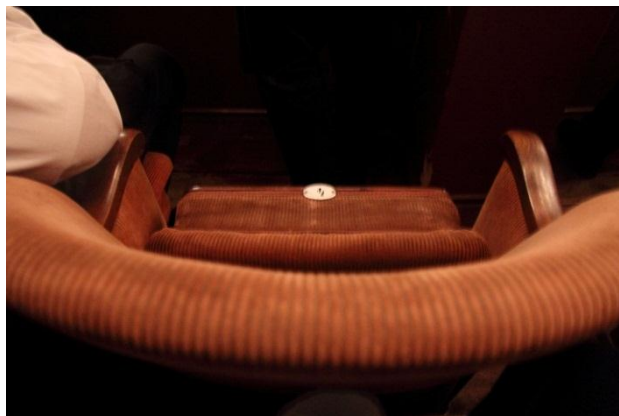
Admittedly for all that was happening on stage, my chief concern was what the music was going to be like and by god, what an amazing sound! I was fortunate enough to sit in the king's box (that had the nice seats- *see picture*) for one opera and the sound was phenomenal, I had to check if I was wearing a pair of high quality headphones. When I heard those Tristan chords I melted. Closed my eyes and just swam in the rich, rich, beautiful sound.

I can say that the experience in every way has made me a

better musician and composer. I hope one day that I might return to Bayreuth and attend the festival again. I was fortunate enough to make some friends in Bayreuth, as well as friends abroad. Some concert goers from Greece have taken interest in some of my compositions too.

So thank you all for having kept this society running for as long as it has. One of the most significant things I learned from my time abroad was that life is about perspective. The program you have developed has provided an invaluable experience to budding musicians and has broadening my perception of music and composing. So thank you.

*Michael Grebla*



**A Posh Seat at Bayreuth**

Michael Grebla is currently involved in a venture known as **appreciate music**

**appreciate music** operates out of the St George's College premises on Mounts Bay Road, Crawley, WA (opposite UWA) teaching music theory, harmony and composition in the form of classes or private tuition to the musically inclined inhabitants of Perth. **appreciate music** was founded by Michael Grebla, a final year BMus (composition) student at UWA and a St George's College resident with a commitment to provide a practical and relevant approach to music theory, harmony and composition in such a way that the content is accessible and useful to anyone with an appreciation for music.

**appreciate music** currently runs four courses per semester on Monday and Thursday evenings. They are non-intensive and are designed to be undertaken alongside study or work. Courses are open to the general public: anyone is welcome to apply however, places are limited as class sizes are kept small to maintain an intimate learning experience.

These courses are ideal for self-taught musicians, the musically curious, university students looking to further their understand of music without doing a degree, those looking to brush up on their theory for an AMEB exam or future tertiary studies, or even the average concert goer who simply wants to understand the finer details of music.

More information can be obtained at the following website - [www.appreciatemusic.com.au](http://www.appreciatemusic.com.au)

## Composer-in-Residence to study at the Royal College of Music

On the morning of December 17th, I climbed lazily out of bed and hobbled over to my computer... to find that I had been accepted into the Royal College of Music! Yes, I would soon be studying my Masters of Music (Composition) in the place that nurtured the likes of Holst, Britten and Vaughan Williams (as well as Andrew Lloyd-Webber, but I'll not hold that against them). As excited as I am by this news, these are still early days and the term doesn't start until September 2012.

Between now and then, I have just enough time to save money for tuition costs and look for a job while I'm there for two years... then I return to Perth for good with my newly acquired skills; no matter how lively the music industry in the UK is, it is only right for me to give back my skills to this country that has supported me my whole life.

I must take this opportunity to once again thank the Wagner Society. You had a direct hand in my acceptance because the work you commissioned from me (*Fanfare für eine sagenhafte Reise*) was included in my portfolio which so thoroughly impressed William Mival, head of composition. He said of the *Fanfare* that he could "hear

Wagner forcing his ego down [my] throat, and I was reluctantly fighting back... and losing." Whether he meant it as a compliment or a criticism, I dared not ask.

I look forward to contributing to the society as best I can, even from overseas, and I relish the opportunity to share all the wonderful experiences I've had there with you when I return.



*Eugene Marshall*

*Eugene was the Wagner Society's 2008 Bayreuth Scholar*

***Congratulations to our Composer-in-Residence, Eugene Marshall!***

# THE WEIMAR WAGNERWOCHE

There were several reasons why I was interested in attending the Weimar Wagnerwoche in the middle of 2011. It was a good opportunity to see a staging of the *Ring* by an opera company in a small provincial German city, relying for the most part on their own resources and without any “name” singers. It was relatively cheap, with my top-price near the front of the stalls costing only about \$100 per night (helped by the strong dollar). While most people seem to associate Weimar with the so-called Weimar Republic, which was established following the First World War and was then overthrown by the Nazis, the city has long been one of the cultural centres of Germany, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and has a number of World Heritage sites, with much of the town centre being listed on the World Heritage register. It was where Wagner’s father-in-law Franz Liszt was the musical director at the court of the Grand Duke following his retirement as a travelling virtuoso, where he composed many of his major works during the 1850s and championed the cause of other composers, not least Wagner (giving the premiere of *Lohengrin* in 1850), and where for the last two decades of his life he normally spent his summers conducting his famous piano master-classes. There were many events and exhibitions being held in Weimar during 2011 to celebrate the bicentenary of Liszt’s birth, so as a pianist (albeit of only modest accomplishments) this was an added attraction for me.

The Wagner week began with a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by Stefan Solyom, a 31-year-old Swede who had recently been appointed as the musical director of the opera at the Deutsches Nationaltheater, and of the Staatskapelle Weimar (the local orchestra). Franco Farina was very good as Tristan and probably overshadowed Catherine Foster, although the latter was excellent in the *Liebestod*. The most radical part of the production was the third act, in which a revolving stage was used to present a series of tableaux illustrating half-remembered memories or even distorted flashbacks from Tristan’s life as he struggled with his delirium.

The *Ring* was the last cycle to be presented in Michael Schulz’s production that had commenced with *Das Rheingold* in 2006, and which our Society will be screening during this year, recorded from the first completed cycle in 2008. Some of the singers were different from those that we will see, as was the conductor (Martin Hoff). But it was the same Brünnhilde (the English soprano, Catherine Foster, and as mentioned above also the Isolde). She was certainly the standout singer, taking the role throughout the cycle which was given over five nights, with only a single day’s break occurring between *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*. The compressed time span may explain why most of the other major roles were shared – for instance, Wotan (Mario Hoff) took the much smaller part of Alberich in *Siegfried* and then he became Gunther, while the Wanderer (Renatus Mészner) had previously been Fasolt and was then Hagen. There were also two separate Siegfrieds (Stefan Vinke and Norbert Schmittberg).

The production itself was quite a mixture – without going into too much detail, there were some aspects that I liked but others that were not so appealing. In addition to the singing roles there were a number of “extras”, presumably actors drawn from the company which also uses the Nationaltheater in Weimar (the city was the home of German literary giants Goethe and Schiller, amongst others). These included major parts for Grane and the ravens (the latter participated directly in Siegfried’s murder), a boy Siegfried and a boy Hagen, and quite a crowd of henchmen with Hunding – one of whom was actually Wotan in disguise. Each of the music dramas began with a preliminary tableau, and during the prelude to *Das Rheingold*, Wotan and Alberich engaged in an arm wrestle to set the scene for the struggle between the two opposing forces.

Family relationships and events (such as weddings) as well as trauma and dysfunction were also highlighted throughout the cycle. For example, all the Valkyries were on the stage with Wotan at the beginning of Act II of *Die Walküre*, dressed as schoolgirls and fooling around, while during the *Ride* they were all in bunk beds, gradually waking up and engaging in a pillow fight before having to get down to more serious business. They also all accompanied Waltraute during the latter’s visit to Brünnhilde in *Die Götterdämmerung*, thus adding their support to Waltraute’s tale of woe about the decline of Wotan and the gods. Mime spent much of his time dressed as a fussy cleaning-lady, complete with bucket and mop, while Gunther and Gutrunne were portrayed as overgrown adolescents. There were even elaborate preparations for a wedding reception during the last act of *Siegfried*, which was then countered by the sinister appearance of Hagen at the climax.

By booking for *Tristan* and the *Ring*, I had the added bonus of free entry into several additional events that took place in the spacious dress circle foyer of the Nationaltheater. In the first of these there was a performance of the *Siegfried Idyll* in its original chamber version, along with two short pieces by Liszt, including *Am Grabe Richard Wagners*, which he composed immediately after Richard’s death. Oliver Hilmes, the author of recent books about Cosima Wagner and the Wagner family read several substantial excerpts from his writings, including the account of Liszt’s death in Bayreuth which reflects very badly on his daughter and her entourage! There was also a recital by Russian pianist Denys Proshayev (on the staff of the Franz Liszt Music School in Weimar), which included three of Liszt’s Wagner transcriptions as well as the Sonata in B minor, which he composed in Weimar. These pieces were



interspersed by readings from the letters between Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck. I did not think my understanding of German would be good enough for a panel discussion by participants in the *Ring* so instead I went to the Goethe Museum for a most enjoyable Liszt recital - with commentaries tracing his life and career – by a splendid young pianist named Cora Irsen.

From Weimar it was a one-hour train trip to Eisenach, which I have visited briefly once before to see Bach's birthplace. My main purpose this time was to go to the Wartburg, the ancient historic castle that is perched high up above the town, and whose minstrel's contests provided the inspiration for the second act of *Tannhäuser*. One of my crazy ideas was to walk up to the castle from the town and I was pretty exhausted when I reached it, but it was worth it in more ways than one, because my route passed by a villa that was built for the writer Fritz Reuter in the 1860s and now houses the Reuter-Wagner-Museum, which has what is claimed to be the largest collection of Wagneriana outside Bayreuth. On display were Wagner's death mask, some of his letters, and performing scores of *Rienzi* and *Tannhäuser*, with many annotations in the composer's hand.

I also visited Zürich where I saw *Parsifal* conducted by Daniele Gatti. Australian tenor Stuart Skelton was well received in the title role, alongside star singers Matti Salminen as Gurnemanz and Thomas Hampson as Amfortas. The production was set in a military hospital, with Gurnemanz dressed as a chaplain, the two knights in Act I as doctors and the youths as nurses. The director's concept was to stage the work around the time of its premiere outside Bayreuth, which was at Barcelona in 1913 – thus around the time of the First World War. He also portrayed Amfortas and Klingsor as brothers, who are finally reconciled in the closing scene. While in Zürich I visited the Villa Wesendonck, which is now a museum of Asian and Oriental art (they had a very interesting special exhibition of Indian painting) but to Wagnerians has, of course, other associations! (see the mention of Mathilde above).

*John Meyer*



Villa Wesendonck



Weimar Nationaltheater with Goethe Schiller monument

The main programme for the Wagner Society this year will be the **WEIMAR RING**. It was released in 2010 and it emerged from the joint efforts of The Deutsches Nationaltheater, the Staatskapelle Weimar, and the Staatstheater Thüringen. Recorded live from Deutsches Nationaltheater, Weimar in 2008, the music is conducted by **Carl St. Clair** with stage direction by **Michael Schulz**. Among the principal singers are **Mario Hoff** (Wotan), **Tomas Möwes** (Alberich), **Catherine Foster** (Brünnhilde), **Erin Caves** (Siegfried), **Kirsten Blanck** (Sieglinde), **Johnny van Hall** (Siegfried) and **Frieder Aurich** (Mime)

# IN SEARCH OF WAGNER'S BIRTHPLACE

During my recent visit to Europe I spent a couple of days in Leipzig. I was very pleased to discover that the hotel that I had booked into was bounded on the north side by Richard-Wagner-Strasse and on the south by the street known simply as Brühl. It was on the second storey of the building at No 3 in the latter street that Richard Wagner was born on 22 May 1813. So early on my first morning in Leipzig, I set off in search of the Master's birthplace. I found that I had to walk almost to the opposite end of the Brühl, but it is not a long street and it is contained entirely within the northern portion of the city centre (which, like many European cities, is enclosed by a "Ring"). Imagine my disappointment when, keeping a close eye on the descending numbers, I reached the designated spot only to find that Wagner's birthplace is currently a huge hole in the ground!

As a matter of fact, the building in which Wagner entered the world (known as the House of the Red and White Lions) was demolished way back in 1886, just three years after his death. In its place a warehouse was constructed, but this also has recently been pulled down along with a number of other buildings in an area spanning several blocks. This is now a large construction site for and shopping and apartment complex to be known as "Höfe am Brühl", due to be completed next year. It is intended that it will incorporate parts of the original foundations of the Wagner house, as well as containing a memorial to the composer. The site of No3 in the Brühl was clearly marked by signs on the fence surrounding the construction area, along with the slogan "Richard ist Leipziger" (Richard is a Leipziger – see picture below), which also happens to be the motto of the Richard Wagner Society of Leipzig.

Whilst in Leipzig I had hoped to hear the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra, which was playing in the opera house for a ballet version of *Carmina Burana*, but

unfortunately the concert was completely sold out. In the meantime, browsing in the foyer shop of the Gewandhaus (concert hall) I discovered a CD of German Romantic piano music recorded by Peter Meyer in a local palace, the Gohliser Schlösschen. He is the only other pianist with my surname that I have come across – although there are several well-known clarinetists by the name of Meyer that I know of! Then in place of the ballet I was able to attend a musical evensong in the Thomaskirche presented by the Leipzig University Choir and instrumental ensemble, the highlight of which was one of the motets composed by Bach when he was in charge of music there between 1723 and 1750.

It was also in the Thomaskirche that Wagner was baptised (under the name of Wilhelm Richard Wagner) on 16 August 1813, three months before his father Friedrich died from typhoid fever. A year later Wagner went with his mother and stepfather Ludwig Geyer to live in Dresden, returning to Leipzig in 1829 and completing his schooling at the Thomasschule before matriculating as a music student of the Leipzig University – but he did not last long as a university student!

After taking up a post in Magdeburg in 1835, Wagner rarely returned to Leipzig but it is understandable that this city wants to think of him as one of their most famous sons. Leipzig is famous for being the Bach city and there is a notable Bach museum opposite the Thomaskirche. I also visited the Mendelssohn museum (near the Gewandhaus, in the house in which he lived and died) and the Schumann museum (in the apartment where he and Clara spent the first four years of their married life). It is only right and proper that there should also be a Wagner museum in place at the spot where he was born, in time for the bicentenary of his birth.

John Meyer



Construction Board at Leipzig



Wagner's Birthplace

# THE ESSEN RING

The unusual thing about the Essen Ring of 2011 is that each of the four operas has a different director, mostly different singers and vastly different interpretations. It was a bit like seeing four different Rings in quick succession. And it was a bit of a curate's egg!

## *The first Evening: Das Rheingold.*

For this the director was Stephan Soltesz.

The set was quite amazing. It was very complex and contained all the locations of the opera. On a lower level was the Rhein on one side with great golden beams supporting an upper level. The gold was represented by strings of Christmas lights which came on at the appropriate time. On the other side, separated by a strange rag covered staircase, was Niebelheim which was set up as a sort of computer nerd's den. Lots of flat screen monitors and boxes of computers.

On the next level was the main stage with the stairs rising through it. On the left was the apple tree where Freia spent lots of time watering it and polishing the apples.

Above again was Fricka's area with richly decorated paneled walls and ceiling and a little office where she spent a lot of time checking the contract and accounts for the building of Walhalla. On the right was Riesenheim where Fasolt and Fafner stored lots of construction materials.

The curtain rose to reveal a young and two eyed Wotan, (Almas Svilpa ) clad only in underwear in the middle of a booze and drug fuelled session with the Rheinmadens. Fricka, ( Ildiko Devos ) was above in her office. Freia polished her apples and below, Heiko Trinsinger was an excellent Donner. Dressed in leather pants and jacket with a T shirt and a gold chain, he was having a very vigorous gay session with a somewhat wimpy Froh. Lots of undressing and beating and heaven knows what else. I believe all the sex was simulated but with the German trend to realism, one can't be sure.

Fricka comes downstairs, kicks the Rheinmaidens out and drags Wotan out of his drunken sleep to look at the accounts. Alberich now stumbles out of Niebelheim and discovers the charms of the Rheinmadens and wins himself the gold. A little later Loge, dressed in a trenchcoat, wanders in and he too passes some time with the Rheinmadens who really do seem to need their morals checked out.

Alberich, now wealthy and wearing a loud blue coat and smoking a cigar works his magic with the Tarnhelm for Wotan and Loge, and after being dragged up to the real world, uses a mobile phone to summon the Niebelungen to bring up the gold.

Later Fasolt and Fafner appear. They are just normal size. Fafner dressed as a builder and Fasolt as the contracts

manager. They lead Freia away up to Riesenheim where she sits on a couch with Fasolt. They are quite enamored with each other and share a drink and a packet of chips as the action continues all around them.

After killing Fafner, Fasolt lugs the gold up to Riesenheim and begins to count it. Alberich sulks in Niebelheim and the Rheinmadens look after Mime.

There isn't really space to go into more detail. Enough to say it was a wonderfully imaginative set with so much going on at once.

The Aalto Opera was only about 70% full this first night and a couple of people obviously didn't like all the sex, drugs and rock-n-roll and walked out. Nevertheless, the performance was received with thunderous applause and not a single boo (which is something the Germans love to do.) The next night, word seems to have got around as it was sold out.

A lot of the singers seem to be from Eastern Europe and to my untrained ear, all were good. The band had around 90 players and was excellent.

## *The Second Evening: Die Walküre.*

This was the same production I saw two years ago and which I wrote about in some detail. It was again excellent. The set was a somewhat dilapidated grand hall with a few watermarks where the elements had got in. A large table was in the centre. Siegmund, (Jeffery Dowd) and Sieglinde (Danielle Halbwachs ) were both young and good looking and well suited fitted to their parts.

Hunding, ( Marcel Rosca ) fearful of Wotan blatantly sucks up to Fricka, ( Ildike Szonyi ). Brünnhilde, (Catherine Foster) was excellent. The slain heroes arrive in Walhalla dressed in lederhosen without tops and sporting gruesome wounds and the Walküre double as the Wunschmaidens so it looks like everyone lived happily ever after.

I won't elaborate except to say it received a thunderous applause.

## *The Third Evening: Siegfried.*

Then it all started to go downhill!

The set was a sort of moonscape with rows of grey plastic bubbles a couple of meters wide. With a bit of painting and imagination, they could have made a huge dragon but instead a few of them just wobbled up and down when the dragon appeared.

I always feel Siegfried is far too long and this was no exception and it could have easily shed an hour or so without missing much of the plot.

Mime was suitably grotesque and a much older Wotan had lost his eye and gained a spear. Brünnhilde, ( Kirsi Tiihonen ) was excellent but Siegfried, ( Johnny van Hall ) began to lose his voice toward the end of Act 1. After a long first interval, during which he had medical attention, he went well for a while but toward the end of Act 3 he completely fell apart with some dreadful warbles and thereafter couldn't get above the orchestra, let alone the very robust Brünnhilde.

It all ended rather sadly but the audience gave them a good clap nevertheless.

### ***The Fourth Evening: Götterdämmerung.***

The director was Barry Kosky and I guess that should have prepared me!

It was all about boxes! Cardboard boxes! Lots of stupid cardboard boxes!

At the beginning of Act 1 Erda comes on stage pushing a large cardboard box. Save for a very small g-string, she is completely naked and she is a very old lady. She proceeds centre stage to remove three cheap plastic chairs from the box and three very smart young Norns set themselves

down and completely ignore her. I found this bit totally tasteless and degrading.

Siegfried, (Jeffery Dowd) was very good. He was a sort of Little Abner character and was totally irreverent to, and unimpressed by, all the splendour of the Gibichunghalle and it's lofty inhabitants.

Brünnhilde, (Caroline Whisnant ) had the most awful voice I can recall. She was certainly loud, but had I heard her through a HiFi system I would have sent it back for service, such was the screeching and distortion. After being deceived by Siegfried she was wheeled back to the Gibichunghalle in a cardboard box on a shopping trolley. It was just stupid!

Hagen's warriors all arrived in a very large open fronted box and were a lot of 30'ish punk rockers in jeans and singlets who pulled at Brünnhilde dress while roaring with laughter at her distress. After the wedding ceremony, they all clambered back into their big box and madly waved tiny flags. Equally stupid!

The contrast between Rheingold and this rather gruesome spectacle was just too much. Rheingold was ingenious and spectacular and all the sex was fun. I found Kosky's Götterdämmerung inane and degrading and the thought of this Brünnhilde singing the long and glorious finale was too much for me to bear, so I left and went back to my hotel to drown my distress in a couple of glasses of a good Riesling.

*Bruce Pearce*

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## **THE SAN FRANCISCO RING**

San Francisco claims to be a "Ring town", ever since the Cycle's local premiere in 1900 and its Company premiere at the War Memorial Opera House in 1935. The local populace, augmented by thousands of overseas visitors, regularly fills the theatre for each production. The Opera House, opened in 1932 seats 3,000 and was built as a memorial to those who fought in WW1 – one cannot think of a finer way to commemorate the fallen.

The production was a modern version, directed by Francesca Zambello, who clearly avoided any outrageous gimmickry but achieved a believable timelessness. The plain black drop-curtain was used prior to each opera, and during scene changes, as a film screen on which scenes from nature portrayed the mood of the action to come. This was very effective, as was the scenery which, although not overdone, was sufficiently realistic. There was also a touch of humour, particularly in Das Rheingold. Fire was used effectively in Rheingold and in 'surrounding' Brünnhilde's rock (only on one side). The dragon was a weird version of a Sherman tank, with large eyes and a mouth which conveniently fell apart when stabbed by Siegfried to reveal the giant.

It was a very strong cast but the outstanding performer was Nina Stemme who sang Brünnhilde. In her forties she actually looked the part – she was slim, with a magnificent voice and, even without breastplate and horse, was a realistic Brünnhilde. Loge, sung by Stefan Margita, was a very likeable rogue. We were treated to two Siegfrieds, Jay Hunter Morris sang the part in Siegfried, a very good actor but did not have a very strong voice, while in Götterdämmerung the part was sung by Ian Storey, who was excellent. The only weak spot was Wotan, sung by Mark Delavan. He lacked presence and sadly at times his voice faded.

Just to visit this theatre was an exciting experience and to add an excellent Ring made the long journey well worthwhile.

*Ann Whyntie*



I attended a wonderful production of *Götterdämmerung* at the San Francisco Opera on Sunday afternoon 5<sup>th</sup> June 2011.

Brünnhilde was sung by Swedish soprano Nina Stemme who received a well-deserved standing ovation at the end. I'm sure we'll be hearing more from her in the future. She was ably supported by English tenor Ian Storey as Siegfried. Also in the cast were Andrea Silvestrelli as Hagen and Gerd Grochowski as Gunther.

The direction was by Francesca Zambello and some of her decisions were a little strange. Why was the Norns rope-of-fate an electrical cable translated as cable and when the rope/cable broke was there an electrical spark? The Gibichung's mansion was a rather impressive metal and glass structure on the Rhine decorated in a kitsch LA style with white sofas and leopard skin cushions. Guttrune, Melissa Citro, looked the film star in a long blonde wig and tight red long dress, very Hollywood. Also later why she appeared in a large Motel style bedroom with Hagen fighting over the use of a remote for the TV is anybody's guess.

The theme of environmental degradation was emphasised by depicting the Rhine despoiled by crushed plastic water bottles, abandoned car bodies and car tyres, when Siegfried met the Rhine Maidens in Act 3. This theme seems to be popular with Opera directors at the moment. Last year in *Hansel und Gretel* at Glyndebourne the forest was all dead trees lying around the place.

The music was well directed by long time SF Opera associate Donald Runnicles. The ending was a bit passé with a young girl dressed in white bringing an Ash tree to be planted at the edge of the stage. Surely they could have come up with something a bit more expressive of renewal? Unfortunately there was no silence after the last bars to savour the atmosphere. The audience seemed to be interested in who was the first to applaud.

A walk through the twilight of the approaching evening ended a truly magnificent experience.

Leon Robinson



**Nina Stemme as Brünnhilde  
Hagen with his Spear and  
Gunther on the right**

## FOREST MURMURINGS by WALDVOGEL

In recorded music, all is not always what it seems. In the early 1950s Kirsten Flagstad, whose voice enraptured American and British audiences before the war, was still in fine shape and EMI embarked on a recording production of *Tristan und Isolde*, with her as Isolde under the baton of Wilhelm Furtwängler.

With Furtwängler involved in the exercise, there were the predictably imagined slanderings of him by Walter Legge, with whom Furtwängler refused to co-operate, whereupon EMI abruptly informed Legge that he would not be producing *Tristan*. On learning of this, Flagstad promptly informed EMI that she would not do the recording *without* Legge. When confronted, Furtwängler settled for a written apology from Legge.

Flagstad melted into the role, with the right phrasing, the right tone, the right vocal touch and what Richard Osborne described as 'exemplary diction'. However, there was a flaw, in that Flagstad's voice was never true above B flat, a point she herself acknowledged. It was suggested to Walter Legge that it would be possible to have Elisabeth Schwarzkopf standing behind Flagstad to sing the two very highest notes. Schwarzkopf explained that 'top notes usually sound the same in all sopranos. It is under the top note where the timbre begins. Even I can't hear my voice in this recording'. Thus, with this ruse successfully implemented, the recording went ahead, and the LPs were received with a kind of quiet rapture.

Unfortunately, two years later the London Daily Mail ran an article on the two interpolated notes, which prompted Erich Leinsdorf to comment, 'A voice like Flagstad's is never comfortable above B flat. Legge called on Schwarzkopf because in the world of recording a dented Rolls Royce just won't do'. Thus, the recording has always been beyond rebuke, despite its faults.

*Based on notes by Richard Osborne.*

# DAS RHEINGOLD SYMPOSIUM

A Rheingold Symposium will be held in Brisbane on Friday 24 August at the Queensland Conservatorium Theatre, on the Southbank.

This will coincide with a visit by the **Hamburg State Opera** (two concert performances of *Das Rheingold*) , **Hamburg Philharmonic** (Rheingold concerts and Mahler's 2nd Symphony) and **Hamburg Ballet**.

Simone Young will be taking part in the symposium which is being held on the day between the two Rheingold concerts. Details will be announced in early March. There will also be an exhibition of masterpieces from the Prado Museum in Brisbane at the time, so there will be plenty to do and see over those few days.

Conducting the **Hamburg State Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra's** concert performance of *Das Rheingold* is celebrated Australian and Hamburg Philharmonic Musical Director **Simone Young**. The first woman to conduct a complete Ring Cycle, in 1999, Simone has since led complete performances of the cycle in Berlin and most recently Hamburg. There will be guest singers, some of whom have performed at Bayreuth, the theatre where the first complete Ring Cycle was seen in 1876.

There will also be an exhibition of masterpieces from the Prado Museum in Brisbane at the time, so there will be plenty to do and see over those few days.

## Das Rheingold Symposium

**Friday 24 August 2012**

**Queensland Conservatorium Theatre, Brisbane**

## PROGRAMME

From 8:30 am	Registration and documentation
9:15 – 9:30 am	<b>Welcome</b> Hal Davis, President of the Wagner Society in Queensland. Professor Huib Schippers, Director of Queensland Conservatorium
9:30 – 10:10 am	<b>Peter Bassett</b> on What Price Love? – Wagner's ideas at the heart of <i>Das Rheingold</i>
10:10 – 10:40 am	<b>Simone Young in Hamburg</b> Excerpts from a documentary film <i>Simone Young: Die Dirigentin</i> by German film-maker Ralf Pleger. Also featuring the Hamburg Philharmonic, Lisa Gasteen, Petra Lang, Placido Domingo and Daniel Barenboim
10:40 – 11:10 am	Refreshment Break
11:10 – 12:00 noon	<b>Simone Young</b> in Brisbane
12:00 – 12:50 pm	<b>Dr Graham Bruce</b> on The Birth of Film out of the Spirit of Music - the cinematic in <i>Das Rheingold</i>
12:50 – 2:00 pm	Lunch
2:00 – 2:30 pm	<b>Seven Pieces for Goethe's Faust (1831) by Richard Wagner</b> Students of the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University
2:30 – 3:20 pm	<b>Dr Stephen Emmerson</b> on A Most Original Mind - Convergence of theory and practice in <i>Das Rheingold</i>
3:20 - 3:40 pm	Refreshment break
3:40 - 4:20 pm	<b>Professor Lisa Gasteen</b> on Preparing major Wagnerian roles
4:20 – 5:00 pm	<b>Das Rheingold: 'a morass of horrors and sublimities!'</b> (Wagner to Liszt, 15 January 1854) Round Table discussion chaired by Leo Schofield

More information on Das Rheingold Symposium can be obtained from

[http://www.qpac.com.au/resources/images/rheingold\\_symposium\\_newsletter.pdf](http://www.qpac.com.au/resources/images/rheingold_symposium_newsletter.pdf)

## Performances by the Hamburg State Opera, Hamburg Philharmonic and Hamburg Ballet in Brisbane

### Thursday 23 August 8pm – Midnight - THE WAGNER PREMIERE EXPERIENCE

The Playhouse and Hamburg Garden, QPAC

A concert performance of *Das Rheingold* together with complimentary interval drinks and exclusive access to the Hamburg Garden for a post-show cocktail party with Simone Young and members of the Opera and Orchestra.

### Friday 24 August 6.45pm – Midnight - GALA EVENING Hamburg Garden and Concert Hall, QPAC MAHLER SYMPHONY NO. 2

### Saturday 25 August 8pm

Concert Hall, QPAC

A concert performance of *Das Rheingold*

### Sunday 26 August, Monday 27 August and Tuesday 28 August 7.30 pm

The Playhouse, QPAC, South Bank, Brisbane

**The Hamburg Ballet – Nijinsky**

### Thursday 30 August – Wednesday 5 September 7.30 pm with some matinee performances

The Playhouse, QPAC, South Bank, Brisbane

**The Hamburg Ballet - John Neumeier** with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra conducted by Simon Hewett

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

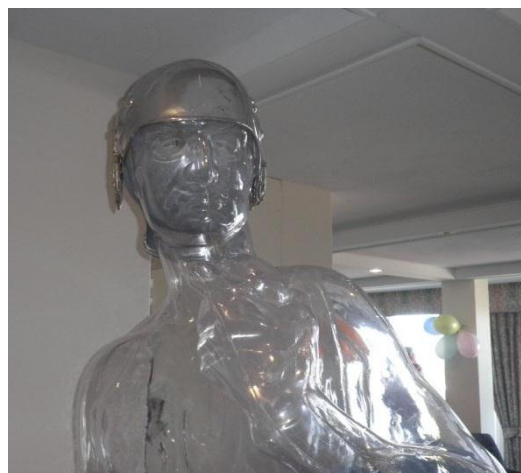
Tickets for *Das Rheingold* Symposium and the Performances listed above are available from QTIX at <http://www.qtix.com.au/>

Phone: 136 246 (Toll Free outside the Brisbane metropolitan area)

## ADELAIDE'S FIRE SALE

Many of us who were fortunate to see the 2004 Adelaide *Ring* may remember the wonderful set, props and magnificent costumes in that Elke Neidhardt production. Sadly, a significant portion of the props were sold off last year because the State Opera of South Australia could not afford to keep them any longer.

Included in the sale were 16 giant Perspex warriors modelled on Michelangelo's *David*. Fortunately for us, our President Robert May was quick to take advantage of the fire sale and proudly displayed a 'David' for all guests to ogle at during Wagner's 198<sup>th</sup> birthday bash which he hosted in May last year.



## DATES TO MARK ON YOUR DIARY

**Tuesday 31 July 2012** – We are in the process of organising a special evening with our patron **Simone Young**, so please keep this evening free. More information will be provided as it comes to hand. Simone will be conducting WASO for a Gala performance of Brahms' German Requiem on Friday 3 August and Saturday 4 August 2012.

**Friday 30 November/Saturday 1 December 2012** – WASO will be performing **Rachmaninov and The Ring**, which will include an arrangement by Henk de Vlieger of Wagner's *Ring*. There will also be an additional earlier performance on Thursday 29 November at 11 am. The performance will be conducted by WASO's principal conductor, Paul Daniel. At the launch of the WASO 2012 programme Paul mentioned that this was the work he was most looking forward to conducting in 2012.

# LATE NEWS

## CONFIRMED DATES FOR THE MELBOURNE RING CYCLE 2013

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
<b>Das Rheingold</b>	Monday, 18 November	Wednesday, 27 November	Friday, 6 December
<b>Die Walküre</b>	Wednesday, 20 November	Friday, 29 November	Monday, 9 December
<b>Siegfried</b>	Friday, 22 November	Monday, 2 December	Wednesday, 11 December
<b>Götterdämmerung</b>	Monday, 25 November	Wednesday, 4 December	Friday, 13 December

## The current casting for 2013 The Melbourne Ring

Wotan	Juha Uusitalo	Hagen	Daniel Sumegi	Loge	Richard Berkeley-Steele
Brünnhilde	Susan Bullock	Alberich	John Wegner	Erda and	Deborah Humble
Siegfried	Gary Lehman	Siegmund	Stuart Skelton	Waltraute	
		Sieglinde	Miriam Gordon-Stewart	DIRECTOR	Neil Armfield

Source: <http://operainsider.info/index.php/melbourne-ring-cast-update-for-ring-leaders/>

To celebrate the **Melbourne Ring Cycle**, Opera Australia has devised a four week festival including comedy, cabaret, mini versions of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, film, food and wine events, lectures, pre-performance talks, plus a host of other surprising performances in unexplored corners of the City of Melbourne.

**Tickets for The Melbourne Ring Cycle will go on sale later in 2012.**

Source: [http://www.opera-australia.org.au/whatson/ring\\_cycle](http://www.opera-australia.org.au/whatson/ring_cycle)

## Wagner's Parsifal - New Production for The Met: Live in HD Series



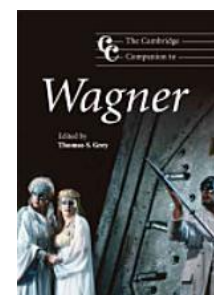
New York's Metropolitan Opera have just released their Live in HD 2012-13 Season. Having transmitted *The Ring* over two seasons, a new production of *Parsifal* is scheduled for transmission in March 2013. The dashing German tenor Jonas Kaufmann will star in the title role of Parsifal with his fellow Wagnerian luminaries including Katarina Dalayman as the mysterious Kundry, Peter Mattei as the ailing Amfortas, Evgeny Nikitin as the wicked Klingsor, and René Pape as the noble knight Gurnemanz. *Parsifal* will be produced by François Girard and Daniele Gatti will conduct Wagner's final masterpiece.

## .....and finally

A gentle reminder that our AGM will be held on Wednesday March 28<sup>th</sup> 2012, 7.30 pm at The Tunley Lecture Theatre, School of Music, UWA. It will be followed by a screening of **Stephen Fry: Wagner and Me** and supper.

The book being raffled is *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*. Edited by Thomas S Grey, this multi-authored volume has information about Wagner's life, times, works and reception. It focuses more on the "broader discourse of 'ideas' in Wagner's works than on in-depth musical analysis of the scores".

This year, only recently published books will be raffled, and they are all brand new!



**Visitors and friends are most welcome to join us, so bring them along!**

The Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia Inc.

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March 2012 Newsletter

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