

WAGNER NEWS

Wagner News is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

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Greetings from the Chairs:

The two weeks in March have been a mother lode of stories to enliven the folklore of the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. At the Metropolitan performances, the Tristan role has been substituted three times, from the scheduled tenor, Ben Heppner, through two covers to the Bayreuth Tristan, Robert Dean Smith, due to reasons like viral infection, falling scenery, etc. The scheduled Isolde, Deborah Voigt, had also decamped for a while due to gastrointestinal problems. This list of woes can compare with the death of the first Tristan soon after the premiere.

We are very grateful that despite our snow filled, frigid winter, a steady group of members attended

our meetings. Such devotion and passion despite the worst winter in many years warmed our hearts and buoyed the spirits of the visiting guest-presenters.

Please make sure to attend our last meeting of the season which will be our scholarship winner's concert on Thursday, April 10th, at 8.00 pm. An annual general meeting will precede the recital at 7.00 pm to present the financial statements and annual report. This is not an election year, so the executives will remain as is.

The scholarship winner is soprano Allison Arends. She shared the principal role in *Ariodante*, the Handel opera recently produced by

the University of Toronto Opera Division. She will be featured in the WholeNote Magazine, April edition.

We welcome the two new Toronto Wagner Society members, Laurie Hill and James Holman.

To those who are going to Bayreuth this summer, we wish the dream of your life; we would like to hear from you how you enjoyed that experience. To those who will be seeing lots of Wagner operas in the spring and summer, think of us and be prepared to share with us your experience and your opinions. Have a safe trip. To those of us staying home, enjoy your Wagner recordings!

Frances Henry and Yvonne Chiu

TWS CALENDAR

Thursday*, April 10
7:00 p.m.
Annual General Meeting
8:00 p.m.
Scholarship Recital
Allison Arends

[*Note change of regular meeting day to Thursday]

All meetings:
Arts and Letters Club,
14 Elm Street



Ruth Waltz

The knights in Parsifal Opera de Paris

PARSIFAL IN PARIS

Some notes from Jim Warrington

Parsifal is a stimulating exercise about good vs. evil, love vs. lust, power vs. subservience, man vs. woman, god vs. human, salvation vs. redemption. As a budding Wagnerian, this was to be my first live *Parsifal*. I was intrigued when the Paris Opera assembled a dream cast and a brand new production with bad boy director Krzysztof Warlikowski and his out-of-control designer, Małgorzata Szczesniak.

Following are my observations on the world's first (and I'm sure, the last) post-nuclear production:

You enter the house and the stage is a huge white screen with 6 plastic chairs sitting in front. Lights dim, orchestra starts. People sit on the chairs, knights in slacks, jackets, ties. Child's hand dominates the screen, pencil prints '*Foi*'. Erases it for '*Amour*'. Erases it for '*Esperance*'. Fade to scene in Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey where the lead character, played by Keir Dullea with white hair, is eating dinner alone. He breaks his wine glass on the floor, looks over to a bed where he sees himself as an old man, dying. The infamous black obelisk appears. End of *Vorspiel*.

Screen rises, Act I begins in an operating room. In the next 5 hours and 10 minutes (with two intermissions) we see:

- Screen drawings by the child of trees, a cross, a chalice, flowers (all plot symbols)

- A Senate chamber for the Knights, which is like an ancient Roman theatre - all chrome and white light

- Hospital room for ailing Amfortas, complete with black-uniformed nurses and doctors in red scrubs

- Heroine Kundry with flaming red hair and flamboyant green ball gown

- Titirel in a wheelchair

- Sinks everywhere (apparently a signature prop of this director), actually useful in Act III when Kundry washes Parsifal's feet

- Ceiling of opera house becomes heaven via lighting and choruses in top boxes (I guess they took a revenue hit!)

- White-haired star of a '2001: A Space Odyssey' becomes Parsifal's mentor - a character added at the director's whim

- The knight Klingsor - the devil in a red zoot suit

- The flower maidens roll in as Jean Harlow look-alike peroxide blondes at night club tables with little red lights

- Parsifal is seduced and stripped to his boxers by above flower maidens - wanders the

stage with a chair stuck to his back

- Holy sword depicted as a brilliant red laser, turning into cross - unbelievable visual effect - unites good, casts out evil, connotes future, all in one visual shock

- Act II closes with Parsifal having dinner at "2001: Space Odyssey" character's table

- Pre-act III clip from Rossellini 1948 film "Germany Year Zero" is shown - 10 year old boy commits suicide in the ruins of post WWII Berlin. Audience boos, yells out '*Opera, pas le cinema*' and '*Wagner, Wagner*'. Prelude to Act III starts. Truly bizarre, until you understand the child analogy in Act III, and why there has been a boy onstage the whole time

- Parsifal is an Abominable Snowman guy, with holy spear, in a mini blizzard. Kundry, now with graying hair (years later, get it?), isn't impressed, until she realizes it's Parsifal under all that Eskimo stuff, and manages to get him down to his skivvies (again!) - this time, long undies. Much discussion, as it is Good Friday and it's Communion time.

- Suffice it to say, with the staging of the Last Supper, the music, what you're looking at - it comes together brilliantly - serious tying up of loose ends (10

year old child doing odd jobs on stage finally explained as lost European youth, Amfortas finally ditches his crutches before dying, the Last Supper gets celebrated, Kundry, Gurnemanz, boy (the next generation Parsifal?) and Parsifal have a group hug. 2001 guy walks off stage left, happy it all went so well.

Curtain falls. Immediate, roaring bravos like I've never heard before at an opera!

Oh, I almost forgot, the singing and the orchestra made this the best Wagner I've ever heard. The team worked seamlessly as an ensemble cast. Waltraud Meier is THE Kundry today, and Chris Ventris, admirable, will be Parsifal at Bayreuth this summer. Truly wonderful performances, especially Meier and Franz Josef Selig as Gurnemanz. Hartmut Haenchen conducted a crisp, exhilarating reading of the score. No dirges here.

Standing ovations and bravos for curtain calls continue. When the director comes out - resounding 'boos.' Warlikowski didn't care - he shrugged, smiled and walked off.

Did it work? You bet! In retrospect, it all came together at the end. I'm happy I went.

Click here for a great blog and some photos:

<http://intermezzo.typepad.com/intermezzo/2008/03/parsifal.html>



Christopher Ventris (Parsifal), Act2 Garden Scene - Opera de Paris

The West Coast Wagner Fever

by Katerina Haka-Ikse

Last January, two Wagnerian works were presented in Southern California: *Tannhäuser* in San Diego and *Tristan* in L.A. In 2009, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* are going to be produced by the LA Opera to be followed by the next two *Ring* operas in 2010. Not unexpectedly, the Seattle Opera also is going to present the *Ring* next year, with a new cast.

Coincidence or perhaps a catalyst behind all this enthusiasm? It may be that James Conlon's appointment as Music Director of the LA Opera in 2006 was the catalyst. As Conlon, himself, was saying in his pre-*Tristan* Performance chat, to accept the post he made it conditional on two issues: to bring as much as possible Wagner to LA; and stage the forgotten operas of composers such as Zemlinski, Ullman, Krenek and others who were suppressed by the Nazi regime. Plácido Domingo, the General Director of LA Opera, was more than enthusiastic about both proposals and things moved quite fast with *Lobengrin* and *Tannhäuser* staged last year, *Tristan* this year, and the *Ring* to come next.

On his side, Ian Campbell, the Director of San Diego Opera was dreaming to stage *Tannhäuser* ever since he saw the 1977 Schneider-Siemssen Met

production. It seems that there was a connection between the LA Opera events and the January 2008 production of *Tannhäuser* in San Diego.

This was a homey, but likeable production. By agreement with the Met, the scenery in San Diego did reproduce the Schneider-Siemssen one, but in a smaller scale to fit the smaller stage. Also, instead of the Met's Paris version of the opera, the shorter Dresden version was chosen for San Diego

Campbell's efforts were recognized for this revival, and for the excellent cast he was able to assemble. Robert Gambill in the title role and Petra Lang as Venus were a great pair, having made these roles their own after singing them, he for 75, she for about 50 times, and both together, internationally, for more than 20 times. Some time ago, Gambill's vocal force as Tannhäuser had raised concerns about future voice fatigue, but there were no signs of wear in this performance. Camilla Nyland was a charm as Elisabeth, and I don't recall any more convincing Landgraf than Rheinhart Hagen (no connection with the Ring Hagen!).

On purpose, I left last Russell Braun who was the reason for Canadians to be there. In this first Wagnerian role as Wolfram he did manage to perform with

ease and elegance, giving a memorable performance of the Evening Star song and handling securely the vocal confrontation with Gambill in the 3rd Act. His success should be a stimulus for Russell to perhaps move to other Wagnerian roles.

The orchestra was small, but effective under the direction of Gabor Ötvös.

The LA Opera resurrected a *Tristan* 1987 production. At that time, Zubin Mehta was the conductor, Jonathan Miller the director, and David Hockney the designer. There was a first revival in 1997, and perhaps to have a Wagner work in the 2007-2008 repertory, there was a second revival of that production last January. It did not prove to be a very good idea. We do not perceive designs and concepts any more with the same criteria as in the past century. Hockney, who has painted delightful, light filled, but mundane Southern California scenes, was at a loss to capture the visual context within which Tristan's innermost struggle was to take place. He, himself says that he has been inspired by Frank Gehry's deconstructivism in doing so. The gigantic bright coloured sails and the yellow masts were creating a circus rather than a mystery (the word used here in reference to the medieval religious plays) atmosphere. And

the presence of John Treleaven who is becoming increasingly obsolete in Wagnerian roles together with the barrel-size Linda Watson

clad in fire-red robes increased the frustration and disappointment that some of the audience have been experiencing. Conlon's bril-

liant conducting was lost in the midst of a cadaverous production, hopefully to be now buried once for all.

Los Angeles Opera *Tristan und Isolde*

by Leslie Barcza

Los Angeles Opera's January 2008 production of *Tristan und Isolde* offers clues about what to expect from this company when it embarks upon its own *Ring Cycle* employing the same stars. Next season in addition to Braunfels' *Die Vogel* (from Aristophanes), and *The Fly*, by Canadian Oscar winner Howard Shore, they begin their cycle with productions of *Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*.

Originally commissioned in 1987, David Hockney's designs (<http://www.hockneypictures.com/tristan.php>) are now in their third production, roughly once per decade. The LAO presented *Tristan* for the first time in 2008 without cuts, on Hockney's 1987 aiming for a faithful interpretation of Wagner's stage directions. The set resembles a storybook illustration, which at times is ideal, but at other times undermines the aesthetics of live theatre.

The LAO orchestra, under resident music director John Conlon, achieved luxurious sounds throughout without any apparent strain. For most of the

opera I was blissfully lost in the mix of voice and orchestra, except for a few occasions when the sheer virtuosity of the pace drew my attention; Conlon's brave tempi reminded me of Richard Bradshaw, but with a better orchestra.

The strongest performances were not, alas, from the stars who will be returning for the *Ring*. Lioba Braun's Brangäne and Juha Uusitalo's Kurwenal may function as confidants, but were easily better than either lead. Braun is a most convincing actress, even when required to stand motionless for most of the production, a singer whose decisive attack complements Conlon's brisk reading. The Finn Uusitalo sounds just like a young Matti Salminen, enunciating and intoning with great precision. Having sung Wotan in Europe, Uusitalo is a singer to watch.

John Treleaven's timbre reminds one of Wolfgang Windgassen, complete with the occasional gargle. The voice is not huge, but very agile, and capable of singing every single note

of Tristan completely in tune and with no evidence of fatigue at the end of the opera. But Treleaven was undone by the romantic staging on the picture-book set. By faithfully following Wagner's directions, dramatic shortcomings are underlined, whether in his silly page-boy haircut, or his clumsy walk that erased any credibility as a heroic Tristan.

Linda Watson's portrayal was more convincing, conforming easily to our idea of a storybook Isolde; but her singing was very inconsistent, particularly in the toughest passages of Act I, or the *Liebestodt*, where her pitches were very inaccurate. The opera's ending was nonetheless satisfying dramatically, with the added touch of having Tristan rise and stand with Isolde in the final moments.

The first installments of the LAO *Ring* in April 2009 will be directed and designed by Achim Freyer (a Brechtian of note), with LAO Artistic Director Plácido Domingo as Siegmund.

WAGNER'S TWINS

by John Rutherford, an identical twin

Did Wagner know the difference between identical and fraternal twins?

This question arises when we experience Act I of *Die Walküre*. The difference between identical and fraternal twins is well known. Identical twins begin "life" as one fertilized egg which splits in two. The result is two human beings who almost exactly resemble each other (they have the same DNA) and they are always of the same sex. Fraternal twins begin "life" as two separate fertilized eggs and the result will be two individuals of either the same sex or one male and one female. These twins may look somewhat alike, but they may also be as different in appearance as any two siblings of the same parentage.

Because Siegmund and Sieglinde are of different sexes, they must be fraternal twins, and yet Wagner makes a point of giv-

ing them the most noticeable characteristic of identical twins – they look very much alike. In fact, they are so alike that even by firelight Hunding remarks to himself, "*Wie gleicht er dem Wiebe!*" (How like my wife he is!)

By 1848, when Wagner had finished the libretto for *The Ring*, the medical profession knew the difference between identical and fraternal twins, so I am going to assume without further evidence that Wagner also knew. But, if Wagner knew, why did he assign a characteristic of identical twins to Siegmund and Sieglinde? Here is a suggestion! He was trying to make Siegmund and Sieglinde as much like Adam and Eve as possible!

Wagner was an atheist (or close to it) and his *Ring of the Niebelungs* is a kind of "Bible Through the Looking Glass", an alternative "take" on the story of

Creation (*Die Walküre*) and Redemption (*Götterdämmerung*).

Siegmund and Sieglinde are the first humans (Walsungs) that we meet, and they first see each other in a hellish Eden complete with a very special tree bearing a "fruit" that has the power to help humankind, not condemn it.

Just as Adam and Eve were of the same flesh (Eve was a "clone" of Adam, but of a different sex), so Wagner's Siegmund and Sieglinde are depicted as "identical" fraternal twins.

Both unions are sanctioned by their respective creators (the Hebrew God and Wotan), and one might imagine Wagner chuckling to himself: "people who condone the union of Adam and Eve are in no position to criticize the union of Siegmund and Sieglinde."



III.1 *Das Rheingold*;
Scene 2 and 4; Entry
of gods into Wal-
halla,
held by Dr. Gudrun
Fottinger



III.2 *Götterdäm-
merung*; Act 2;
Scene in front of the
Gibichung Hall.

Josef Hoffmann's Stage Design Sketches for the first Bayreuth Ring in 1876

by Richard Rosenman

The 2006 Bayreuth season featured a special, and one-time only, exhibition of Josef Hoffmann's rediscovered set of *Ring* stage designs from the first Bayreuth Festival of 1876. At the close of the season, the fourteen small oil sketches and five more, large format oil paintings, were put away in the basement storage of what had been Winifred Wagner's house in the Wagner family compound, immediately to the left of Wahnfried. This severely styled home, built in the 20th century, in a vague fascist variation of Art Deco, common to the 30's in Germany as well as to Mussolini's Italy, now houses the Richard-Wagner-Museum. It is through the good offices of Dr. Oswald Bauer, the discoverer of the long lost paintings, that I was received and shown them by Dr. Gudrun Fottinger of the Richard-Wagner-Museum.

The story of the homecoming of this historical treasure is fascinating.

Josef Hoffmann (1831-1904), the Viennese landscape painter and stage designer and the author of these works, had retained by contract the sole artistic and material rights to his designs. At the close of the first Festival, they disappeared from view and until their reappearance the only available record were black and white

photographic prints, originally prepared by the artist/owner, Hoffmann, and sold in Bayreuth and Vienna. King Ludwig II considered acquiring them but did not, either because he balked at the price, or because Hoffmann was unwilling to sell. He did, however, own the photographs.

It was only in 1990, that Oswald Bauer heard through a grapevine of the existence of a group of large paintings similar to the photos published in one of his books. The then owners of the designs insisted that the paintings, by tradition passed down the generations, were said to have a connection with Wagner. It was in 1993 that he finally found himself face to face with a large easel covered by a white sheet. It came off with a flourish to reveal what he immediately recognized as the final *Rheingold* scene, the gods' entry to Valhalla. (See illustration 1). This was only one of the five paintings in the possession of the Baroness von Heyl zu Herrusheim. Her ancestor was one Cornelius von Heyl, a member of a wealthy Jewish family in Worms, patron of the first Bayreuth Festival, contributor to its funding and thus eligible to attend the performances. He was also known to be a dedicated follower of all that had to do with the Nibelung legend and thus

eager to acquire the paintings. There is ample record of these to have been in the possession of the family throughout the intervening years.

It took until 2003 to overcome the lack of interest, as well of funds, for their acquisition by Wahnfried.

The other fourteen small size oil sketches appeared quite independently in 2005 at the Munich art market. Their history is unknown. All but two are signed with Hoffmann's monogram and there is no doubt that these, in a format traditional for sketches, were prepared for the set models and, ultimately, for the sets themselves, made by Max and Gotthold Brückner in Coburg.

After the 2006 public exhibition, all these sketches and paintings, nineteen in all, were sent to the basement storage at the museum to join the eclectic collection of Wagner memorabilia, ranging from true treasures to kitsch, accumulated during the more than 100 years and now accessible only to historians.

This report is based on Dr. Oswald Bauer's essay, published in the official Bayreuth 2006 program book, and on conversations conducted with him during the 2007 Bayreuth season.

Wagner Onstage: April – September 2008

Listing correct to March 30, 2008. For further information, check with the opera companies via: www.operabase.com

Das Liebesverbot

Glimmerglass: July 19, 22, 28; Aug. 2, 10, 16, 22.

Der Fliegende Holländer

Mannheim: April 12
Stuttgart: April 10, 20.
Vienna, Staatsoper: April 8, 11, 14
Munich: May 11, 14, 18
Berlin, Deutsche Oper: June 8, 12, 17, 21, 29
Bremen: June 28; July 1, 3, 5
Stralsund, Theater Vorpommern: June 27

Lohengrin

Gera: April 25; May 2
Berlin, Deutsche Oper: May 10, 16, 20, 25
Braunschweig: May 11, 24, 31; June 22
Geneva: May 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20
Nürnberg: May 3, 18, 22; June 1, 8; July 13
Saarbrücken: May 3, 8, 16, 21, 31; June 8
Vienna, Staatsoper: May 22, 25, 28; June 1
Leipzig: June 1, 29

Tannhäuser

Barcelona: April 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 18, 22
Berlin Staatsoper: April 6, 12, 22, 26
Cologne: April 4, 6, 18; May 3, 10, 16
Essen: April 4, 6, 12, 17, 23; May 11, 22; June 1, 7
Hanover: May 1
Dresden: June 22, 25, 28
Baden Baden: July 28, 31; Aug 3, 6

Die Meistersinger

Dresden: June 29
Munich: July 31

Tristan und Isolde

Vienna Staatsoper: April 1
Amsterdam: May 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 25, 28
Berlin Staatsoper: May 12
Bielefeld: May 18, 24; June 1, 8, 21
Munich: June 30; July 4
Bayreuth: July 26; Aug 5, 14, 18, 26

Das Rheingold

Hamburg: April 2, 9
Detmold: May 31

Die Walküre

Görlitz: April 13
Strasbourg: April 18, 21, 27; May 2, 6
Barcelona: May 28, 31
Mulhouse: May 16, 18
Freiburg: June 8, 20; July 3, 10, 12

Siegfried

Riga: April 25
Vienna Staatsoper: April 27; May 1, 4, 8, 11, 14
Bergen: May 22
Aix-en-Provence: June 28; July 1, 4, 7
Valencia: June 14, 17, 22

Götterdämmerung

Antwerp: June 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20
Ghent: June 29; July 3, 6, 9
Weimar: July 5

The Ring

Weimar: July 9, 10, 12, 13

Parsifal

Dessau: April 26; May 4, 17; June 21
Mannheim: May 12
Bayreuth: July

Wagner orchestral and vocal music

Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss Festival, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, May 31 till June 6.

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Opera de Paris