

WAGNER NEWS

Wagner News is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

TWS CALENDAR

Monday, September 29

8:00 p.m.

Tim Albery and Michael Levine

Monday, October 27

8:00 p.m.

A conversation with Russell Braun

Monday, November 17

8:00 p.m.

Alexander Neef about COC

All meetings:
Arts & Letters Club,
14 Elm Street

TWS web site: www.torontowagner.org
E-Mail: torontowagner@yahoo.com

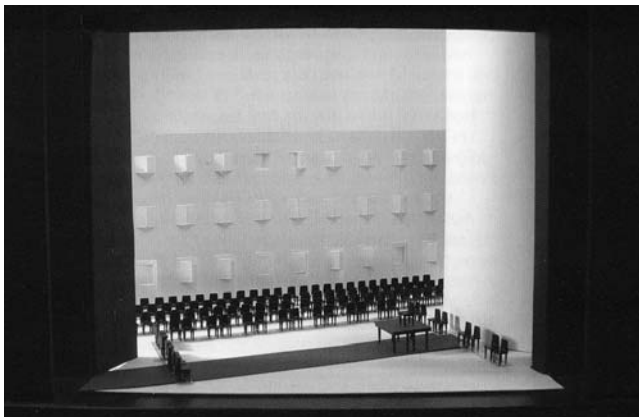
Greetings from the Chairs:

Greetings and welcome to returning and new members to another season of interesting evenings at the Toronto Wagner Society. This season we have a good lineup of events beginning with well known director Tim Albery who will talk about his work on *Dutchman* and *War and Peace*. We are all proud of Russell Braun singing and this time we will have the opportunity of hearing him talk about his career. In November, we are pleased to announce that the new COC director, Alexander Neef will be talking about the COC and his plans for the future. We are all looking forward to getting acquainted with him.

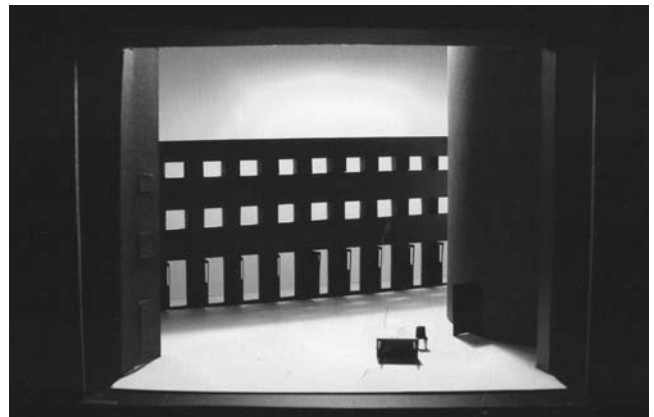
Some of our members have been to performances in various parts of the world and their reports are available in this newsletter and others to come later in the season. The newsletter includes as well a book review of a very provocative book written by John Deathridge, a renowned Wagner scholar. We urge members to read this wonderful book.

And finally, on a sad note, the recent passing of Helen Gardiner, one of our members, is a great loss to Toronto. A generous philanthropist who supported all the arts, Helen was an avid opera goer, and was so looking forward to going to Bayreuth this year. Her interests also included sponsoring students at the National Ballet School and nurturing them. She and her late husband were well known for their fine ceramic collection which was given to the Gardiner Ceramic Museum. We will miss her.

Frances Henry and Yvonne Chiu, co-chairs.



Die Meistersinger stage designs, Photo Gottfried Pilz



Rare Wagner revived in Dresden's Frauenkirche

by Wayne Gooding

Wagnerians from across Europe and beyond were in Dresden June 14 for a rare performance of Wagner's *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* (The Love Feast of the Apostles), a "biblical scene" (as it's called on the title page of the score) for male voices and large orchestra. The performance took place in the Frauenkirche, where the composer conducted the first performance on July 6th, 1843, a century after the church was consecrated. The Frauenkirche collapsed after the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945, and this June's performance was the first there since the gaudily Baroque landmark's restoration and reopening in 2005. Indeed, it was the first performance there with the Staatskapelle Dresden orchestra since 1913, when Ernst von Schuch conducted it in a concert to commemorate the centenary of Wagner's birth.

Das Liebesmahl is an oddity in Wagner's work. He wrote it in 1843, putting aside *Tannhäuser* to satisfy a commission from the Dresden Liedertafel, a local male choral society he'd taken on as conductor early that year. The head of the Liedertafel asked Wagner to compose something for the Second General Festival of Male Choruses to be held that July, the idea being that the choruses from across Saxony in the festival would all participate. There was talk of an a cappella piece that would last about 30 minutes, though Wagner decided that something of that scale and length would need an orchestra.

He chose to set the story of the Pentecost, in which the Holy Ghost descends on Christ's disciples and they are able to speak in tongues. In the bible, the story is in Acts 2:

"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

And suddenly there came a sound

from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Characteristically drafting his own libretto, Wagner worked on the piece between April and June 29, 1843. Although *Das Liebesmahl* must be counted an early work, it is nonetheless the work of the composer who has already enjoyed successes with *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* and so whose stylistic voice is already becoming distinctive. It's certainly written on large Wagnerian scale, encompassing three choruses of youths (with multiple tenor and bass lines), the 12 apostles (basses) and a chorus of "voices from on high" (16 tenors, 12 first basses and 12 second basses). To make things dramatically interesting, the choruses are deliberately of unequal size. The orchestra is huge, too, with quadruple woodwind, a large brass section, four kettledrums and even parts for such instrumental oddities as a serpent and ophicleide (both early bass wind instruments). A particularly interesting feature is that the orchestra does not enter until just over 20 minutes into the score, first heard at the point the story gets to "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind." Even though the piece wasn't written for the stage, Wagner was obviously concerned with theatrical effect.

He was not happy with the overall result, however, writing later in *Mein Leben*: "I was not displeased by the success of this work, particularly in the rehearsals held under my direction with the Dresden choral societies alone. When, therefore, twelve hundred so-called singers from all over Saxony

grouped themselves around me in the Frauenkirche, where the performance took place, I was astonished at the comparatively feeble effect produced upon my ear by this colossal mass of human bodies. The experience convinced me of the inherent foolishness of such gigantic choral undertakings, and produced in me a decided antipathy to concerning myself with them in any way in the future." (My Life, Da Capo Press, 1992, p. 258).

Despite Wagner's misgivings, however, publishing history suggests the work had a wide and active performance life through the remainder of the 19th century. In Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel published both full and vocal scores in 1844, reissuing them in 1870, 1884 and, with English and French translations, 1892. In England, meanwhile, Novello published vocal scores in 1876 and 1898.

Perhaps the problem was that Wagner had too many voices at the premiere. At this June's performance, the Staatskapelle Dresden was in full force while the chorus—made up of seven choruses from around Dresden, Brünn and Prague—amounted to just under (a still impressive) 300. While the orchestral sound (especially in the Bruckner Symphony "O" that filled out the program) struck me as a little muddy from the reverberation in the tall and broad expanse of the church, the voices sounded clear and distinct. Although the present-day Frauenkirche is a reconstruction of the one Wagner knew, one got the impression that he knew the space he was writing for, and that some of the effects were calculated for this space. This was particularly striking on the entry of the "voices from on high," the choir positioned in June, as it was at the premiere, high in the Frauenkirche's lovely cupola. These voices seemed to float down to meet those in the nave to mysterious and ethereal effect.

The work is, indeed, uneven musically.

One does not hear massed male voices often, and the rich and romantic harmonies here are initially compelling. But the a capella sound, as Wagner was concerned it would, becomes less interesting over time. While he tried hard to create some drama in the text when the disciples express their fears for their safety, the unvarying palette of tenor and bass voices in close harmony starts to pall. It's interesting, though, to hear writing for male chorus that stands as a precursor for the choruses in *Tristan und Isolde*, *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*.

Musically and dramatically, things pick up enormously on the entry of the orchestra, the heavenly wind signaled by a quiet tremolo in the strings that rises to a forte and unleashes a torrent of instrumental sound. It's an astonishing effect. The orchestral writing is inspired in some places, and over the top in many. I was surprised by how much tonal color and rhythmic vitality even the young Wagner managed to pack into less than 10 minutes of music. Quite apart from phrases that sound like direct quotations from his own work, such as the arching theme of the Pilgrim's Chorus in *Tannhäuser*, at the time a work in progress, the orchestration shows Wagner in full romantic flight and quite confident in his ability to handle such huge forces in a formidable space. Listen with your eyes

closed and you can hear the future Wagner, Richard Strauss, Erich Korngold's film music and, in the interplay of the orchestra and chorus in the final pages, Sir Edward Elgar.

By recalling to myself the occasion, and by visualizing the Frauenkirche, I come to the conclusion that the work, with all its theatrical, Catholic brilliance, must have given an appearance of pomp. R. laughs at the theatrical entrance of the Holy Ghost, and when I tell him my feelings he says, 'Yes, it's a sort of Oberammergau play.' -Putting the music aside, he says, 'There one is fully aware of the composer of *Tristan und Isolde*'.' It's not clear whether he was joking or not, but there is certainly a foundation of truth in the observation.

At the end of the June performance, with thunderous applause echoing around the nave, conductor Marc Minkowski lifted his score, turned and presented it to the audience. It was a moving gesture, as if he was returning the music to its rightful place. Hopefully, performances of *Das Liebesmahl* in the Frauenkirche will become part of the Wagner performing tradition again. I cannot imagine it being as effective anywhere else.



In her diary entry for June 17, 1869, Cosima Wagner describes an evening when she asked Wagner to play through *Das Liebesmahl*: "I asked him for it because I do not know the work, and he tells me I should not expect too much.



‘Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil’ by John Deathridge.

University of California Press. 2008. Reviewed by Frances Henry

This is a provocative and challenging book and its complex analysis of Wagner’s work takes time to read and digest. The author, John Deathridge, is a renowned Wagnerian scholar. His thesis seems to be that Wagner’s music dramas, are the work of genius, and are often based on new and innovative, dramatic and musical creations, but they should also be viewed as building upon the work of earlier theatrical traditions in both opera and theatre. Thus, he analyzes the influence of baroque opera, the style called “trauerspiel” or baroque mourning plays and, of course, classical Greek drama, and shows how Wagner was influenced by them. In addition, Deathridge analyzes each of the operas in terms of how Wagner was influenced by the time, place and space that Wagner found himself in at the time of writing. He also concentrates on the relationship of Wagner, the man and, especially his changing definition of himself, demonstrating often enough how he defined and later re-defined himself in his writings. He also attempts to demonstrate that Wagner placed enormous obstacles to his own work. For example, his “highly idiosyncratic staging of the modern... his often abstruse allegorizing, his broad and widely misunderstood inclusion of the sacred, and his penchant for baffling dialectics that also many times found their way into the structure of his music...” This multi-faceted approach is, I believe somewhat unique to the scholarship on Wagner and makes this book particularly absorbing.

Before discussing these issues in more detail, there are two introductory points made by Deathridge which bear mention. The first is his reasons for excluding *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger* from this book. He notes that both are based on singing competitions and both are problematic; the first because it “verges on musical and dramatic incoherence as Wagner himself confessed”. In *Meistersinger*, he finds the opposite: “it is overly stylized and too cohesive, features that lend it a smug burgerlich complacency” I must confess that

Meistersinger is also on the bottom of my list.

The second point involves methodology and especially the sources that he used for his book. The author admits to a heavy reliance on Wagner’s own writings and that of Cosima’s diaries as well as other Wagnerian scholarship but his main issue is the way in which Wagner changes his own autobiographical writings to suit his later times and situations. This makes the task of the Wagner scholar especially difficult as what Wagner writes in the earlier phase must always be checked against the same points made differently in later writings.

Now to some of the substance of the book. The first chapters deal with the *Dutchman* and *Lohengrin*. What is especially interesting about his speculative analysis of *Dutchman* is that he believes there may be echoes of vampirism contained within it. This is based on the fact that there is a town called ‘Senta’ in present day Serbia-Montenegro which borders on Transylvania, the folkloric home of vampires. Wagner was deeply interested in folklore and read it avidly. What is more credible is Wagner’s description of Senta in medical terms as sickly and “pale”. The Dutchman is also described as a “pale” man. Thus these otherworldly and narcissistic lovers may in fact be vampires.

In *Lohengrin*, Deathridge finds the real beginnings of the “music of the future” and he takes this opera far more seriously than do many Wagnerians. Wagner seemed to think that *Lohengrin* contained themes but it is clear that leitmotifs were specifically invented for the *Ring*. The author notes that Wagner was trying, after the fact, to show the linear progression of his leitmotiv system. This later attempt was an example of Wagner’s “self-invented myth”. Recognizing the importance of *Lohengrin*, Deathridge sees it as the precursor of the later “modernist” works. Despite its Christian symbols, “the aspiration towards radiant light... is not fulfilled... nor is there the slightest sign of blissful release that marks

the end of all Wagner’s other major work.” (36) He notes that the opera ends with Lohengrin’s departure and Elsa’s death, and this “ending is so equivocal and unusual for Wagner that it is legitimate to ask whether a sequel was planned that would provide the missing redemptive conclusion...” (36) This sequel turned out to be the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, “unlikely as it sounds at first”.

The *Ring* represents the transition between the world of nature or mythic time versus historical or real time. It therefore operates on many levels and the interplay of levels is one of the most interesting features of the *Ring*. It also tells the story of the insoluble dilemma that pervades Wotan’s life. The metaphors and prophecies in *Rheingold* are a kind of blueprint for the mythical discourses in the rest of the *Ring* which builds to the inevitable end of Wotan. In *Rheingold*, the gods are both in nature and society and it is the “tragic conflict between the natural and social worlds which characterizes the entire *Ring*. The focus on this dualistic tension is revealed in *Rheingold* when Loge tells the gods that they will grow old without Freia’s apples. The interchange of these levels is also demonstrated in orchestral transitions and journeys throughout the music of the *Ring*. Binary oppositions also play an important role in demonstrating this interplay as when Wotan tricks and defeats Alberich, which occurs in mythic time, but Gunther’s and Hagen’s betrayal and murder of Siegfried takes place in real time. Both Wotan and Siegfried “go on journeys between the worlds of society and the fairy tale” except in opposite directions and between different kinds of worlds. Wotan goes into the bowels of the earth whereas Siegfried journeys up the Rhine River. Wotan heeds Erda’s – who represents nature – advice to part with the ring but Siegfried in real time ignores the pleas of the ‘natural’ Rhinemaidens and keeps the ring. Another pertinent example of the dualism between nature and reality is reflected in the triumphant music that accompanies the gods into Valhalla and the poignant cry of the

The Strauss Festival: Munich, 2008

by Frances Henry

Most Wagnerians also love the operas of Richard Strauss and several of us visited the Strauss festival in Munich in July. One of its stars this year was Canadian Adrienne Pieczonka singing the role of Ariadne in a marvelous production directed by another Canadian, Robert Carsen. The festival traditionally ends with a performance of *Die Meistersinger* so the trip included at least one Wagner opera.

Of the six operas I attended, three in my opinion, were really outstanding while the remainder ranged from o.k. to not very interesting. First, the good ones. Top of the list was *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The production was full of comedic movement led by members of the National Theatre's ballet company so the dancing, miming and general movements of characters on stage were far better than what one usually sees on operatic stages. Zerbinetta, brilliantly sung and acted by Diana Damrau, was ably assisted by her four henchmen, sometimes appearing in drag, who flirted, cavorted and generally lit up the stage. The sets were simple and included rehearsal spaces, the use of the auditorium for entrances and exits and a minimum of props. The production was characterized by intense physical movement which included the singers. It obviously required considerable rehearsal time but the result was well worth the effort.

In addition to the glorious coloratura of Damrau, Pieczonka created a sensitive, highly nuanced and completely effervescent Ariadne. Vocally,

she was nothing short of superb. Daniela Sindram was a fine Composer and the general level of vocal performance was high. The orchestra conducted by Kent Nagano was superb.

The production of *Elektra* was one of the last completed by the late director Herbert Werneke. Using brilliant primary colours, strong lighting and a visually very dramatic diagonal moving platform, he created a stark but very beautiful set. The role of Elektra was a tour de force performance by veteran Gabrielle Schnaut who has made this one of her signature roles. Her intense physical and emotional characterization of the disturbed Elektra was deeply moving. Eva Maria Westerbroek was also a very good Chrysothemis but Agnes Baltsa is now a bit past her vocal prime.

Salome featured another very intense performance by Angela Denoke in the title role. It was an unusual interpretation especially because Denoke's voice is rather cold, and in appearance – tall, very thin, and blond – she does not resemble the traditional Mediterranean or middle eastern image of Salome. The dance was beautifully staged featuring veils dropping down from the ceiling which she used to entrap the other characters. It ended with her tearing off the top of her slinky black costume and concluding the opera topless.

The other three operas included a very old and traditionally staged version of *Rosenkavalier* which I found generally uninteresting. Denoke did not quite fit the role of the

Marschallin and Tomlinson does not have enough of a comedic flair to bring out Baron Ochs.

The production of *Arabella* included a visually arresting set and some generally good singing but was limited by a substitute Arabella (Pamela Armstrong) hastily flown in to replace an ailing Anja Harteros.

Most unfortunate of all was a really mediocre *Meistersinger*. Directed by Thomas Langhoff, it looked somewhat modern but there was no interpretative or conceptual idea behind it. Thus, it was simply a retelling of the 'story'. Musically it was well conducted by Peter Schneider and the National Theatre's orchestra played beautifully as they did for all the operas. It didn't fare too well on the vocal side either with Robert Dean Smith sounding very small and often swamped by the orchestra as was Brendel's monotonal Hans Sachs. The once mighty Kurt Rydl singing Pogner should retire as his wobble was an embarrassment.

One final note was that we were very lucky to secure tickets at the last minute to a long sold out recital given by the new German sensational tenor, Jonas Kaufmann. Singing a program of Schubert, Britten and Strauss, he demonstrated a voice of unusually lyrical beauty coupled with a strong dramatic tenor sound. In fact, he reminded us all of the young Jon Vickers. It was a truly fabulous evening of music making at its very best.

Wagner Onstage: Sept. – Dec. 2008

Listings correct to August 30, 2008. For further information check with opera companies via: www.operabase.com

Rienzi

Bremen: Oct. 12,
Leipzig: Oct. 28 – Nov. 22,

Der Fliegende Holländer

Berlin DOB: Sept. 14, 17; Oct. 19, 25,
Prague: Sept. 14; Oct. 15; Nov. 23,
30,
Vienna: Sept. 19, 22, 26,
Leipzig: Oct. 11, 15,
Munich: Nov. 8, 11, 15,
Edmonton: Oct. 25 – 30,

Lohengrin

Berlin DOB: Oct. 30; Nov. 2, 6,
Köln: Nov. 14, 16, 20, 23,
Vienna: Nov. 16, 19, 23,
Gera: Oct. 29,

Tannhäuser

Graz: Sept. 27; Oct. 5, 12, 16, 29;
Nov. 14, 26, 29,
Dresden: Oct. 8, 12, 24,
Osnabrück: Oct. 8,
Berlin DOB: Nov. 30,
Ulm: Sept. 18,

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

Dresden: Oct. 2, 5,
Budapest: Oct. 12, 19, 26,
Mannheim: Nov. 2,
Darmstadt: Oct. 12,

Tristan und Isolde

Stockholm: Oct. 11, 18,
Paris: Oct. 31; Nov. 3, 6, 13, 18, 21,
26, 30,
Dessau: Nov. 2 – 23,
New York: Nov. 28,
Tallin: Sept. 6 – Oct. 4,

Das Rheingold

Zürich: Sept. 17, 19, 26; Nov. 20, 26,
Weimar: Sept. 18,
Coburg: Sept. 27, 30; Oct. 2, 4, 7, 10,
23; Nov. 5, 12, 15, 28,
Karlsruhe: Oct. 3,
Lübeck: Oct. 29,
Weimar: Oct. 29,
Essen: Nov. 8, 15, 18, 28,

Die Walküre

Lübeck: Sept. 3, 7, 21; Oct. 3, 19;
Nov. 16,
Weimar: Sept. 20,
Hamburg: Oct. 19, 23, 28; Nov. 2, 9,
12,
Zürich: Nov. 16, 19, 30,
Vilnius: Nov. 14,

Siegfried

Lisbon: Sept. 30; Oct. 3, 6, 9, 12, 15,
18,
Weimar: Oct. 11; Nov. 1,
Florence: Nov. 20, 23, 26, 29,

Götterdämmerung

Esbjerg den ny Opera: Sept. 3, 6,
Weimar: Nov. 30; Nov. 2,

Der Ring des Nibelungen

Hamburg: Children version: Oct. 4,
5, 6,

Parsifal

Mainz: Sept. 12,
Valencia: Oct. 25, 27, 31; Nov. 4, 7,
Dessau: Oct. 4 - Nov. 23,

T W S 2 0 0 8 - 0 9
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New

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Every year, the Society applies for tickets to the Bayreuth Festival on behalf of members.

To apply, you must have been a member of the Society for at least a year, and your membership must be in good standing at the time of application.

Send a written request for application forms on receipt of this newsletter to:

Katerina Haka-Ikse,
 #908 - 123 Edward Street,
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(Be sure to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.)

Return the completed forms, with the deposit specified below, to Katerina by September 15. The forms include full instructions and conditions.

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