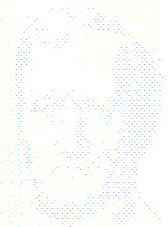




# The Wagner Society of Ireland

Founded 2002

President: Dr. Alexander Anissimov, Conductor



## Newsletter

August 2013

### CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

Dear Member,

As we come to the end of the summer it is time to look ahead to the events of the Society over 2013–14. Hopefully these will give you something to look forward to.

We have been working our way through the works of Wagner with Derek Watson and have now got to the *Ring*. We were wondering how best to cover the *Ring* – we decided one opera a year would take too long but equally it was asking too much to ask members to take out four weekends in short succession. We have therefore decided that we will have an introduction to the *Ring* and *Rheingold* in Autumn 2013, *Walküre* in early Spring 2014, *Siegfried* in autumn 2014 and conclude with *Gotterdammerung* in early 2015. Given how successful and popular the previous seminars were, this journey through the *Ring* should be exciting.

In keeping with the *Ring* theme there are a number of reviews in this newsletter of recent *Ring* cycles attended by members. We can only encourage you to write for the benefit of your fellow members impressions of performances you attend. Indeed, in the case of the *Ring* we have had some wonderful experiences this year and though we were initially reluctant to organise another trip to the *Ring* we are suggesting that those who are interested could attend the *Ring* in Budapest in June 2014. (see below for more details) This cycle will be done over four nights and is a concert version with projections. Those who have attended it before have praised it and the prices are reasonable. It will fall in the middle of our *Ring* seminars. In general next year there is a relative poverty of Wagner at European opera houses and it is next to impossible to organise a trip that would include more than one work. However we may also – if there is interest – plan a short weekend away to hear one of the other Wagner works.

We trust that the talks outlined below provide variety, and it is good that Fergus Sheil will be speaking to us on the anniversary of that wonderful *Tristan* last year, but I know the other speakers will not take offence if I highlight one very exciting evening. This year as our Christmas treat to ourselves we will have the benefit of Dame Anne Evans in conversation with Pdraig Ó Rourke. She is a wonderful lady and having the chance to discuss with her,

her career and her experience of singing Brünnhilde is something members will not want to miss. We look forward to seeing you at the talks next year and please contact the committee if you have any thoughts or ideas on how to improve our running of the Society.

*Anthony Linehan*

## SOCIETY PROGRAMME OF EVENTS – 2012/2013

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Time</b>
<i>2013</i>		
Thurs 12 September	Fergus Shiel: <i>On the challenges of staging Tristan und Isolde in Dublin, 2012</i>	8.00 p.m.
Sat.12 – Sun 13 October	Derek Watson workshop: <i>Introduction to the Ring as a whole, and to Das Rheingold</i>	10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. (Sat), 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Sun
Sun 13 October	Paul McNamara (tenor) and Philip Mayers (piano): <i>Song recital 'In the shadow of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus', with songs by Stanford, Liszt, Humperdinck, Wolf and Duparc.</i> Hugh Lane Gallery (Admission free.)	12.00 noon
Mon 14 October	Paul McNamara: <i>Lecture recital: an introduction to Wagner and the Bayreuth Festival</i> , Room AM109, Arts Millenium Building, NUI Galway. (Admission free.)	1.00 p.m.
Tue 15 October	Paul McNamara (tenor) and Philip Mayers (piano): <i>Song recital</i> (for details, see above). Aula Maxima, NUI Galway. Tickets €20 / Friends and Concessions €16 / students (full time) €6 from Music for Galway 091 705962 or from Opus 2, 4 High Street, Galway.	8.00 p.m
Thur 7 November	Pádraig O'Rourke: <i>Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau</i>	8.00 p.m.
Thur 5 December	Dame Anne Evans <i>in conversation with Pádraig O'Rourke about singing Wagner</i> , followed by a reception	8.00 p.m.
Weds 18 December	Live broadcast of <i>Parsifal</i> from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden – Odeon, Stillorgan and elsewhere. See details below.	5.00 p.m.
<i>2014</i>		
Thur 23 January	John Allen: <i>Lesser spotted Wagner: the minor compositions of Richard Wagner</i>	8.00 p.m.

Sat 22 – Sun 23 February	Derek Watson workshop: <i>Die Walküre</i>	10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. (Sat), 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Sun
Thur 6 March	Annual General Meeting	8.00
Thur 27 March	Paddy Brennan: <i>Wagner's Weird, Wacky and Wonderful World</i>	8.00
Wed 9 April	Muiris O'Keeffe: 'Fear and loathing in Valhalla: attitudes to women in Wagner's operas'	8.00
Thur 8 May	Ian Fox: <i>Wagner's muse – the influence of Cosima on Richard Wagner</i>	8.00
29 May – 1 June	Annual Meeting of the Richard Wagner Verband International, Graz, Austria	

Paul McNamara's recital on 13 October is part of a new Dublin Song Series, curated by Dearbhla & Finghin Collins in collaboration with the National Concert Hall. This and the two events in Galway are presented with the support and in association with the Wagner Society of Ireland.

Other dates for meetings in 2014, including the AGM, will be notified in the next newsletter.

Unless otherwise stated, meetings are held at the United Arts Club, 3 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin 2.

## Information on other forthcoming events

### *Parsifal* from ROH

The new Royal Opera House *Parsifal* will be broadcast to Movies at Dundrum, and also in Limerick, Waterford and Newbridge, on 18 December 2013. For further details, see

[http://www.odeoncinemas.ie/fanatic/odeon-plus-information/s207/Stillorgan/m14665/NT\\_Live\\_Macbeth/](http://www.odeoncinemas.ie/fanatic/odeon-plus-information/s207/Stillorgan/m14665/NT_Live_Macbeth/)

and

<http://cinema.roh.org.uk/now-booking/nearest/ie/48211>

## The *Verband* Meeting in Graz

The meeting of the Wagner Societies, under the auspices of the Richard Wagner Verband International, is always an enjoyable even and allows one to meet members from other Societies. Next year the meeting will in Graz from the 29 May to the 1 June (with an optional additional excursion on the 2 June). There is a performance of *Lohengrin* on the evening of 30 May. Full details of the meeting can be found at

<http://www.wagnercongressgraz.com/en/contact>

and on the right side of the page you will see a link to the programme. When looking at the programme keep scrolling down – the English version is towards the end.

## Opera Trips 2014

As mentioned in the introduction there is a *Ring* cycle in Budapest on 12–15 June 2014. A number of members have expressed an interest in going and have booked tickets. As it is already fairly heavily booked we ask that members book their own tickets on the website: <http://mupa.hu/en/wagner-2014>. Once we know how many are going, we shall try to organise a hotel. The whole cycle costs approximately €185 for the best seats. The production is semi-staged and takes place over four nights. There are direct flights from Dublin to Budapest. If you do book a ticket, please let us know.

For those who do not have the energy for a complete *Ring* in four nights, we may organise a weekend trip. It is likely it will only include one Wagner Opera. (There is, for instance, *Trsitán und Isolde* at the Teatro Real, Madrid, in January and early February.) If you are interested in such a trip please contact Anthony at the Society's e-mail address ([info@wagnersociety.ie](mailto:info@wagnersociety.ie)), and if there is enough demand he will look into the possibilities.

## Report of the Meeting of the Richard Wagner Verband International, Leipzig, 18–22 May 2013

I travelled to Leipzig to attend the 2013 Wagner Congress and the *Verband* meeting on behalf of our Chairman, Anthony Linehan.

The *Verband* meeting was held in the magnificent Rathaus (Town Hall, nothing to do with rats). It was well attended, with delegates from as far away as Thailand. It started with a welcome speech by the RWVI President, Professor Eva Mårtson, presentations of various societies' new presidents and awards. This was followed by reports on membership and the *Verband*'s finances. Other matters covered were Wagner scholarships, the 2012 Wagner Voices competition and the work done on co-operating with universities.

Discussions followed on proposals to 'internationalise' the *Verband* by encouraging non-German members for the committee; to allow proxy voting from Societies (mainly international) unable to attend the annual *Verband* meeting; and to hold occasional *Verband* meetings in Bayreuth. These proposals will be considered by the *Verband* committee.

We had presentations from the organisers of future Congresses: in 2014 it will be held in Graz, Austria (29 May–1 June). The 2015 Congress, to be held in Dessau, Germany (14–17 May), seems particularly appealing as it will include a complete *Ring* cycle performance. The 2016 Congress is scheduled for Strasbourg, France.

The Wagner Festival musical framework, consisting mainly of Wagner operas, was very enjoyable. It started with an excellent, modern *Rheingold*. Wolfgang Brendel, scheduled to sing in *Die Meistersinger*, was ill and was replaced at the last moment by Jan Hendrik Rootering in what was a very modern, some said controversial, *Meistersinger* production. This was followed by a very simple, easy-to-understand *Parsifal*. Finally there was a very unusual, once-in-a-lifetime staging of *Götterdämmerung* in the auditorium of Leipzig University, which was enjoyed by the whole audience.

The Congress closing ceremony was attended by government ministers, local dignitaries and some members of the Wagner family. Along with the usual speeches we enjoyed some more of Wagner's music.

Leipzig is a busy place. As well as the Wagner Congress, it welcomed the annual meeting of Goths! It was interesting to see them (40,000+) throughout the city, dressed in extravagant, sometimes terrifying, costumes (not all of them in black). They were all very friendly and not dangerous as long as one did not try to feed them by hand. (Joke)

*Michael Marr*

## Reviews

### **The *Ring* at Longborough 2013**

Barbara and I attended the first cycle of the first complete performance of the *Ring* by Longborough Festival Opera, deep in the Cotswolds, archetypal English countryside. The festival has been building up to this for nearly two decades. First it presented an ingeniously cut-down two-night version of the *Ring*, and then in the last few years has presented full performances of the four components separately. This was the triumphant conclusion of a long journey. Curiously, it was the only complete staging of the *Ring* in Britain during Wagner's bicentenary year.

Longborough today is reminiscent of what Glyndebourne must have been like in its earliest years back in the 1930s, although without the connotations of being part of the London season that Glyndebourne has since acquired. Most people still wore black ties, but the atmosphere was not socially exclusive.

Like Glyndebourne, Longborough began with the enthusiastic owners of a country house building a small opera house in its grounds. The enthusiasts in this case were Martin and Lizzie Graham, and their enthusiasm (unlike the Christies' at Glyndebourne) was specifically focused on Wagner. Their opera house began life as a barn, but it has been provided with an impressive neo-classical façade that is a little reminiscent of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth. At the apex of the pediment is an enormous statue of Wagner. Statues of Verdi and Mozart occupy strictly subordinate positions at each side. A trumpeter summoned the audience, Bayreuth-style, with a relevant *Leitmotiv* from the balcony.

Just before the start of *Rheingold*, Martin Graham emerged out of the swirling mists of the smoke machine and explained how many years ago he had watched the one-act-per-week BBC transmission of the Boulez–Chéreau Bayreuth *Ring*, and said to Lizzie that ‘we must have one of those’. He had been accused of identifying with Loge, and was wearing a short tailcoat that his tailor had made for him on the model of the Chéreau Loge.

The house holds just 500 people, and the stage is relatively small (though larger than that in the old house at Glyndebourne). The orchestra pit, however, extends – Bayreuth fashion – deep under the stage. Even so, it accommodates only 70 players, not the 110 of the standard *Ring* orchestra. This production therefore used the version of the score prepared by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1903–75) for use in the smaller German houses. Sometimes at peak moments one missed the sheer weight of the more familiar larger orchestra, but on the other hand there was often a welcome gain in clarity. And, as the conductor Anthony Negus remarked, he did insist on a bass trumpet, which Sir Reginald Goodall regarded as indispensable.



Negus, who worked with Goodall, has shared his mentor’s fate of being relatively neglected by major opera houses. But he has conducted a good deal with Welsh National and indeed assisted one year at Bayreuth. His pacing was ideal – not slow like Goodall, and indeed slightly on the brisker side of average – with the essential quality that one sensed as soon as he brought down his baton at the beginning of *Rheingold* that he knew how he was going to conduct the immolation scene 14 hours later (as only a few, such as Knappertsbusch or Janowski, manage to convey). The drama unfolded naturally in his hands, without the pace

being pulled around or dramatic moments overemphasised in the manner of, say, Solti. There were a few minor orchestral fluffs from the scratch orchestra, mainly on the first night, but they didn't matter.

The sensation of the Longborough *Ring*, as reviewers have unanimously recognised, was Rachel Nichols's Brünnhilde. Young, good looking and a brilliant actor, Nichols has an unusual background for a Wagnerian dramatic soprano: she has sung a great deal of Baroque music, and retains a true trill and the precision required in that *Fach*. In her transition to the Wagner repertory, she is studying with Dame Anne Evans. For all her abundant power, she was always absolutely secure. Because Longborough is such a small house, one could see facial expressions and nuances of movement that are usually out of eyeshot in the big houses where Wagner is normally staged. Nichols conveyed every subtlety of emotion in Brünnhilde's passage from playful daughter larking around with Wotan in Act II of *Die Walküre*, through the heartrending *Todesverkündigung* scene to Wotan's farewell, then the confused emotions she experiences on being wakened by Siegfried, and the vengeance scene. As for the shattering impact of the immolation scene, words fail me. You will never, ever, see a more *believable* Brünnhilde than this.

The rest of the cast were mainly young British singers (or in the case of Malcolm Rivers, the *Siegfried/Götterdämmerung* Alberich, a very old British singer). The Rhinemaidens (Gail Pearson, Sara Wallander-Ross and Catherine King), doubling as valkyries and norns, sang beautifully throughout, as did Anna Burford (Erda), Lee Bisset (Freia/Sieglinde/Gutrune), Alison Kettlewell (Fricka/Waltraute), and not one but two Siegfrieds (Hugo Mallett and Jonathan Stoughton) and two Wotans (Jason Howard and Philip Joll). Omission from this list does not imply weakness – there were no really weak links.

The Director and Designer were Alan Privett and Kjell Torriset. The production was modernist and minimalist, unfussy and undistracting. The only touch of the usual condescending postmodernist *Regieopera* nonsense was that Gunther came on in a wheelchair, presumably a heavy-handed hint that he is a weak character, but then jogged off with the rest of the chaps at the end of the scene. Mistake, but a small one in the context of the big picture.

One afternoon, between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, we attended two seminars organised by the Wagner Society in a neighbouring village hall. The first was an illuminating interview with Bryan Magee, philosopher, former MP and television journalist, author of *Aspects of Wagner* (1968 and revised editions) and *Wagner and Philosophy* (2000). I particularly remember one anecdote. The score of *Tristan* having been printed several years before the first performance, Wagner sent a copy to Arthur Schopenhauer, only months before that philosopher's death. Schopenhauer was offended that, although Wagner had written a dedication to him, he had not included a covering letter. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer read through the score, and recorded in his diary that Wagner was 'a fairly good minor poet, but the music is no good'. (Note to myself: if *Tristan* is, as Magee says, 'a Schopenhauerian opera', I must read Schopenhauer.)

The other seminar took the form of an interview with Gwynne Howell, often hilarious (for example his imitation of Goodall's conducting, which he described as resembling the motions of knitting). It culminated in a short master class with the young British bass Julian Close, who is blessed both with a PhD in physics and a cavernous voice of Gottlob Frick or Boris Christoff proportions. Close was singing Fafner, but understudying Hagen, and it was on

Hagen that Howell had revealing guidance to offer, even though as he admitted he does not himself have a Hagen voice.

Longborough is having a quiet Wagner year in 2014, though Rachel Nichols is scheduled to sing the *Wesendonck Lieder*. The Grahams have recognised the need at last to put the festival on a more professional long-term footing. They seem to have managed thus far with a permanent staff of three, and had to turn down their one offer of public subsidy – £40,000 from the Arts Council – because it came with strings to do with bringing in more ethnic minorities, wheelchair users and other worthy groups, which the Grahams did not have the administrative resources to undertake. In 2015, they will present *Tristan und Isolde* for the first time, with Rachel Nichols singing her first Isolde. The *Ring* will be revived in 2016. Highly recommended.

*Stephen Mennell*

### **New York *Ring* Cycle, 2010–13(?)**

It is hard to believe that after many years of planning, major expenditure on singers, new technology, heavy engineering and serial soloists that the ‘current’ New York production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* may no longer be staged after June 2013. To some it will be a welcome relief. Others are starting to tire of the never-ending criticism of the production. In the 2013 review of *Götterdämmerung*, the *New York Times* reviewer said,

Perhaps its time to stop talking about *The Machine*. Sure, Robert Lepage’s 45-ton set for the Metropolitan Opera’s current production is loud, gimmicky and exorbitantly expensive, but so are many restaurants in this city and that has never stopped New Yorkers from clambering over one another to get a table!

I personally have been fascinated with this production since it first appeared in the 2010–11 Met Opera season with *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. I saw this series, along with thousands of Met HD cinema goers between 2010 and 2012. I attended the Met HD Encore performance in July 2012 where the cycle was repeated, along with the Emmy-winning documentary ‘Wagner’s Dream’. I spoke with Michael Marr after he attended the live cycle in New York in 2012 (his review appeared in an earlier newsletter of the Wagner Society of Ireland). I purchased and viewed the Blu-ray disc when it was launched in late 2012 and watched most of the cycle again this year on Sky Arts 2 and that still wasn’t enough! I had to complete the circle, as it were, and see the production live at the Lincoln Centre. This I did between 25 April and 2 May 2013.

Robert Lepage and Met General Manager Peter Gelb have always argued that their production was a traditional one and close to what Wagner intended *Der Ring* to be. I am inclined to agree with them, and a lot of the technology is there to dramatise this traditional approach. While the production seems almost comedy-like on occasions such as the Valkyries on the beams of ‘the machine’ during the opening of act 3 of *Die Walküre*, there are moments where the production adds to the storyline. Two examples of this are the descent and return to Nibelheim in *Das Rheingold*. One really gets the impression that Wotan and Loge are travelling to another world with the imaginative use of the machine and simple lighting

The scene change in most cases throughout the cycle was efficient and seamless. I certainly wasn’t aware of what one reviewer called ‘white noise’, and this cycle (cycle 2, 2013) didn’t



have any technical hitches. If I had one problem with the production, it was with the use of body doubles. These were used on a number of occasions, including the final part of *Die Walküre* where Katarina Dalayman is replaced by a body-double because they want Brünnhilde to be lying upside down on the rock named after her for the closing minutes of the opera. ... Why??? If anything, the body-double issue was more marked live than it was in the earlier screen/TV productions I had seen

Conductor Fabio Luisi really brought pace and colour to the New York *Ring* cycle. The Met orchestra has received pretty much universal praise for this production, whether under the baton of Levine or Luisi. It was every bit as good as the music I heard under one of my favourite conductors seven weeks later when he – Daniel Barenboim – conducted the cycle at La Scala. When the brass section played they hit the roof – and I should know, I was sitting in the Family Circle! – the dramatic intensity of the orchestra was particularly powerful, during the forging scene in *Siegfried* and the concluding scene of *Götterdämmerung*.

Perhaps it was because I was used to the towering character of Bryn Terfel playing Wotan/the Wanderer in the Met HD production, but I never came to feel comfortable with the singing of Mark Delevan in this production. While his diction and voice were excellent, they lacked the vocal and visual presence of Terfel.

Stephanie Blythe as Fricka, on the other hand, was wonderful both in the intensity of her presence and the projection of her voice. This was particularly in evidence in Act 2 of *Die Walküre*. The Nibelungs were wonderfully represented by Eric Owens as Alberich and Gerhard Siegel as Mime. Their acting was as good as their singing. Hans-Peter König appeared in all four operas, covering dramatically the parts of Fafner, Hunding, the dragon and Hagen.

Simon O'Neill had great presence as Siegmund, with Martina Serafin playing Sieglinde. I was to see O'Neill play the same role opposite the even more dramatic and wonderful Waltraud Meier at La Scala seven weeks later. No doubt as to which duo was more powerful.

Katarina Dalayman started powerfully as Brünnhilde and just got better and better. I believe her voice and presence on stage was better than the performances of Deborah Voight that I had seen in earlier HD performances. I also very much enjoyed the chemistry between Dalayman and Jay Hunter Morris as Siegfried. Morris stepped into the role in 2011 and not everybody was happy about this. The onstage presence of the boy from Paris, Texas, was always liked and he is believable as the 17-year-old young agile Siegfried ... However, there are some who believe he is more a Siegmund than a Siegfried. My view is that he has adapted well to the new role and the audience absolutely loved him

So all in all it was a great occasion to get to New York to see this ring Cycle. I have to mention the generosity and spirit of inclusion of the Wagner Society of New York, who were wonderful hosts and really made Wagnerians from all over the world feel welcome, as well as organising a full programme of events that we attended.

There is no Wagner Opera in the Met 2013–14 season, and the Met are still reeling in adoration from the *Parsifal* in the 2012–13 season, which was the highlight of the season (seen by some of our members in person and on Met HD in cinemas). I believe 'the machine' will be taken to the operatic equivalent of the desert where they stored aeroplanes during the Gulf crisis. And they will be reluctant to bring it back into Manhattan for a revival. It will live on in DVD sales ... but maybe that was always the idea.

*Jarlath Jennings*

### **The *Ring* at La Scala, Milan, 2013**

I had never been to La Scala before, and had always wanted to visit it. The first impression is the beauty of the auditorium, so steeped in history. The second impression I had was of the orchestra pit, which is almost entirely in front of the stage and so there is quite a gulf between the auditorium and the stage – exactly what Wagner did not want. However, my abiding impression of this *Ring* was the orchestral playing and the joy of being able to hear details in the orchestration I have never noticed before. I understood for the first time why Solti wanted to remove part of the cover in the Bayreuth pit. Never has the *Ring* sounded so glorious to me. And yet this ability to hear detail in the orchestra was not at the expense of the organic whole or the architecture of the *Ring*. In other words, the conducting of Barenboim was wonderful. I had wondered would the La Scala orchestra play as well for him as his more familiar Berlin orchestra, but I need have had no fear, since they played like angels and, I felt, brought a wonderful Italian legato to the work as well.

The risk of such an open orchestra is that it makes life impossible for the singer and indeed in *Rheingold* I felt some of the voices were slightly distant at times; but in the other works there were no such problems and one heard the singers perfectly. Indeed sonically this was a *Ring* I expect never to hear excelled, and the acoustic of La Scala allowed me enjoy the *Ring* as never before including the great climatic orchestral moments like Siegfried's Funeral March.

With regard to the production it had one great merit, which is a sad reflection on our times, which is that it did not offend. Indeed it did a lot more – it was for the most part a straight telling of the story, albeit with modern imagery. The correct characters were on stage at the correct time and did as Wagner wished. The production was radical in that its main emphasis was on character and the interaction of characters, and for the first time in my recent experience Siegfried was a believable character whom one could genuinely like.

The stage setting had one flaw in my opinion, which may have been the result of its being a shared production – the sets were very open with drop walls at the back but nothing to the side and nothing to enclose the singers in any kind of acoustic support. I felt they deserved more support than that, but it did not seem to affect them even though there were a few 'dead spots' on the stage. Other than that the staging had what I require: (a) the locations were physically if not realistically represented – for example Brünnhilde's rock involved some height on which she was found; (b) there was variety – the *Ring* is too long to have a unit set, no matter how impressive: here there was variety; and (c) there was colour – I for one am tired of grey sets.

So what was it like? Well *Rheingold* was dominated by a movement group who annoyed some, but whom I found strangely poetic. I was amazed at their stamina to dance for the length of the opera, but also impressed that the movement they were given was in keeping with the music. The strength of the idea was that they became the Tarnhelm surrounding their owner – amusingly at times as a chair – and so on. This clever solution also allowed them appear as the dragon in *Siegfried*. The way they slipped from one owner to the next emphasised the nature of Alberich's loss. Another memorable visual in *Rheingold* was the use of shadows to emphasise the size of the giants in contrast to Freia. The singers in *Rheingold* were all good but none overwhelmed one.

With *Walküre* Act I the production really showed its merits. The setting was impressive and the videos – of hearths/ fireplaces and spring – effective, but what they did not do was overwhelm the singers, rather allowing space for the signers to dominate our attention. And

what singers: Waltraud Meier is a creature of the stage and her Sieglinde was perfect. She inspires those around her and Simon O'Neill gave a performance to match hers. His cries of 'Wälse' will stay long in the memory. Mickhail Petrenko was an evil and dangerous Hunding. One hopes in every performance for those nights when everything goes right, when the stage takes fire and when one is left breathless. This was one of those nights – as was reflected, not in the roar from the audience when the act ended but in the silence followed by the cheers. This was as good as it gets. Sadly Act II did not maintain the same level. It quickly became clear that René Pape – a singer I admire – was in considerable vocal and indeed physical trouble. He kept wandering to the stage back and side. This gave the excellent Fricka of Ekaterina Gubanova nothing to work against, and their scene for the first time in my experience went for nothing. Likewise the monologues dragged. Irene Theorin gave a good account of herself but, I imagine, would have been so much more if she had a Wotan to act against. It was no surprise that an apology was made for René Pape before the third act and he did his best to get through the night saving himself for the end. I was left in some doubt, however, whether the role really suits his voice. Act III of *Walküre* was effective, especially the interaction between Waltraud Meier and Irene Theorin. I should finish by saying that, while the performance was clearly diminished by the vocal troubles of René Pape, it still was an excellent night given the orchestra and the other singers – but the promise of Act I was not kept.

*Siegfried* was for me the most successful opera of the cycle. I never really look forward to *Siegfried* and am always surprised how much I can enjoy it. However the key has to be having a Siegfried who can sing the role. I have had some dreadful experiences, and so it was with some relief I heard Lance Ryan sing – and he looked the part. What I loved was the portrayal of Siegfried just as I imagine Wagner had intended, but I for one had never seen. He was not a dumb youth, nor a vicious one – which is how modern producers seem obliged to portray him lest they be accused of endorsing the German 'superhero'. Here Siegfried was portrayed as a young man, naïve, ignorant but with a noble heart. Once or twice he made moves to be nice to Mime, but could not bring himself to like the vicious dwarf. One felt he would have liked to. Equally Mime was not just played for laughs but was a nasty piece of work with no true feelings for Siegfried. The setting was excellent, giving good acting spaces and allowing for a dramatic forging scene.

Act II in the forest was a series of pipes from the fly-tower, which when lit green gave all the imagination needed to see a forest. The excellent Wanderer of Terji Stensvold and the Alberich made a lot of their scene. The one touch I loved in this act was that the death of Mime was almost accidental with him running on Siegfried's sword as he tried to kill Siegfried. It was not a ruthless act by Siegfried but – and surely this is close to the truth – Mime caused his own death.

Act III reminds me of something else strange and wonderful about this production – all the preludes were played with the curtain down allowing us to concentrate and prepare for the curtain to rise. The scene with Erda – the excellent Anna Larsen placed far upstage – was effective as ever, but it was the scene between the Wanderer and Siegfried which was particularly fine, the change in their relationship being clearly delineated until Wotan tried to oppose him. It captured so well how Wotan in the end found it hard to relinquish power to someone he could not control. The scene between Brünnhilde and Siegfried also very well portrayed their developing relationship – Irene Theorin being particularly moving. Vocally it was all one could ask for. And so ended one of the best *Siegfrieds* I had seen and a wonderful night at the opera.

*Götterdämmerung* saw a new Siegfried in Andreas Schager. He was new to me and again looked the part and sang very well. Again the production had no problem with Siegfried as hero. However the night belonged to Irene Theorin, whose Brünnhilde developed new depths leading to a wonderful immolation scene, sung out gloriously. The staging was for the most part fine, but there was an extraneous idea of the decline of the Gibichungs which, given that they are minor characters was unnecessary and led to a theme in the sets of frozen body parts that I found annoying – but maybe it was that I just did not get it. Dramatically it was again a wonderful evening and musically all I could have wished for. The end left one exhausted, exhilarated and renewed.

The seats we had in La Scala were ideal – just the right distance from the stage. The company of the Irish contingent excellent and the whole week was one of those life-affirming events that live long in the memory. The final word must go on Daniel Barenboim – his was great conducting; clear, insightful, full of detail and yet never losing the line of the music and considerate to his signers. This was great conducting by the standards of any age and we were privileged to hear it in this anniversary year.



*Gemma Hussey, Veronica O'Donaghue and Valerie Casey onstage at La Scala*

One more point: The La Scala *Ring* cycle attracted a large group of WSI members (despite the cost of tickets), and the social dynamics added to the experience of the *Ring*. Whatever it was – whether it was meeting at the related events that our tickets allowed us to access; or chatting before and during the operas; or the get-together for ‘meaningful discussion’ over drinks or meals – it really brought home the benefit of seeing the operas as a group and all the social interchange that comes with being in a beautiful stylish city like Milan.

*Anthony Linehan*

### **The *Ring* at the Proms.**

The complete *Ring* was performed at the BBC Proms for the first time in a single season: *Das Rheingold* on 22 July (Prom 14), *Die Walküre* the following night (Prom 15), *Siegfried* on 26 July (Prom 18), and *Götterdämmerung* on 28 July (Prom 20). This was also the first time

Daniel Barenboim had conducted Wagner in the UK.

It was a thrilling and wonderful experience – one I shall never forget. The way Barenboim controlled the orchestra and moulded the performance was a joy to behold. According to the press, at rehearsals he repeatedly urged the orchestra to keep the volume down. ‘He instructed them to play with the lightness of Mendelssohn, reminding them that he had played Schubert’s *Winterreise* in the Albert Hall with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau – just two men, one piano – and every note could be heard’. As a result of this, the singers came across very well. Bryn Terfel, who sang Wotan in *Walküre* was terrific and managed ‘soft-voiced singing of incomparable beauty’. Nina Stemme sang all three Brünnhildes, and was particularly strong in *Götterdämmerung*. There were two Siegfrieds – Lance Ryan and Andreas Schager.

All in all a Ring to remember, and no production distractions. There is a lot to be said for concert performances – although Wagner would probably not approve.\*

The end of *Götterdämmerung* was amazing and there was a remarkable ten seconds of silence following the orchestra’s final note. Barenboim made an impromptu speech after the thunderous final applause. ‘What you went through with us, this is something I never dreamt of and I never thought it was so possible, because the communion between us, the musicians and you, the public, depends not just on us but also on you. And you have brought us so much silence.’

*James McLoughlin*

\* I agree with James about the merits of concert performances, and, although it is true that Wagner’s idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* involved staging, there is also some evidence that he fussed about the scenery a great deal less than about the playing, singing and acting. But would he have disapproved of a concert performance – or a demi-semi-staged one like this? Possibly not, because in 1877 he himself conducted excerpts from his work in concerts in the very same Royal Albert Hall.

The BBC did Wagner proud in this year’s Proms. Between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, Semyon Bychkov conducted *Tristan und Isolde* (Prom 19, 27 July) – appropriately, perhaps, since *Tristan* was composed between Acts II and III of *Siegfried*. Donald Runnicles conducted *Tannhäuser* on 4 August (Prom 29), and Sir Mark Elder *Parsifal* on 25 August (Prom 57). Besides all that, this year’s programme includes the Wesendonck-Lieder and the overtures to *Die Meistersinger* and *Rienzi*. Alas, poor Verdi!

– *Stephen Mennell*

## WAGNER SOCIETY WEBSITE

We would remind members to keep an eye on the [www.wagnersociety.ie](http://www.wagnersociety.ie) website. Michael Marr keeps it as up-to-date as possible, and fresh information often appears there in advance of circulation in the newsletter or by special communication.

## NEWSLETTER

### *Circulation and Interim Updates*

The Newsletter is circulated by email unless members do not have an email address, in which case it is sent by ordinary post. Updates or reminders are also sent by email from time to time.

***Contributions***

The Committee welcomes contributions members themselves might like to send us, whether brief reports on performances or recordings of Wagner's works, or thoughts on aspects of his work that they would like to share with other members of the Society. Contributions can be sent by email to: [info@wagnersociety.ie](mailto:info@wagnersociety.ie)