



The Wagner Society of Ireland

Founded 2002

President: Dr. Alexander Anissimov, Conductor

NEWSLETTER – OCTOBER 2015

We have already had two excellent talks in our 2015–16 season: John Allen on ‘Wagner Knights’ on 17 September, and Désirée Mays on ‘Wagner’s Women: Real and Imagined’ on 15 October. The next big event is:

Derek Watson Workshop on *Götterdämmerung*

Derek will conclude his series of workshops on the *Ring* with a whole weekend session on *Götterdämmerung* on 20–22 November, at the United Arts Club as usual.

Please note that – because of the huge scale of *Götterdämmerung* – on this occasion **the workshop will start on Friday evening, 20 November at 7.30 p.m.**, and continue throughout Saturday and Sunday 20–22 November.

The charge for the workshop is €35.00 per participant, payable on the day. Numbers are limited by the size of the room, so please **reserve your place** by emailing our Treasurer, Mary Spollen, at spollenm@eircom.net.

Please bring along your copy of Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung* by Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, to which Derek will (as in earlier workshops) make frequent reference.

And the next two meetings:

Thursday, 10 December 2015

Recital by Padraig O'Rourke, followed by Seasonal Drinks

Wednesday, 13 January 2016

Joanna Crooks: The 2002 NYOI *Ring* Cycle in Limerick and Birmingham

Both meetings will be – again as usual – at the United Arts Club, 3 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin 2, starting at 8.00 p.m.

Tannhäuser Live from the Met

On Saturday, 31 October, starting at 4.00 p.m., *Tannhäuser* will be transmitted live from the Metropolitan Opera House to a cinema near you. Please check local listings.

Bayreuth Festival 2015 – Report by Timothy King

Mary and I managed to get *Ring* tickets online, and we were lucky enough to get returned tickets to *Tristan*.

Musically the *Ring* was superb, both vocally and orchestrally. I was again struck by the perfection of the *Festspielhaus* acoustics. Unlike Jarlath Jennings in 2014, we were able to show our appreciation of the orchestra at a curtain call, and since it had been a very very hot summer in Central Europe, it was evident that they had taken full advantage of Wagner's 'mystic gulf' freeing them from the sartorial requirements imposed on most orchestras.

Before going, I knew that the production was not liked – I remembered reading that two years ago its first performance set up some sort of booing record – but I found much of it, especially *Siegfried*, ghastly beyond imagining. It exhibited all the things that I personally dislike about most, though not all, *Regietheater*. I can accept the inevitable anachronisms in any change of period (although why should the elaborately constructed US 66 motel in which *Rheingold* takes place, and which is realistic down to the 1960's rotary dial payphones, also offer Wi-Fi?) and I can put up with a certain amount of eclectic peculiarities, but the total lack of dramatic integrity, a host of vulgarities intended to shock a bourgeoisie that has by now become immune to shock, and a stream of side events, which appear deliberately to distract from the singing at its musical high points, were unforgivable. Especially irritating was a screen that would drop down in various places – a film photographer followed the singers around from time to time and the onstage singers were often dwarfed by their own grey screen images, but there were also flashbacks; I did my best not to look at them but couldn't help noticing somebody cutting a birthday cake in the first act of *Die Walküre* (which was in several other respects the musical high point of the cycle). There were other references to film – *Siegfried* ended with Siegfried and Brünnhilde in a café in the Alexanderplatz (in Berlin) where any enjoyment they might have received from the bottle of wine they were sharing was clearly destroyed by a family of crocodiles snapping at their feet. We learnt afterwards this was a reference to a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who was both a friend to and influence on Castorf. In *Götterdämmerung*, the pram full of potatoes pushed down a long flight of steps at some moment of high emotion was presumably a reference to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. Once I knew I was going, I decided not to read earlier reviews, but not looking back I see that the *Guardian* reviewer referred to Tarantino-style characters in the *Rheingold* motel, and quite possibly the annoying video screen that I tried so hard not to look at in *Die Walküre* had other film references too.

Somewhere there seemed to be some thematic ideas not carried through. Oil production was one – there was gas guzzler outside the motel and other cars appeared periodically, an oil derrick in pre-revolutionary Baku provided one of the settings in *Walküre*, and when in the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* oil slowly leaked from a barrel stacked outside a chemical factory and Brünnhilde sprinkled more oil outside the façade of the New York Stock Exchange we were primed for the ultimate conflagration of capitalism. But no, the fire was

confined to the interior of one upturned oil barrel, and having thrown the ring into it, Brünnhilde walked off the stage. In any case gold plays such an essential part in the *Ring* that one cannot substitute oil – Freia was covered by gold bars rather than oil.

Another potential theme was revolution. The programme had two substantive essays, one on aspects of the relationship between Marx and Wagner, and the other on *The Principles of Revolution* by the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin (who had been with Wagner at the 1849 Dresden uprising); in one scene the Wanderer appears disguised as Bakunin. Mime's workshop lies in the shadow of a Communist Mount Rushmore. At one point Wotan rather conspicuously reads *Pravda*. Why, one wondered, did not the New York Stock Exchange become more explicitly Valhalla?

Other than these two essays, the programme offered no coherent explanation of the events on stage. There were several paragraphs on irony by a French philosopher/musicologist, Victor Jankélévitch, whose relevance to the production escaped me. There was a further paragraph on irony by the dramaturg/assistant director, Patric Seibert, who also had several roles on stage. Mostly he appeared to represent the common man, for example serving drinks, washing cars etc., subject to regular abuse and periodic beatings. In *Siegfried*, he was dragged on in lieu of the bear, and spent most of the act tied to a pole. Finally in the last act of *Götterdämmerung*, his bloodied body, which had apparently been run over, was dumped into a car boot by the Rhinemaidens. At one of the most dramatic points in *Die Walküre*, he crept onstage and sat in the coop in which Sieglinde had been earlier fattening a turkey, reading a book. I assume that this is where Castorf thinks that dramaturgs should belong.

A few minutes into the first scene of *Rheingold*, watching Alberich in a deckchair outside the motel playing with a rubber duck, I resolved never to go to an opera in Germany again. When Siegfried chose to shoot Fafner, who had returned to human shape, with a semi-automatic instead of wielding Nothung, I wondered ‘could this be the shot that killed *Regietheater*?’ No such luck, I fear.

But between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* we saw *Tristan*. We had been extremely lucky to get returns for this – and not just any returns but wonderful seats in the middle of the front row of the balcony. On our only previous visit to Bayreuth, courtesy of the Irish Wagner Society, we had seen Katharina Wagner’s unforgivable *Meistersinger*, and feared the worst. This was totally different from the *Meistersinger* and was almost anti-Castorf in its focus and simplicity, and its very clever use of light. One can quibble about aspects of the staging, one may not understand all Katharina’s departures from her great-grandfather’s staging – why set Act 2 in a prison? One can complain that Herlitizius, having recently sung Brünnhilde in Vienna, carries too much of it into her Isolde, and I have certainly heard Liebestods that moved me more, including Miriam Murphy in Dublin. But the totality was very satisfying, especially so in contrast to *Siegfried* the night before. Her great uncle Wieland’s productions in the 1950s were notable for their very simple spare sets, and if this is the direction in which Katharina decides to move Bayreuth productions it would be great. If I ever had an opportunity to see this *Tristan* again, I would certainly take it.

It seems unlikely that I shall manage to get such an opportunity – at least not next year. There is to be a new *Parsifal*. Originally the director was to have been Jonathan Meese, another German who likes to shock – he was prosecuted (but acquitted) after he gave a Nazi salute on the stage – but he was fired in 2014. The new director will be Uwe Eric Laufenberg. A quick internet trawl suggests that, compared with Meese and Castorf, his productions are relatively

conservative. Could this be the direction in which Katharina takes Bayreuth?

It was so hot that we spent most of the post-breakfast, pre-opera hours reading in the shade in the garden of our hotel. But we did visit the newly reopened Wahnfried and the adjacent museum, and were very greatly impressed. There is no attempt to disguise the Wagner family's pathological anti-Semitism. And on the lawns below the Festspielhaus, a series of stands elaborates this history and describes the ways in which the Nazis had disturbed and often destroyed the careers, and sometimes the lives, of artists who had performed or directed at Bayreuth. Most of these were of course Jewish, but there were others, such as Fritz Busch, the first music director at Glyndebourne, who left Germany because of their ideological objections to the Nazi regime.

We spent our non-opera day visiting Coburg which is easily reached by train and also highly recommended.