



# The Wagner Society of Ireland

Founded 2002

President: Dr. Alexander Anissimov, Conductor



## Newsletter

January 2010

### CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

Dear Member,

It is with great pleasure that I introduce the first newsletter of 2010. My first pleasurable task is to thank Deirdre Tinney for her work on it.

Last year ended with the exciting performance of Das Rheingold by Opera Ireland and it was good to see so many excellent Irish singers involved. Our work with Opera Ireland proved a very positive experience for both parties and they appreciated our running the afternoon seminar and for encouraging people to attend the opera. For us it was a great pleasure to meet the singers backstage after the opera.

Your Committee has been working hard and continues to develop the programme for you. This year we have a number of new events. First was the Study Day in January on The Flying Dutchman. It was good to see so many members attend. It was a long day but one that I found very stimulating and a great break away from my normal work. It was wonderful to immerse oneself in Wagner for a whole day. It is the intention to follow this first study day and work through the operas of Wagner chronologically.

Our next event is the trip to Berlin. I am delighted to say there are over 40 of us travelling so it should be great fun. As you can see from the Programme of Events we have two extra talks arranged for March and April. Please also note the date of the AGM has been moved to the 8<sup>th</sup> March. This is to facilitate us in sending out the papers for the AGM as with so many of us travelling to Berlin it was going to be difficult to organise for the original date. I do hope the change does not inconvenience you and that you will be able to attend.

I hope you find something among the events we have organised that will interest you and we look forward to meeting you. There is a lot of information in this newsletter but even then we could not put everything in. Please look on our website where we are posting more information about downloads of recordings and other interesting links. The full Paul McNamara review can also be found there (see p. 3 of this Newsletter).

Lastly can I also mention that you will shortly get a reminder that your subscription is due? It is very necessary if we are to continue to develop the Society.

Kind regards,

Anthony Linehan

## SOCIETY PROGRAMME OF EVENTS 2009/2010

2010 got off to a great start, with the indefatigable Derek Watson treating a rapt audience of some 24 members in the Herbert Park Hotel to a detailed, day-long study of the biographical and artistic sources, the composition and the central themes of The Flying Dutchman. With our studies complete, we went our separate ways for dinner, with a sizeable group of members choosing the option of dining together in the hotel, before we reassembled to view a film of the opera together.

Please note that there have been some changes to the events planned, which are outlined in the updated list below.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Time</u>
<b>February 10<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup></b>	Wagner Society of Ireland Group Trip to Berlin Performances of the following operas will be attended at the Deutsche Oper: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rienzi: The Last of the Tribunes</li> <li>• The Flying Dutchman</li> <li>• Tannhäuser and the Singers' Contest at Wartburg</li> <li>• Lohengrin</li> <li>• Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</li> </ul>	Berlin	
<b>March 8<sup>th</sup></b>	Annual General Meeting <b>Please note change of date.</b>	United Arts Club 3 Upper Fitzwilliam Street Dublin 2	8.00 p.m.
<b>March 31<sup>st</sup></b>	Muiris O'Keeffe Old Bayreuth recordings (1904-43) <b>Please note new event</b>	United Arts Club 3 Upper Fitzwilliam Street Dublin 2	8.00 p.m.
<b>April 29<sup>th</sup></b>	Paddy Brennan Performances by DGOS/Opera Ireland of Wagner operas since the 1950s <b>Please note new event</b>	United Arts Club 3 Upper Fitzwilliam Street Dublin 2	8.00 p.m.
<b>May 20<sup>th</sup></b>	Deirdre Tinney Wagner and French Symbolist Poets of the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century	United Arts Club 3, Upper Fitzwilliam Street Dublin 2	8.00 p.m.

## NEWS

### BAYREUTH BALLOT

Once again, the Society was fortunate to receive some tickets for the Bayreuth Festspiele this year. The Ballot took place on 17<sup>th</sup> December in the United Arts Club and a number of lucky winners will be travelling to Bayreuth this summer. Travellers are advised to contact someone who has previously been to Bayreuth to get a range of helpful advice on matters such as accommodation, travel, dress, eating, etc. If you know no-one who has been there, do contact the Committee at [info@wagnersociety.ie](mailto:info@wagnersociety.ie) and someone will be happy to give you some pointers you may well find helpful.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

**Paul McNamara, Tenor**

**Sunday January 31st 2010 at 12.00 p.m.**

As part of the Sundays @ Noon concert series and marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Robert Schumann and the 150th of the birth of Hugo Wolf, Paul McNamara will give a recital of music by both composers, accompanied by Philip Mayers, piano. The Society is helping to sponsor this recital due to our interest in Paul's growing international success as a performer of Wagner. A recent glowing review from MusicalAmerica 'A New Heldentenor for a New Decade' can be viewed on our website [www.wagnersociety.ie](http://www.wagnersociety.ie), or via the following link: [www.musicalamerica.com](http://www.musicalamerica.com)

ADMISSION TO THE CONCERT IS FREE

### Programme

Vier Husarenlieder von Nicholas Lenau	Robert Schumann
Der Soldat I & II	Hugo Wolf
Husarenabzug, Hauptmanns Weib, Mein altes Roß	Robert Schumann
Der Musikant	Hugo Wolf
Der Spielmann, Der Bräutigam und die Birke	Robert Schumann
Bei einer Trauung, Selbstgeständnis	Hugo Wolf
Sehnsucht, Schöne Wiege meiner Leiden	Robert Schumann
Begegnung, Der Glücksritter, Lieber Alles	Hugo Wolf
Der Soldat	Robert Schumann
Der Tambour	Hugo Wolf
Die beide Grenadiere, Dichters Genesung	Robert Schumann
Auftrag	Hugo Wolf

## REVIEWS AND MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO NEWSLETTER

**DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN** – Vienna, June 2009.

*Michael Marr*

I managed to obtain tickets for the Ring in Vienna this year and I'm glad I did. The production was a new one by Sven-Eric Bechtolf – a traditional interpretation, minimal sets, no hidden political or cultural meanings, just excellent music and great singers. The conductor was Franz Welser-Möst, he really brought out the famous Wiener Staatsoper orchestral sound.

The Finnish bass Juha Uusalo sang Wotan/ Wanderer – he has a tremendous voice and stature. Stephen Gould was a great Siegfried, other excellent singing and acting was done by Eric Halvarson (Hagen), Johan Botha (Siegmund), Ain Anger (Fafner / Hunding), Boaz Daniel (Gunther), Herwig Pecoraro (Mime) and Adrian Eröd (Loge).

The role of Brünnhilde was shared between Nina Stemme (who also sang Sieglinde) and Eva Johannson. Stemme's Brünnhilde was very impressive and the only voice I did not like was Johannson's. But this did not spoil my enjoyment of a great Ring Cycle performance.

The Staatsoper is a wonderful venue with excellent acoustics. An unusual feature is the fact that it has 560 (five hundred and sixty!) standing tickets available for sale on the day of the performance, and opera fans queue up before noon in order to get one of the favoured positions. There are usually also some tickets returned on the evening of the performance and it seems that in the end, anyone who wants to get in does so.

I met an American couple there who were visiting Vienna and had been urged to go to the Staatsoper. They had never been to an opera before in their lives! Turning up on spec, they managed to get two tickets for *Götterdämmerung* – as the saying goes when asked for directions here in Ireland, “I wouldn’t go there from here” – it would not have been my choice for a first opera. But they were very impressed by the spectacle and the music!

Next time you’re in Vienna, do make a point of going to the Staatsoper – you will probably manage to get a ticket and you will certainly enjoy yourself.

They are actually repeating the Ring this March, 2010, with the following schedule:

20 Rheingold  
21 Walküre  
25 Siegfried  
28 Götterdämmerung

More info (and possibly some late/return tickets) at [Staatsoper.at](http://Staatsoper.at)

**THE SEATTLE RING** – August 2009

*Mary O'Donoghue and Mary Spollen*

Seattle Opera’s Ring, which has become known as “The Green Ring”, was first produced in 2001 and received its third revival in August 2009. Designed by Thomas Lynch with trees, ponds, mossy banks and rocky ledges, its sets were inspired by the landscape of North West USA.

We attended the second of the three cycles which was lucky as the others were prone to illness. Many of the principles had been with the production from the start. Richard Paul Fink as Alberich, Greer Grimsley as Wotan and Stephanie Blythe as Frica and Waltraute, all reprised their roles to great success. Stig Andersen as Siegfried and Janice Baird as Brünnhilde were appearing for the first time. Stuart Skelton sang Siegmund while Margaret Jane Wray was a superb Sieglinde. The orchestra, conducted by Robert Spano, played wonderfully.

Directed by Stephen Wadsworth, it was a straightforward production concentrating on the relationship between the various characters and there were lots of revealing moments. Wotan and Frika appeared very much a couple, Siegmund died in Wotan’s arms, Erda broke through the ground for her first appearance. There was also a very animated dragon and a real horse. It all contributed to a very satisfying production.

For the opening of *Das Rheingold* the Rhine Maidens were suspended three stories above the stage performing acrobatic movements in full body harnesses specially designed to allow

them to sing as well as move – very impressive. It was a great pleasure to hear Miriam Murphy make her Seattle Opera debut as Gerhilde, clinging to a rock face, and she coped admirably with the synchronised movements required of the Valkyries at regular intervals.

There was a lot of local publicity around Janice Baird in the role of Brünnhilde, which had been previously sung to great acclaim by Jane Eaglen. In the event, she appeared to be struggling in the earlier operas, only making an impression on the role in *Gotterdammerung*. Stig Andersen's Siegfried worked well without too much emphasis on the nastiness of his relationship with Mime.

This was a Ring in which the musical values were secure, the visuals were very impressive and the stage craft was a support rather than a hindrance – which is always to be recommended.

**WESENDONCK LIEDER** – Patricia Bardon/National Symphony Orchestra, NCH, 2009

*Deirdre Tinney*

Our own Patricia Bardon performed the five songs known as the *Wesendonck Lieder* with the NSO last October. She partnered the orchestra's rich sound with ease, her restrained yet emotionally charged performance conveying the intense and passionate yearning of both words and music.

Given the Wagner Society of Ireland's special interest in Irish performers of Wagner, members will be interested to know that Patricia Bardon will be singing Erda in the Ring later this year at the Met.

This is not a review, but rather the account of an exploration sparked off by the performance. The concert has already been reviewed in at least one Irish newspaper, and cannot be revisited.

I was hearing these songs for the very first time. Having grown up with the weekly chamber music concerts that used to be given by the Royal Dublin Society over the winter season, which offered far too many and varied works to prepare for in advance, I have never lost the thrill of hearing an unknown work for the first time in live performance. From the orchestra's opening bars and Patricia Bardon's first soaring sustained note, I knew I was in for a treat. The performance sent me off in search of further enlightenment, and William Ashton Ellis's translation of Wagner's correspondence with Mathilde Wesendonck provided the perfect starting point for some fascinating insight into his working and emotional life at this period.<sup>1</sup>

The collaboration between Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck on these five songs must surely be one of the most extraordinary in the history of music. While the exact nature of their relationship is debatable, there can be no doubting its mutual passion, the more intense phase of which lasted for about six years. The twenty-three-year-old Mathilde became a committed and active supporter of the composer from the time she first heard him conduct his *Tannhäuser* overture in Zurich in March 1852. Apart from putting her energy into helping ensure the staging of a production of *The Flying Dutchman* shortly afterwards,

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, W.A., 1905. Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck. London: H. Grevel & Co.

she persuaded her wealthy husband Otto to give repeated financial assistance to the ever struggling Wagner, including purchasing a small house by the grounds of the estate where the Wesendoncks were building a large residence for themselves, into which he settled in April 1857. While there had for a long time been constant correspondence between the pair (Mathilde was, however, only one of Wagner's many correspondents, as he was a prolific letter-writer) as well as daily visits between both households whenever the Wesendoncks were in Zurich (they travelled and spent considerable periods abroad), the period in the little house he called 'Asyl' ('Refuge') marked the most intimate period of the two households and proved extremely fruitful in terms of Wagner's work.

Their respective spouses reacted differently to the friendship. Wagner's wife Minna found the relationship increasingly galling and was eventually unable to tolerate it. In April 1858, she confronted Mathilde over a letter from Wagner that she intercepted and the ensuing crisis led to Wagner having to leave Zurich the following August, and was the catalyst for the break-up of the Wagners' marriage of over 20 years. Otto continued to offer Wagner continuing financial assistance after the crisis, and a frequent and intimate correspondence continued between Wagner and Mathilde for many years. However the relationship subsided into more conventional terms and the daily close contact never resumed. While some commentators refer to Mathilde Wesendonck simply as Wagner's mistress, others accept an alternative possibility. In a letter to his sister, Klära Wolfram, just days after having to leave his 'Asyl', Wagner wrote that '*...this love, which had remained unuttered by a word between us, was finally to cast aside its veil when I penned the poem of my Tristan just a year ago, and gave it to her. Then for the first time did she lose her self-control and confess to me that she must die!...Yet we recognised forthwith that any union between us could not be so much as thought of and were accordingly resigned; renouncing every selfish wish, we suffered, endured, but – loved each other!...My wife.....tolerated our companionship, - which on its side never violated morals, but simply aimed at consciousness that we were in each other's presence.*'<sup>2</sup> The point of this is not to indulge in tittle-tattle about people whose lives are long since over. Rather it is to better understand and feel the incredible yearning that suffuses the entire opera of *Tristan and Isolde* and is also powerfully evident in the *Wesendonck* songs.

Going beyond the usual role of muse, Mathilde herself wrote these five poems, which Wagner set to music for voice with piano accompaniment over the months of November 1857 to May 1858. This, of course, was shortly after the mutual profession of love described above in Wagner's letter to his sister. (He also set one, *Traüme*, for chamber orchestra, and conducted it beneath Mathilde's window on her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1857; but the now well-established orchestral settings were composed later by Felix Mottl). The songs draw heavily on scientific and philosophical concepts and are romantic to the point of being gothic, expressing a hopeless, intense yearning, with utter frankness. They are both psychologically and musically fascinating for anyone interested in Wagner's work, and must indeed have presented considerable discomfort for both their spouses.

The third of the set, *Im Treibhaus*, made the greatest impression on me initially. Its haunting melody conveys the oppressive, circumscribed world of the hothouse, its plants surviving in the artificial environment that has been created for them, but yearning for their distant exotic homes. For me, the subject of this poem suited Mathilde's own creative skill rather more than the wilder transports of ministering angels, weeping suns and rushing wheels of time; although of course, Wagner had no difficulty with any of these subjects. Wagner designated two of the songs (*Traüme* and *Im Treibhaus*) as studies for *Tristan and Isolde*, whose initial

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, W.A., 1905. Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck. London: H. Grevel & Co. pp. viii-ix.

conception (in addition to elements of Siegfried and Die Walküre which were developed during this period) was inspired by his relationship with Mathilde. I turned to *Tristan and Isolde* (also for the first time!) to hear how the studies sounded there. It was fascinating to discover how the mournful repetitive theme from *Im Treibhaus* has been transformed not only rhythmically, but also in its entire psychological and dramatic significance, at the beginning of the last Act of *Tristan and Isolde*. The grafting of extreme yearning onto an ancient myth is of course Wagner's doing alone, and the composition has moved completely from Mathilde's imaginative world into Wagner's own creative universe.

Mathilde went on to write more poetry and a number of plays in later years, but none of them made it onto the world stage. In 1863, following a rather nostalgic letter from Wagner, then living in Vienna, Mathilde sent him another set of poems, maybe hoping to spark some further creative response. Although he acknowledged their receipt, addressing her as 'Meisterin' in his next letter (he was struggling with *Die Meistersinger* at the time), no setting to music ensued. By then, his attention was no longer held by his former muse, and Cosima von Bülow was about to take centre stage in his life.

## NEWSLETTER

### *Circulation*

The Newsletter is circulated by email unless members do not have an email address. The Committee would urge all members to consider opening an email account, as this is the most convenient and speedy way, not only to circulate the Newsletter, but also to keep members up to date on developments which, as we have seen during the recent bad weather, can change at short notice!

### *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)

## WAGNER SOCIETY WEBSITE

Fresh information is posted on the site as quickly as we can manage. Do check it out frequently at:

[www.wagnersociety.ie](http://www.wagnersociety.ie)

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