

WAGNER NEWS

Wagner News is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

TWS CALENDAR

Monday, Sept. 19, 8.00 p.m.

Video extracts from the
brand new production of
PARSIFAL
at Bayreuth



Ryan McKinney (Amfortas)
PHOTO Enrico Navrath

Monday, Nov. 14, 8.00 p.m.

Stephan Bonfield is back to
talk about
**THE ASPECTS OF
GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG**

ALL MEETINGS AT
ARTS AND LETTERS
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ROUNDTABLE FOR
'GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG'
February 15, 2017

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MY TWO TRISTANS **Pierre Couture**

Two productions of *Tristan und Isolde* seen in Paris and London less than one month apart in May and June 2016, and obviously two different minimalist conceptions of this most challenging work.

Tristan und Isolde (21 May 2016) **Théâtre des Champs Élysées,** **Paris**

Mise en scène / Pierre Audi
Dramaturgie / Willem Bruls
Scénographie et costume / Christof Hetzer
Lumières / Jean Kalman
Vidéo / Anna Bertsch

Tristan / Torsten Kerl
Isolde / Rachel Nicholls
Le Roi Marke / Steven Humes
Brangäne / Michelle Breedt
Kurwenal / Brett Polegato
Melot / Andrew Rees
Un jeune marin, un berger / Marc Larcher
Un timonier / Francis Dudziak

Choeur deRadio France
Chef des chœurs / Stéphane Petitjean
Orchestre National de France
Direction musicale / Daniele Gatti

PHOTOS Vincent Pontet

Mild und leise - Isolde

At the Théâtre des Champs Élysées

in Paris, on 21st May 2016, in a staging where large panels of metal and wooden monolithic structures moved noisily around the stage, Pierre Audi poorly directed a capable set of singers who seemed uncomfortable in their movements. Fortunately, the inspired lighting was capable of hiding some direction imperfections. Whatever vision he intended to convey was never obvious, particularly in the last act where Isolde sings her final hymn as the ultimate dedication to love and passion quite far at the back of the stage and away from her dead Tristan, "*en chambre séparée*". She is surrounded by dead bodies, and totally desolate whilst being transfigured. This is symptomatic of Audi's vision where singers rarely interact with each other, and move separately.

This production was Daniele Gatti's swan song to the *Orchestre National de France* after eight troubled years at its helm - it was a difficult relationship with both the orchestra and the Parisians. By keeping a more natural volume of sound, with some exceptions where the tensions were more reminiscent of a Verdi opera, the slow passages were beautifully stressed and showed an inspiration suitable from a maestro recently appointed to lead one of the finest orchestras in the world, the *Royal Concertgebouw* of Amsterdam. He is known to have always been extremely

supportive of his singers.

Our own Brett Polegato sang a magnificent Kurwenal, very expressively and masculine, impetuous and powerful, young yet heroic. That night he was certainly singing for Dominique Meyer who had come from Vienna to see this production. And he was a good counterpart to Torsten Kerl, a more lyrical Tristan who sang all the notes with ease and flexibility, but without much elegance at times. This "lumber jack" looking yet convincing tenor managed to sing this arduous part without any major signs of vocal fatigue, which is an achievement in itself.

Michele Breedt, heard several times at the Zürich Opera, was a powerful and very adequate Brangäne, contrasting beautifully with the more lyrical sound of Isolde, the English soprano Rachel Nicholls. I loved this Isolde who looked beautiful on stage and sang a very feminine, yet heroic, character with a vocal timbre so much reminiscent of the great Hildegard Behrens. She took over the role only three weeks before opening night, filling in for Emily Magee who had to return to the USA for family reasons. She may not have the power of a Nina Stemme but she certainly displays some inspiring beauty of tone, no big vibrato and with reserves of volume where needed. Her Isolde is on a very human scale and her *Liebestod* truly impressed me when she performed it with lots of tension at a slower tempo; she is a name to remember.



Torsten Kerl (Tristan), Rachel Nichols (Isolde)

The London performance on June 15th was a

totally different story and also a very exciting one. To be honest, I was very apprehensive of attending a performance of *Tristan and Isolde* sung in English at the English National Opera. But, minutes after it started, immersed in the powerful mass of sound coming from the orchestra and the great cast of singers, I completely ignored the fact that it was not sung in German. Mind you, Andrew Porter in his translation has adapted some English words to the music to the point of making them almost grammatically meaningless.

This ENO production was eagerly anticipated because of the choice of Sir Anish Kapoor as set designer and Daniel Kramer, the recently appointed artistic director of the ENO, as director of this new staging. You may remember Kapoor for designing the controversial "queen's vagina" - officially called "Dirty Corner" - on display last year in the gardens of the palace of Versailles.

The production worked very well for me with imaginative abstract sets dividing the stage into a three-part pyramid where Isolde and Brangäne occupy the left side while Tristan and Kurwenal are acting on the right. The interactions take place in the middle. This space, reserved for the two lovers, displayed a large geological moon-like structure - hovering in space - where Tristan and Isolde operate in a very isolated world. That is why their costumes seem more suited to a spaceship than the opera stage. The big surprise in the costumes and acting are with the characters of Kurwenal and Brangäne who seem to come out directly from *Comedia del'Arte* and, after the performance back stage, Heidi Melton explained to me that, according to Kramer, in Wagner's spirit, comedy and tragedy are often juxtaposed, and sanity is only achieved in death.

Tristan and Isolde (15 June 2016)
London Coliseum, English National Opera

Stuart Skelton. Tristan.
 Heidi Melton. Isolde.
 Matthew Rose. King Marke.
 Craig Colclough. Kurwenal.
 Karen Cargill. Brangäne.
 Stephen Rooke. Melot.
 David Webb. A Young Sailor.
 Peter Van Hulle. A Shepherd.

ENO Music Director Edward Gardner, Conductor



I remember reading a theory that posits that King Marke entertains a homosexual interest in Tristan - Marke's lines at the end of Act II: "*When once his wife died childless, Marke did love you so, that he never wished to marry anew.*" - and, to my knowledge, this production does more than any other Tristan staging to portray King Marke with eyes only for Tristan. Towards the end of Act II he attempts to reach out towards Isolde, without touching her, extending slowly his hand to roughly six inches from her body, only to withdraw when she starts her vocal outbursts.

But, we do finally have a Tristan; the Australian tenor Stuart Skelton, due to sing Tristan in the opening of the new MET season in September, has the vocal power and beauty of tone to do justice to this magnificent role. Physically and vocally, he reminds me of the great James King and he never failed to ride this powerful orchestra with the superb heroic tone. During the second act love duet, when he sings the line "*Lass' mich sterben!*", we know that he is far from dying physically and vocally.

Isolde, Heidi Melton, started very strong at the beginning of both first and second act, but the voice tired fast towards the end of both acts; she is still young and fairly new to this demanding role, and will need to work on pacing her large instrument. Her *Liebestod* needs to be fine-tuned. Karen Cargill showed us a very rich sounding Brangäne, and Matthew Rose sang a very noble King Marke.

But, for me and the audience on that night, the big star, in addition to Stuart Skelton, was Maestro Edward Gardner and his ENO Orchestra; a very powerful and dynamic reading, very intense at times when the tensions demanded, and yet so lyrical in the softer passages. I often thought that his taxing tempi firing on all the cylinders and the loudness of the orchestra, which created such a frenzy, only happened because he trusted his singers to follow him.

In short, two brilliant, yet very different, nights of Wagner ecstasy. The next episode of *Tristan und Isolde* will be at Bayreuth in August.



Matthew Rose (King Marke)
 Heidi Melton (Isolde)
 Stuart Skelton (Tristan)

PHOTOS Catherine Ashmore

A POWERFUL *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE* IN DORTMUND

Frances Henry

I timed my recent visit to Germany to coincide with a new production of *Tristan and Isolde* performed at the Dortmund Opera company. Although this is not a large major house, it nevertheless has a solid reputation for producing first rate opera. I was not disappointed because it was one of the best productions of this work that I've seen in the last 25 or so years. It also provided a good opportunity to see Lance Ryan in the role of Tristan, accompanied by British soprano Allison Oakes who I had seen earlier in Bayreuth in the small role of Gutrun.

The direction was by Dortmund's intendant Jens-Daniel Herzog who set the production in the time of past dictatorships, recalling regimes in the former Soviet Union, East Germany, Pinochet's Chile and the like. As the curtain goes up, Tristan was shown in full military uniform as a commander seated at a desk, apparently signing death warrants. A portrait on the wall shows King Marke, recalling how the Soviet Union hung pictures of Stalin in their offices. Hard neon light illuminates ugly grey blue walls. A ragged man is brought in, shows identification papers but Tristan rejects them and orders the now blindfolded man outside. As the orchestra plays the love motive, a shot is heard. Herzog, the Director, seems to be demonstrating cruel life in a dictatorship; Tristan is part of the system, of oppression. Many scenes in this militaristic production such as Melot and his men brutally beating Tristan at the end of the Act II are staged to further this idea. The sets, three simple plain rotating but powerful walls, seem to indicate the political prison from which there is no escape.

The love between Tristan and Isolde is presented here as a kind of opposition to this world of power and control. This idea is demonstrated in two uniquely staged scenes. After they have drunk the potion (out of a thermos flask), they fall into a mindless, senseless, mad laughter, whirling and dancing around a table, throwing props around as though finally released from a horrible existence. The second scene provided the most beautifully staged version of the love duet that I've ever seen in this opera. Isolde, beautifully sung and acted by Allison Oakes, stands centre stage in a simple orange dress; Tristan in uniform approaches behind her and slowly begins to caress her body while she leans against him. As the music and their passion swells she turns into him and they kiss and embrace. These scenes were so incredibly powerful and worked so well largely because the two, Lance Ryan and Allison Oakes are both

exceptionally skilled actors as well as wonderful singers. Tristan's Act III can sometimes be a bit boring because most directors either don't know how to make it move or they are faced with a singer who can't move well or both. Here director Herzog had an athletic and very fit Tristan in Lance Ryan who certainly can move on stage. In this case he was made to slowly and painstakingly crawl between the partitions of the three paneled wall! The effect was literally breath taking.

Other singers in the cast performed extremely well and the Dortmund Philharmonic under the leadership of Gabriel Feltz's sensitive conducting sounded beautiful.

For me, this was a *Tristan and Isolde* to remember.



Allison Oakes (Isolde),
Lance Ryan (Tristan)
Martina Dicke (Brangäne)

PHOTOS Theater Dortmund



NEWS and COMMENTS

Halevy's *La Juive*, Munich, 2016

Richard Rosenman

As the saying goes, every antiSemite has his favourite Jew. Richard Wagner had several and among composers it was Fromental Halévy. In this year's Munich opera festival, besides *Lohengrin* we saw Halévy's best known work, *La Juive*. It is mentioned here because it is universally quoted as having influenced Wagner's music, as in *Die Meistersinger*. I have delved into it and found that the reported connection is tenuous at best and probably universally quoted because of the inexplicable fondness and admiration of Wagner for Halévy and his music, inexplicable because Halévy was a Jew and *La Juive* was sympathetic about a Jewess, and Wagner was the foremost antiSemite of his age.

The connection with *Die Meistersinger* seems to be limited to the organ and choir opening, common to both. In *La Juive*, at least the production we saw, it was particularly striking - to make it even more so it was pre-recorded in an actual church, with the unmistakable spacious reverberation of a church interior.

Alex Ross comments: "Wagner described him (Halévy) open and honest and not premeditatedly cunning trickster like Mayerbeer", and Ross goes on: "Wagner should have written 'like me' ". "Wagner, in addition, probably took his Magic Fire music from a weirdly glittering passage that plays after Rachel exposes Léopold as the lover of a Jew".

Cosima, in her diaries, comments on June 16, 1874: "...Our conversation led us to *La Juive*, and R. says that, after his taste has been completely ruined, it was this score which gave him back his feeling for pure music." And again on May 25, 1875:

"...In the evening he takes up *La Juive*, pleasure in the great style of his work - a quite different use of Jewish sounds from that in present day Jewish operas (*Die Maccabean*, *Die Königin von Saba*)" E.N. (by Anton Rubinstein and Karl Goldmark, both premiered in 1875).

BOOKS

Oswald Georg Bauer, who has spoken to Toronto Wagner Society in the past and is known to our members for the articles he had contributed to this newsletter, has finally seen the publication (in German only) of perhaps his most ambitious project, the mammoth *Die Geschichte der Bayreuther Festspiele* (The History of Bayreuth Festival), in two volumes, 1600 pages and 1100 illustrations.

Oswald Bauer, a long time insider at the Bayreuth Festival and for many years the right hand of Wolfgang Wagner, was commissioned by him to compile these volumes with the sole requirement that it be based on "original sources only". With unlimited access to the festival and *Wahnfried* archives, it took over a quarter century to compile. This is only the last in a long list of his works. The book launch was on July 26, 2016, at *Wahnfried*.

Notes on Bayreuth's new production of *Parsifal*

Frances Henry

Germany experienced four terrorist acts in the week before the opening of the Bayreuth Festival this summer. This necessitated a strong security and police presence and cancellation of all 'red carpet' and other events and even Wagner fan Chancellor Merkel did not attend. It is a wonder then that this summer's Bayreuth Festival opened at all with its scheduled production of *Parsifal*.

This production had more than its share of internal terrorism. Some years ago the Festival contracted controversial performance artist Jonathan Meese to direct. Meese is well known in the country for his use of the swastika and Hitler salutes in his performance and was even taken to court and fined for his actions which are against German law. Moreover, he had never directed an opera before. Finally claiming that his production and staging designs were far too expensive, he was fired in 2014 and Uwe Erik Laufenberg, intendant of the Wiesbaden state opera was belatedly hired. Meanwhile the much heralded Latvian conductor Andris Nelsons was engaged to conduct but after several weeks of rehearsals, Nelsons announced he was withdrawing from his contract claiming artistic differences with Christian Thielemann, newly made music director of the Festival. It was alleged by chorus and orchestra members that they were ordered to perform to Thielemann's direction rather than Nelsons. With just weeks before the opening, a seasoned and mature but little known (outside of Germany) former E. German conductor named Hartmut Haenchen was engaged. The real wonder of all of this *sturm und drang* is that the production is a critical and audience success. *Parsifal* was televised on German T.V. and I was able to get a copy of the video.

Although I don't like to comment on a production unless I've seen it, I can say that it looks extremely interesting and very provocative. There are Islamic touches in it in some of the placement and set designs and costumes but there are also many Christian and even a few Jewish themes. Laufenberg seems to be trying to unite all religions in this conception. *Parsifal* thus becomes a mythical redeemer for faith in the spiritual and religious world. The Grail scenes are very beautiful and the space videos are gorgeous. Musically it is bit slow and I would have preferred stronger and sharper downbeats, but with the Bayreuth orchestra and acoustics it works well and conductor Haenchen has a clear grasp of this music and the ability of this wondrous orchestra. The singing is all around very, very good with one exception... I've never liked Gerd Grochowski in other roles and even less as Kingsor... weak and not nearly evil enough both vocally and dramatically. The star, if any, is Georg Zeppenfeld's warm but noble Gournemanz, and I was extremely impressed with the beauty of Ryan McKinney's voice (and other things!) as Amfortas. (to cast a gorgeous body builder - even though he can sing - as the ailing, bleeding, sick Amfortas seems a bit odd to say the least!) and Elena Pankratova was a strikingly powerful Kundry. The premiere audience gave it a rousing 10 minute cheers and applause.

MUNICH'S *LOHENGRIN* REVISITED Richard Rosenman



Klaus Florian Vogt (Lohengrin)

PHOTOS Wilfried Hösl



This July 2016 Richard Jones production is a revival.

It was reviewed extensively on these pages in the September 2009 issue of Wagner News, the year of its premiere. Since then it was revived irregularly but consistently in the intervening years, (in 2011 and in May 2016,) each time with different crews, perhaps less spectacular than the two witnessed by me.

Almost all of the idiosyncratic flights of fancy were kept intact, faithful to its first iteration. The same intimations of a fascist police state with its clichéd paraphernalia - indeterminate modern military uniforms and arms, TV screens in a simultaneous broadcast of the Speaker's harangue. All the while, inexplicably, in a throwback to the Middle Ages, Telramund, in pursuit of eliminating Elsa, pours high octane gasoline on the pyre around her tied to a stake, and swords are present though not used (Telramund is dispatched with a Star Wars' toss of the arm).

The idea, of course, remains the same - Lohengrin and Elsa build a house and we watch it grow in the successive curtain rises, with the completion marked by the topping up of the structure with a prefab roof, and coinciding with signing of the marriage contract, a muted celebration at a table, thankfully replacing the traditional solemn Wedding March and its participants' shuffling along with a numbing slowness.

All the while, in front of the completed house, across the proscenium, a team of blue shirts (now the followers of blue shirted Lohengrin-does this remind you of brown shirts?), moving in puzzling choreographed pirouettes arrange a flower studded bed that spells "*Hier, wo mein Wahn Frieden fand, 'Wahnfried' sei dieses Haus von mir benannt*" (in Ernest Newman's translation: "Here where my illusion found peace, be this house named by me Peace from Illusion"), the quotation engraved above the door to Wahnfried.

We know the story, only circumstances change. The idyll unravels - Elsa, betraying the 'don't ask, don't tell' pact, asks the question; Lohengrin concedes; Telramund foolishly and fatally for himself challenges Lohengrin with a sword to an unequal combat; Lohengrin burns down the house, Elsa shoots herself and, in a rewrite, the crowd commits a suicide.

Translation? Knight-in-shining-armor rescues a damsel-in-distress; building a house for domestic bliss in a middle class life together; or is it building a state, a new brighter future for Brabant? Domestic bliss goes, so does the house - she destroys his dream, he destroys hers; or is it the bright future for Brabant condemned to a failure? Every mortal is dead; did they not wish to live in the Brabant of yore? Lohengrin returns to wherever he came from; a new life form born from the swan, a new life for Brabant, after all.

This second viewing does not resolve my doubts or throw more light on the *why*. Construction of a new social order? Failing momentarily but with a bright future? While a lofty idea, the construction is a distraction.

There is the little acknowledged phenomenon that singers/actors, not invariably but more often than not, play themselves.

Perhaps partly to blame are the sometimes insufficient indications as to what is expected of the personification. It is up to the almighty director to define it, to impose it, or simply abdicate his or hers responsibility in the name of the suspect open-mindedness, the “respect for the individuality”, the last usually praised by critics as sensitivity.

This *Lohengrin* is just another example of this reality. With the advantage of having seen both versions of this production, the original premiered in 2009 and the 2016 one, I can compare how different singers handled the same role and how there were changes involving the visual characterization of the principals - how the style and personality of the characters played on stage mirrored those personal traits of the actor/singer and how they determined what we witnessed.

Thus, Anja Harteros, the original Elsa, imprinted her on stage with traits of her own, familiar to us from her other roles - distinction, elegance and, above all, formidable strength; while Elsa here, Anne Schwanewilms, came across as a pliable and vulnerable heroine, and as such perhaps a more apt choice for the built-in characteristics of this role. Ortrud, on the other hand, an underplayed and moderately evil Michaela Schuster in 2009 and then, more alike than different from Harteros in temperament and attitudes, was replaced by Evelyn Herlitzius, today’s exemplary Elektra (and hotly debated for her *pros* and *contras* in other roles), a diminutive but unyielding, snarling spitfire.

In the title role, Jonas Kaufmann was replaced by Klaus Florian Vogt - from a hunk to a choirboy. Evgeny Nikitin graduated from the Herald to Telramund, giving both the aggressiveness of a bully.

As they say, time heals all. The original production generated violent boos in the prelude and Act III. Seven years later, after some intermediate revivals, the show was accepted with equanimity, or in the worst case, with an unconvinced approval.

Richard Jones, for what he is, can be excused.



Evgeny Nikitin (Telramund), Evelyn Herlitzius (Ortrud)



Anne Schwanewilms (Elsa), Klaus Florian Vogt (Lohengrin)



THE AUSTERITY *RING* Richard and Susan Horner



PHOTO Clive Barda, OPERA NORTH

During April to July Opera North performed its semi-staged *Ring Cycle* at a number of UK venues. We attended the performances at The Lowry in Salford, where in 2003 we had the good fortune to see Scottish Opera's *Ring*. The Lowry is a multi-disciplined arts centre located on some abandoned docks of the Manchester Ship Canal. In 2003 the dockland across one canal from The Lowry was vacant land. That area is now occupied by MediaCity UK with television studios and associated businesses. Reflecting the trading through the Canal, the rejuvenated quays and basins often have Canadian names – Labrador, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Ontario. A somewhat tenuous link with Toronto is colourful mayoral candidates. One of Salford's mayoral candidates in 2012 was known as Mr. Big; a local businessman and criminal who suffered a modern day fate similar to Siegfried. In 2003 we were impressed by the welcoming atmosphere created by The Lowry volunteer staff and that has not altered one bit. In a 2009 New York Times article Anthony Tommasini found it to be accessible and inviting. Many an arts organization would benefit from taking a leaf from The Lowry organizational book.

The structure of the performances was a triptych of screens at the back of the orchestra, which was situated on the stage, (we guess another occasion when Wagner is turning in his grave), the usual arrangement for opera-in-concert or semi-staged performances. Most of the performers sang on a slightly raised narrow platform running the width of the stage in front of the orchestra. At the back of the platform were four chairs either side of the conductor, although for *Götterdämmerung* one

chair was removed and the odd one positioned behind the conductor. To accommodate the *Götterdämmerung* chorus the stage was also brought forward and the platform shortened. The singers were mostly in concert performance dress, with Wotan and Siegfried (somewhat dishevelled) in more formal attire. Even when singing to each other the singers sang and acted to the audience. The chairs were not used to sit while not performing, but occasionally as a prop. The photograph: from the third act of *Die Walküre* shows an exhausted Sieglinde resting on a chair while the Valkyries, including Brünnhilde, are awaiting he who cannot be disobeyed. Other than the chairs, no props were used. The positioning of the orchestra and singers was, we believe, a favourable factor in the overall high quality of the music. Perhaps you have gathered why some commentators have named this: the “austerity *Ring Cycle*”. The ex UK finance minister (and keen Wagnerian) known for his austerity policies was reported as attending at least one of the London performances of this ring cycle. We assume he at least approved of the frugality of the production.

The triptych of screens was used to provide scenery, narrative and surtitles. The inclusion of the narrative with the surtitles enabled the neophytes in the audience to be involved in the dramatic progression. Occasionally, the screens were used to enhance the scene such as when Siegmund was killed and the water stream turned red or the flames when Wotan puts Brünnhilde to sleep. Therefore, unlike the Sellars/Viola *Tristan und Isolde*, the screens did not compete with the actions of the singers for our attention.

We happened to stay at the same hotel as the conductor and the cast. If we interpreted the overheard breakfast comments correctly, then the director asked the singers, and therefore the audience, to imagine what was happening. The production could appeal to those members who dislike idiosyncratic directorial interpretations of opera. However, it did mean that other than through the singer's acting, physiological and sociological aspects of the *Ring* were not much in evidence.

The lack of scenery and costumes was compensated by acting out scenes and situations. Perhaps we can share how a few of the imaginative moments were portrayed. Alberich slithered over the Rhine's rocks by crawling and slipping on the chairs. The audience was

the conduit through which Sieglinde fed water to Siegmund as both held their cupped hands out to us. The Giants wore red ties, pocket squares and socks (at breakfast Richard was able to flash his red socks and handkerchief to Fafner at the next table!). The death of Fasolt was implied by the simple removal of the pocket square and dropping it to the platform. The death of Fafner by his removal of his tie. Normally death was communicated by the crossing of arms and the singer turning to the orchestra. Loge's fire by his fluttering hands. Due to an absence of props, *Nothing* was wielded by Siegfried while nothing was in his hands. Besides economy of cost it does mean that it removes any possibility of the anvil not splitting or the Wanderer's spear not being shattered by *Nothing*! Brünnhilde was put to sleep by her kneeling in front of Wotan who kissed his hand before touching her eyes. Hagen's dream through him sitting in the chair in front of the conductor and Alberich appearing from behind the chair but now wearing black gloves. These all might seem simple but ones imagination was made to work and it all proved extremely effective. Although the element of surprise is absent when the scene is imagined it does avoid disappointment if the realization does not live up to the mental image.

The orchestra under Richard Farnes, who retired from his position as music director of Opera North after these performances, performed admirably and they were the stars of the show. Of the singers, the following were worthy of special mention. Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhake (Loge), as one would expect from his recent Mime performances in Toronto, was a delight. Much to our regret, the following three were singers new to us. James Creswell (Fasolt and Hunding). Jo Pohlheim (Alberich), whose characterization was at odds with his love of children including his twin boys (overheard at breakfast). Kelly Cae Hogan (Brünnhilde) got vocally stronger over her three operas. It was a challenge to imagine Kelly Cae Hogan as Wotan's favourite daughter when during breakfast she was fretting over how her husband at home in the USA was going to resolve a plumbing issue so that five (at least it was not eight) girlfriends could visit after the conclusion of the cycles. Mats Almgren (Fafner and Hagen), who in 2006 sang Hagen in Toronto, had a touch of Pinter in his menace.

Whilst we prefer dramatic presentations would we revisit this *Ring* cycle if it were to be remounted? An emphatic yes.

TRISTAN and ISOLDE

After the Opera North's *Ring* Cycle, we

took in the ENO's *Tristan and Isolde* in the middle of a theatrical sandwich. Although musically good and scenic designs intriguing, we found the costume designs to be perplexing and at times ridiculous. Isolde, who seemed to be suffering from self-harming with a knife, should perhaps have followed the example of the Chicago White Sox pitcher who was recently suspended by his team after he took a knife to a set of team uniforms that did not meet his approval.

In the first act Brangäne and Kurwenal's costumes brought to mind the late Desmond Heeley designs for the Stratford Festival's 2006 production of Dion Boucicault's comedy *London Assurance*, especially Brian Bedford's wig. Their wigs could almost have doubled as dove cotes. It might have been their shoes, but they seemed to totter on and off stage like a couple of dolls. At one point Kurwenal tried to take Brangäne from behind and the costumes (every cloud has a silver lining) plus her resistance were thankfully too much for him to overcome. In the second act they had fortunately lost their wigs but now with their prominent white ruffs

appeared to be Danish Lutherans. By the third act they seem to have fallen on hard times or living on the streets. We thought of Nagg and Nell, Hamm's parents in Beckett's *Endgame* who survive in two dustbins (some might argue a suitable repository for the costumes).

Tristan started out as a samurai. Similarly Melot, but he had the Cross of St. George painted on his face partially obscured by his Donald Trump hairstyle. By the third act Tristan was now also a destitute street person complete with his warming blanket.

Isolde's first act formal dress included a farthingale as an undergarment. After taking the potion both Isolde and Tristan then had to struggle to remove most of their intricate costumes. In keeping with the self-harming, and just prior to King Marke's entry in the second act, Tristan and Isolde seemed to be partaking in a suicide pact. Their assignation had taken place in a section of a sphere of which the inside was an airy somewhat hollow meringue. King Marke's nursing staff attendants strapped the lovers to gurneys whilst they received lifesaving treatments. It might be another Stratford Festival memory, but King Marke's beard did make him look as if he just dropped in from the religious farming community around St. Jacobs, Ontario.

DIE MEISTERSINGER IN MUNICH Pierre Couture

When we walked on Maximilianstrasse on Saturday afternoon, two days before opening night of the new David Bösch's production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, the advertising posters on the walls of the National Theatre seem to suggest the presentation of a very controversial modern production. Yes, at times the stage may appear very much loaded with oddities depicting the working class life in Franconia, sometime in the latter part of the 20th Century, but devoid of any political gags, erotic displays or confrontational scenes. A fairly conventional production with large drab buildings, in desperate need of being refurbished, and balconies equipped with early models of satellite dishes; wide leg suits worn by the principals also suggest a staging taking place just after World War II where a constant display of clipped newspaper articles, advertisements and photographs projected on the back wall remind us that this director tells us a story that is wonderfully close to the libretto by Richard Wagner.

Although *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is considered a Wagner music drama, it is nonetheless a comedy and the only such work among his mature operas; and David Bösch treated it this way all along. Still under the influence of Schopenhauer, Wagner believed that art - more precisely German music - was a valuable escape from the vicissitudes of life's activities; Hans Sachs is preoccupied in finding the truth through music and passing it on to Walther von Stolzing.

Jonas Kaufmann (Walther)



The young "aspiring Meistersinger" in this staging, Walther von Stolzing, is being presented as a young bohemian, troubadour - almost an outcast and a rebel - constantly walking with his guitar and totally a misfit in this stuffy group of traditional Meistersingers. Dressed in black jeans, t-shirt, and leather blouson - this "*Junker Stolzing*" (the Junior) being a rebel without a cause "à la James Dean", as the score constantly reminds us, is concerned with winning the contest and the girl, but could not care less about the "trophy"; as Act I ends, disgusted with the rules and attitude of the Meistersingers, he does not seem to understand or approve of their predicament and smashes resentfully the Wagner skull, - a visible sign of their fine art - throws an object at the photo of Eva on the back wall, and runs off the stage supposedly to the heart of Nürnberg while showing the finger to this whole despicable spectacle. David Bösch made me realize for the first time how rebellious and similar Walther, Parsifal, and the young Siegfried can be in their innocence, aloofness, uncorrupted state and marginality, bombarded by books and advice from wise elders.



Needless to add that, at the end of this Act I, after this glorious singing and conducting of the legendary Kirill Petrenko, a true singer's conductor delivering his usual magic, the crowd erupted with multiple bravos. The same response welcomed the closing of Act II but, at the very end of the opera, the applause was somewhat reduced - almost nervous - until the production team appeared on stage being welcomed by loud boos. Contrary to traditional stagings where Stolzing reconciles with the Meistersingers and ultimately accepts the "trophy", in this one the rebellious Walther just could not do it: he disappears back into his

"old comfort zone" of Nuremberg, looking very upset.

In addition to the veterans delivering their fine artistry, the David and Eva were beautiful surprises for us. Wolfgang Koch was Hans Sachs, taking time at the beginning of the opera to fine tune his vocal resources; the ever so reliable and charismatic Markus Eiche sang the attractive lines of Beckmesser (heard him before as a brilliant *Rhinegold's* Donner, Wolfram, and Golaud in Munich) and the always reliable Jonas Kaufmann painted an unforgettable Walther, with his rich baritone in such beautiful contrast to the musically lighter tenor of Benjamin Bruns singing the part of David. And, what a surprise to discover the appealing and substantial voice of Sara Jakubiak as a fine Eva filling the National Theatre with her "*Oh, Sachs, mein Freund...*" in the last act.

To my ears, the weak link was the unimaginative Pogner of Christof Fishesser lacking the rich bass voice to impose his authority on the Meistersingers. This is the kind of production that requires very strong physical stamina from the principals, particularly Beckmesser who has to deliver his Act II "serenade" from the top of a scary hydraulic lift, and Walther and Eva having to sing a duet on top of the "Sachs Shoe Repair Canteen" - very reminiscent of David Bösch's staging of Monteverdi's *Orfeo à la Priscilla Queen of the Desert*.

Another very enjoyable evening at the Munich *Staatsoper* due primarily to the excellent conducting of Maestro Petrenko who seems to gather the loudest applause whenever he appears, and an appealing comic production that becomes a beautiful spectacle in the last part of Act III. I am already looking into booking a ticket for the revival in October. The web streaming of the live performance will take place on the [31st July](#) and, hopefully, we will be able to enjoy this performance in HD video shortly afterwards.



Wolfgang Koch (Hans Sachs), Jonas Kaufmann (Walther)

PHOTOS - Wilfried Hösl

Wolfgang Koch (Hans Sachs)



Benjamin Bruns (David), Jonas Kaufmann (Walther)

WAGNER ONSTAGE

SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2016

Listings correct to September 2016. For further information check with opera companies via: www.operabase.com

The Flying Dutchman

Copenhagen; Sept.3 - Oct.16
Tallin; Sept.22 - Nov.11 **NP**
Halle; Sept.23 - Nov.6 **NP**
Dessau; Oct.1 - Nov.13 **NP**
Heilbron; Oct.13
Antwerp; Oct.20 - Nov.4 **NP**
Singapore; Oct.23 - 29
Austin; Nov.12 - 20
Gent; Nov.15 - 22
Helsinki; Nov.18 - 30

Tannhäuser

Meiningen; Sep.4 - Oct.3
Sevilla; Oct.28 - Nov.5

Lohengrin

Vienna; Sept.5 - 18
Nantes; Sept.16 - 20 **CP**
Montpellier; Oct.13 - 16 **CP**
Frankfurt; Oct.21 - Nov.11
Gallen; Oct.22 **NP**
Hamburg; Nov.13 - 27
Seoul; Nov.17 - 20

Das Rheingold

Raleigh; Sept.16 - 18
Chicago; Oct.1 - 22 **NP**
Dresden; Oct.15 - 22
Tokyo; Oct.18
Minneapolis; Nov.12 - 20
Wiesbaden; Nov.13 - 25 **NP**

Die Walküre

Tokyo; Oct.2 - 18 **NP**
Budapest; Nov.2 - 17

Siegfried

Odense; Sept.9 **CP**

Der Ring

Melbourn; Nov.21 - 28

Die Meistersinger

Detmold; Sept.18 - Nov.20
Berlin, Komisch; Sept.25 - Oct.22
Munich; Sept.30 - Oct.8
Weimar; Nov.5 - 13

Tristan und Isolde

Graz; Sept.24 - Nov.25 **NP**
The MET; Sept.26 - Oct.27 **NP**
Rome; Nov.27 - 30 **NP**

Parsifal

Bremen; Sept.11 - Oct.16 **NP**
Berlin, DO; Oct.16 - 30

CP - concert performance
NP - new production

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