

# WAGNER NEWS

*Wagner News* is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

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## TWS CALENDAR

Tuesday, September 18  
at 8.00 pm  
**My Favorite Wagner Productions.** The discussants include our own members, Joseph So, Pierre Couture and Frances Henry. Video clips of productions chosen by us and curated by Linda and Michael Hutcheon will be shown.

Monday, October 15  
at 8.00 pm  
**Roundtable with the cast of HADRIAN** discussing their **Wagnerian Repertoire** including Ben Heppner, Karita Mattila and Thomas Hampson

Monday, November 19  
at 8.00 pm  
**Video Highlights from this year's controversial production of LOHENGRIN at the Bayreuth Festival**

**ALL MEETINGS AT  
ARTS AND LETTERS  
CLUB,  
14 ELM STREET**

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# Munich *Parsifal* Combines Great Musical Qualities with Quirky Production

Joseph So

Jonas Kaufmann (*Parsifal*), Nina Stemme (*Kundry*), Christian Gerhaher (*Amfortas*), René Pape (*Gurnemanz*), Wolfgang Koch (*Klingsor*), Balint Szabo (*Titirel*); Kirill Petrenko, conductor; Georg Baselitz, designer; Bayerisches Staatsorchester. National-theater, July 5, 2018.

Jonas Kaufmann *Parsifal*, Christian Gerhaher *Amfortas*  
Photos: Wilfried Hoesl



The 2018 Munich Opera Festival holds many highlights – including a revival of the *Ring* – but for most the main attraction had to be the new production of *Parsifal*, designed by noted German painter Georg Baselitz and directed by Pierre Audi. It opened the Festival on June 28 for a run of five performances, including the closing night on July 31.

As is typical with *Regie*-driven productions, this *Parsifal* opened to divided opinions. Based on reports, there was vociferous applause from the audience towards the singers and conductor Kirill Petrenko, while the creative team was greeted with a mixture of cheers and some loud booing from a few in the audience, directed at Georg Baselitz. Opinions in the press were equally divided, ranging from a highly positive critique by Rupert Christiansen in the *Telegraph* to a much less favourable one by Zachary Woolfe in the *New York Times*.

I caught the third performance, on July 5. Having attended the *Bayerische Festspiele* for ten consecutive years, I can say that Munich together with Bayreuth have the ‘model’ Wagner audience — knowledgeable,

quiet, attentive, and discerning. For five and a half hours in a packed, non-air-conditioned house and with many dressed to the nines, the audience exhibited unflagging discipline with no fidgeting, and so quiet you could hear a pin drop. As expected, the *mis-en-scene* is modern, based on Baselitz’s black and white paintings of aged, naked and decrepit bodies. Act 1 is naturalism with a twist – after the Communion, the trees begin to sink as if kneeling, eventually collapsing to the ground. While it does create a striking effect, its meaning remains elusive. There’s a surprising absence of religious symbolism — no Grail and no Crucifix unless you count the feeble-looking cross Klingsor uses as a spear. Kundry’s dwelling is under a horse’s skeleton. Poor Amfortas, supposedly suffering unbearable pain from his bleeding wound — he has no bed, not even a chair, but is made to wander around the stage using a cane.

In the more typically “operatic” Act 2, Klingsor and Kundry make their entries by crawling out from under a roughly painted curtain of four naked, aged bodies upside down. Unlike the wild woman in Act 1, Kundry is blond and all dolled up, rather like a diva ready for her

*Liederabend*. Perhaps the most distracting touch in this production is the costuming for the chorus, where most have on flabby naked body suits. The knights are not shy to take it all off during the Communion. Klingsor wears enormous black shoulder pads and has an exposed belly button. In Act 3, the trees and the hearth are upside down, hanging from the ceiling. In the last act, Parsifal wears an enormous codpiece.

I mention these seemingly random and disparate points not to be nitpicky. Baselitz and Audi are obviously making a statement, but exactly what is their vision? There's a short, two-part trailer put out by Munich Opera where Baselitz, Audi and the principals speak briefly, but it's sadly not illuminating. As I see it, the emphasis of the ugliness of the body is an attempt to underscore the original sin, and the eternal struggle between the spirit and the flesh that is the one of the central themes of *Parsifal*. So it's rather curious that the religious symbolism is deemphasized, and the Flowermaidens, whose purpose is to seduce Parsifal, are made to look ugly and decrepit.

As to Parsifal's wearing of the codpiece in Act 3 — I give the disciplined audience full marks as there was not a single giggle to be heard. My reading of that is he has gone from the simple fool in Act 1 to that of a *mensch* in Act 3, and sexuality is part and parcel of manhood. The production is dimly lit and visually grey and uninviting. While beauty should never be a given in opera, it should reflect the story, such as in the *Blumenmädchen* scene, surely a moment of seductive beauty. I find all these peculiarities distracting and interfering with the sublime moments in the music, such as the transformation scene in Act 1 and the Good Friday music later. As is quite often these days with concept productions, the one unalloyed pleasure on July 5 was musical. Top honours went to tenor Jonas Kaufmann, who sounded wonderful

as Parsifal, although I would have liked a bit more youthful and playful manner in Act 1 and with the Flowermaidens in Act 2. Soprano Nina Stemme was an impressive Kundry; her dark timbre suits the character well. She also sang a caressingly beautiful "Ich sah das Kind" and had all the Bs and B-flats for the climaxes, though she telegraphed each high note with obvious preparation!

René Pape was, as expected, a very fine Gurnemanz who has more music to sing than anyone else in this opera. As Amfortas, Christian Gerhaher sang with power, beauty, and Lieder-like intensity. Wolfgang Koch was a properly evil Klingsor, though made to look ridiculous by his costume. But given this character, I suppose it's par for the course. All the smaller roles were exceptionally well cast — First *Blumenmädchen* was Golda Schultz, no less! Kirill Petrenko conducted flawlessly, with great power and delicacy. The torrents of sounds from the pit were truly thrilling. The sounds from the Monsalvat Bell leitmotif in Act 1 was overwhelming — I even felt the vibrations coming from the wooden floor and up my legs!

As a regular visitor to European opera houses, I have seen my share of *Regie*-driven productions. While I'm in favour of periodic rethinking of the standard repertoire to reflect current sensibilities, it must be done in such a way that is respectful of the composer's intentions. And that means without changing the text, the drama, or the music in a substantial way. The Baselitz-Audi *Parsifal* does not betray the spirit of the work, which is commendable. But the director's vision isn't clear to the audience. The quirkiness can only result in an overall weakening and thus a loss of impact. Fortunately, Wagner opera fans can decide for themselves, as the performance on July 8 was live streamed from the Max-Josef-Platz just outside the National-theater.

Christian Gerhaher Amfortas





# THE MUNICH *PARSIFAL*

Pierre Couture

## "Kein Graf. Kein Speer. Nur eine Wunde" - Pierre Audi

I remember reading in the British magazine *Opera* two years ago that the Bavarian State Opera was planning a new *Parsifal* production for this year involving their musical director Kirill Petrenko, Jonas Kaufmann, Nina Stemme, Christian Gerhaher, Wolfgang Koch and René Pape, and thought then that it could be the *Parsifal* of a lifetime. Also, fully aware of Pierre Audi's reputation as an avant-garde director who had created in 2012 an awesome and successful production of *Parsifal* at Dutch National Opera, the stars seemed to be fully aligned.

My first visit to this *Parsifal* was on June 28, 2018 - the opening night of the production which coincided with the opening night of the summer Munich Festival which, this year, was celebrating the 100th season of the Bavarian State Opera and also the 200 years since the opening of the National Theatre. Very much the same as in Amsterdam where Pierre Audi had started from the set designs of Anish Kapoor, he repeated the experience by developing a production concept based on the paintings of renowned German visual artist Georg Baselitz. *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal* and the *Ring of the Nibelung* are all tales inhabiting an imaginary world.

First performed in Bayreuth in 1882, Richard Wagner's final musical drama - a *Bühnenweihfestspiel* ("A Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage") grapples with wounds that affect individuals as well as societies as a whole and some interpretations may at times resemble our own world of deep divisions.

As very often with Audi productions, we end up with a mostly religiously neutral and abstract staging that is also rich in spirituality and is left to the viewer's own interpretation. It certainly succeeds for me in igniting my imagination as it transcends the traditional pseudo-Christian themes around death and redemption. Through the static Baselitz world of gloomy pictures, Pierre Audi presents *Parsifal*, one of the most enigmatic in Richard Wagner's oeuvre, with no religious grail, no communion served, no seductive flower garden at the beginning of Act 2, no physical presence of Titirel, no Klingsor's Castle - the scene is extremely minimalist and is happening in front of the curtain with only Klingsor and Kundry present; the focus is on the wound, the suffering and the blood which ultimately will reach Parsifal's soul with the help of Kundry and Gurnemanz.

Coming from a strong Catholic upbringing, I could not help connecting this production and its prevalent theme directly to the concept of the original sin - or the ancestral sin - of disobedience in consuming the forbidden fruit and the automatic guilt transferred to generations. Baptism would temporarily turn a man back towards God, but the irreparable damage in man and nature was grinding slowly away from a life of paradise. Having studied with Jesuit priests with strong teachings from Thomas Aquinas who stated that the supernatural gifts of Adam before the Fall were forever lost, our existence



Nina Stemme *Kundry*, Christian Gerhaher *Amfortas*



The Team: Georg Baselitz on the left and Pierre Audi on the right.

Photos: Pierre Couture

would now be subject to the inferior powers with the ensuing human frailty, suffering, vulnerability and mortality.

My second performance in Munich made the connection to the original sin even more obvious to me after I had just found out about a letter written by the composer to Ludwig II, of September 7, 1865 (the year of the first prose draft) where Wagner himself would have emphasized the connection between Parsifal and the Christian myth of the Fall as described in the Bible.

From the moment of birth, man is destined to decay as a result and it explains the costumes worn by the knights and the flower maidens; the bodies, even for these young women, are far from being perfect and the scenes expose the harsh realities of vulnerability. The leafless Baselitz-designed trees in the first act are also shrinking to death at the end of the act. In the third act, the Baselitz trees are on their heads, as if Mother Nature had possibly reacted strangely to climate change. The wound that never heals would ultimately originate from Amfortas having sex with Kundry.

#### **From Gurnemanz in Act 1:**

*doch - eine Wunde brennt' ihm in der Seite:*

*die Wunde ist's, die nie sich schliessen will.*

"But a wound was burning in his side,  
This wound it is that will never close."

The second act takes place in front of a black and white - "flat Baselitz castle" - stage curtain exposing a giant wound where Klingsor personifies the devil just before Parsifal and Kundry, wearing an elegant black dress and blond wig (the ultimate personification of desire), deliver their well sung and passionate duet. She empowers Parsifal to reach a higher level of compassion which could ultimately help redeeming Amfortas and the world from that inflicted wound. In the end, everyone collapses including Kundry, and Parsifal pursues his quest while Amfortas and the Knights find their salvation through death.

This Georg Baselitz - Pierre Audi cooperation was fully supported by magnificent playing from the orchestra and Kirill Petrenko who, at times, might have used some fast and brisk tempi but always in good taste. There was superb singing by all the principals; I heard tenor Jonas Kaufmann as Parsifal for the first time in April 2006 in Zürich and his voice has now fully matured and darkened. His third act duet with an unusually more lyrical than usual René Pape, a totally convincing Gurnemanz, conveyed so much humanity as their soft low voices blended so perfectly.

So much has been written about the superb performance of Nina Stemme as Kundry, with her incredible voice so free in all registers. Christian Gerhaher's Amfortas with his luxurious

baritone singing and totally convincing acting received the biggest applause of the evenings.



Kirill Petrenko

Maestro Kirill Petrenko, who conducted *Parsifal* for the first time, is a "very good opera conductor" for tenor Jonas Kaufmann who confessed in an interview that "he tries to read in the sources what Wagner's original intention of the piece was"; some musical passages may sound unusual as a result since he does not follow the traditions of past performances and takes his information as directly as possible at the source. I recently met a Bayreuth woman resident who is a guide to the *Festspielhaus* and *Villa Wahnfried*; she was telling me that, last winter, the maestro came to spend the entire day with the original Wagner score of *Parsifal* in the basement of *Villa Wahnfried* in preparation for his upcoming performances in Munich. He even requested one extra hour at the end of the day to complete his exhaustive search.

Overall, a very lucid and intelligent production by Pierre Audi; it is not distractive and vulgar, and does not alter the scenario. In addition, the direction of the chorus and the singers was effective.

On opening night, with a more traditionalist crowd attending the launching of the Festival and also with the absence of some customary religious artifacts, Pierre Audi's work was loudly booed by some, yet applauded warmly by others. The German veteran 80-year-old artist Georg Baselitz received great applause.

(Attended opening night, June 28, 2018 and July 8, 2018 - the night of the web streaming)

## Notes on Munich's State Opera Production of *Parsifal*-2018

Frances Henry

I must begin these notes with a disclaimer: I have not seen this production in person but only on the video streaming provided by the Munich opera house on Sunday, July 8. I hesitate, therefore, to write a 'formal' review. However, our editor has persuaded me to at least write a few notes because my take on aspects of this production may be somewhat different to that of other viewers.

I should state that I found it musically compelling with a brilliant, vivid, somewhat fast paced tempo conducted by the 'magician of music', Kirill Petrenko. It was also very well sung by René Pape, Nina Stemme, Jonas Kaufman, Christian Gerhaher and Wolfgang Koch. It is with the staging and costuming that I take exception.

The director Pierre Audi has set most of the action in a dingy forest and even Klingsor's magic garden is dull and monochromatic. The huge ink drawings by George Baselitz were, for me, uninteresting and added to the gloominess of the whole production. I imagine the director envisions a world that has decayed and is certainly aging waiting for new blood (literally) to enliven it. Perhaps to make his point several major scenes are portrayed by singers wearing fat suits. This is my real objection to this production.

First, the Knights of the Grail dressed in something like ordinary grail wear release their top costume to show old, wrinkled, fat and flabby flesh.

Presumably this is meant to show how aged and unhappy they have become but surely this portrayal strays far from Wagner's intentions. However, the worst offenders are the Flower Maidens who are among the most un-flowerlike I've ever seen. The whole point of this scene is to have these maidens seduce Parsifal the way in which Amfortas was seduced, to maintain the evil Klingsor's power. Instead, these 'flowers' are wearing the most hideous fat suits and most of them are depicted with ugly, protuberant hanging breasts capped by red flower nipples. As if this wasn't bad enough, their genital area was smeared with blood - presumably menstrual blood. These apparitions were then sent out to seduce Parsifal. No wonder he fled in horror! I am affronted by their ugliness. Moreover, the feminist in me is offended by these portrayals of female ugliness and, in particular, by bringing in the aspect of menstruation presumably to signify that women represent danger to men. Women are considered pollutants and especially dangerous when they are menstruating in some societies of the world even today. However, is this reason enough to depict them in this manner on stage and far from Wagner's original intentions in creating these characters?

*Parsifal* for me, and many other music lovers, is one of Wagner's greatest creations. This production debases it in design and interpretation.

P.S. And, by the way, what is it with Munich's fat suits? Their earlier production of *Tannhäuser* had Venus and court wearing fat suits and some were obese non-singing actors. Elena Pankratova is a well built, curvaceous woman very suitable to playing Venus... why should she be sitting in a mountain of obviously fake fat?

*Parsifal*, Jonas Kaufmann in the Rose Garden

Photo, Ruth Walz





## THE BAYREUTH FESTIVAL: 2018 **DIE WALKÜRE: BOOING FOR PLACIDO DOMINGO**

(from the Nordbayerischer Kurier, Roman Kochall, 01.08.2018 loosely translated by Frances Henry)

This year brought back two prominent returnees to Bayreuth: Waltraud Meier who sang Ortrud in *Lohengrin* and Plácido Domingo who came not as a tenor but as a conductor and received a bad surprise! Domingo's last appearance came 18 years ago in Tancred Dorst's production of *Walküre* when he was in the audience but witnessed the audience booing the tenor who sang Siegmund. He was seen by some members of the audience who created an unforgettable scene as suddenly cheers surged up and the cry "Bravo Plácido" rushed through the house. On Tuesday, (the premiere of *Die Walküre*, July 31) the reactions were somewhat stronger but not the way the world renowned tenor would have wished. As he came out and stood before the curtain facing the house, there were many more very loud boos rather than cheers. Domingo stood momentarily a little unbelieving - and did not show himself alone on the stage but only as part of the singer's ensemble.

### Too Little Suspense

It may be possible that in this *Walküre*, Domingo used a Wagner style which, one believes, really belongs in the past. The conductor gave us pathos instead of a dramatic access. However, simply directing only slowly does not necessarily lead to tension, as evidenced by the magic fire at the end of the piece. The movement in this piece (the end of the opera) came almost to a standstill. The dismemberment of many passages may not always have been pure joy for the singers. Was it the director's intention, or was there another level in which Catherine Foster stomped on the spot 'I defy your bidding' and stared straight at the conductor? The singers were quite good but they had to fill in their roles in view of the slower tempi. The ensemble performance was excellent. But in this *Walküre*, this orchestra failed in long stretches to bring out the deep dimension of the music. This was particularly shown in the first act when Stephen Gould in Siegmund's *Wälse* call - despite wonderful power and good sound - could not bring out the urgent need that Siegmund is living through at this moment. More support needed to come out of the pit.

### First Conducted by Kirill Petrenko

One mustn't forget that this Frank Castorf directed production was first conducted by the highly praised Kirill Petrenko. What a contrast! With Petrenko's clearly constructed sound, the precision of the integration of the orchestra and the singers, the dramatic access that lifted Wagner's music and presented it in a light tone - nothing much of this remains. Anyway, this *Walküre* as a strange singleton draws her circles on the Castorf revolving stage.

You will be amazed when you recall that traditions in Bayreuth enjoyed a sacrosanct status not too long ago. Yet if one reads in the program book of the current *Walküre*, the season 2018 Bayreuth Festival gave us the unprecedented opportunity to break with the myths in Wagner's *Festspielhaus*, or at least subject them to examination, because this year's *Walküre* is performed alone without being part of a *Ring* production."

### Brünnhilde Sleeps Forever

So we have a unique feature.. and this Brünnhilde will probably top sleeping beauty and sleep forever, no hero will come to awaken her. The best feature of this Tuesday's production that will stay in one's memory is the good singing. Catherine Foster's '*Hojotoho*' call .. so clean, bright but at the same time much dramatic intensity. Very few can sing it that way. Her singing also has a lyric quality. Anja Kampe as Sieglinde and Marina Prudenskaya as Fricka sang at a high level as did John Lundgren as Wotan and Tobias Kehrer as Hunding. As Stephan Gould, who just four days earlier sang a wonderful Tristan and now had a good response as Siegmund, speaks for itself.

The booing of the great tenor as conductor in the house was also reflected in the many reviews in newspapers and online. Audience reaction is also somewhat mixed. I, for one, listened to the production streaming and was also taken aback by the really bad conducting and especially the very slow funeral tempi but would never have booed. I felt saddened that this great performer experienced this behaviour. On the other hand, some colleagues, and especially Pierre Couture who was present at the performance, felt that this was really the fault of the Bayreuth management for having hired him in the first place. As well this year, French tenor Roberto Alagna was originally engaged by the Bayreuth management to sing *Lohengrin* which he had never sung before. He withdrew just a few weeks before the opening claiming did not have time to learn the part. Luckily, Piotr Beczala was available to assume the role with great success. Bayreuth has also been attempting to attract Anna Netrebko to sing Elsa but she withdrew last year saying also that she could not learn it in time. She is again slated to sing it next year in 2019, perhaps.

One must question the wisdom of the Bayreuth management at this time for trying to engage 'stars' even though they are not familiar with the music they need to perform!

## Day & Night *Tristan und Isolde*

Richard and Susan Horner

As Oscar Wilde wrote “I can resist everything except temptation”. The thought of *Tristan und Isolde* at the Dutch National Opera on February 14<sup>th</sup> was just too much for this couple’s self-control. Then again, as Shakespeare wrote “Why then, can one desire too much of a good thing?”, so we indulged in an additional performance on February 10<sup>th</sup>.

Conductor – Marc Albrecht

Director – Pierre Audi

Tristan – Stephen Gould

Isolde – Ricarda Merbeth

King Marke – Günther Groissböck

Brangäne – Michelle Breedt

Kurwenal – Iain Paterson

The set for Act 1 consisted of a few sawn sections of steel ships, which looked as if they had been imported from one of Edward Burtynsky’s Bangladeshi shipbreaking photographs. We think it was the lighting that at times gave the rusty sections an iridescent sheen. The sections’ movements were controlled remotely. If this indicates Pierre Audi looks forward to the autonomous car, he might wish to treat the prospect with some apprehension. During both performances a stagehand had to enter and insert a large key in the base of a section, presumably the equivalent of the reset button. During the prelude

Tristan and Isolde meet, with Isolde holding a large sword with the Morold notch. However, rather than let the sword fall, Tristan turns aside as Isolde wields it. The costumes in Act 1 were mostly medieval. Isolde in her background explanation to Brangäne stared out at the audience with a ferocity that came back to mind when later in London we saw a theatrical adaption of the film *Network* in which Peter Finch raged during his “I’m mad as hell” monologue. Isolde’s disposition was not helped by the sight of Morold’s head hoisted on a long spike by a mocking mob.

King Marke appears to have acquired an interfering mother in law. Isolde’s mother has been up to some mischief with the potion casket. Although the supposed death and love potions were in different coloured phials the contents did not have the expected effects. Brangäne who had downed the contents of the remaining phial after Tristan and Isolde had drained the contents of the love potion, promptly collapsed. The effects would appear to have been psychosomatic as Brangäne’s subsequent resurrection indicated the contents were either a placebo or another love potion. When King Marke enters in a monk’s habit he is accompanied by a disabled older figure using a crutch to move. Initially we thought the latter was King Marke rather than Melot, but our confusion was resolved when Isolde knelt before her intended.

The set for Act 2 was predominately what appeared to be vertical whale rib bones. At the back of the stage was a shape, possibly an icosahedron, which features on the nearby statue of Baruch Spinoza (“The purpose



Stephen Gould *Tristan*  
Ricarda Merbeth *Isolde*

Photos: Dutch National Opera



of the State is freedom"). A runway jutted into the stage from the left.

Unfortunately, Tristan used this to run to his tryst with Isolde – tenors should never try to run on any stage! During most of their subsequent exchanges regarding "day's deceiving light" and "the noble sway of night" they do not touch. Indeed, in this production until the love duet, Tristan seemed to be far from Isolde's flavour of the month. During the love duet they do lie on the runway but back to back. Reflecting the time of day, their costumes were of a darker hue than in Act 1. When challenged by Melot, Tristan takes up his sword, but Isolde intervenes which enables Melot to stab Tristan with his knife – Mercutio's fate in *Romeo and Juliet* (where again the lovers are reunited in death). Due to his disability, Melot's stabbing action caused him to stumble across the stage and collapse.

In Act 3 the costumes except for King Marke and Melot were contemporary army surplus. Perhaps reflecting the military hair style requirements, a barber must have been rather busy during the second intermission. An open fronted sea container with a glass back was centre stage. On the right of the stage stood a burial scaffold. Tristan was reclining in the container but emerged when he stirred and returned before his death. When Isolde, Brangäne, King Marke and Melot arrive, a stabbing spree takes place so that in addition to the usual deceased, Brangäne is dispatched by Kurwenal who in turn is stabbed by King Marke. The stage contains more dead bodies than the closing scene of *Hamlet*. The container goes dark and when it is illuminated through the back scrim, the body of Tristan has disappeared together with the glass back to the container. Isolde dressed entirely in black stands in the container to sing

the *Liebestod*. At the conclusion Isolde moves towards the daylight emitting from the back scrim.

For us this production did make us consider more closely than in others the exchanges regarding day and night. Contrast a few of the words used about night (splendour, chaste, wondrous and holy) with those used about day (spiteful, false, deceiving, and boastful). Can one argue that the Earl of Gloucester in *King Lear* only becomes aware of which of his sons is false when he is blinded or thrust into permanent night? Having said that, if our interpretation of the conclusion is correct, then Isolde is attracted to the daylight which we presume is now Tristan. Might this mirror the final hymn to the rising sun at the end of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* – "the splendour of her locks of light"? In April/May, 18, the Dutch National Opera is remounting the Pierre Audi staged production.

Although we have doubts about Stephen Gould's athletic prowess, his singing was radiant throughout. We are in danger of being accused of stalking the superb Günther Groissböck - Heinrich der Vogler in November and Gurnemanz in May. Ricarda Merbeth, whilst not always the sweetest of sounds, gave a convincing portrayal of Isolde.



Stephen Gould *Tristan*; Ricarda Merbeth *Isolde*



## Pierre Couture in Bayreuth / 2018

The tireless Pierre provides us with a running commentary on his latest experiences in Bayreuth. Short of a detailed and exhaustive review, it gives us a heat of the moment ( 38 C. outside and god knows what inside) set of first impressions and judgements based more on the emotional than a cold interpretation.

### Pierre says:

This is my fifth consecutive year in Bayreuth and the very worst when it comes to heat discomfort; at every performance, so far, there are always one or two elderly patrons fainting and creating quite a commotion while being taken out of the *Festspielhaus*.

On Tuesday evening the outside temperature was 38 degrees and it must have been at least 45 inside - and the heat was not generated by Domingo's bland conducting.

### Die Walküre, July 31, 2018

Plácido Domingo booed last night at his conducting debut in the Bayreuth *Die Walküre*.

The public reaction last night at Bayreuth was not unexpected; his conducting was slow, traditional and lacked some "spine" in the most crucial moments. I never boo but last night I felt like doing it.

You should have seen the reaction on his face - I don't believe he has ever been booed as a singer before and it may be his first time at the age of 77; it was loud and obvious to the point where Catherine Foster, our Brünnhilde, rushed onto stage to hug him. He never reappeared alone again on stage and was later embraced by John Lundgren, the great Wotan, who also had some rare, minute difficulties towards the end of his great final monologue.

At this time of the year, the beginning of the Festival, the crowd is mostly German - one hears very little English or foreign languages, except that there are also a lot of French Wagnerians in town, not always happy with the hourlong intermissions. The Germans do know their music and easily voice their complaints. What a difference with Petrenko's almost legendary conducting of *Walküre* in Munich nine days ago.

For the first time in my life I got very close to booing myself! Bayreuth should be the place where one would expect the very best...although I fully subscribe to Wieland Wagner's "New Bayreuth" with its *Werkstatt*,

the quality ought to be there, especially when you look at the high cost of tickets. It is not artistically shrewd to hire Domingo, a great singer not particularly known for conducting, let alone conducting a Wagner opera at the Wagner "shrine".

Tonight's *Parsifal* is much better, conducted by Semyon Bychkov.

### Parsifal, August 1, 2018

What a difference a great conductor makes! Last night's *Parsifal* was, I believe, even better than in the last two years. Zeppenfeld's Gurnemanz was great but now I think Günther Groissböck is definitely better with his rich and sonorous voice.

Schrager and Pankratova were just superb; the big surprise of the evening was how fantastic Thomas Mayer was as Amfortas. Enormously sexy, with a rich baritone and overall better than Ryan McKinny in the past two years.

Semyon Bychkov got a standing ovation - a rare event here at the beginning of the Festival with a mostly German crowd. Big difference with Domingo the night before and with mostly the same crowd.

Yes, Ryan McKinny was also enormously sexy, albeit limited, Amfortas during the last two years; but that being stated, at this point of my life, my libido and heart respond much more to the enormous sex appeal of a suffering, broken, and finally furious Amfortas with a darker and deeper baritone voice. Thomas Mayer's voice, with great understanding of the German text and superb articulation, contrasts beautifully with the deep *basso profundo* tone of Günther Groissböck's Gurnemanz and the amazing heldentenor voice of Schager who truly surprised me: I just wish they had waited this year to commit the performance to commercial video with also a better conductor Semyon Bychkov. I already own the released BLU RAY of that performance.

Today is *Lohengrin*: I drove to the box office and have been there since 6:30 am - first in line and nobody there yet at 7:30. The box office opens at 10:00. Currently sitting on a bench and I do expect to be successful at securing a decent ticket. Not a soul around, just the service people picking up the laundry from the night before.

### **Lohengrin, August 2, 2018**

I was extremely lucky on Thursday morning when after waiting in the queue for three and a half hours I was the very first one when the doors opened at 10 am. There were only two tickets available - expensive, but I had a foot in the door. Sitting in the *Mittelloge* on Row 1, dead center, where apparently Kanzlerin Merkel normally sits and where Hitler also sat... In the end there were 23 people asking for a ticket but there were only two available.

To be honest, aside from the extremely comfortable seat and the leg room, I would rather sit where I normally do - Parkett rows 15 to 20, dead centre, where the sound is better and you are closer to the stage !

The new *Lohengrin* production is a sort of non-political fairy tale that touches our imaginary world with a strong environmentalist message at the end; briefly, I can almost call it "50 shades of Blue". *Lohengrin* is bringing some light / electricity to the dark castle of Brabant; the production is not caught into the "me too movement" since *Lohengrin* ties Elsa to an "electric" post, in a completely orange environment, punishing her for having asked the forbidden questions. And, symbolically at the very end, some wood faggot sticks are brought to the feet of Elsa to simulate the medieval punishment reserved to witches.

This production may in the end become famous for what it did not achieve; we never saw the finished direction of the original director, the Latvian Alvis Hermanis, who had already started to work with painters Neo Rauch and Rosa Loy when he quit before the American Yuval Sharon was brought to "rescue" the project and continue where Hermanis left off. Hermanis is well known for the 2014 Salzburg production of *Trovatore* set in a museum. We never saw the Bayreuth debut of French tenor Roberto Alagna - *Dieu merci* ! This new Bayreuth production did not generate any scandal and is not shocking at all; not surprisingly, there was no swan for the arrival and departure of *Lohengrin*: just an ultra modern looking stylized white swan

reminiscent of an aircraft / spaceship, at the top of the sets.

It does not have the strong religious or political message of the *Parsifal*, seen the night before, which I absolutely loved - my 4th viewing here in Bayreuth. Or, the *Meistersinger* which I will see again tomorrow night as my swan song to Bayreuth Festival 2018 edition but it remains a very charming and imaginary setting where the music and the singing triumph. The Telramund, Polish baritone Tomasz Konieczny - badly booed at opening night of *Lohengrin* - barked a little too much for my taste in the Act 1 but improved significantly in Act 2. Having been a long time admirer of the great Waltraud Meier, I do believe this is the very last time I heard her; her voice is not what it used to be and, at this point, she has to be seen and not heard ! What a great singing actress she is and she controls the stage even though she does not sing.

### **Tannhäuser, Meistersinger, Flying Dutchman,, August 2018**

Thomas Mayer's performance is far better than his Telramund heard live - the same performance broadcast on BBC Radio 3 - on June 13, 2018 in London. They had announced that he was feeling somewhat "physically indisposed" - Christine Goerke confided back stage that she was very concerned about not catching his "bug" - and he, indeed, looked very weak, albeit still sexy, when he came out back stage. I opted not to take a photograph for respect..."

Overall, notwithstanding the intense heat and humidity which makes you feel like doing nothing, it was a great cultural experience with the exception of the first night - I just don't connect at all with the *Fliegende Holländer* production and certainly did not fancy Greer Grimsley singing the title part. I saw it again on Friday evening with the great John Lundgren and what a difference.

Last night's *Die Meistersinger* was a total success; Emily Magee is much better than last year's Anne Schwanewilms. They all repeated their great performance from last year and all received huge applause; the Germans love Klaus Florian Vogt - who indeed sang very beautifully as Walther - and gave him such a huge applause and very loud "floor thumping". Philippe Jordan also received a loud ovation.

With the well "rejuvenating" one-hour intermissions, it makes for a very long evening. The performance started at 4:00 pm and I left the Festspielhaus at 10:45 pm.



# WAGNER ON STAGE

**Listings correct to December 2018.**  
**For further information check with opera companies**  
**via: [www.operabase.com](http://www.operabase.com)**

## *Der fliegende Holländer*

Helsinki; Sept.20 - Oct.11  
 Passau; Sept.22 - Oct. 21  
 Riga; Sept.28 - 30 NP  
 St. Petersburg; Oct.9  
 Minsk; Oct.11 - Dec.2  
 Dallas; Oct.12 - 20  
 Braunschweig; Oct.13 - Dec.20, NP  
 Houston; Oct.19 - Nov.2  
 Flensburg; Oct.27 NP  
 Tallinn; Nov.24 - 28

## *Lohengrin*

Antwerpen; Sept.20 - 28  
 Stuttgart; Sept.29 - Nov.5 NP  
 Wien; Oct.23 - Nov.7  
 Berlin, DO; Oct.28 - Nov.11  
 Prague; Nov.4 - 12  
 Bonn; Nov.4 - Dec.26 NP

## *Tannhäuser*

Meiningen; Oct.2  
 Leipzig; Nov.18 - Dec.9

NP - New Production

## *Das Rheingold*

Kassel; Sept.15 - Dec.25  
 Pforzheim; Sep.19 - Dec.9  
 Montreal; Nov.10 - 17  
 Seoul; Nov.14 - 18  
 Göteborg; Nov.17 - Dec.9 NP

## *Die Walküre*

Köln; Oct.21 - Dec.1 NP  
 Magdeburg; Sep.16 - Nov.23

## *Siegfried*

Oldenburg; Sep.22 - Nov.4 NP  
 Chemnitz; Sept.29 - Nov.10 NP  
 Chicago; Nov.3 - 16 NP

## *Götterdämmerung*

Karlsruhe; Sep.30 - Dec.2  
 Dusseldorf; Oct.27 - Dec.2 NP  
 Chemnitz; Dec.1 - 22

## *The Ring*

London; Sep.24 - - Nov.2  
 Hamburg; Oct.30 - Dec.2

## *Die Meistersinger*

Munich; Sep.23 - 30  
 Wiesbaden; Sep.29 - Nov.4 NP  
 Mannheim; Oct.28 - Nov.25 NP  
 Sydney; Nov.13 - 22

## *Tristan und Isolde*

Linz; Sep.15 - Dec.25 NP  
 Hannover; Sep.16 - Dec.22 NP  
 Paris; Sep.16 - Oct.9  
 Berlin, DO; Sep.23 - Oct.3  
 Moscow; Sep.29

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