

# WAGNER NEWS

Wagner News is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

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## January - February

We begin our Winter Season with a truly exciting event. In collaboration with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, we are invited to attend the rehearsal led by Sir Andrew Davis, of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, Act 1, featuring singers Lise Davidsen, Simon O'Neill and Brindley Sherratt. This will take place on **Jan 30, 1.15 pm**, Roy Thomson Hall, Stage Door entrance at southern end of the building. Afterwards, there will be a Q. and A. with the performers.

Remember that on **Jan. 31 and Feb. 2**, the formal concerts of this program will take place. Discounted tickets for society members can be purchased on the website until **Jan. 18**.

**February 20** also brings us a Gala event in which Jessye Norman will be honoured with the Glenn Gould Prize hosted by the Glenn Gould Foundation.

Please note that Jessye Norman will be giving a Master Class and the public is invited. It takes place on **Feb. 15** at Walter Hall, Faculty of Music, University of Toronto at **3 pm**. Jessye Norman will also be part of a symposium at the Toronto Reference Library on the subject of "Artists of Colour and their Contribution to Opera". Further information will be emailed to you as soon as we have it.

Susan Bullock and Christine Goerke appearing in the COC's Elektra have been invited to meet with our society while they are here in Toronto. A date will be emailed to all member as soon as it is finalized.

**March - May Meetings:** TBA ; Email notices will be sent as soon as events and dates have been decided

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



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# The London Ring Cycle III: October 16-24, 2018

## A Very Theatrical Experience

Pierre Couture

I was not impressed by the original 2004-2006 Keith Warner *Ring* production at the Royal Opera, nor the 2012 revival, so my expectations were not extremely high when I booked tickets for this recent offering. I opted to sit in the stalls near the stage which I thought would help me better understand Warner's intentions. Unfortunately that was done at the expense of the sound which was slightly distorted by my being so close, unlike the glorious sound of the orchestra and singers, from the lower amphitheater section that I heard at the recent Verdi Requiem concert. I fully understood the mistake I had made especially considering the excellent cast this time around. No wonder the tickets - with the top price at up to £ 300 - sold out fairly fast a year in advance to various levels of "Friends" so that no tickets were available for the general public.

Some London friends told me that of the four operas, *Das Rheingold* was the only one that had a full dress rehearsal and the first full cycle turned out to be the real dress rehearsal. The few glitches mentioned in the press reviews were a testament to this lack of preparation.

In his own words, Keith Warner is concerned about the search of social, spiritual, human and political truth. According to his short documentary at the beginning of the telecast of *Die Walküre* on the 28 October 2018, he said that "The world of the *Ring* is three worlds: there's way up the top of this ladder where Walsall "Valhalla" will be, and at the other end of it we have the earth, and beyond that deep down we have *Nibelheim* which is where the dwarfs...where Alberich and Mime live." He attempts to demystify in a highly theatrical fashion Wagner's vision as "a journey from a world ruled by gods to a place where their power is relinquished to humans." He strongly believes that Wagner was "a revolutionary of the theatre, someone who wanted theatre to be at the centre of civic life". He is concerned that, over the years, productions of the *Ring* have somewhat retreated from that goal. To support his theory, Keith Warner has brought up a most appropriate and surprising quote from Wagner himself: "I will only be happy when the person who gets the loudest applause is the person who has acted best, who has shown the character in the truest way, not the person with the best voice." Warner strongly believes that this is the reason why Wagner wanted to direct, rather than conduct, the first *Ring Cycle* at his theatre in Bayreuth in 1876.

Concerned with establishing the adequate balance between realism and symbolism, he attempts to connect Wagner's drama to our current world and forces us in this life-changing experience to consider what happens subsequently in an uncertain, all-too-human future. Remind you of anything?

There does not appear to be an overall deep concept that connects the entire *Ring* cycle aside from updating it somewhat to more modern days while stressing the realistic and fantastical elements. Aside from the ropes and ladders of the Greek set designer Stefanos Lazaridis, the flamboyant sets have been somewhat simplified since his untimely death in 2010. His staging of the four operas is dominated by a helix spiral climbing all the way up to space. This grand and glamorous curve is symbolic of the regeneration of humanity's DNA, and the biological ties amongst this highly dysfunctional family. This helix, albeit reduced in size, becomes the ring of fire in which Brünnhilde is abandoned at the end of *Walküre*. This hints at the ultimate destruction of the family, as does the immolation scene at the very end of *Götterdämmerung*.



Nina Stemme / Brünnhilde



John Lundgren / Wotan



Alan Oke / Loge; Gerhard Siegel / Mime

PHOTOS; Bill Cooper

In a definitely allegorical production, Keith Warner seems concerned to emphasize the importance of interaction between characters, whether they sing or not, sometimes with stunning theatrical effects. The major asset of this *Ring* remains the interplay of the characters, most notably in the minimalistic settings. It is always fascinating to witness how Wagner's and Shakespeare's works with complex characters seem more prone and subject to *Regietheater* than any other composer.

According to Keith Warner, the modern approach to Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* consists of fulfilling the goal of the "total work of art" which blends music, poetry, drama and design in order to create "transcendental theatre which explores the deepest philosophical ideas".

For myself, the most minimalistic images of this production will remain the strongest in my memory. As the dust settles, my heart still trembles at the majestic voice of our fearless Brünnhilde, the phenomenal Nina Stemme. I have followed her career since 2001 in her London debut as Manon Lescaut in English at the English National Opera. Which was also a Warner/Lazaridis production. At age 55, her compelling London *Ring* performances may possibly be her last iterations of this spellbinding role. I was fortunate to experience two of her *Ring* cycles in Munich earlier this year and I have always considered her voice to be most human, warm and feminine. Fully aware that her high notes may be occasionally tainted with some tight edginess, her genuine facial expressions and expressive body language were the Royal Opera's trump card this year. Her rich low notes and top register seemed to gather increased power and thrust as the cycle unfolded while reflecting wisdom, pride and nobility.

Neil Fisher in The Times expressed my thoughts better than I can possibly write them, referring to "the immensity of Stemme's voice and presence, which could very possibly make a stage burst into flame by itself". He went on to add that "Yet it isn't so much the power of her voice as the humanity and intelligence with which she wields it that makes her unforgettable."

Also, I shall never forget Antonio Pappano's lyrical and poetic approach to the Wagner *Ring*. He had always been known as the singer's conductor - I had a long conversation back stage with Emily Magee after *Walküre* when she rated Pappano the best conductor she ever worked with. He presented a highly textured score while maintaining the constant momentum and never lost sight of the details. There were a few notable glitches with the often problematic French horns at the beginning of *Rheingold* and elsewhere.

The brass was also problematic at the beginning of the third act of *Götterdämmerung*. The orchestra sound never overwhelmed the singers and I particularly enjoyed Pappano's softer approach in transitions and the more tender moments. His fluid and sensitive conducting, always in harmony with Warner's theatrical approach and the singers, rendered his phrasing and shaping of individual moments just mesmerising. He can certainly be thrillingly bombastic in the grand climaxes when total power was required. Unsurprisingly, he and Nina Stemme always gathered the loudest applause.

The imagery of *Das Rheingold* was cumbersome to say the least and problematic with a mixture of cluttered staging and at times an irritating mess reminiscent of a Victorian or Edwardian setting contemplating an experimental future - witness the genetic experimentation in the laboratory of Alberich and Mime with dismembered corpses and toy planes. There is a symbolic connection with the toy aircraft in *Das Rheingold* being transformed into a wrecked larger aircraft in the first act of *Siegfried*. It means that Wotan, currently the Wanderer in *Siegfried*, has come down to earth as he emerges from the broken shell of the cockpit and is becoming more vulnerable and human. In the end, it all washed out as a satirical parody bordering on comedy with the intent of entertaining the audience.

I was actually surprised to hear very few English singers in this London-based *Ring*. Only Sarah Connolly as Fricka, and Karen Cargill as Waltraute. I have always admired the artistry of Sarah Connolly but have to admit that her voice occasionally lacked the depth and power of Ekaterina Gubanova that I heard in Munich. However, she is such a great singing actress and her performance fits very well with the director's concept.

Same with John Lundgren's Wotan and Johannes Martin Kränzle's Alberich who were perceived by some as underpowered with less venom in their voices compared to some historical baritones. They both sang more lyrical and nuanced roles which were just as commanding with rich, dark tones. They were totally in harmony with Warner's goal of "humanizing" the Ring and Pappano's more lyrical and poetic reading.

It was a luxury casting to have the fast-rising star Lise Davidssen singing the small but important role of Freia. She is gifted with a beautiful timbre and immense power, and I am looking forward to her Sieglinde in Toronto at the end of January, and as Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* in Zürich and Bayreuth next year.

The other three operas are much less annoying, and are more minimalistic without too many superfluous distractions.

The first act of *Walküre* offers us a powerful real Heldentenor with a heroic ringing tone, Stuart Skelton, and a very vulnerable and believable Sieglinde - Emily Magee, who it has to be said, is in her vocal decline. There does not appear to be much chemistry amongst these singers but, as lovers, they look like they have fallen in love at first contact - very reminiscent of *Tristan and Isolde*.

The beginning of Act III shows Siegmund lying dead on a mattress during the scene with the Walkyries. Brünnhilde confirms that Sieglinde is pregnant and that she will give birth to Siegfried, the noblest hero in the world.

Wotan's Act II monologue was richly sung by John Lundgren and the scene following with Brünnhilde is so touching for its humanity, very much like his farewell and the devastating confrontation in Act III which is painfully poignant. I have watched this act twice on video and get teary eyed every time. There is definite chemistry between the two Swedish singers. Nina Stemme's facial expressions and vocal line are a perfect match for John Lundgren's intelligent and

virile portrayal, and are supported by Pappano's magic sense of musical theatre. After *Walküre*, back stage with my fellow stage-door johnnies, we all agreed that we may never hear again a better Brünnhilde in our lifetime.

Stefan Vinke seems to sing better all the time in the role of Siegfried. It was amazing to witness how relatively fresh his heroic voice sounded towards the end of the last act. In this production Siegfried and Brünnhilde are often singing physically apart with much chemistry between them. The opera comes to a final climax with a surge of orchestral power as they both fall onto the mattress in a very theatrical gesture. Siegfried has, after all, been living in the forest all his life and Brünnhilde is the first woman he encounters. As we will see later on in *Götterdämmerung*, his love for Brünnhilde is very fickle and he is in love with a woman's body. That is why he literally jumps on top of Brünnhilde's body on the mattress where his father lay during the beginning of the last act of *Walküre*. In the last Bayreuth *Ring*, Castorf had Siegfried making love to the wood bird...it is all about youth's hormones.

In *Götterdämmerung*, Hagen has set the tone and the agenda with his strong presence in the living room setting at the Gibichungs and Stephen Milling's sonorous and impressive bass voice cuts through the orchestra like butter. Some people wish for a voice with more venom but it is not necessary since it is so effective. He is also in harmony with Pappano's splendid pacing of the score, and did not need to be bombastic. His character is such a driving force in the plot that I think the opera could simply be called "Hagen". The Austrian baritone Markus Butter who sang Gunther is the weak link and he was greeted with some boos at the very end.

Although Hagen does not sing in the following scene his strong physical presence, as he sits on a very theatrical setting, conveys a magisterial sense as if he has decided the course of action to come. The exchange between Brünnhilde and Waltraute sets the crisis point as Brünnhilde does not heed the dire warnings against Siegfried and the *Ring*. She is still under the spell of the "rocks".

Coming to the last scene of the first act, where Brünnhilde is stripped of the ring, and Hagen is still sitting in his regal chair, Siegfried sings on the side of the stage with the "tarnhelm" on his head while Gunther fights Brünnhilde to obtain the ring. I had not experienced staging like this before, and I wondered how Siegfried would get the ring from Gunther. Fortunately, the Act II staging answered my query and, while still respecting the text, provided Hagen the perfect excuse to punish Siegfried who had been a traitor in seizing the ring from Günther. Regardless of how many times one sees the *Ring*, it is always welcome to witness a scene that clarifies or sheds light on a particular aspect of the drama, and Keith Warner's staging answers some questions for me.

The second and last act of the Keith Warner's *Götterdämmerung* "joined the dots", so to speak, for me in

providing some believable theatrical answers to the drama. For me, the best ending remains the Munich Kriegenburg production where all gather in a circle around Guttrune to lift her spirits after she lost her brother and husband.

I particularly enjoyed Pappano's conducting Nina Stemme's glorious singing in the Immolation scene. As soon as she came on stage for her final bow, the entire audience stood up to give her and Pappano a rare standing ovation. During my 40 years of attending performances at the Royal Opera House, I don't remember this happening before. Despite some initial and anticipated problems with *Das Rheingold*, the remainder of the Keith Warner production certainly provided a very enriching Wagnerian experience for me. It features vastly superior singing over the 2004-2005 and 2012 stagings. Ultimately, it is Nina Stemme's powerful performance and Antonio Pappano's intelligent direction that enhances the overall quality of this production. This is what matters the most and, upon leaving the Royal Opera House after *Götterdämmerung*, I just fell like staying in London longer and starting all over again with the *Ring* IV.



The Rainbow Bridge



# Royal Opera House London Ring, Third cycle, Oct. 2018. *Frances Henry*

This *Ring* was a disappointment! I saw it some years ago in 2012 and didn't much like it then. Given the splendid casting for this year's revival, I thought to give it another try. Directed by Keith Warner and conducted by Antonio Pappano, its stars included Nina Stemme (Brünnhilde), John Lundgren (Wotan), Stefan Vinke (Siegfried), and a cast of other good singers. For me the main problem was Warner's staging. Although he made some significant changes since its last iteration, it remains a messy, very confusing and concept less production. One searches in vain for some meaning as there is little consistency from opera to opera except for an ever-present red cord which probably signifies fate.

*Rheingold* was a mess; the gods looking through a telescope at a tiny little house projected at the back, the giants look like humans except Fafner has a pointy head, Alberich and Mime carry out operations on corpses in *Nibelheim* and lots of trash lies around the stage. This is supposed to be a comedic approach to it. It wasn't funny! I had looked forward to seeing Lundgren whom I've only heard streaming where he sounded very impressive, but he seemed vocally indecisive and weak. Lise Davidsen was made to look like a simpering girl, but she sang beautifully. Hers is a voice to watch and there is much agreement that she is just on the edge of major stardom. Even Pappano in the pit didn't really bring out the glories of the *Rheingold* music particularly the soaring end which seemed underplayed. All told, a most unimpressive beginning to the *Ring*.

*Walküre* brought a stunning first act courtesy of Stuart Skelton who was making his ROH debut – don't know why the ROH didn't come around to him much earlier. His Sieglinde Emily Magee was lovely with a clear uncluttered sound and together they moved and interacted very well. Lundgren in Act 2 sang a good monologue and the *Todesverkündigung* between Skelton and Stemme was quiet, lyrical and quite moving. The Valkyries carrying skeletal horses heads (yes, indeed) weren't given much to do but they did sing in unison. Wotan's farewell was well sung but I am fond of a much warmer, enveloping, loving Wotan that Lundgren did not provide. The third act 'duet' between Brünnhilde and Sieglinde, a great *Ring* highpoint where the birth of Siegfried is announced and one of my favourite bits in the *Ring* was very poorly sung. Magee's high notes were not clear and Stemme's cold steely tone overpowered her. Coming to *Siegfried*, Act 1 begins again with a lot of trash, junk, a broken-down airplane having crashed through Mime's whatever. Gerhard Siegel, once the dominant Mime of our time is, I think, over the hill both vocally and dramatically. His was a caricature. Stefan Vinke did a very good first act Siegfried full of spirit and vigor and his voice sounded fresh despite his having sung 100 Siegfrieds. Stemme and Vinke did not have much chemistry and it was hard to

believe that they were really in love. I think the fault lies with Nina Stemme who everybody thinks is the greatest but her cold hard tone does not appeal to me. The voice has little colour or shading. Vinke remained vigorous to the end but the directorial touch of having him take a flying leap on top of Brünnhilde - lying on an old decrepit mattress - made a mockery of their supposed great love. It made people laugh rather than sigh with longing. *Götterdämmerung* brought a very weak Gunther in Markus Butter and Emily Magee made an appealing Guttrune. Stephen Milling's Hagen sounded good – he has a big, rounded voice – but too warm for the evil Hagen. Act 2 wedding scene had a bunch of people including a bunch of women dressed in rag turbans and a strange looking black and white costume none of which made any sense. The plotting against Siegfried, always a high point of this opera, lacked intensity and Stemme's hard sound dominated. And Act 3.... Well, I don't know, I left!

Yes, hard to believe that I would leave the end of the *Ring* but frankly I couldn't stand it any more. I have never been a fan of Nina Stemme and much prefer Christine Goerke in this role. Stemme is a great performer and she received a standing ovation, I was told, but to me her high notes were shrieked, hard and pushed. I just could not hear anymore of them.

The ROH orchestra had some weak moments throughout especially in the horns. I also thought that Pappano's conducting lacked power in the high full orchestra moments. He slowed down the tempo in all the quiet interludes for reasons I don't understand, it just slowed down the whole show. I would not classify Pappano as a true *Ring* conductor.

In sum, I was very disappointed and not because I've seen many far better *Rings* in my long opera going life but because I simply didn't find it very good.



Stuart Skelton and Emily Magee / Siegmund and Sieglinde

# NEWS *and* COMMENTS

On September 17, TWS hosted Ben Heppner and Karita Mattila, in town to sing in COC's production of Rufus Wainwright's *Hadrian*. Thomas Hampson, the third notable in this universally excellent cast, also invited to speak to us, was unfortunately not able to join them. The question and answer session, conducted by Joseph So and Jim Warrington turned out to be really a one sided conversation, given the volubility of both guests and generally a very relaxed atmosphere.

Karita Mattila was a vivacious and passionate speaker. Asked the obvious questions about her and Richard Wagner, she described own quite extensive history of Wagner roles and offered some coy references to her ultimate goal in foreseeable future, the role of Isolde, in her view the pinnacle of feminine roles.

Ben Heppner was relaxed and comfortable, a guy next door out of his many stage costumes and personalities. He was talkative and voluble in his answers.

Some photos of the guests show the animation of Karita Mattila and the grandfatherly mien of Ben Heppner.



PHOTOS: RICHARD ROSENMAN

Bayreuth is in the process of digitizing Richard Wagner Archive and making it available to all. This will include the entire Archive, letters between Richard and Cosima (at least the surviving ones), his notebooks, copies of his scores and photos.

It will be placed online, available to anyone. No final date has been given. For more information see The Richard Wagner Museum online.com

## FROM TSO - A SPECIAL OFFER

Good afternoon, Wagner Society.

I hope this email finds you well. The Toronto Symphony Orchestra would be delighted to extend a 20% discount to your members for the upcoming performance **Sir Andrew Davis Conducts Wagner.**

Please note that this offer will be available from (9am) Jan 7-18 (inclusive). Should you have any questions, please let me know.

We look forward to welcoming you to Roy Thomson Hall!

Sir Andrew Davis, conductor

Lise Davidsen, soprano

Simon O'Neill, tenor

Brindley Sherratt, bass

Wagner: "The Ride of the Valkyries" from Die Walküre

Berg: Three Pieces for Orchestra

Wagner: Act I of Die Walküre

[Thu. Jan 31 at 8:00pm](#)

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Book tickets at 20% off with promo code **WAGNER** at [TSO.CA](http://TSO.CA)

Ticket limit 4. Not valid in combination with other offers or discounts. Not valid on previously purchased tickets. Offer ends on Jan 18.

# Wagner the Anti-Semite; should Art and the artist be separated? *Wayne Gooding*

Questions about Richard Wagner's anti-Semitism and the historical line linking the composer to the catastrophe of National Socialism and the Holocaust are by this time clear and well defined, but broadcaster and writer Richard Harris's Rear View Mirror column in the November issue of Toronto's theWholeNote magazine, Wagner in the Age of #MeToo (p. 86), has surely done nothing to resolve them.

Harris's column was apparently triggered by the fallout in Israel last summer when the *Kan Kol Hamusica* (The Voice of Music) public radio station played the last act of *Götterdämmerung* in a 1991 performance from Bayreuth conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Complaints led the station to apologize, with assurances that the long-standing (albeit never officially mandated) ban on broadcasting Wagner in Israel would be respected going forward. Yonatan Livni, Chairman of the Wagner Foundation in Israel, has always believed the ban wrong-headed, and said on the Sept. 3 edition of CBC's *As It Happens* that when he heard of the *Götterdämmerung* broadcast he "thought that Messiah, who will supposedly come from our area, has finally arrived." Livni's opening gambit was a colourful set up for his position that with Wagner, you have to separate the composer and his opinions from the music. Livni had made the same argument in Israel. "I welcome the first unhidden playing of Wagner's music," he said in *Haaretz* newspaper on Sept. 1. "... We do not play the opinions of the composer, but the wonderful music he created. My late father was a Holocaust survivor and from him I learned to get to know Wagner: 'He was a vile man who wrote heavenly music'." There is, of course, nothing new in this; what we might call the "separation argument" has been widely adopted by Jewish and non-Jewish Wagner lovers alike, by Jewish and non-Jewish Wagner performers (e.g. Daniel Barenboim) and by Jewish and non-Jewish Wagner scholars (e.g. Father Owen Lee's Wagner: The Terrible Man and his Truthful Art).

Harris, citing Livni, summed the argument up succinctly: "Art and the artist should be separated; the work must be allowed to stand on its own merits. That is what art demands." But then, while conceding that #MeToo may seem tangential ("#MeToo, with its wide ambit, has nothing to do with the arts, let alone Wagner..."), he nevertheless cites the movement as a wake-up call that it may be "perfectly legitimate to refuse to divide the artist from his or her art. Maybe they shouldn't be divided: maybe artists and their art exist in a complicated, roundabout, mutually self-referencing cycle of meaning." So far, so good, since there's no "maybe" about it. Adhering to the separation argument does not mean that you deny any and every connection between an artist and his or her art. As Harris writes: "Music-making is deeply grounded in politics, ideology and social discourse. It always has been."

Harris's position becomes more problematic when he goes on to say, first, that "perhaps it's time to suggest that art can legitimately be judged on moral as well as aesthetic grounds, including the moral behavior and actions of its creators," and, second, that in this #MeToo-inspired line of enquiry, Wagner is a special case. The composer's undeniable anti-Semitism—including, of course, in the two editions of *Das Judentum in der Musik*—is just the start of the matter; "Wagner was not just an anti-Semite," Harris continues, "he was a primary intellectual progenitor of the Third Reich."

From here, taking it as given that this historically loaded anti-Semitism is heinously rife in the music, Harris confronts Wagner-lovers with an Ethics 101 moral dilemma: either we put the anti-Semitism out of mind and embrace everything else about the music; or we reject the anti-Semitism in both the man and the music. In the former case, we would become carelessly complicit in the anti-Semitism ("It's not that we don't understand the questionable quality of Wagner's art — it's just that we decide not to care."); in the latter case, presumably, the logical conclusion of our moral stance would be to impose a personal ban on Wagner. To be clear, Harris does not advocate a ban, and his own conclusion is curiously ambiguous. Even after two heated paragraphs to establish that "Wagner was the key to Nazism" and that anti-Semitism is "at the heart of Wagner's art as well," he seems fine with just a tepid caution: "it's time, perhaps, for us to be neither surprised nor indignant if we find #MeToo-inspired questions disturbing our pleasure." Maybe he was just being ironic.

Those two heated paragraphs that stand as Harris's statement of facts to bolster his argument also stand as the weakest section of his column. The only direct connection he makes between Wagner's and Hitler's anti-Semitism comes in a direct quote Harris attributes to the latter: "'Whoever wants to understand National Socialism,' said Hitler, 'must first understand Wagner.' From the horse's mouth, so to speak."

The problem here is not the blanket murkiness of the generality, which begs the question of what, exactly, in Wagner might be necessary to understand National Socialism. The problem is that there is no direct evidence that Hitler said this. It's not in *Mein Kampf*, it has not been identified in any speech, it does not appear in the major academic biographies, and it does not appear in any memoir or memorandum of anybody who had direct contact with him. The most likely original source is *They Wanted War* (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1940) by Otto D. Tolischus, a Pulitzer Prize-winning, New York Times journalist. The quote is there, but without any citation or direct attribution. The quote is repeated in William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960, Simon and Schuster), but again with no clear citation. Harris doesn't cite any source, either, even though the direct quotation is critical to his argument. Having invoked #MeToo, Harris at this point risks charges of #FakeNews.



Problematic, too, is Harris's blithely quick acceptance that Wagner's anti-Semitism is front and centre in the music, as in the assertion, "the gnomish and dwarfish Alberich and Mime are surely none other than thinly disguised, dog-whistle portraits of [Wagner's] ultimate Jewish scapegoat." Others credible sources certainly view the characters in the same way—from Gustav Mahler to British Wagner scholar Barry Millington—but the forms and limits of anti-Semitism in Wagner's music requires a considerably more nuanced examination than Harris seems to countenance. It's just as easy to find credible authorities to challenge his view. Daniel Barenboim, for example, says this in a conversation with the late Edward Said ([danielbarenboim.com/wagner-and-ideology/](http://danielbarenboim.com/wagner-and-ideology/)): "It also needs to be said for clarity's sake that, in the operas themselves, there is not one Jewish character, there is not one anti-Semitic remark. There is nothing in any one of the ten great operas of Wagner even remotely approaching a character like Shylock. That you can interpret Mime or Beckmesser in a certain anti-Semitic way (in the same way, you can also interpret The Flying Dutchman as the errant Jew), this is a question that speaks not about Wagner, but about our imagination and how our imagination is developed, coming into contact with those works." Harris may challenge all this, but his case will need more than the bald assertions of the Wholenote column. To help him prepare, he (and, indeed, any Wagnerian interested in anti-Semitism in the music dramas) should review the extended debate between scholars Barry Elmslie and Mark Berry freely available on the web site of London-based The Wagner Journal (<http://www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk/wagnerandanti-se.html>).

Finally, bizarrely, Harris suggests that Wagner lovers might get the point that the music is anti-Semitic "if some intrepid director made the flames at the end of *Götterdämmerung* emanate from a *Reichstag* fire, or inscribed *Arbeit Mach Frei* over Mime's demonic workshop." I concede that I can't think of any production that features exactly these scenes, though would not be surprised to learn of such from better-travelled *Ring* junkies. But Harris is simply wrong if he is suggesting that Wagner productions have glossed over the composer's anti-Semitism and that historical line to National Socialism, and he just has to review a couple of recent Bayreuth stagings to see his error. Stefan Herheim's *Parsifal* clearly follows German history from 1870 to the present day, with Act II set in part in the Nazi era (complete with Swastikas and frightened groups running at night with suitcases) and Act III set in the modern *Bundestag*. More pertinently, Barrie Kosky's current Bayreuth production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* explicitly evokes Wagner's ambivalent anti-Semitism in Act I (with Beckmesser appearing as the Jewish conductor, Hermann Levi), Hitlerian anti-Semitism in the street brawl in Act II and a national accounting for it all in the courtroom of the post-World War II Nuremberg Trials for Act III.

At root, the problem with Harris's column is its simplistic and cursory traversal of complex and troubling issues. He does not consider the possible third choice for Wagner lovers, which is to recognize the anti-Semitism in the man, the music and the line running from the composer's times to Hitler's Germany while still embracing and taking pleasure in the music. That third choice is impossible if, like Harris, you make Wagner's 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Semitism the direct and proximate cause of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, state-sanctioned extermination policy of the Nazis. That Harris does this so uncritically while invoking the high moral ground of #MeToo is the most disappointing aspect of his column. Let's here give a more-balanced last word to Barry Millington, who concludes his chapter on Wagner's anti-Semitism in *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth* (Oxford, 2012, p. 191): "Anti-Semitism is an intrinsic element of the Wagnerian world view that gave us some of the greatest masterpieces of Western civilization—the *Ring*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal*. So rich and multilayered are these works that it would be foolish to limit their content to an ideological obsession. Rather, we should embrace them for all their infelicities, accepting that it was precisely that ideological obsession that drove Wagner to such inspired heights."



Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg; Bayreuth, 2017  
Johannes Martin Kränzle as Sixtus Beckmesser.

Photo: Enrico Nawrath





Hans Breuer as *Mime*; Bayreuth, ca. 1899  
Richard Wagner Archiv, Bayreuth



Arthur Rackham, 1911; *Mime*  
from "The Ring of the Nibelung"

## An ecologically sustainable *Ring* at the Göteborg Opera

Richard Rosenman

Since ecologically sustainable has become the flavour of the century, it is the *Ring* that has its turn now. Here it is not a director looking for a theme for a novel production of the *Ring*, but a director, in this case Stephen Langridge, looking for an artistic project on the theme of sustainability and finding it in the *Ring*, an ideal example of nature being despoiled and violated. There had been a number of such attempts in the past, most half hearted and half baked - see the Seattle *Ring*, in the innocent years when a lots of green was a sufficient excuse for a claim of "eco" - but only now there is to be a true, 100% pure, eco friendly, bio degradable, ecologically driven interpretation by the Göteborg Opera House, including environmentally sustainable solutions in all areas of the production. At least that is the claim.

The premiere of *Rheingold* has been in November 2018, and the conclusion with *Götterdämmerung* is scheduled for 2021. Each part being given on its own with a year in between.

Given the long time interval between the first and the last part of the tetralogy, with a year long interval between each part, the production is meant to emphasize the passage of time and its visible wear and scars on the sets and costumes. Thus, for instance, the exposed recycled wood backdrop will be darkened in colour with each yearly step, as it would happen in nature.

This concept can be carried by the Göteborg Opera to absurd lengths - so, for instance, the *Ring* dictates the emphasis on its cyclical nature - the circulation of power, recycling, the circularity of time.

The motto of recycling dictates on the choice of costumes - bought in second hand stores; on the material used in the sets, barring, we hope, those recovered from the city dump. Same can be claimed in the use of singers, who under the dictates of this principle will circulate, or recirculate, successively in different roles (this, however, being done routinely throughout the history of opera, without claiming to be ecologically correct).

Another pretension is to support itself on ideas that, again, have been exploited since the genesis of the work without the claim to be recycling - the leitmotiv is recycling; the constant retelling of past events is recycling.

Such an environmentally sustainable production may seem a solemn, humourless, ideologically driven attempt to shoehorn a *Ring* into a doctrine-faithful clothes at any cost. But some people are dead serious about principles and will not stand for any discussion. If this really happens, the people will decide whether to be impressed or to laugh.



## ...and, as for Siegfried Wagner....

Richard Rosenman

This report is based on the text of the official release by the exhibition *Siegfried Wagner: Bayreuth's "Fairy" Crown Prince*, at the *Schwules Museum* in Berlin, and on the interview with Kevin Clarke, curator of the exhibition, by Sam Goodyear.

Have you ever wondered why Siegfried Wagner, groomed by his father and mother, musically educated by his grandfather Franz Liszt and by Engelberg Humperdink, the inheritor of much more than the name and composer of eighteen operas, some with his own libretto, passed almost invisible and forgotten in the period between his death and the post Second World War years, and was not celebrated as he should have been, even today? All this having been the supreme boss in Bayreuth for 24 years, until his demise (1906 - 1930), and member of a whole generation of homosexual artists and their champion.

To answer this and to throw light on his life, on his achievements, and in particular on the sexuality, the *Schwules Museum*, the Gay Museum in Berlin, celebrated an exhibition bearing the suggestive title *Siegfried Wagner: Bayreuth's "Fairy" Crown Prince*, in 2017.

Siegfried Wagner, known among his intimates as Fidi, never hid his predilection for the male sex and maintained his relationships with men in a relatively open manner. This, of course, encouraged the blackmailers and their silence had to be repeatedly bought with hush money. It all changed with the notorious Eulenburg scandal in 1914 when journalist Maximilian Harden, supported by the former German law criminalising homosexuality, targeted Siegfried. Prince von Eulenburg, one of a gay circle close to the Wagner family, promoted the Wagner cult with his ties to the emperor Wilhelm II and it was he who secured the permanent financial support for the Festival. After Harden branded Siegfried publicly as gay, Siegfried avoided further rumors by marrying the 17 year old Winifred. Four offspring, among them two male heirs, Wieland and Wolfgang, were delivered and scandal was avoided.

Siegfried ran the Bayreuth Festival as a powerful theatre director and many artists, conductors and singers, tried to get on a good footing with him, among them Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler who performed many of Siegfried's compositions in Vienna.

Siegfried, well aware of his power, joked about it in public interviews. His choice of individuals allowed in attest to it. Among them were stage designer Kurt Sohnlein, rehearsal pianist, and by the account of Peter P. Pahl (one of the organizers of the exhibition and Siegfried's biographer) his presumed own illegitimate son Walter Aign. The most famous performers included heldentenor Max Lorenz with whom he recorded the Flower Maidens scene, and Herbert Janssen inserted as Wolfram in the famous *Tannhäuser* production

conducted by Toscanini. Furthermore, his lover Werner Franz was hired as a conductor in 1924.

This preferential treatment extended also to lesbian artists. For 25 years his two assistants were a lesbian couple, Luise Reuss-Belce (former soprano at Bayreuth) and Evelyn Faltis. Outside of the circle of musicians there was also Franz Stassen, painter and illustrator, (whose drawings were published in the past in this newsletter), Siegfried's close gay friend and later on Wieland's teacher and perhaps the reason why Wieland always worried about turning homosexual.

While the subject of the exhibition was overwhelmingly Siegfried, other members of the Wagner family had their sexuality discussed and questioned.

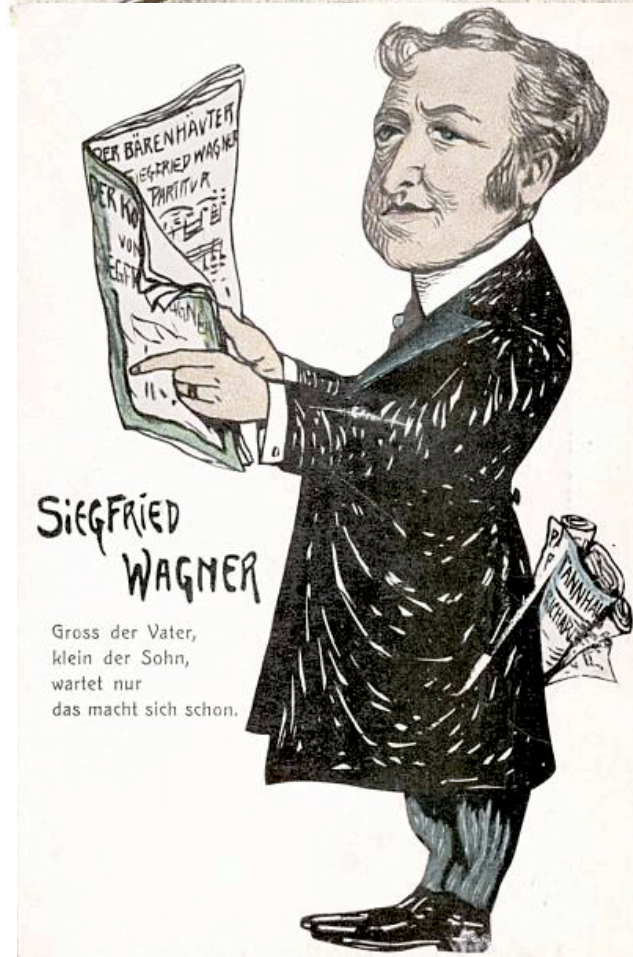
Thus Richard Wagner, as sustained by Heinrich Pudor in his early 20th century work *Richard Wagners Bisexualität*, was a "bisexual sleeper", mainly on account of his predilection for clothes that might be considered feminine. Very early on he had a circle of gay friends, among them Paul von Joukowsky, celebrated as the set designer for the premiere of *Parsifal*. With the parents' blessing Joukowsky and his Italian lover Pepino took the then 5 year old Siegfried on a holiday. There is also king Ludwig II, the godfather of Siegfried, and, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche.

In general, Richard Wagner, contrary to his disparaging of so many other groups, never did speak negatively about homosexuals. Some went further in their assessment. Hans Fuchs's *Richard Wagner and Homosexuality* was written with the intent to list Richard Wagner among them and it was described as "a sympathetic portrait of Wagner as queer". It called him "homosexual in spirit". While admitting that Wagner's sexual inclination were straight, they all saw his feminine traits as being akin to homosexuality. A most sensational incident is described in 1937 Karl Ludecke's memoir *"I knew Hitler"*.

He quotes Hitler as saying, on concerns about homosexuals in the SA, "Ach, why should I concern myself with the private lives of my followers. I love Richard Wagner's music - must I shut my ears because he was a pederast?" (As quoted in Lothar Machtan's 2001 book, *"Hidden Hitler"*, 280). Jean-Jacques Nattiez in his "Wagner Androgyne" considers that Richard conceived of himself creatively as both a man and a woman.

Among others in the family, Siegfried's illegitimate son Walter Aign was investigated for homosexuality and the exhibition as well touched upon the homosexual fears suffered by Wieland Wagner, his first born, who, according to historical evidence worried about inheriting homosexuality from his father and grandfather.





**SIEGFRIED  
WAGNER**

Gross der Vater,  
klein der Sohn,  
wartet nur  
das macht sich schon.

"Big is the father, small the son, waits only for the power "  
(so when, already?)

Upon Siegfried's death and with the ascendance of Winifred who took over the direction of the Festival, led by her there was a concerted effort to diminish the reputation and to belittle the achievements of Siegfried. Winifred ensured that Siegfried's compositional work were no longer performed as being "insignificant" next to the "genius" of his father and this preventive practice continued well after her death and through her son Wolfgang.

While there was (and still is) a ceaseless stream of books on all that relates to Richard Wagner and Bayreuth, Siegfried is virtually ignored, given but a marginal attention, with his sexual identity or the homosexual circle of artists he brought to the Festival little discussed. While the Richard Wagner Archives preserve and make public all his letters and writings, Siegfried's documents and private correspondence never made it there. Instead, they were given to and kept in total secrecy by Amélie, daughter of Verena Laffrentz-Wagner and still languish there. No one beyond her knows what is inside.

This opposition went so far as having Winifred object to Peter P. Pahl's starting a Siegfried Wagner Society in 1970's, as well as to his writing Siegfried's biography which, however, did appear later as *Siegfried Wagner, Genie im Schatten*.

All the above reinforces the aim of the exhibition to rescue the memory of Siegfried as a person, in a nonjudgemental way. On the other hand, his reputation as a musician depends on another set of values. What about his music making?

The efforts of Winifred paid off - very few of us ever listened to his music, either for lack of want or opportunities.

His operas were performed regularly in the first decade of 20th century, among them by Gustav Mahler in Vienna. In the 1920's they were championed in Germany as "Germanic contemporary" to counter the "degenerate" and "Jewish" music of the avant-garde. Today, nearly all of his works are available on CD's. In the words of Dr. Kevin Clarke, curator of the exhibition: "What I find most surprising in Siegfried Wagner's recordings is the casual and natural style of singing and orchestral playing - no bombast...It's almost as if Siegfried prefigured conductors such as Clemens Krauss or Pierre Boulez by 100 years. The two full cast recordings from Siegfried's Bayreuth - *Tristan* and *Tannhäuser* - present singers who are almost conversational. They never put pressure on their voices, they have crystal clear diction and they sound vocally young and expressive....Siegfried brought Fritz Busch and Arturo Toscanini to Bayreuth, not Hans Knappertbusch.... It's in total opposition to the Knappertbusch and Thielemann approach of later years".

The purpose of this exhibition was to attempt to undo all these injustices done to Siegfried Wagner's memory. To follow the track of his most auto biographical operas, to analyze his intimate relationship with Clement Harris, the English pianist and lover, his nexus with the nazi movement and the anti-Semitic circles. To do this it adopted an intentionally narrow point of view in looking at this family/clan. The liberating principle of it is that what was so assiduously covered or attempted to be hidden, here is carefully spelled out, whether as innuendo or as a fact.

Living under the shadow of the overwhelming reputation of his father, branded as a homosexual and having his memory and works intentionally suppressed by his widow while the rest of the family basked in a relentless attention, he at least deserves to be rescued from this near oblivion, this near anonymity, and given his due.

# WAGNER ONSTAGE

**Listings correct to . March 1, 2019**  
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## JANUARY 2019

03/01 Parsifal, Sofia  
 05/01 Das Rheingold, Chemnitz  
 06/01 Lohengrin, Bonn  
       Tristan und Isolde, Linz  
 08/01 Das Rheingold, Wien  
       Der Ring an einem Abend, Mainz  
 09/01 Das Rheingold, Pforzheim  
 10/01 Der fliegende Holländer, Firenze  
 11/01 Der fliegende Holländer, Dresden  
 12/01 Das Rheingold, Kassel  
       Die Walküre, Chemnitz  
       Die Walküre, Wien  
       Das Rheingold, Pforzheim  
 13/01 Tannhäuser, Berlin Deutsche Oper  
       Der fliegende Holländer, Firenze  
 15/01 Der fliegende Holländer, Firenze  
       Der fliegende Holländer, Dresden  
 16/01 Siegfried, Wien  
 17/01 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
       Tristan et Isolde, Montpellier  
       Lohengrin, Bonn  
       Der fliegende Holländer, Firenze  
 19/01 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
       Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,  
 Poznań  
       Der fliegende Holländer, Riga  
       Siegfried, Chemnitz  
 20/01 Tristan et Isolde, Montpellier  
       Götterdämmerung, |Wien  
       Tannhäuser, Berlin,  
       Deutsche Oper  
       Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,  
 Mannheim  
       Der fliegende Holländer,  
 Braunschweig  
 21/01 Der fliegende Holländer, |Zagreb  
 22/01 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
 23/01 Der fliegende Holländer, Zagreb  
 24/01 Der Ring an einem Abend,  
 Mannheim  
 25/01 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
       Das Rheingold, Pforzheim  
 26/01 Der fliegende Holländer, Zagreb  
       Götterdämmerung, Chemnitz  
       Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,  
 Poznań  
       Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,  
 Mannheim  
       Siegfried, Duisburg  
 27/01 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
       Tannhäuser, Tokyo  
       Das Rheingold, Chemnitz  
       Der fliegende Holländer für  
 Kinder, Lübeck  
       Der fliegende Holländer,  
 Braunschweig  
 29/01 Der fliegende Holländer, Zagreb  
 30/01 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
       Tannhäuser, Tokyo

## FEBRUARY 2019

01/02 Das Rheingold, Madrid  
       Parsifal, Sofia  
       Lohengrin, Bonn  
       Das Rheingold, Kiel  
 02/02 Der fliegende Holländer, Malmö  
       Tannhäuser, Tokyo  
       Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,  
 Mannheim  
       Der fliegende Holländer,  
 Braunschweig  
 03/02 Götterdämmerung, Karlsruhe  
       Siegfried, Duisburg  
       Tristan und Isolde, Linz  
 06/02 Tannhäuser, Tokyo  
       Der fliegende Holländer, Zagreb  
 08/02 Der fliegende Holländer, Malmö  
       Der Ring an einem Abend, Mainz  
 09/02 Tannhäuser, Tokyo  
 10/02 Das Rheingold, Kassel  
       Siegfried, Duisburg  
       Tristan und Isolde, Linz  
 12/02 Das Rheingold, Genève  
 13/02 Der fliegende Holländer|Malm,  
       Die Walküre, Genève  
 15/02 Siegfried, Genève  
 16/02 Der fliegende Holländer, |Malmö  
 17/02 Tannhäuser, Dresden  
       Götterdämmerung, Genève  
       Tannhäuser, Weimar  
       Lohengrin, |Praha  
 20/02 Parsifal, Melbourne  
 21/02 Der Ring an einem Abend,  
 Mannheim  
 22/02 Lohengrin, Praha  
       Der fliegende Holländer, Dresden  
       Parsifal, Melbourne  
 23/02 Lohengrin, Bonn  
 24/02 Lohengrin Praha  
       Der Ring an einem Abend, Essen  
       Parsifal, Melbourne  
 26/02 Der fliegende Holländer, Malmö,  
 28/02 Der fliegende Holländer,

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