

Wagner Scholar – Bayreuth Festspiele August 2015

Before I start my write-up regarding the Bayreuth Festspiele, I'd like to personally thank the Wagner Society of Scotland for their kind generosity and support making my trip as a Wagner Scholar possible. Not only was it an experience I will never forget but it also enhanced my professional outlook as a singer within the industry. More importantly it made me appreciate the legacy that Wagner left behind.

Bayreuth Festspielhaus

Upon arriving at the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth we were allowed to go inside and view the main foyer and orchestra pit. We were told about the acoustics of the theatre and why Wagner designed them the way he did in order to enhance his superb operas.

The orchestra pit differed from any pit I had seen at any other house. The pit was literally covered from the audience's view, not to hide the orchestra but for sound purposes. The pit is built on several different levels to accommodate the huge orchestra Wagner requires for his operas. The trombones are out of view of the conductor as he is raised several platforms above, and the string section is arranged slightly differently from those of what we would consider a 'normal' orchestra. Because of the conductor's position, it is nearly impossible for him to see the first violin section, therefore they are moved to where the second violin section would be so that he can conduct them more clearly.

Another point to make is that those that help run and maintain the Festspielhaus respect Wagner's wishes to keep the theatre as much in its original state as possible. Of course in Wagner's time there was little ventilation in the pit, and stage and auditorium as well as the pit can reach up to 45 degrees. This is why there are two alternating orchestras and why orchestra members are allowed to dress in light casual clothing so they can cope with the heat. It also explains why we only see the conductor at the end of the performance.

The theatre is built on a hollow floor, and the roof and pillars are also hollow to allow the sound to bounce off and resonate throughout the theatre. The theatre as a whole is plain and simple, not grand in décor or appearance but Wagner clearly built this theatre to accommodate his operas for acoustic purposes. Even those in the top Galleries would hear the smallest pin drop, as was clearly evident in the productions that I saw in the coming week.

Lohengrin

Lohengrin was one of my favourite productions of the week: the music, singing, orchestration, design, direction and concept were all fantastic. This could be because it was one of Wagner's more romantic operas and I was more familiar with the beautiful motifs that kept reappearing throughout.

For this production I was sitting in the Galleries, even though it was considered quite high and out of view, I could see and hear everything for the whole production. Wagner had really taken time to design the theatre; there was nowhere that was left with a completely obstructed view or anywhere that was hard of hearing.

The staging of this production was different but I found that the concept was perhaps better understood than that of Siegfried. The production was set in what looked like a testing laboratory and all chorus members were dressed as rats, who became more and more human in appearance and likeness throughout the opera.

The principals were dressed in normal attire and the two leading female roles in particular became more glamorous as the opera progressed, except that at the end, when Telramund's and Ortrud's evil schemes don't quite go to plan, Ortrud then appears quite disgruntled and slightly gone mad.

The music was sublime and the singers were never overpowered by the orchestra even in the fullest moments of orchestration; the same could be said about the other two productions.

Petra Lang (mezzo-soprano) was in my eyes a particular stand-out in this production; her voice carried with a beautiful and rich tone, yet with an evident blade that cut through both orchestral and entire ensemble parts. This isn't to say that the other singers were not of the same standard; they were all outstanding and all individual, especially Lohengrin sung by Klaus Florian Vogt, whose voice was so pure and angelic that it was quite a shock that it was different from other Wagnerian tenors in other productions.

There were elements of old and new in this production, and the music and singing were the highlights of the piece.

Siegfried

The orchestration, the direction and the singing were absolutely amazing, but clever as some of the set and staging were it was a somewhat strange and obscure production, very different from anything else I had ever seen before.

The design was particularly clever as the stage was on a revolve that spun a complete 360 degrees. One side was built like Mount Rushmore but with Russian dictators. The other side of the revolve was much like a cheaply lit town plaza with offstage rooms/shops. To show these rooms off-stage there were cameras placed around the room or filmed by a cameraman on foot. It was then broadcast on a large screen above the stage. This made the production seem more personable and less fantasy-like, as suggested in the original plot. That said, the Mount Rushmore set made it seem much more fantasy-like and the scaffolding that was placed around the entire mountain and the lighting really did it justice especially in the scene when Siegfried forged his sword.

Tristan und Isolde

Tristan und Isolde is one of Wagner's most challenging operas, requiring huge vocal stamina from the two name parts. I have to admit I did find myself sitting there with my jaw ajar as I was astounded by the sheer stamina of each singer and how they kept going.

I was sitting in the main part of the theatre for this production and the acoustics were quite different from sitting up in the Galleries. The slightest pin drop could be heard and the music was sublime throughout the entire opera. There were moments when I just closed my eyes and let myself be engulfed by Wagner's music, and to say I could do this at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus made it all the more surreal.

Stipendien Concert & Overall Experience

Bayreuth is a large yet quaint town and I was fortunate to be lodged with a lovely German family who were all musical and have been to the Festspiele regularly.

Our first day as I mentioned previously was taken up with meeting many of the other two hundred plus scholars from around the world and with a tour of the cleverly designed Festspielhaus.

During the course of the week not only did we see the three operas but also we were fortunate enough to explore Bayreuth and both the Wagner Museum and the Liszt Museum. The Wagner Museum was actually Wagner's late place of residence and it was wonderful to be able to say that I have actually set foot where Wagner lived and worked, not to mention the abundant masses of manuscripts, history and letters that were all in some way linked to Wagner himself.

It was lovely to see some of the other Stipendien/scholars singing in the concert, as it showed the performers at different stages in their careers and in their development as singers technically and dramatically. Katerina Wagner was also present to hear the singers. We all dined in one of the main halls another evening where I met more musicians and some lovely residents of Bayreuth.

I was sad to leave Bayreuth as I felt that I hadn't explored it enough and I was being rather greedy by the fact that I wanted to see another opera and stay longer, but with that said I am so very grateful for the Wagner Society of Scotland's generosity and scholarship.

To be able to say that I experienced the Bayreuth Festspiele first hand is something I will never forget. It has only enhanced my goal to explore Wagner's operatic repertoire all the more as a mezzo-soprano and perhaps to perform there one day in the future.

Thank you ever so much.

Kamilla Dunstan