

## Report on RWVI Venice, Italy 28 November – 1 December 2019

Founded in 1992, the Richard Wagner Verband Internationale (International Association of Wagner Societies) is a confederation of Wagner societies around the world from as far afield as New Zealand. Each year a Congress is held to report on the activities of the various societies, and to hold the AGM. The Wagner Society of Scotland was well-represented this time around, with six members attending, including Derek Williams (Chair and delegate), Committee Member Dale Bilsland (2nd delegate), Members Jan Conway, Robert McCutcheon, Natasha Billcliff and her partner. Notables who attended included Katharina Wagner and Eva Wagner-Pasquier, great granddaughters of Richard Wagner, and we had the opportunity to talk with them in the informal parts of the Congress, which they attended for the duration.

The hosting society had much at stake, with Venice having been badly flooded the month before, and flooded again after we left. Indeed, at one point there had been talk of postponing, or relocating the Congress. Even though we were deluged in rain on arrival, things settled down, and we were able to walk the streets of Venice freely, and visit the sights in between Congress events held primarily at the Palazzo Ca' Vendramin Calergi which houses the second largest Wagner museum in the world, and was the place where he died.

On our first night, we were treated to a 'Concerto per Cosima' at the meticulously restored Teatro La Fenice, that had been burned down in an arson attack in 1996. The rooms on every floor were masterpieces of 18<sup>th</sup> Century architecture, while the theatre afforded excellent views from most seating, although there were some restrictions in visibility from the side boxes. After an introduction by the outgoing RWVI president, Horst Eggers, the first part of the concert featured the Wagner Symphony in C, under the baton of Levente Kalman Török, a former Bayreuth Scholar 2015 of the ARW Venice. The second part featured the winner of the most recent RWVI International Singing Competition for Wagner Voices, Jessica Elevant. Jessica performed the *Wesendonck Lieder*, accompanied by the same orchestra. The opening dinner in 'Casa Wagner' - Ca' Vendramin Calergi concluded the evening.

Next morning at the Assembly of Delegates, a new board was elected, with Rainer Fineske declared the new president after a brief presentation by candidates for the position. Some of us went off sight-seeing, with all returning for luncheon at the historic dining rooms of the Ca' Vendramin Callergi. That afternoon, we attended 'Tribute to Wolfgang Wagner', which began with a lecture by Dr Oswald Bauer, and ended with a lengthy conversation between Katharina Wagner and journalist, Manuel Brug, about her relationship with her father. The session was simultaneously translated into several languages via provided headsets. It was quite odd to hear everyone at the Congress speaking German, only to go out into the streets, and hear everyone speaking Italian, reminding ourselves that we were of course, in Italy! In the evening, we were given a concert, 'Love and Death in Venice', where extracts from Wagner's diaries were read aloud by an actor.

The following morning, delegates had the opportunity to attend the formal opening of the exhibition 'Richard Wagner: l'ultimo soggiorno..' in the Richard Wagner Museum in Ca' Vendramin Calergi, housed in the rooms where he lived during his last visit to Venice and where he eventually died. After a unanimous motion to preserve the museum in Ca' Vendramin Calergi approved by the Delegates' assembly at the Budapest Congress, the RWVI had become one of the founding members. It was a truly moving experience to walk around the rooms where the master spent his final days, and to look out the window at the lawn leading to the canal where the Black Gondola came to take his body away, eventually to be buried at Wahnfried.

That evening saw a stunning performance of Verdi's *Don Carlo*, with excellent performances from all soloists and orchestra, again in the historic setting of Teatro La Fenice, whose acoustics amply supported the demands of the opera, delivering audio of great clarity and power.

On the last day of Congress, some of us attended St Mark's Basilica for the morning mass. While the grounds were dry on arrival, we had to walk across planks to exit the church, which is regularly subject to flooding.

Our last evening presented a memorable concert in the church of San Vidal by the local orchestra 'Interpreti Veneziani' founded and directed by Paolo Cognolato, Bayreuth Scholar 1992 of ARW Venice, which gave a first-class performance of works by Vivaldi, Mendelssohn, Wagner and Paganini. This was followed by the final dinner at the historic Conservatory of Music, where we were again honoured by the presence of the Wagner sisters, Katharina and Eva.

The next RWVI Congress was scheduled to have been held in Bonn from 23-27 September 2020, the 250th anniversary of Ludwig van Beethoven's birthday, however this has now been relocated to Berlin, January 2021 because of the Coronavirus pandemic lockdowns causing 10 of the Beethoven Congress events to be cancelled.

These conferences are of exceptional interest and quality, and I warmly encourage members to attend. I think I can speak for the six of us who attended this time, when I guarantee that you will not be disappointed!

**Derek Williams (Chair)**