

WAGNER SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND NEWSLETTER

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From the Chair *Derek Williams*

RWVI Congress 2024

After the cancellation of the October 2022 Madrid RWVI Congress owing to insufficient registrations post-Covid, the 2023 Congress was held in Brussels, after which it had been approved by the RWVI Presidium that the 2024 Congress would take place in London. However at the Brussels Congress AGM, it was announced by the RWVI President (Rainer Fineske) that owing to operational costs and organisational difficulties, the 2024 Congress would instead be held in Madrid in May, when a performance of *Die Meistersinger* was planned. This was hastily approved by the Assembly of Delegates. However, in February this year it was announced that Madrid was regrettably again cancelled, and that the RWVI Congress would move to Berlin. Needless to say, this was the subject of much discussion at this year's AGM, and concerns were also expressed regarding changes to the reservation system for the Congress, the AGM and opera bookings all to run through a travel agency, who have since announced their intention to sue the RWVI for losses allegedly incurred.



Outgoing RWVI President, Rainer Fineske addressing the Symposium



Nike Wagner addressing the Symposium



L>R: Derek Williams, Heike Maria von Joest, Rainer Fineske, Nike Wagner, Torsten Fineske, Harry Leutscher, Jo Cousins, Susan Vincent

There then followed the quinquennial election of the new President (Harry Leutscher) and a new Presidium, with only former RWVI President Selma Guðmundsdóttir from the outgoing committee standing again for election. I was also elected, so Scotland now has a direct voice on the RWVI board.

I would like to thank personally our former Chair, Dale Bilsland for first convincing me to attend the Innsbruck Congress back in 2017, where he introduced me to the movers and shakers at the RWVI.



The new RWVI Presidium 2024-2029

L>R: Esther Lobato, Christian Stürzl-Moitz, Derek Williams, Rainer Fineske (outgoing President), Karin Colpan, Thomas Winiarski, Michael Schmidt, Selma Guðmundsdóttir

Deutsche Oper Berlin

The new Presidium are acutely aware of the need to improve communications with member societies, all of whom are experiencing declining membership post-Covid. We must also find ways to communicate better with a younger demographic. Updates will be promulgated as the new board policies regarding communication, membership drive for younger members and reining in costs are progressively instantiated.

Deutsche Oper Berlin production of the *Ring*

The Stefan Herheim production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for Deutsche Oper Berlin conducted by Sir Donald Runnicles impressed greatly, not only in the superb singing by its fine cast and first class orchestra, conducted *from memory* by Sir Donald, but in its innovative staging centring on the theme of refugees, whose suitcases form the basis of the spectacular mobile set construction for the entire tetralogy. There is also a gutted grand piano centre stage for the entire production, which like the Ring itself, is a puppeteer of Power. Drapes feature heavily throughout the production, sometimes backdropping landscapes, other times resembling flames, through imaginative and vivid use of lighting.



Orchestra, Cast and Conductor take final bows after *Götterdämmerung*



Bows with Conductor, Sir Donald Runnicles after *Das Rheingold* at Deutsche Oper Berlin



Unlike the most recent controversial Bayreuth productions by Kastorf wherein oil substitutes for gold, and Schwarz, where a stolen child substitutes for gold, the Herheim *Ring* actually has a magical, glowing ring! The Rheingold Wotan, Iain Paterson, told me after the show that the battery-powered ring started burning his finger as it was over-heating - an occupational hazard of "the show must go on". As a modernist conception, while it differs from more traditional productions, the Herheim *Ring* is largely faithful to the narrative. Moreover, unlike at the two most recent Bayreuth Festspielhaus productions, there was no booing at any operas during the Berlin production. Indeed, at the final curtain, many patrons were upstanding with tears in their eyes. Wonderful also to see the entire orchestra assemble on stage to take their bow for the final curtain calls. The success of this *Ring*, and the absence of booing suggest that Bayreuth itself could benefit from a reimagining of Wagner's magnum opus along comparably different lines, that might help reverse the decline in audiences over the past decade.

Also present with me at the *Ring*, and at Congress, were Committee member Susan Vincent and London Wagner Society Secretary, Jo Cousins. We had a chance to catch up with the affable Sir Donald a couple times after the show, and when I expressed amazement at his having conducted the whole of *Das Rheingold* from memory, he nonchalantly explained, "You get to know it after a while"! We managed to socialise with the uber-friendly cast too, including Wotan, played by Scottish bass baritone Iain Paterson, and Alberich, played by the Hawaiian baritone, Jordan Shanahan.

You may have noticed from the recent announcement on our website, that the Society's Patron, Sir Donald Runnicles has kindly accepted our invitation to address the Society, without fee, at a public Interview and Recital at 2pm, Saturday afternoon, 24 August, the night after his Usher Hall concert, as a fundraiser during the Edinburgh Festival. We will soon be communicating more about this in a letter to members, but for now, please buy your tickets, and invite as many friends as you can! Many thanks to Events Organiser Susi Liles for setting this up.



L>R: Derek Williams, Susan Vincent, Sir Donald Runnicles

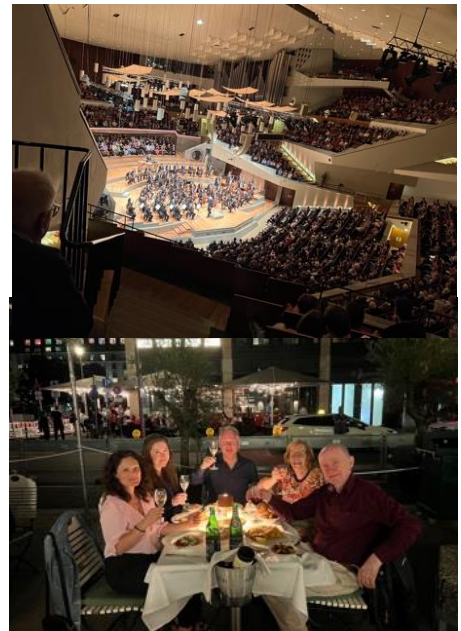


L>R: Harry Leutscher (new RWVI President) Derek Williams, Sir Donald Runnicles
at Deutsche Oper Berlin



L>R: Derek Williams, Susan Vincent Jordan Shanahan (Alberich), Iain Paterson (Wotan)

On our night off, Susan Vincent and I trotted off to see the Berlin Philharmonic under Sir Simon Rattle performing Bruckner 6 in their superb new auditorium. The acoustics are so perfectly rendered that the orchestra is rock-concert loud and crystal clear in every part of the hall, with no artificial amplification. After the concert, we reconnected with our pals for a bit of nightclubbing.



One of the nicest aspects of Congress is meeting up with friends, old and new, and with our new Presidium, there is much to look forward to on the Wagner horizon. I very much encourage members to consider attending future congresses - great music, great friends and great dining!

We have an exciting new season of talks starting 29 October. Please check the website for updates

L>R: Esther Lobato, Jo Cousins, Harry Leutscher, Susan Vincent, Derek Williams

Summer Course - BBC Broadcaster David Nice

'Sailing towards The Flying Dutchman'

Wagner's early operas and his first masterpiece

Eight Tuesdays 2.30-4.30pm, starting 6 August

Fee: £120 for the whole term of eight two-hour classes on Zoom

Email: david.nice@usa.net ASAP to confirm a place

Tannhäuser, A Personal View by Joy Millar

Royal Opera House 2023

Cosima Wagner's diary entry from Venice for 23rd January 1883 –

'Chat in the evening brought to end by R. with the 'Shepherd's Song' and 'Pilgrims Chorus' from Tannhäuser. He says he still owes the world another Tannhäuser.'

Whatever Wagner's view of his masterpiece may have been, it is greatly loved by his followers worldwide, evoking some of the most magical and enduring music. It brought back memories of my journey to Eisenbach, to present to the Wagner Museum there John Millar's copy of Lady Burrell's book on Wagner, and to be present at a wonderful performance of the Tannhäuser opera by the Meinigen opera company, a wonderful performance in the Minstrel Hall of the Wartburg castle - a wonderful, magical experience - to listen to opera in the castle which inspired Wagner to write the work. Since then, I have only heard Tannhäuser in Bayreuth and have experienced German theatre at its most outrageous at many strange and thought-provoking productions, so it was with great anticipation and a little apprehension that I attended the third revival of Tim Abery's production of Tannhäuser at the Royal Opera House.

The original performance fronted a stellar cast including Semyon Poichkov conducting Johan Botha, Sophie Koch, Eva-Maria Westbrook and Christian Gerhaher, who won the Olivier Award for his performance of Wolfram. The present cast looked just as impressive although Ekaterina Gubanova did not sing at this performance. I have seen brilliant performances several times; in this present production at the Bayreuth Festival Eva Planka sang Venus very competently in her place. By the time of this performance Stefan Vinke had abandoned the role through illness, his place being taken by Austrian tenor Norbert Ernst who started nervously but worked his way through the music drama to produce a very acceptable 'Rome Narrative' in Act iii. Lisa Davidson starred as Elisabeth. As usual, both critics and the public applauded the performance and saluted her magnificent voice. I alone, it seems, have reservations about both her voice and acting. I have seen her in Fidelio (Covent Garden), Lohengrin and Tannhäuser at Bayreuth more than any other contemporary female singer. She sings roles with flawless precision (although unpleasantly loud even at Covent Garden where the acoustics can be less than perfect), but I find her dramatically wooden and unappealing in this era of wonderful actors/singers such as Karita Mattila, Asmik Grigorian and Waltroud Meier. The production I found dull, depressing and without direction and by the end I craved the dwarf, the black drag act and the vitality of the Bayreuth production of Tobias Kratzer.

Bayreuth Tannhäuser 16 August 2023

I have been visiting the Bayreuth Festival for forty years and will continue to attend while I can still travel, but how the mighty festival has fallen! Once you waited ten years for a ticket; now, with a few exceptions you can buy them on the day, and next year Bayreuth is offering Ring Cycle tickets at cut prices. Parsifal - a new production of course - was sold out as was Tristan & Isolde with only three performances, but the star of the festival was Tannhäuser. Usually I despair at the extreme new productions at Bayreuth - Hollander with no ships/no sailors and both the story beginning and ending changed. Parsifal - the new production - messy, muzzy and dare I say boring. However, with Tobias Kratzer's production of Tannhäuser they have a winner. With a Burger King van, clowns, a dwarf, a black drag act and the Bayreuth police. The omens were not good but the performance was exciting, different, dynamic and dramatic. I'm sure Wagner would have loved it - the audience certainly did, and the festival organiser is extending its run this year so I shall certainly be applying for tickets. The singers were also outstanding. Tannhäuser - Klaus Florian Vogt - dominated the stage with his performance (I think he has at last realised he is a star); Ekaterina Gubanova was an exciting, brilliant Venus; Elisabeth Teige a gentle well sung Elisabeth. Gunther Grossbeck, who has a beautiful bass voice, sang a powerful Landgraf, and Markus Einke a rich warm baritone made a sympathetic Wolfram. The orchestra and chorus as usual were magnificent under the conducting of Nathalie Stutzmann.

March 2024 . . I now have my tickets, I await the joy of Tannhäuser again.

Recent WSoS Lectures

Notes from our Secretary, John Anderton

19th November 2023: Richard Austin - 'Karl Ritter – Wagner's contact in Zurich'

Richard outlined the relationship between Wagner and Karl Ritter whom he met in Zurich in 1858. Their relationship developed and declined in various ways over the years and involved among others von Bulow, Liszt, Feuerbach, and the involvement in various operas including Lohengrin, Die Meistersinger, Siegfried, The Ring, and Tristan und Isolde and Parisfal. During this time there was a close relationship between Wagner and Ritter, with Wagner developing a dependence upon the young Ritter which does not appear to have blossomed for various reasons including Ritter's marriage.

Richard played extracts from the above operas and was warmly thanked for his scholarship into Ritter's life and work which many admitted to be an aspect of Wagner's life which had previously been unknown to them.

17th December 2023: Hanna de Bruin - 'Recollections of Bayreuth 2023' and AGM, with recital of Wesendonck Lieder

Hanna shared her experiences from attending the Bayreuth Festspiel as the Bayreuth Stipendiatin 2023 of the Wagner Society of Scotland. In addition she presented the Wesendonck lieder by R. Wagner, the song cycle she has conducted research on this past year. Hanna is a mezzo soprano and graduate of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

21st January 2024: Katy Hamilton - 'The curious case of Brahms, Wagner and the Wesendoncks'

Dr. Katy Hamilton is one of the UK's most sought-after speakers on music, providing talks for a host of organisations including the Southbank Centre, BBC Proms, Garsington Opera and Edinburgh International Festival. In addition, she regularly writes programme notes for the Salzburg Festival, Wigmore Hall and Philharmonia Orchestra, and is a frequent contributor to BBC Radio 3. Katy is an editor and contributor to several scholarly books on the music of Johannes Brahms, and has also published widely on the music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

25th February 2024 Michael Downes 'Further reflections on the Ring'

Following his talk to the Society last year, Michael went on to describe further aspects of the Ring's creation as described in his book 'The Story of the Century; Wagner and the Creation of the Ring' to be published at the end of 2024.

Chapter 5 covers the role of King Ludwig from 1869 and the performance of Das Rheingold in Munich in 1869 under Hans Richter. The possibility of an opera house at Bayreuth was mooted in 1871 with funding from Wagner Societies, and Ludwig always a major contributor.

Chapter 6 describes the artistic challenges of the now completed Bayreuth with rehearsals closely supervised by Wagner. Despite enthusiastic press reports Wagner felt that the venture had been a failure.

The final chapter describes Wagner's considerable influence in launching his operas world-wide including the USA.

24th March 2024: Flora Willson - 'Wagner, Meyerbeer and the problem of commercial success'

Dr Willson, senior lecturer in Music at King's College London, illustrated how both composers sought to promote their operas in Paris with variable success, with Meyerbeer being initially more successful. Wagner became linked to the communist manifesto of Karl Marx and Engels and eventually surpassed Meyerbeer but was always short of funds and composed Tristan und Isolde to bail out his finances.

Questions followed on the role of Massenet and Spontini, Wagner's musical memory, spectacle, and the length of 'runs', and Flora was warmly thanked for an interesting and illuminating talk.

28th April 2024: Katherine Fry - 'An Exploration of Wagner's London Journeys'

Dr Fry, Research Fellow in musicology at Kings College London, covered four main themes:

1. Wagner's impression of London In 1877 with Cosima, 'a vast city' with 'steam and fog', little music and various venues including Albert Hall. Here he composed the 'Rule Britannia' overture.
2. Wagner as conductor. Invited by the London Philharmonic, Wagner's conducting technique and communication with the orchestra was not good, and not well received by critics.
3. London promotions of Wagner's operas was all helped by George Eliot, Karl Klindworth (scores), and Edward Dannreuther (Working Men's Society). The London Wagner Society was launched.
4. Concert Hall Music. His Royal Albert Hall performances, presented as 'Bayreuth on Tour', were generally not successful.

There was a full and informative discussion and Katherine was thanked by the Chair for an informative and fascinating account of an important contribution to Wagner's operatic experience.

26th May: Professor David Trippett - 'Wagner's Melodies, Bellini's Sinnlichkeit'

David Trippett is Professor of Music at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow at Christ's College, and the recipient of several music awards. Most recently, his edited volume 'Wagner in Context' is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

This talk focused on Wagner's relation to Italy and Italian culture, and set out from the myth that (unlike Rossini) Wagner was unable to compose true melody, despite placing this at the centre of his ideal for expression in Opera and Drama. In particular, he discussed a little-known aria Wagner composed for Norma, comparing its musical ideas with Bellini's original, and placing this in the context of musical freedoms that could extend across national outlooks. Arising from this, the talk considered the wider influence of Italianità on Wagner's concept of sensuality (*Sinnlichkeit*), and it places this in the context of debates that continue to this day about Wagner's cultural identity, asking why national categories of Italian / German continue to provoke divergent responses from scholars.

The Edinburgh Players Opera Group

***Götterdämmerung*. Sunday 29th September 2024**

Portobello Town Hall, Portobello High St, 10.30 – 16.45 (with two intervals)

The Edinburgh Players Opera Group is performing the final opera in the Ring Cycle in September. The Wagner Society of Scotland is sponsoring them again and we are all looking forward to what is always an exciting and rewarding experience. The details are above, and an excellent cast has been engaged. A great deal of work and effort goes into these performances and the completion of any 'Ring' cycle, by professionals and amateurs, is an enormously satisfying experience for players and audience alike.

All lovers of Wagner's music should take the chance to experience this amazing performance for a fraction of the usual ticket price. We hope to see you there. *Friends and family welcome!*

Ian McLennan

WAGNERISM in the Twenty First Century A Book Review by Dilip Roy FRAS

Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and now Wagnerism: a 19th century icon has gone on to achieve a phenomenal cult status in the 21st century. "Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music" is written by an American music scholar Alex Ross and was published in 2021. Ross studied music at Harvard and writes regularly for The New Yorker magazine, and is also a Pulitzer Prize Nominee. This 769 page book reads like an encyclopedia although an encyclopedia on Wagner was published in the bicentenary year 2013 with contribution by various Wagnerian pundits but this book, written on an epic scale, supersedes all the previous books written on Wagner.

Ross cleverly dissects every aspects of Wagner's work his involvement in Art, Politics, Music and Philosophy and clarifies some of the myths associated with Wagner the he was the most antisemite person, but according to Ross he was the most liberal of all the artists of the time. Wagner is recognized as the most widely influential figure in the history of music today, he is the most popular icon the world over including in Southeast Asia apart from India where Western classical music did not make a great deal of impact except Beethoven and Mozart, but that too in a Parsee community who took European classical music seriously and the product was Mehli Mehta, and his now world famous son Zubin Mehta. However, Satyajit Ray in his adult life became a serious admirer of Western classical music thanks to his parsee doctor friend who had a wide collection of Western classical music and Ray would be invited regularly at his residence.

Wagner's colossal creations such as The Ring Cycle, Tristan and Isolde, Lohengrin and Parsifal were models of formal daring, mythmaking, erotic freedom and mysticism. In Wagnerism Ross restores the magnificent confusion of what it means to be a Wagnerian and his admirers included artists, intellectuals, philosophers and Nobel Laureates. Wagner's many-sided legacy will remain for a long time to come, in my personal opinion, forever. Wagner will be remembered as the Shakespeare of music.

RICHARD WAGNER : The Emperor of European Music Dilip Roy FRAS

"The oldest, truest, most beautiful of music, the origin to which alone our music owes its being is the human voice." (Richard Wagner)

Nineteenth century Germany saw the emergence of intellectuals both in Arts and Sciences and among them was a Renaissance man called Richard Wagner who was born in one of Germany's cultural cities, Leipzig, on 22nd May 1813. Leipzig's university is also known for its study of Indology like several other major universities of Germany. It is important to note that Wagner's brother in law Prof. Herman Brockhaus was the head of Sanskrit faculty under whom many well-known Indologists studied, among them a French Indologist called Eugene Burnouf who later published a six hundred page volume called "History of Indian Buddhism". The book also influenced Wagner and was planning to work on Buddhist opera called Die Sieger (The Victors), but unfortunately he could not complete it due to ill health.

Richard Wagner was a genius who combined all the faculties of the arts. Besides being a composer of operas, he was an architect who supervised the building of his opera house in Bayreuth. He was a dramatist who also wrote libretto for his music drama operas, an essayist, a philosopher in his own right and a prolific writer of prose works who wrote on subjects such as "Artwork of the future," "Pilgrimage to Beethoven," "Opera and Drama," "Religion and Art". These are recognized as some of his important works. Wagner also invented a brass musical instrument called TUBA which came to be known as "Wagner Tuba" which he commissioned specifically to be used for his four part sixteen hour epic opera, the "Ring of the Nibelung. In one of Wagner's major prose works, (Die Wibelungen, World History as told in Saga) written in 1848 in which he clearly states that the entire European race including that of the "Nibelungs" originates from India. This belief was further established by scholars of Indology in 19th century Germany such as Herder, Novalis, Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel that Germany's cultural origins actually stems from India.

Wagner influenced whole generation of composers who came after him such as Bruckner, Holst, Mahler, Schoenberg, Stenhammar, Strauss and Zemlinsky, and also went on to influence intellectuals such as Nobel laureates Thomas Mann, G.B. Shaw, and W.B. Yeats. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche described Wagner

as a “volcanic eruption of the total undivided artistic capacity of nature itself,” while Thomas Mann hailed him as “probably the greatest talent in the entire history of European art.” The Russian philosopher and an intellectual writer Leo Tolstoy well known for his writing “War and Peace,” a panoramic epic of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia, was one among the great admirers of Wagner. The 19th century French impressionist artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir did the oil portrait of Wagner on canvas at Palermo in 1882 a year before Wagner’s death in 1883, the painting which now hangs in the famous Louvre museum in Paris. Such was the admiration by Renoir for Wagner.

According to World renowned Maestro Zubin Mehta, “Nine Symphonies of Beethoven and the Operas of Richard Wagner are the founding pillars of modern European classical music.”

PHILOSOPHY IN RICHARD WAGNER OPERAS

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) in 19th century Germany revolutionized the concept of philosophical thinking throughout Western Europe and beyond through his epic writing “The World as Will and Interpretation.” The Latin book *Upanishad* published in 1802 by the French Indologist Anquetil-Duperron was the greatest influence on Schopenhauer’s philosophical thought. He called the opening up of Sanskrit literature “the greatest gift of our century,” and envisaged that the philosophy and knowledge of Upanishad would become the cherished faith of the West. Most noticeable, in the case of Schopenhauer’s work, was the significance of Chandogya Upanishad and Mandukya Upanishad which are mentioned throughout *The World as Will and Interpretation*. The composition of Upanishads dates back to 1800 BCE. Schopenhauer also went on to influence philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein, scientists Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrodinger, writers Leo Tolstoy and Hermann Hesse, and composers such as Brahms, Mahler, Schoenberg and above all Richard Wagner. In India too there were admirers like Shri Aurobindo, Tagore and Vivekananda who were inspired by Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

Although Wagner was familiar with India’s classical literature like Ramayana, Mahabharata and the works of Kalidasa, the major turning point in Wagner’s creative life was in the mid 1850’s when he embraced both the philosophical writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and religious insights of ancient India. Wagner writes in his autobiography *Mein Leben* (My Life) he discovered the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer by reading his epic work “World as Will and Interpretation” in 1854 he read the book four times and that he was so much elevated, that in the following year he wrote to his composer friend Franz Liszt in 1855 praising “the most oldest and most sacred religion known to mankind”. For Wagner, Schopenhauer’s philosophy came to him as a gift from heaven. Schopenhauer’s aesthetics also influenced Wagner’s thinking that music was the ultimate soul of expression which is clearly evident in Wagner’s major operas such as Lohengrin, Tristan and Isolde, The Ring of the Nibelungs and Parsifal are clearly consistent with Indian thought. In the Ring Cycle his epic opera to date in it he made use of comparative mythologies that of India, Greece and Germany (Norse) the opera Ring Cycle which is made up of four parts is an allegory, and tells of the struggle for power between the Nibelung dwarfs, the Giants and the Gods.

The first Richard Wagner society was founded in Mannheim, Germany in 1871 since then The International Association of Wagner Societies has more than 26,000 members in 147 societies which belong to International Association of Wagner Societies around the world. The number of groups under the organization’s auspices has expanded considerably in the last fifty years. Today Wagner Societies can be found in all parts of the world including South East Asia in cities like Bangkok, Shanghai and Tokyo also Cape Town in South Africa besides American and European countries. During Wagner’s Bicentenary year in 2013, my own letter under the title “Eastern philosophy and Wagner” was published by notable classical music magazine *Gramophone* from London.

Wagner’s opera house in Bayreuth has become a pilgrimage for the Wagner devotees and they congregate from all over the world as the annual festival takes place in the months of July and August and the tickets are sold out months in advance. Bayreuth is also the place where Wagner’s family lived in a house called Wahnfried it also has a library and a museum. The library has a section of ancient books on Indian literature.

“There are three different types of people who take interest in me, if I am correct: those who know my music, (and they are rare), those who do not know it but love it and those who hate it without knowing it.”
(Richard Wagner)

(Dilip Roy is a researcher on cultural subjects and is a Fellow of Royal Asiatic Society of UK. Mr. Roy is an avid collector of classical records among his proud possession is a three CD sets of Upanishads with an introduction by Prof. Julius Lipner and slokas rendered in a classical style by veteran vocalist Pandit Jasraj)

Longborough Festival 2024 – ‘DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN’ Ian McLennan

‘A Nugget of Rheingold in the Cotswolds’

Having endured several different opera productions over the past few years where designers and directors have wanted to say much more about themselves than the opera on display, we had given up hope of finding any ‘Ring’ production that set out to tell the complicated story in a clear way and allow the music to produce an emotional response from the audience. We have seen the ‘chair’ Ring in Dresden and we watched the ‘oil (black gold)’ version from Bayreuth. These productions concentrated on subsidiary themes in Wagner’s work, often to its great detriment. (The current version in Bayreuth seems to be particularly grim!)



Longborough Opera House

So off we went on our very first visit to Longborough. Our first view of the theatre, which is a relatively simple affair (a converted chicken shed) with a subterranean Bayreuth-like pit, also gave us no idea of what to expect. Before Rheingold started, we wondered whether this was all going to be a mistake. The clever thing about Longborough is that they know all this and put all their efforts into producing the highest quality performances they can. Longborough presents its version following Wagner’s stage directions and intentions. The result was that this was one of the best (if not THE best) production we have ever seen of the Ring Cycle (and we have seen a few!). There was simple and effective staging (with very imaginative back projections) which allowed the emphasis to be on the text, the singing and playing. Everyone involved understood the story and the whole idea behind why it was composed in the first place. There was joy in the expressions of the singers throughout and it was clear they all believed in the production values.

The end of *Götterdämmerung* was innovative and uplifting. The best we have ever seen! Special mention of a few people (but they were all good with no weaknesses!): Anthony Negus (Conductor), Lee Bisset (Brünnhilde), Bradley Daley (Siegfried), Julian Close (Hagen) and lots more!

We could write pages, but suffice to say, we will be back!

IFMcL – 23.06.2024

REVIEW OF LOHENGRIN AT OPERA SOFIA BULGARIA DIRECTED BY PLAMEN KARTALOFF Susi Liles

I very much enjoyed this production which was a breath of fresh air after some of the extreme Regietheatre we see these days. I thought the production was visually very strong.

During the prelude there was a large visual representation of a Grail, which was made out of lights. Knights of the Grail dressed in robes raised their chalices.

A 'tree of life' was the main part of the scenery on stage. People emerged from the tree and Lohengrin arrived by climbing steps at the back of the tree. So Lohengrin was in an elevated position at times, which certainly aided him to project his voice well. Feathers fell from the sky before we saw the wings of the Swan descend. The tree was used



The Opera House, Sofia

very cleverly and later became the background for the bridal chamber. During the final scene as Lohengrin and Elsa parted the tree was split in half.

Bandalovska initially did not project her voice well, but she very quickly then did so. Costadin Andreev was a solid Lohengrin. Ortrud (Gabriela Georgieva) was the star of the show - she was on fire. The audience reacted with spontaneous applause on several occasions, which for me interrupted the flow a little. This is likely due to the fact that historically Italian opera was favoured in Sofia, where of course applauding after an aria would be acceptable. It has been Plamen Kartaloff who has promoted Wagner productions on Sofia.

BEING IN SOFIA DURING THE WAGNER FESTIVAL

Bulgaria has always had a strong tradition of singing. Under communism the funding of the Arts was massively promoted. Indeed the opera house in Sofia was built during the communist period. State funded choirs formed a significant part of People's social life. It was the "Ministry for the People's Enlightenment", and later the "Directorate for People's Culture" that controlled the Arts. Religion was not encouraged by the communist government, so perhaps this is one of the reasons why Wagner was not played so much during this period.

It is very warm in Sofia in June (around 36 degrees), and pretty warm in the opera house too. Unlike in the UK the audience was not a sea of grey hair, there were quite a few young people too. I also saw two children in the audience. We met people from around the world in the intervals - eg USA, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and the UK.

Sofia has that delightful, slightly run-down Eastern European look. There are many cobbled streets, the pavements are uneven, and steps often broken. There are plenty of quirky restaurants and cafes. The streets in Sofia are lined with trees some of which give out a beautiful scent. One notices immediately the bird song even in the city. Bulgaria does actually have much greater biodiversity than the UK. I got an App called BirdNET which records bird song then analyses it and tells you what birds the birds are that you heard. On a table outside a city centre restaurant on the tram route I recorded the bird song, and the App told me they were swallows.

If you enjoy history there is no shortage of it here. The Metro station Serdika (Serdika being the Roman name for Sofia) in the city centre is like a whole museum, and even has a Roman road going through it. There are many possibilities to take trips to see Thracian tombs, for example.

There are also many old churches and monasteries to visit, some with 10th Century frescoes. Icons are popular here, and there is an exhibition of icons dating back to the 15th century in the crypt of the Aleksandur Nevski cathedral.

There is some beautiful unspoiled countryside around Sofia in the Vitosha mountains. Of course there are the usual art galleries and museums. One thing that concerned me before arriving in Sofia was the reports



From left: Malcom & Susi Liles, Jan Conway, Natasha Billcliff, Donald Maclean



Lohengrin



of stray dogs, and in particular packs of stray dogs in the city. After a few days I have seen no stray dogs in the city centre at all. I just saw one stray dog from the tram in the outskirts of the city. One other thing is that in Bulgaria shaking your head means yes, and nodding means no. This has the potential to cause considerable confusion! Certainly, Sofia is a lovely place to be based for a Wagner festival.



The Roman amphitheatre in Plovdiv, Bulgaria
(performance of *Turandot*)



The Society's aim is to promote the knowledge and appreciation of the life & works of Richard Wagner
The Wagner Society of Scotland is registered as a Scottish Charity No. SC028209

Find out more at <https://wagnerscotland.net>

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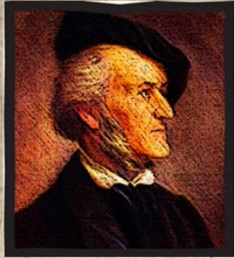
Please direct any newsletter correspondence to newsletter@wagnerscotland.net.

The Wagner Society of Scotland is a member of the [International Association of Wagner Societies](#)
(*Richard-Wagner-Verband International*, RWVI).

We warmly congratulate our Chair, Dr Derek Williams, on being elected to the Presidium of the 26,000-strong RWVI. With a board of just ten persons, this is a great honour to Derek, and well deserved. Well done, sir!



WAGNER SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND



Interview & Recital

Saturday 2pm 24 August 2024

Live Event

Sir Donald Runnicles - piano
Thomas Lehman - baritone

"The unforgettable performances (...) marked one of Scotland's proudest periods in orchestra history."
-- THE GUARDIAN

"Runnicles kept the orchestral colors shimmering in an ultra-subtle mist."
-- WASHINGTON CLASSICAL REVIEW

"Lehman brought an understated emotional sincerity to the role with a light but rich timbre, effortlessly filling the Usher Hall."
-- THE GUARDIAN



Held at Greenbank Parish Church Braidburn Terrace, Edinburgh EH10 6ES
(Take the No 5 Bus from Edinburgh CBD)

£25 (£20 WSoS members)*

www.wagnerscotland.net
www.donaldrunnicles.org
07857602004

*Students are eligible for the Member rate by joining the Society. WSoS Membership is free for students.

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Thanks to Robert Brady for creating the artwork for this campaign