

AUTUMN NEWSLETTER 2019

Dear Member,

We have already started our autumn series of lectures with an excellent talk by Michael Lee. Our next meeting will be on Monday October 21st when Adrian LeHarivel returns to speak to us on “Wagner & the Myths of the Rhine”. We are very grateful to Elaine Padmore, former artistic director of Wexford Opera, Royal Danish Opera & the Royal Opera House Covent Garden who has agreed to extend her visit to Ireland for Wexford Festival Opera in order to attend our meeting on November 4th next. She will speak to us on “Opera at the helm: my years as director of opera at Covent Garden & The Royal Danish Opera”. Elaine has a lot of experience in programming Wagner operas and the only Wagner opera she has not programmed during these years is Die Feen.

The next Society trip is to Amsterdam on November 16th to see Die Walkure directed by Pierre Audi and conducted by Marc Albrecht.

If you have any ideas for talks or activities for the Society, please let a member of the committee know. Finally, I ask you to encourage your friends who have an interest in music and opera to join our Society. They are welcome to attend one of our meetings in order to get to know the Society.

Regards
Veronica

NOT A SWAN TO BE SEEN-MUSINGS OF A BAYREUTH NEWBIE ANDREW PERCIVAL (SELF-CONFESSED WAGNER ATHEIST)

There were supposed to be two newbies making their Bayreuth debuts last night (August 14th 2019: myself and Anna Netrebko) in the event only one of us turned up so what promised to be a very special occasion indeed became inevitably demoted in expectation.

This was my first and very possibly only visit to Wagner’s great Festspielhaus, created expressly for the optimal public presentation of his own masterworks with distractions reduced to their absolute minimum and huge care expended upon balanced acoustics.

It seemed likely that one of the stars of my evening was likely to be the theatre itself and so it proved. Bayreuth operates to its own highly individual presentational method: performances begin on the stroke of four o’clock and when we found ourselves finally walking back down the green hill at the conclusion of the proceedings, we calculated that we had been up in Valhalla for something of the order of five-and-a-half-hours: intervals are a regulation sixty minutes in duration



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which permits ample reflection time for the mellifluous sounds and memorable stage pictures which have gone before and as the possibility of indulging in the customary refreshment opportunities-with the unusual and highly popular addition of “festival bratwurst” or to dawdle through the gardens and statuary which pepper the green hill replete with their commemorations of legendary Wagnerians past and present...or to browse the German-language operatic books (including a new biography of Frieda Leider) and wallow in the historical atmosphere which undeniably permeates the entire place. Snappy brass fanfares played live on the outside balcony keep you in touch with reality by proclaiming the imminent recommencement of worship and ensure that you don’t commit the cardinal sin of returning late to the auditorium. In any metropolitan city, all of this might have been deemed an unnecessary temporal inconvenience: but here it only adds to the ultimate respect which is accorded to this bizarre ritualistic experience. This is the first opera house I’ve visited which required me to prove my identity by showing my passport when entering the building although the attendant seemed much bemused by the appropriate genius of my surname at a Wagner theatre! Inside this eccentric building you’re immediately struck by the lack of aisles and emphasis on the serious nature of the task we have all gathered to witness. Sightlines are exceptional even from the (very) cheap seat up in the gallery and in spite of the highly reflective surfaces throughout its compass, with loud climaxes never thundering too loud nor the softest pianissimo ever completely lost- it’s drastically different from other theatres due no doubt in large part to the cowl which extends over the entire orchestra pit with musicians “stacked up” on three levels beneath it. The mellow, ethereal, balanced sound which results made me dream of hearing the works of other composers in this disarmingly balance acoustic-something which will, of course, never be allowed to occur! Lohengrin probably represents the limits of my Wagnerian tolerance and is a piece I like and know well from multiple recordings down the ages: but the clarity with which one can discern the layered subtleties of the maestro’s orchestral textures under live conditions took me aback somewhat-it takes time to adjust to the sonic clarity of the venue: you begin to mistrust your own ears-wondering how anything can sound so richly even and beautiful! This was clearly Wagner’s intention with his theatre but it can be disconcerting. The Bayreuth Festival has pioneered a modern stage performance style which is ostensibly at odds somewhat with what the building was designed to present (it’s “excused”), in the display’s at Wagner’s Wahnfried as an attempt to distance the festival from its historical associations with National Socialism, but I’m not sure I buy that; happily this Lohengrin steered a course that stopped short of recent times and despite a few jarring on-stage visuals (anything resembling a swan was replaced by electric lights down a wire!) proved high on both spectacle and theatricality (I particularly enjoyed



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Lohengrin's duel with Telramund, conducted on flown wires above the stage) just as the old maestro might have wished and intended. I've never been one to follow Wagner singers- who's and who's out: so on this occasion I'd only heard one of our principal artists before. And that nearly fifteen years ago as Orombello (I Lombardi): Piotr Beczala only added this role to his eccentrically broad repertoire a year or two ago but with it he has finally found his true métier: Lohengrin is a huge sing, particularly the final act and while he's certainly no Heldemtenor in the traditionally accepted sense, this particular role seems to fit him like a glove: he sang lyrically throughout deploying plangent tone and great musical sensitivity, nor was he lacking at all in ardent power at the very top of the role's compass when required. Above all, he sounded both heroic and at his ease all evening and cut a confident romantic figure on stage- whilst it's difficult to imagine him tackling Tristan or Siegfried, what more can you ask for in a Grail Knight. Without question, a Lohengrin for our times. Ivan Kozlovsky would be have been proud of him! Other roles appeared to be cast form particular strength too, Tomas Konieczny as Telramund displayed a consistently raspy, resonant baritone, his voluminous tone sailing easily over the top of any amount of orchestral texture- ably matched by Georg Zeppenfeld as an unusually lively, agile Koenig Heinrich (always exciting to hear a bass with a good confident top on his voice) Ortrud's punchy music was delivered with great gusto by the diminutive Elena Pankratova who is clearly a voice to reckon with: indeed I got the distinct feeling that these represented what must be the cream-of-the-crop of current Wagnerian singers. Egil Silins made much of the Heerrufer's pronouncements and was well matched for vocal power with his colleagues. Only Anette Dasch as our replacement Elsa fell short of the anticipated level: there's a disjoint at the top of her voice that disconnects the registers (maybe age and wear are telling) and an occasional uncertainty of attack that fell on the ears like a compromise- particularly when heard in this beautiful acoustic- merciless to voices that display any hint of lack of focus: not that this served to deter her huge cohort of fans who were clearly present in numbers and gave her a rapturous reception at the end of the evening. But for me the real heroes of the occasion were unquestionably the chorus, over a hundred in number and singing with an evenness and eloquence that one would have trouble finding elsewhere, they filled this huge space with vocal precision and personality such that I have seldom experienced before. It's difficult to believe that they perform together for just these few weeks each year. Christian Thielmann, local hero and arch-Wagnerite drove the piece forward with great pace and energy. Despite initial misgivings this ended up being a super special night for me and for Wagner too. If Anna had turned up for her debut too, it would probably have been one for the ages. Will I return? Hmm... With the right cast, piece and production I's certainly be interested- who would'nt with such a beautifully appropriate venue ...If



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only one could guarantee access to tickets. For those craving more context, there is the Wagner walk, from the town centre all the way up the Green Hill with quarter sized effigies of the great man himself, arms outstretched beckoning you to engage with locations that punctuate his association with Bayreuth. There is also the stark angularity of the fully restored Wahnfried, Wagner's house which is part of the required pilgrimage and contains multiple relics of the great man and his penchant for floppy velvet hats: he was clearly a person with strong views on his own self-image.

But there are other attractions in Bayreuth which crave the attention of the non-cult inducted Wagnerite-a charming Baroque theatre (Marschner's *Der Freischütz*) in which I passed a magical morning and the jewel in the crown, the small but completely overwhelming Franz Liszt Museum- Liszt was a curious musical figure, one existing on the very peripheries of high level musical performance, way beyond the limits of his own career as both a pianist and composer: but his family associations with the Wagner's meant he became a conduit between the enclosed cult-like world of the Wagner's and the wider European musical scene. He was also a child prodigy, and by inference exposed to a huge multiplicity of operatic experiences. The museum preserves his associations with both composers and other performing musicians during an important developmental time in musical history and sends one back to the operatic transcriptions for piano which he made over his long life. Here was someone uniquely well placed to observe changing musical fashion. It stirred the heartstrings. To have Lohengrin offered up so well with such love and care for its music and theatricality...and to experience such other generous delights at Bayreuth has to offer surprised me greatly. I feel both enriched and uplifted by the whole adventure. Not for the first time is the guiding hand of King Ludwig II of Bavaria to be felt on the tiller: without his intervention we would all have been much the poorer. It's no accident that his bust remains well positioned prominently in front of Richard Wagner's house.

THE RING IN BUDAPEST 2019-TIM KING

The Budapest Wagner Days in June are well-known to several members of the Wagner Society and I learnt about them from the enthusiastic reports of a trip organised by the Society a few years ago. Having lived there for more than three years around the turn of the Millennium, Mary and I thought it would be fun to go back, and on learning that there were to be concert performances of two Ring cycles each performed over four nights in June, this seemed an ideal opportunity.



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From the reports I had gathered that it was not performed in either of the two opera houses or the main concert hall, and therefore assumed that it would be in the rather soulless Congress Centre on the Buda side of the Danube where large concerts were sometimes held. I was wrong. In 2005, a new arts complex known as Müpa was opened in the southern part of the city, and in 2006, the conductor, Adam Fischer, began the annual Wagner Festival. I do not know how much the scheduling has evolved over the years, but to a considerable degree it is based on Bayreuth—in most but not all recent years there has been at least one full Ring Cycle with other operas from the Bayreuth canon added from time to time. 2018 had no Ring Cycle, but three other operas. 2020 will see one Ring Cycle, *Die Meistersinger*, and a recital by Waltrud Meier. Unlike Bayreuth, a Ring Cycle takes place on four successive nights, which one is told was Wagner's original intention. Emulation of Bayreuth goes further than just scheduling—there are brass fanfares before each act, and long intermissions.

The concert hall in Müpa is remarkable. Adjustable panelling allows for its acoustics to be adjusted to what is being performed, and for the Ring they were superb, at least for those like ourselves in the front rows of the stalls. Audience experience is enhanced by comfortable seats and air conditioning. The stage is very extensive and its front part can be lowered to form a large, deep orchestral pit. Side galleries above the stage can also be used, as they were to permit Wagner's rarely-performed scoring for six harps in *Das Rheingold*, and also for the Songbird in *Siegfried*.

From the first note of *Das Rheingold* to the last note of *Götterdämmerung*, musical quality was outstanding. When booking, I had seen that the conductor's name was Fischer and assumed that this would be Istvan Fischer and that the orchestra would be his very highly regarded Budapest Festival Orchestra. Again, I was wrong—the conductor was Istvan's brother Adam, and the orchestra was the Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. I make no claim to be qualified as a judge of orchestras, but I was very impressed with this one.

I was quite swept away by the quality of the singing. The principals had almost all had recently sung leading Wagnerian roles in major opera houses—three had just come from the Met's Ring Cycle this Spring. They were all so good that I am reluctant to single any of them out, but for me Siegmund (Stuart Skelton) and Sieglinde (Camilla Nylund) were so perfect that I cannot believe that the first act of *Die Walküre* has ever have been better sung. Since this was a Ring over four nights, there needed to be two Brünnhildes. Both were British who have made their careers in Germany. The better known was Catherine Foster, who sang the role in the most recent Bayreuth Ring Cycle, and performed brilliantly in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*. Allison Oakes, in *Siegfried*, proved her equal. The smaller roles were all sung by Hungarians, for the most part very well. The one exception was the



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Second Norn—a not infrequent case, especially in Eastern Europe, of a local singer now on the downward slope of what some years earlier had been a distinguished career.

As it was a concert performance, the singers mostly wore evening dress and before each act those who would soon be singing took their places on chairs at each side of the stage. There was little attempt to relate the appearance of the singers to their roles, at least for the men; the Rhine maidens and the songbird were exceptions. Siegfried, for example, was sung by Stefan Vinke, a rather overweight, balding, middle-aged man, who must have looked very different when singing the role recently in the recent productions in both Covent Garden and the Met. But they were all opera singers, not mere recitalists, and this was a semi-staged performance. So once in the performing area – a raised stage between the rows of chairs, a flight of steps behind leading to relatively narrow platform that extended the full width of the stage—they acted convincingly. Wotan carried a spear, but there were few, if any, other individual props. Nothung, for example, did not materialise, though it appeared on the panelled screen behind the upper performing area.

The singers shared the performing space with a company of highly talented and acrobatic dancers. Sometimes it was obvious what their choreography represented – Niebelungs, Hunding's hounds, the Valkyries' horses etc.—but often it was not, at least at first viewing. It was always worth watching, even if one didn't understand its relation to what one was hearing. In addition to the dancers was a slight man in a red tail coat that I thought at first was Loge himself just observing, but that was quickly disproved—was it then perhaps Loge's alter ego? But at one point there were three such figures, including a child, so that didn't work.

This screen, eleven metres wide and three metres high, was essential to the staging. Its panels could be individually opened, and occasionally allowed a character to enter or to be seen behind. Erda was the only character who sang as though from the screen, with only her face shown in close-up. Sometimes the screen became a blank wall, sometimes a curtain was drawn across it, sometimes it was transparent but for the most part it served as an enormous space for continuous background projection. In some cases the link between the projection and the sung performance was obvious—at the outset, the Rhine maidens sang in front of a film of underwater swimmers, leading to the expectation that the film would relate closely to the libretto. But in the very next scene, the opposite occurred. We never see Valhalla, not when Wotan beholds it first, not when the Giants arrive having constructed it nor even when Wotan leads the way into it. There is indeed a rainbow, but only over the mountains. In fact mountains predominate in the background projections—sometimes they are as drawn by a cubist artist, sometimes seen as a distant range, sometimes passing from winter to spring in the space of a few bars,



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sometimes filmed in close-up. In *Die Walküre*, a war-ravaged cityscape was surely not meant to be contemporary Valhalla, but with surtitles only in German and Hungarian which I can't read it is conceivable that there were explanatory references in the libretto. Sometimes the background images departed too far from either realism or myth to be helpful—on Siegfried's journey, realistic woodland scenes lead not to a cave but to a screen in which a cartoon dragon is sketched in white chalk before our eyes. At least twice the screen was filled with the outline of pedestrians walking briskly in increasingly dense crowds until it turned black and disappeared. In *Götterdämmerung*, the Gibichungs sing against a city background—modern tall office blocks with traffic moving below, and somewhat later mirrored in waters of the Rhine.

In the programme, much is made of the changes in staging that have been made to this year's production, with particular reference to the use of the screen. Talking to somebody for whom this was the sixth visit to Wagner Days, I gathered that from an audience perspective the changes were not hugely significant. What the programme suggests is that actually making the film was an enormous technical undertaking—eight animators worked continuously on computer graphics, the underwater scenes required 12 hours of night time filming with divers to staying continuously in the water for that period. Moreover since no musical performance can ever guaranteed to be exactly the same as any other, the actual work of projection must have been highly demanded for each performance. But creatively, the film clearly took on a life of its own. The one criticism I have of the production is that nobody seems to have worried about how its choreographic and film components would best serve the all-important musical one. This made for four very interesting and worthwhile evenings, but perfection has yet to be achieved. I wrote this note in order to suggest to members of the Wagner Society who had

not been to Budapest to consider doing so. There are lots of flights, and costs are moderate by European standards—we paid roughly 15% of what equivalent seats would have cost in the recent Royal Opera production. Last year we had no difficulty in booking very good seats in the autumn. But I have just checked on 2020, when there is to be only one Ring Cycle and now find that there is literally only one seat left anywhere in the concert hall. I suspect that a large number of group opera tours have discovered what extraordinary value it is. Might it be worthwhile for the Wagner Society to write formally to Adam Fischer, noting how much members have enjoyed Wagner Days in the past, and asking to be kept informed about production plans and booking arrangements as they emerge for 2021?



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