

## MY FIFTY YEARS WITH RICHARD WAGNER

I don't for a moment profess to be an expert on the subject of the German composer Wilhelm Richard Wagner and have not made detailed comments on performances, leaving opinions to those far more enlightened than I. However having listened to Wagnerian works on radio and record from the late 1960s, and after a chance experience in 1973, I have been fascinated by the world and works of Wagner ever since. I have been fortunate to enjoy three separate cycles of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in Bayreuth 2008, San Francisco in 2011 and Melbourne in 2013 and will see a fourth, being the world's first fully digitally staged Ring cycle in Brisbane in 2020 under the auspices of Opera Australia. I also completed three years of the degree course in Architecture at the University of Queensland from 1962 and have always been interested in the monumental buildings of Europe, old and new, including the opera houses I have visited for performance of Wagner's works.

It all started in earnest on September 29, 1973 when I was 28 yrs old, when, with friend and music mentor Harold King of ABC radio fame, together we attended the inaugural orchestral concert given at the Sydney Opera House, in which the legendary Swedish soprano Birgit Nilsson opened the world renowned building singing an all Wagner programme including the Immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung*, accompanied by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by a young Charles Mackerras. This event fully opened my eyes to the Ring Cycle - and I have managed to keep the historic souvenir programme.

In the 1970s and 80s in Sydney, I spent hours and hours listening to the Ring direct from Bayreuth on ABC radio, in AM until 1976 then FM, dreaming one day I might go to a festival there. During these years, I saw two Australian Opera performances of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and one each of *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal* and *Der Fliegende Holländer*, accompanied by my long term Australian Opera subscription friend, Tony Twiss. In the late 1960s, both in our early twenties, Tony and I had taken turns to literally sleep on the footpath for a night or so in a queue outside the Capitol theatre in Sydney's Haymarket area so we could be among the first young people to obtain tickets through Harry M Miller's then new ticket purchasing concept of 'subscriptions' to a number of operas across the year. We could avail ourselves of the under 26 years of age series for a ridiculously low price of approximately \$5 for a seat in the Gods, or very upper level of the Capitol, and the wonderful old Newtown theatre (actually located in Enmore). Later we moved to the new Sydney Opera House where I enjoyed the first Sydney Symphony orchestra concert in it's new home with Birgit Nilsson as mentioned earlier. During almost twenty years of subscribing, I also saw another two concert performances one week apart at the Opera House concert hall of *Götterdämmerung* with Brunhilde sung by famed British soprano Rita Hunter in the mid 1980s. When asked if she found the role stressful, Rita said "Good heavens no, I could have a cup of tea and sing it all over again !"

On January 28th 1983, to honour the centenary of Wagner's death on February 13, I enjoyed a performance of Wagner's only completed symphony, the C major, given by the Sydney Symphony orchestra at the Sydney Town Hall under the auspices of the Wagner Society of New South Wales, then less than three years old. My memory is hazy but I believe it was an afternoon concert and there may have been other Wagner works on the programme apart from the 35 minute symphony which was the first major work Wagner wrote at age 19 and the last work he conducted on December 24, 1882 before his death almost two months later while on holiday in Venice.

"Wagner" directed by Tony Palmer

I saw this 6 hour epic film for the first time in, I believe, 1984, at the gilded and chandeliered State theatre in Sydney. During one of two intervals, we dined on very basic Qantas 1980s style aircraft dinners served on plastic trays to patrons who sat in and around the theatre foyer along with plastic cups of white or red wine, all included in the ticket price. However it was all very exciting. The film, now digitally re-mastered and available on disc, was later edited into a ten part television series. In this legendary production were many famous British actors, including Richard Burton as Wagner and Vanessa Redgrave as Cosima, along with Ralph Richardson, Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud, three of the most dominant British stage and screen actors of my lifetime, appearing together in the same film or stage production on only this one occasion. The lengthy film is a well crafted dramatic biography of Wagner.

Paul Wobcke and I enjoyed *Der Fliegende Holländer* performed in Brisbane in 1991, and a concert version of *Parsifal* during the Brisbane Biennale in 1995, with a glorious voiced tall and elegant German named Isoldé Elschlepp, who, at the last minute, due to illness which had befallen the scheduled Romanian singer, stood in as Kundry singing with a thrilling unfazed mezzo despite having flown direct from Europe only a day before, thus saving the key event of the festival.

Towards the end of 2000, after seeing an article earlier in the Courier Mail about the recent formation of the Wagner Society in Queensland, I joined the society. I have a receipt from January 2001 for my membership signed by then Secretary (Kathy) Barbara Clifford. Paul Wobcke joined a year or so later. Unfortunately, we went to few events, due to work and commitments to elderly family members, but have both maintained our membership even though we have lived in Hobart, Tasmania since 2007.

In 2006 Paul and I saw a splendid production of *Das Rheingold* at the post war reconstructed Semperoper in Dresden, the city which was so much part of Wagner's young revolutionary life. We also made a day trip from Munich to Füssen in Bavaria to see Neuschwanstein, the fabled castle of Wagner's young benefactor King Ludwig with its frescoed walls and ceilings devoted to Wagner's works. In Vienna, in the foyer of our Hotel Royal, we saw the piano on which *Die Meistersinger* was largely completed when Wagner was living at Hadikgasse 72 in Vienna's 14th district in 1863 and 1864 prior to his moving to Lucerne, for his second lengthy stay in Switzerland. The piano was later gifted to the manager of the hotel and remains today in the easily accessible Hotel Royal foyer at the end of Singerstrasse right on the Graben only a few steps from the Stephansdom. The Royal has a large and marvellous collection of framed autographed photographs hanging on its Firenze restaurant walls of famed singers over the decades from the Wien Staatsoper including many well known Wagner exponents all associated with a long term hotel manager there. It was THE place to be for cast and singers after the opera from the mid 20th century period onwards.

In 2007 we both applied for seats to the 2008 Bayreuth Wagner festival through the Wagner Society in Queensland, and were successful. We set off together in 2008 with our first stop being the familiar Tribschen outside Lucerne, where Wagner's son Siegfried was born in 1869 and where he composed the *Siegfried Idyll* to commemorate his son's birth. Here he also completed *Die Meistersinger* and Act 3 of *Siegfried*, and started *Götterdämmerung*. We saw paintings, memorabilia and the piano on which Wagner worked and where in this renowned Swiss city, Wagner was reputedly at his happiest. We visited St Matthew's church in Lucerne where Wagner finally married Cosima, Franz Liszt's daughter, in 1870. However we could find no plaque or the like in or around the church acknowledging the ceremony.

Then it was on to the medieval German city of Worms on the Rhine river associated closely with Martin Luther in the 16th century, where we found a most interesting contemporary museum located inside the remains of the medieval wall of the city, explaining much about the Norse and Icelandic legends on which the Germanic poem 'The Nibelungenlied' is based. Many of the poem's stories are related brilliantly in the museum by means of a central tower of digital screens displaying among other things, clips from *Siegfrieds Tod*, part of the original 1924 German masterpiece film *Die Nibelungen* by Fritz Lang. The *Nibelungenlied*, in which the city of Worms is mentioned, is related by an anonymous 11th century poet who supposedly wrote the famous German poem on which, together with the *Siegfried* legends, Wagner based his story. Dragon statues abound in the city, and an imposing statue of Hagen of Troneck flinging his gold treasure into the Rhine, stands on the banks of the river there. The original cathedral, Dom-St Peter, whose construction commenced over one thousand years ago, is among Germany's finest High Romanesque buildings. At a portal to the cathedral, according to the *Nibelungenlied*, Merovingian queens Brunhild, and Kriemhild (or Gudrun who eventually became the last wife of Attila the Hun), supposedly had a terrible fight about who's husband, *Siegfried* or *Gunther* respectively, was of higher rank, and therefore which queen had the right to enter the cathedral first, a conflict which caused the death of *Siegfried* and drove the later action of the *Nibelungenlied*. This weekend experience made a fascinating prelude to Wagner's Ring cycle the following week.

From Worms we travelled by train to the Wagnerian holy of holies, the charming city of Bayreuth, capital of Upper Franconia, whose 18th century expansion was presided over by Frederick the Great's favourite sister, the Margravine Wilhelmina. There, we stayed at the excellent Bayerischer Hof hotel for ten days, met up with Dr Graham Bruce, our society's Vice President, and other members and chatted with well remembered former NSW Wagner Society President the late Hon Jane Matthews at breakfast time. We attended the final of the three Bayreuth Ring cycles, together with three additional Wagner works, *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger* and finally *Parsifal*. Over a period of nine days, apart from an extraordinary musical experience, we enjoyed all the quirks and do's and don'ts of attending the festival in the legendary Festspielhaus, such as hard seats, no armrests, no air conditioning, the avoiding of perfumes and colognes, and seat cushions exceeding 1.5 cm in depth deeply frowned upon. On our opening night, we noticed a group of three couples together in the audience aged in their early twenties wearing ball gowns and white tie and tails, while virtually all the audience dressed formally. The legendary orchestral sound from the deepest of pits is a powerful memory for me over ten years later.

We also attended an extra concert of lieder by Schubert, Wolf and Loewe, at Wagner's now newly restored Bayreuth home, Villa Wahnfried, given by Detlef Roth, the Amfortas in our later Parsifal. Roth was accompanied by young pianist Juliet Allen on Wagner's Wahnfried piano, a gift to Wagner from Steinway & Sons in New York. At the rear of Wahnfried in the garden we admired the unadorned graves of Wagner, his wife Cosima (née Liszt) and his dog, Marka. We enjoyed another evening of romantic piano music and singing by local Bayreuth music academy graduating students in the magnificent rococo Margravial opera house, the interior of which Herr Wagner loathed, which led to his taking up the local council offer of Die Grüne Hügel, the Green Hill, on which the Festspielhaus was then built. On our first arrival there, we noticed the large gold inlaid marble wall plaque showing the cast names of the first Ring performance in 1876, and stood on the portico roof where the day's opera excerpt fanfares are played three times by brass players from the orchestra before each act commences. Many tourists came to see the audience waiting outside to enter. On opening night of the festival each year in July, all living German Chancellors are in attendance, such is the respect Germans have for Wagner's works.

Following our Rheingold, we enjoyed a sumptuous dinner at the Festspeilhaus Steigenberger restaurant, in memory of Gudrun Wagner who had died the year before, arranged each year by the Southern California Wagner Society. We met numerous society members, one of whom was staying in the room next to ours, and when asked how she would travel from Bayreuth to Salzburg for the last performance of it's annual music festival, a distance of 400kms, said quietly "By taxi, I guess". At the dinner, several Ring cast members spoke in an informal q. and a. During the numerous intervals of the seven performances, much of the audience stood outside in their finery consuming the popular German fare, Weissewurst, or white sausage, in bread rolls available from stalls, in an area below the window where Adolf Hitler stood for the crowd on the annual occasions he visited the city for the festival before the war. An excellent shop there sold dvds and we acquired the legendary Harry Kupfer Bayreuth Ring from the 1980s, recorded in high definition video in 1992. Hidden in the credits of the Walkure and Siegfried is a list of five 'musical assistants' one of whom will become chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony in 2022, Simone Young. As we came out at intervals, formally dressed people were observed holding signs reading 'Suche Karte' meaning 'ticket wanted' for the ensuing acts. About seven times as many tickets are sought by would be audience members as there are seats each year. In many city shops, Wagnerian memorabilia was sold and we bought a photo postcard of Wagner's son Siegfried and his English born wife, Winifred for a few euros. Many other items were available. On non-performance days we went by local bus to the spectacular Schloss Eremitage outside the city and also did a day trip to the medieval city of Bamberg by train. We are indebted to Graham Bruce, a Bayreuth audience member on several previous occasions, for joining us in these extra activities.

Along with a by and large wonderful Ring conducted by Christian Thielemann, we also saw a quite ordinary so-called regietheater production of Die Meistersinger, an enjoyable if strange staging of Tristan and lastly, as the final performance of the entire 2008 season, a truly spectacular Parsifal directed by Stefan Herheim weaving a militaristic history of both Bayreuth and Germany itself into the ancient Holy Grail story, in which at one point four or five enormous Nazi swastika flags unfurled via the flies onto the stage causing a chorus of loud booing, something not at all unusual at Bayreuth for a number of reasons. As the glorious music reached it's conclusion, an enormously wide and high semi-circular mirror rose from the floor of the stage, soon reaching the vertical position facing the audience, so we could see ourselves reflected in the mirror as the house lights were brought up partially, a spine tingling few minutes. After seemingly endless applause, stamping and cheering for this opulent production, the final for the year, with the entire orchestra appearing on stage for the first and only time during all seven productions, the curtain finally came down and, after a further 15 seconds or so, slowly rose again on a darkened stage save for a single white spotlight. Wolfgang Wagner, the composer's grandson, made his very last appearance at Bayreuth before retirement, standing silently alone, as he had done for decades, this time leaning on his walking stick under the single spot. Fifteen minutes of cheering and roaring applause followed, the likes of which I have never heard. It was a moment in history and a complete surprise to Bayreuth novices like us. Wolfgang was the son of composer of 18 operas and conductor and director of the festival from 1908 to 1930, Siegfried Wagner, Richard's son. With his brother Wieland in early years, Wolfgang had overseen all Bayreuth post World War 2 productions which had recommenced in 1951. However Wieland died in Munich in 1966 and Wolfgang continued his grandfather's and father's director roles alone at the Festspielhaus for another 42 years, with his wife Gudrun at his side, until we saw the very last performance over which he presided prior to retirement and handing over to his daughters Eva Wagner-Pasquier and Katharina Wagner.

In 2009, I joined the Wagner Society of New York online and shortly afterwards Paul joined with me and I have maintained membership until today. Our membership in 2011 resulted in our obtaining seats for the San Francisco Opera's so-called American Ring directed by Francesca Zambello in mid 2011 where we first saw digital video projections in opera, and heard soprano Nina Stemme as Brünnhilde in the third cycle, along with a young stand-in Siegfried, Jay Hunter Morris from Paris Texas, quite a sensation, who has sung in Australia, and went on to sing the role at the Met in ensuing months.

Not only did Nina sing effortlessly, by all accounts for the entire three cycles, only six weeks prior to cycle one, she had performed *Götterdämmerung* a further two times only a couple of weeks apart for the same company - a great effort. Having seen Birgit Nilsson in 1973 in Sydney, it was wonderful for me to hear a next generation Swede, performing so confidently. Nilsson was a long time mentor to the young Stemme in Stockholm and at least one photograph of the two singers together is available online. The ABC now has a reconstructed section of the Immolation scene on dvd from the Sydney Opera House opening, also available online albeit as very grainy black and white film.

Regarding the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, a review of its 100th anniversary marathon televised concert, held in 1983, included these words. "Birgit Nilsson, beloved 65-year-old Swedish soprano who got the day's only standing ovation, followed her aria from Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde', with an unannounced, unaccompanied Swedish folk song. She said it was a favourite of Christine Nilsson, the Swedish soprano who sang Marguerite in Gounod's 'Faust' for the Met's first opening night, October 22, 1883", eight months after Richard Wagner died.

In 2013 we saw the final *Götterdämmerung* of three stylish 'Milanese' Ring cycles performed at La Scala in Milan conducted by Daniel Barenboim, husband of legendary cellist Jacqueline du Pre (who I had seen play with the Orchestre de Paris conducted by Barenboim in 1979 in London), who kept us all there in the superbly refurbished opera house until well after midnight applauding the final of the first Ring performances given there since the 1930s. Later that year, we enjoyed the second cycle of the superb Neil Armfield Melbourne Ring, greeted with much praise around the world, with memorable singing particularly that of the Siegfried, Stefan Winke. The New York Wagner Society reviewer was fulsome in his praise of the singing, the somewhat Australian-ised production, and the Ring orchestra conducted by a young New Zealand based Finnish born conductor, Pietari Inkinen, who stood in for Richard Mills who had withdrawn. Pietari will conduct the 2020 Bayreuth Ring cycles, such is the recognition now afforded this young man.

In 2016, we thrilled to Nina Stemme again together with heldentenor and 2013 Melbourne Ring's Siegmund, Stuart Skelton, about six weeks after they had opened the 2016 Met season with a rapturously received Tristan, as they gave an outstanding performance of an abridged version of the opera in our adopted city of Hobart. Mezzo-soprano Monika Bohinec, who is an ensemble member of the Vienna State Opera, sang the role of Brangäne while the then TSO chief conductor, Slovenian Marko Letonja, a friend and colleague of Nina's, presided over the wonderful evening with an augmented TSO orchestra, a concert unique to Hobart in every respect. In 2017, six months after the Tristan concert in Hobart, Marko conducted both Stemme and Lundgren in a by all accounts splendid Ring In Stockholm, in the birth country of both singers.

Paul and I then enjoyed another fine Parsifal conducted by Richard Mills at the St Kilda Palais Melbourne in February 2019 during which we dined with long time travelling friend Kenneth Park, and arts identity Hugo Leschen. Much lively debate centred on the first Opera Australia Melbourne Ring production over five years earlier. A simply staged and memorable Parsifal at the restored 1927 Spanish baroque Palais, the largest seated theatre in Australia, was presented by the low subsidised Victorian Opera. Highly accomplished playing by the entire ensemble of young musicians from the Australian Youth Orchestra, and an international and local cast, added to the brio of the occasion. The bass from Britain, Peter Rose as Gurnemanz, and Swede Katarina Dalayman as Kundry stood out for me. Act 1 was extraordinarily moving. At the conclusion of each interval, we were treated to Bayreuth style brass fanfares from members of the orchestra's brass section in the cavernous two level neo-classical foyer calling the audience back to their seats.

On November 2nd 2019, three years after the first concert, we attended a second in Hobart with Nina Stemme and, this time, her fellow countryman John Lundgren, consisting of excerpts from *Die Walküre*, *Götterdämmerung* and *Der Fliegende Holländer*, another outstanding occasion. Now conductor laureate of the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, Marko Letonja again conducted the TSO, augmented by young players from the Australian National Academy of Music. The concert began with a thrilling *Walküre* Act 2 excerpt, Nina cleverly commencing with off stage hojotohos before she entered while singing to meet Lundgren's Wotan. Her immolation scene which concludes *Götterdämmerung* was breathtaking as was John's Dutchman monologue. The entire concert included professional atmospheric lighting appropriate for the music passages by Swedish designer Bengt Gomer. A long and standing ovation ensued once again at the conclusion of a marvellous night in our city.

Long may opportunities be available to all of us to enjoy the incomparable music of Richard Wagner, and long may we make what we will of his works and their productions, both old and new, such as the forthcoming first fully digitally staged production of the Ring in Brisbane in November 2020.

Roger Glynn-Connolly    December 16, 2019