

Wagner in Australia

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Some 80 or so productions and concerts of Wagner's works have been performed in Australia between 1877 and the end of last year. I don't have time to examine them all, but I would like to provide an overview of what motivated managers and producers in the past, and what is likely to motivate or discourage productions in the future.

On 18 August 1877, one year after the first Bayreuth Festival and the year in which Wagner began work on the music of *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin* was performed at the Prince of Wales Opera House in Melbourne by William Lyster's Royal Italian and English Opera Company. The season also included *Aida* which was Verdi's latest opera. *Lohengrin*, on the other hand, was thirty years old and had long been surpassed by *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger* and the entire *Ring*, and yet how avant-garde it must have seemed to those Melbourne audiences! It was sung in Italian, as was the usual practice in non-German-speaking countries in the 19th century, and the principal singers were from Europe and the United States. It was prepared and conducted by Alberto Zelman who, lacking a copy of Wagner's orchestral score, simply took a piano version and orchestrated it himself. In those days, composers couldn't control international performances of their works. The *Berne Convention* on the international protection of literary and artistic works wasn't concluded until 1886, three years after Wagner's death. The United Kingdom, Victoria and other British colonies became parties in 1887.

Following the 1877 Melbourne performances of *Lohengrin*, a local resident and German expatriate, Emil Sander, wrote to Wagner to inform him of this event, and Wagner replied as follows:

My very dear sir,

I was delighted to receive your news, and cannot refrain from thanking you for it.

I hope you will see to it that my works are performed in 'English': only in this way can they be intimately understood by an English-speaking audience. We are hoping that they will be so performed in London.

We (that is, I and my family) were extremely interested to see the views of Melbourne which you sent me: since you were kind enough to offer to send us more, I can assure you that I should be only too delighted to receive them.

Please give my kind regards to Herr Lyster, and, however remote your part of the world may be, continue to be so well-disposed towards
your most grateful servant,
Richard Wagner

The 1877 Melbourne season ran to nineteen performances with an orchestra of about 40 players and 100 singers.

William Lyster was a colourful Irishman and soldier of fortune and, in 1861, he had set sail from America with a full chorus and orchestra to gold-rich Melbourne. The company's repertoire included over thirty operas, and performances were given in Melbourne, elsewhere in Victoria, Adelaide, Sydney and throughout New Zealand. During a hunting expedition in 1867, Lyster accidentally shot one of his tenors and, soon afterwards, the company returned to the United States where it was disbanded. In 1870 he came back to Melbourne to pursue new operatic ventures. Such global work habits characterised artistic careers in those days, and it's worth noting that Wagner himself was a wanderer. After spending his youth and early career in Saxony, he then lived and worked in Latvia, England, France, Switzerland, Italy and Russia, and, on different occasions, spoke of settling down permanently in Greece, Brazil, the United States and Italy. It was Ludwig II who insisted that he make Bavaria his home, and although the composer tried to disentangle himself from Ludwig and turned to Prussia in 1871 for support, this never came. In the end, he settled not in Munich as Ludwig wanted, but in Bayreuth and, eventually, he died in Venice.

In 1907, *Die Walküre* was first performed in Australia in a production managed by George Musgrove. Twelve performances were given in German, including some in Melbourne that had standing room only. The conductor was Gustave Slapoffski, half English and half Russian who claimed that conducting *Die Walküre* had been the proudest moment of his life.

Our first Brünnhilde was German soprano Johanna Heinze. In Sydney, on one occasion, she presented Musgrove with a doctor's certificate just minutes before the curtain was to go up on *Die Walküre*. Act I passed without incident but since there was no Brünnhilde for Act 2, the audience was treated to *The Flying Dutchman* instead.

People were amazed that the orchestra had been increased to 50, with the result that it overflowed from the pit into the stalls area. The scenic wonders were commented on (very realistic rocks and clouds) as was the presence of a real if somewhat decrepit horse which was startled when Brünnhilde brandished her spear in its face and tossed its head, knocking off her helmet. Fricka was described as entering in her ram-drawn 'go-cart'.

In 1912, the opera company of British impresario Thomas Quinlan visited Australia and performed four Australian premieres in eight days, including *Tristan und Isolde*. In 1913, the company travelled throughout the British Empire performing the entire *Ring* – never before seen in Australia - together with all of the other mature Wagnerian operas with the exception of *Parsifal* which was still exclusive to Bayreuth. Twenty-five different operas were performed in just under eight weeks in Melbourne, including two *Ring* cycles and the national premiere of *Die Meistersinger*. In Sydney the season was extended to nine weeks because of a New Zealand strike and included another *Ring* cycle plus extra performances of *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*. All of the existing Puccini operas were performed, four of Verdi's most popular operas, and an assortment of French works including *The Tales of Hoffmann* which alone was given fifteen performances. So, 25 operas in just 17 weeks - the achievements of our modern opera companies pale by comparison.

Opera Queensland has given just two performances of Wagner's works since its establishment in 1981 as 'The Lyric Opera of Queensland' - a *Flying Dutchman* concert in 1983 and a staged production of the same work in 1990, 36 years ago. On a more modest scale, pianist Alex Raineri and I gave a studio presentation on '*Wagner, his Contemporaries and Followers*' in 2020 repeating what we had done in Sydney and Melbourne, and there was also a recital that year by Bradley Daley on '*Songs of Wagner and Strauss*'.

As you know, concert performances of *Tristan und Isolde* were scheduled by Opera Queensland in Brisbane for 2020 but these were cancelled at the height of Covid. Our society had offered a sponsorship of \$10,000 for the *Tristan* concerts and had transferred the first instalment of \$5,000 before the cancellation was announced. We were assured that the performances would be rescheduled and so we didn't ask for our instalment back. I gather that a decision will be subject to the final budget figures and that we shouldn't expect performances before 2028-29 at the earliest. A new Victorian opera company called *BK Opera* was formed in 2016, and rumour has it that it's planning a *Tristan* concert in Melbourne later this year.

Opera Queensland itself has performed little Wagner, but Queenslanders have benefited from performances by other companies - by the Elizabethan Trust

Opera Company (a forerunner to Opera Australia) with *Lohengrin* in 1958, *Der fliegende Holländer* in 1967, and *Tannhäuser* in 1973. Some of you might remember those – I do. They were followed by a splendid biennial concert of *Parsifal* in 1995 conducted by American Gunther Schuller with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and chorus members from the Lyric Opera of Queensland. It featured James Maddelena, Donald McIntyre and Franz Mazura in major roles, and Margaret Schindler and Greg Massingham from the Queensland Conservatorium as squires. I came up especially from Adelaide, and many audience members had come from interstate and New Zealand. The fact is that Wagner attracts audiences from beyond our state borders in a way that no other composer does.

There was also a *Tristan und Isolde* concert in 2005 conducted by Richard Mills for Lyndon Terracini's Queensland Music Festival, with the Australian Youth Orchestra. Lisa Gasteen sang Isolde, John Treleaven was Tristan, and Hal Davis was in the chorus of sailors. I gave talks and compiled the program. The visiting Hamburg State Opera performed *Das Rheingold* in concert in Brisbane in 2012, and our Society presented a symposium in the Conservatorium Theatre at which Simone Young (among others) spoke. Audience members came from all over Australia. And of course, there was Opera Australia's *Ring* in 2023, which I've described as *a Ring without boundaries* - a *Ring* for the modern world located in no particular time or place but making use of modern visual technology.

The conductor of the first *Ring* in this country in 1913 was the German Richard Eckhold who also conducted the first *Meistersinger* here. The stars of the 1913 *Ring* were English soprano Maud Percival Allen as Brünnhilde and American Robert Parker as Wotan, who also sang Hagen. German Heldentenor Franz Costa was our first Siegfried. Quinlan planned to return to Australia in 1915 with an even more ambitious season, including *Parsifal*, but the catastrophe of the first world war put paid to that, and opera in Australia drifted into more predictable channels with an emphasis on the Italian repertoire. *Die Meistersinger* wasn't seen again for 75 years, and the complete *Ring* for another 85 years. *Parsifal* didn't have its first staged performance in this country for 88 years after entering the public domain, when it was staged in Adelaide in 2001. When the 'body operatic' began to twitch into life again in the second half of the twentieth century, people had forgotten all about Thomas Quinlan and his contemporaries.

Quinlan was primarily an opera impresario, but Sir Benjamin Fuller was what used to be called a showman. In 1934 he invested heavily in a travelling grand opera company. Most of the principals were imported from Britain, including Australian dramatic soprano Florence Austral, singing for the first time in her

homeland. 13 performances of *Die Walküre* were staged, along with 12 performances of *Tristan*, 13 of *Tannhäuser*, 4 of *Lohengrin* and 11 of *The Flying Dutchman*. Austral's association with Wagnerian roles began in London where she shared roles with Frida Leider. In Germany she was a principal artist of the Berlin State Opera opposite Friedrich Schorr. Melba called her "one of the wonder voices of the world".

In 1939, Marjorie Lawrence - a famous Brünnhilde in Europe and America but rarely heard in her native land - made a concert tour of Australia and, at a performance broadcast by the ABC, she sang the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung*. According to the press the next day, "the town hall rocked on its foundations with the thunder of appreciation."

In 1977, the British opera manager Peter Hemmings was appointed as General Manager of the Australian Opera, and, at the top of his 'to do' list was a production of the *Ring*. Richard Bonyngue, who was the Australian Opera's Music Director at that time, doubted that Australia had enough singers to do the *Ring* justice. He'd got to know the Wagner repertoire at Covent Garden during the 1950s when Joan Sutherland was pursuing a long-held ambition to become a Wagnerian soprano in the footsteps of Flagstad. She sang Helmwig, Woglinde, the Woodbird, and Eva, and these were subsequently recorded. She had sung the Woodbird in a live performance at Covent Garden in 1954 (which can still be heard online) and also in Solti's superb recording of *Siegfried* for Decca. Bonyngue persuaded her to abandon her Wagnerian ambitions and concentrate on the coloratura repertoire.

Hemmings together with his chosen conductor Mark Elder and director David Pountney were adamant that any *Ring* performed by the Australian Opera should be sung in English. For a variety of reasons (mainly because of tensions between Hemmings and Bonyngue), the management of the Australian Opera descended into chaos in the late '70s and Peter Hemmings' appointment was terminated at the end of 1979. In March that year, *Das Rheingold* was performed, not on stage but in a concert in the Sydney Opera House using Andrew Porter's translation. Mark Elder conducted. The concert performances continued: *Die Walküre* with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in August 1981, conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras, and *Götterdämmerung* with the Sydney Symphony in October 1981, also conducted by Mackerras.

Bonyngue decided that a new production of *Die Walküre* in German should be staged in 1983, which, over time, could be expanded into a complete staging of the *Ring*. Work on the 1983 *Walküre* got under way with a consortium of German business firms providing funding for an entire cycle for the Australian bicentennial year 1988. Sponsorship of \$1 million was also provided by the

Federal Republic of Germany. Stuart Challender made a masterly reduction of the score, probably resembling what audiences had heard in the first Australian performances. But because the opera theatre pit wasn't large enough for a performance of the complete *Ring*, plans to stage *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* were abandoned.

Between 1996 and 2000, each of the *Ring* operas was performed in concert at the Sydney Opera House by the Sydney Symphony and Edo de Waart – I remember them well. Those concerts were precursors to the current series of *Ring* concerts being conducted by Simone Young.

Managers of opera companies in our times are either keen to perform Wagner's works, or they are not, and over the years I've come across both. Prominent amongst those unsympathetic towards Wagner is Stuart Maunder, currently Artistic Director of Victorian Opera and, occasionally, a guiding light for the Lisa Gasteen National Opera Program where, in 2024, he focussed on Rossini, Donizetti, Offenbach and Gilbert and Sullivan. When his predecessor, Richard Mills, was the Artistic Director of Victorian Opera, Mills scheduled some splendid Wagner productions, notably *The Flying Dutchman* in 2015 (with Bradley Daley as Erik), and *Parsifal* in 2019 for which I wrote articles and gave interviews and a talk. Mills had been Artistic Director of West Australian Opera when, in 2006, they staged Opera Australia's production of *Tristan und Isolde*, for which I wrote a book and program essay and gave talks. Lionel Friend was the conductor, and Lionel had also conducted a *Götterdämmerung* concert performance in Perth in 2003. He was assistant conductor for the 1998 and 2004 Adelaide *Rings*, and I still correspond with him. The West Australian Symphony Orchestra and West Australian Opera have a strong Wagnerian history, the latest examples of which were two concert performances of *The Flying Dutchman* a week ago. Mills was engaged by Lyndon Terracini to conduct Opera Australia's *Ring* in Melbourne in 2013. But he withdrew and Terracini then appointed the young Finn Pietari Inkinen, who was later engaged for the 2020 *Tristan* in Brisbane that didn't happen.

Before Stuart Maunder moved to Victorian Opera in 2023, he had been Artistic Director of the State Opera of South Australia along with Yarmila Alfonzetti as the CEO, both of whom succeeded Stephen Phillips. When Maunder and Alfonzetti took up their appointments in Adelaide in 2018, they inherited plans for staging Act 3 of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* featuring Bradley Daley as Walther, whom our society sponsored. After the performance I asked Maunder if he intended to stage a complete *Meistersinger* in Adelaide, to which he replied (and these are his exact words): "Not while my backside still points to the ground". So, obviously, Wagner wasn't for him! He favours light opera and musical theatre and has a particular fondness for Gilbert and Sullivan.

In the 1990s, the State Opera of South Australia had received strong support from the then State Liberal government and, in particular, from the Minister for the Arts, Diana Laidlaw, and the Head of Arts SA, Tim O'Loughlin, who previously had been Chairman of the State Opera Board. I worked closely with both of them and was a member of the State Opera Board and the *Ring* Corporation Board, and I devoted much of my time to promotion and marketing – writing articles and a book, doing radio interviews, organising a *Weekend with the Ring* in late 1997, and giving pre-performance talks. Minister Laidlaw and Tim O'Loughlin regarded the Wagnerian productions as filling a gap left by the loss of the *Grand Prix* motor race to Victoria. But a change of government came in 2002, and the incoming Arts Minister (and Premier) Mike Rann didn't share Laidlaw's enthusiasm, and neither did his commonwealth counterpart, the rock band enthusiast Peter Garrett.

The 1998 *Ring* in Adelaide grew out of a proposal by Bill Gillespie, then Chief Executive of the State Opera. The production had been created for the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, and Pierre Strosser's rather austere interpretation wasn't everyone's cup of tea, but I liked it a lot. The orchestra under Jeffrey Tate played superbly. The whole thing was a triumph and introduced thousands of Australians (including politicians and bureaucrats) to Wagner in general and the *Ring* in particular. Eva Wagner-Pasquier, the composer's great-granddaughter, attended as guest of honour, and was delightful. 56% of the audience came from outside the state, and there was a boost to the gross state product of around \$10 million. There was also an operating surplus. The production cost was a comparatively modest \$7.9 million (most of which was met from box office sales), which illustrates the advantages of using a production that has already been designed and developed. It's worth remembering that although the *Ring* comprises four operas, in terms of size it equates to six or seven regular operas.

The 2001 *Parsifal*, designed originally for Opera Australia but never staged by them, cost \$2.3 million (again mainly met from box office sales) and it brought an economic benefit to the state of \$2.4 million. A third of the audience came from interstate and overseas.

For the 2004 Adelaide *Ring* (the first fully Australian *Ring* production) 133 musicians were engaged, including relief musicians. Members of interstate symphony orchestras took leave of absence just to have an opportunity to play this wonderful music in a full production. For performances, there were at least 95 musicians in the pit at any one time. Needless to say, the practical requirements of mounting something like that were formidable. The rehearsals were spread over seven-and-a-half months and the theatre was occupied for

over five months in total, for which the hiring costs alone were 2.6 million dollars.

The 2004 Adelaide *Ring* had some wonderful visual images, and the superb singing was led by Lisa Gasteen at the peak of her career, as can be heard on the complete Melba recordings which won the *Grand Prix du Disc*, twice. It also won an unprecedented 10 Helpmann awards.

For the 2004 production, 65% of the audience came from outside the state (including many from New Zealand, Europe, North America and Asia), and the boost to the gross state product was 15 million dollars. The final production cost of around 15 million dollars was in fact reasonable compared with the costs of *Rings* elsewhere in recent years. The Los Angeles *Ring* of 2010 for example cost 31 million us dollars, and the 2013 Melbourne *Ring* cost \$20 million but benefited from a second performance in 2016.

Opera Australia still won't say publicly how much the 2023 Brisbane *Ring* cost because (so they say) of commercial partnership agreements. But expenses climbed as the production was postponed twice because of Covid and the company's debts for 2023 were huge, not just because of the *Ring* but because of the cancellation of its entire program. Will the 2023 *Ring* be staged again and make a profit? We'll have to see.

The current Executive Director of the State Opera of South Australia, Mark Taylor who, until late 2022 worked for Opera Queensland – is *not* a Wagnerian. 2024 coincided with the 20th anniversary of the 2004 *Ring*, but I was astonished to find that the present management didn't even want to talk about it, let alone celebrate it. Nevertheless, I wrote an article for a national arts magazine. This year, for its golden anniversary, the South Australian company will stage Rossini's *Cenerentola* and Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods* (both also being staged by Opera Queensland). But there's no Wagner by either company.

One of the most positive Australian advocates of Wagner's works has been Lyndon Terracini, who became Artistic Director of Opera Australia in 2009. Before that, he was in charge of the Brisbane festival, and before that, the Queensland Music Festival. Prior to moving from Queensland in 2009, he had almost managed to secure Valery Gergiev's Mariinsky *Ring* from St Petersburg, before the government of Premier Peter Beattie called a halt to his plans.

For Opera Australia, Terracini intended to create an entirely new *Ring* as a co-production with Houston Grand Opera although, eventually, Houston withdrew and went instead with a production from Valencia with a budget of 16 million US dollars. Terracini then received an offer from Stephen Phillips to restage the

2004 Adelaide *Ring* in Melbourne, but the Adelaide production with its elaborate stage effects and fire and water was too complex for even the relatively large Melbourne theatre.

And so, Terracini began the process of creating a stand-alone *Ring* for Melbourne. Initially, he intended to perform it one opera at a time over four years, but eventually he decided to do it all in one go. The production was repeated in 2016, which more than covered its costs – as second stagings usually do.

Terracini's commitment to Wagner has no better example than Opera Australia's *Ring* in Brisbane in December 2023. Intended originally for 2020, it became a casualty of the pandemic (as I'm sure you remember) and was postponed until 2021. When the pandemic lingered, the *Ring* was postponed again until 2023 when it was staged in all its technically demanding splendour, and the audience came from around the world. It was conducted by the highly experienced Philippe Auguin, who had conducted *Tannhäuser* for Opera Australia in 1998. Terracini's term as Artistic Director of Opera Australia finished in October 2022, but what we saw and heard on the stage of Brisbane's Lyric Theatre a year later was undoubtedly the fruit of his labours.

At the other end of the spectrum, the productions by Melbourne Opera have also been noteworthy. That modest, privately funded company has staged all of Wagner's mature works with the exception of *Parsifal* which, I'm told, is being planned for next February. Melbourne Opera's activities, overseen largely by Suzanne Chaundy and conductor Anthony Negus, follow in the footsteps of the earliest opera companies that introduced Australians to Wagner, going back to the *Lohengrin* of 1877. They deserve our admiration, and offer a reminder that all things are possible when motivated by the same determination and commitment that inspired Richard Wagner.

Text of an address to the Wagner Society in Queensland Inc, delivered on Saturday 16th May 2026