

The Wagner Society Newsletter

VOL. 1 NO. 1

FEB. 1985

LOOKING BACK AT 1984

This first issue of the Wagner Society newsletter comes as we begin our second year as an independent organization. It seems an appropriate time to look back at what we have been doing, and ahead at what promises to be an exciting year for Wagnerites in Northern California.

The winter of '84 saw the most intrepid of us at the first Donner Ring party, enjoying good food and wine and rare recordings. In February we journeyed north to Petaluma, where the Cinnabar Theater presented Das Rheingold as a chamber opera in Andrew Porter's translation, its tiny orchestra augmented by a synthesizer. Despite an indisposed Loge, it was a bold attempt by a small company, and a delightful evening.

Spring brought us a visit from Speight Jenkins, general director of the Seattle Opera, who spoke to us on the directions in which he is taking the company, and especially about the new Ring he is mounting for the 1986 Festival, with Linda Kelm as Brünnhilde. He played us tapes of the singers we would be hearing

in the last appearance of the much-loved Glynn Ross production that summer.

In May, we celebrated the 171st birthday of Richard Wagner with a party at the German Oak restaurant. Among the guests were Ring director Nikolaus Lehnhof; Eva Marton, on the eve of her first Brünnhilde; Helga Dernesch, our Erda; and Helmut Pampuch, here to sing Mime. Mr. Lehnhoff spoke on his stage work on the Ring, and we were all entertained by a campy film biography of the composer, called Ring of Fire, and of course the great What's Opera, Doc? with Bugs Bunny.

Also in May, we saw another unique Wagnerian production, as WS member Sally Gorham directed her fourth-grade students at the Marin Waldorf School in Das Rheingold, in their own English version. Her Nibelungs were most spectacular.

June found us back at the German Oak for a lecture by WS member Dr. William Cord on the origins of dwarf and giant legends in Norse mythology and Wagner's use of the myths in the Ring. And we could hardly miss each other at the five superb performances of Siegfried at the Opera House.

July and August were for travel. Some of us went to Seattle for the Ring, and some to Bayreuth. In September we reassembled at the Goethe Institute to exchange travel stories. In October we enjoyed another visit from Mr. Jenkins, with previews of the Seattle Opera's new production of Iannhäuser, which was attended by a group of WS members the following month.

Jess Thomas, one of the great heldenteners of recent decades, became the first honorary member of the Society at our November dinner meeting at the Century Club. We closed the year with our annual pot-luck Christmas party, with some traditional holiday music and, of course, some Wagner.

We begin our second year still a young group, now 65 strong. This year we will be seeing the completion of the San Francisco Opera's Ring, as well as the first installment of Seattle Opera's new version. We will be presenting a series of events in connection with the Ring, including lectures and parties, and will be hosts to other American Wagner groups. We hope many of you will join us.

OUR DINNER WITH JESS



World-renowned heldentenor Jess Thomas with his wife and WS Board members after being made honorary member and presented with gold membership card in recognition of his many contributions to the opera world.

BAYREUTH 1984

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER GESAMTKUNSTWERK

This past summer, ten members of the Society were able to make that ultimate Wagnerian journey, a visit to the Bayreuth Festival. For most of us this was our first time, and an event we had much anticipated. It was an experience that did not disappoint.

Bayreuth itself is a town of great charm, very quiet and relaxed even in the midst of the Festival. We all stayed not in hotels, but in the homes of Bayreuthers who provide bed and breakfast through the local visitor's bureau. This made Bayreuth seem even more homelike, less like a town full of tourists. One hostess even had our whole delegation to a backyard barbecue. And while performances at the Festspielhaus are dressy, almost ritualistic affairs, elsewhere life can be small-town informal. We gathered after each performance in restaurants or gaststätten, and there we were able to meet some of the singers, including Helmut Pampuch, who wore a San Francisco Ring T-shirt, and Peter Hoffman.

The attractions of Bayreuth are well-known - the glorious baroque Margrave Opera House, where Wagner briefly considered holding his festival, and where we attended a liederabend with James King; the park of the Eremitage outside the town; and of course Haus Wahnfried, now a museum. We browsed among the Wagneriana, from early manuscripts to the Meister's piano and velvet beret, and sat in the restored music room listening to historic recordings. A special exhibition on "Wagner and the Jews" dealt in a startlingly open and thorough way with this thorny issue. Just to see this material in Wahnfried was heartening. And behind the house lies the grave of Richard and Cosima Wagner, where we left flowers on behalf of the society.

A particular high point for us was a meeting with Wolfgang Wagner grandson of the composer and director of the Festival, in a private garden at the Festspielhaus. There we delivered personally our small contribution to the Festival. WS member William Cord presented Herr Wagner a copy of his book An Introduction to Richard Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen".

But most of all, there were the performances, and the Festspielhaus itself. Hearing the works in this theater is truly unlike hearing them anywhere else. The acoustics are, as promised, magical. The sound of the famous "invisible orchestra" is full and smooth, but still always clear. The quality of the playing is impeccable. The listener can hear things in the music he has never heard before, either in performance or on

recordings. The motivic structure becomes even more dramatic. The theater is also notable kind to singers. Some voices unimpressive in the vast spaces of the San Francisco Opera House or the Met here sound unforced and natural.

This summer's production varied greatly in style. Meistersinger was the most "old-fashioned, with beautiful realistic sets actually resembling Nuremberg. This is a Wolfgang Wagner production, and he proves to be a brilliant director, especially in his handling of large numbers of characters. Not only each of the Mastersingers, but each of the chorus seemed to be a real character. The performance was filled with disaster. Bernd Weikl, the Sachs, was replaced midway through Act 3 by Hans Sotin (Wolfgang Wagner playing Terry McEwen); even worse, Siegfried Jerusalem, while lovely of tone, simply cracked and fell apart on Walther's high notes. Even so, the direction and Horst Stein's conducting made for a remarkably satisfying evening.

At the other extreme was Der Fliegende Holländer. Just as San Francisco's recent version was set as a dream of the steersman, Harry Kupfer set his as a fantasy or hallucination of Senta, who is an inmate of an asylum. When at the end she thinks she is throwing herself into the sea, she in fact leaps from a window and dies on the sidewalk. However one may feel about this sort of thing, the production had many dramatic

GRÜSSE MIR WALHALL



WS member William Cord presents a copy of his book to Wolfgang Wagner outside his office at the Festspielhaus.



Honored guests at last year's Wagner Birthday Party included several of the participants in SFO's memorable Siegfried. Here director Nikolaus Lehnhoff discuss his staging with WS member James Keolker. See the schedule for details of the 1985 celebration.

Bayreuth...

touches. The Dutchman's ship, for one, is formed of two huge cupped hands, which open to reveal the doomed captain. Simon Estes was a magnetic Dutchman.

The Götz Friedrich Parsifal was visually the most stunning, taking place largely inside a white colonnaded tower set on its side. Klingsor's garden, however, had little of nature or beauty to it, and he himself presided from a rather rickety looking scaffold equipped with radar and spotlight. The flower maidens might have been costumed by Frederick's of Hollywood. Peter Hoffman sang Parsifal brilliantly, but was not dramatically credible. There is too much of Siegmund in his Pure Fool, and it was hard to believe his rejection of Kundry's advances. But the conducting of James Levine, and the playing of the Festival orchestra, of this most beautiful of Wagner's scores, made such objections irrelevant. The Amfortas of Simon Estes, Kundry of Waltraut Meier, and Hans Sotin's Gurnemanz were outstanding.

We will cover the Ring in detail in the next issue.

REVIEWS

Richard Wagner's Music Dramas

Carl Dahlhaus

Translated by Mary Whittal

New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979

161 pages, \$22.95

Carl Dahlhaus, scholar, critic, and musicologist extraordinaire, has provided us with one of the most informed accounts of Wagner's music dramas, and Wagnerians should consider themselves fortunate to have this highly readable translation at their disposal.

This scholarly work has several admirable qualities. It is short in length - a mere 161 pages - and concise throughout. The ten works from Flying Dutchman to Parsifal are discussed in a lucid style that should not frighten the uninitiated. The book's premise is that the term "music drama" has been misunderstood, and it is Dahlhaus' task to bring about a more sophisticated understanding of the works. Each opera involves some crucial aesthetic problem upon which Dahlhaus focuses. As I said, it is a slender volume, but it does not lack in literary, musical, or dramatic analysis. Its strength lies in the author's ability to direct his arguments at popular misconceptions and long-standing prejudices.

There are many detailed and illuminating analyses of particular dramatic scenes throughout the text, including the argument that Dutchman can be construed as a "ballad for the stage," and a discussion of the reasons behind Wagner's several changes to the ending of Götterdämmerung.

Although musical examples are cited, the book is not difficult technical reading. Also, it is not an exclusive specialist study. To quote the editors, "It will help the enthusiastic beginner to come to terms with these great works as well as offering many valuable insights to the experienced Wagnerians."

-Jens Shurk

The editors of the newsletter solicit essays; articles; photographs; reviews of books, recordings, and performances; and any other material of interest to Wagnerians. We will be publishing a special Ring edition in May; please send material by early April.

Submissions may be sent to:

Newsletter Editor
The Wagner Society
542 Utah Street
San Francisco, CA 94110

...AND IN 1985

BOARD REPORT & ELECTION RETURNS

- Feb. 24, Sunday Ballet Russe
3:00 pm 1944 Clement at 21st Ave.
Non-members \$3 Student vocal recital
Membership meeting and refreshments
- Mar. 24, Sunday German Oak Restaurant
3:00 pm 2257 Market betw. 16/Sanchez
Non-members \$5 Lecture by Dr. William Cord
on Norse myth and the Ring
Membership meeting
No-host dinner and drinks
- Apr. 21, Sunday Goethe Institute
3:00 pm 1500 Bush St.
Non-members \$5 "Mostly Wagner" vocal concert
Membership meeting and refreshments
- May 19, Sunday Richard Wagner's 172nd Birthday
3:00 pm Rathskellar Restaurant
Members \$25 600 Turk St. at Polk
Non-members \$30 Program and guests TBA
RESERVATIONS REQUIRED
RSVP with payment to the Society
- June 2, Sunday Der Ring des Nibelungen begins
San Francisco Opera
Concomitant WS activities TBA
- June 22, Saturday Wagner biographical film
San Francisco Opera
Contact WS if interested in group ticket purchase

Under its by-laws, the Wagner Society is governed by a ten-member Board of Directors elected by the membership. Directors sit for two-year terms, with five terms expiring each year.

In November of 1984, three new members were elected to the Board: Trisha Benedict, David Dalto, and Ramona Wascher. Jens Shur and Jack Teeters were elected to second terms.

The Board chose its officers at its January meeting. The 1985 regime is:

President	David Dalto
Vice-President	Trisha Benedict
Treasurer	Carl Childs
Recording Secretary	Ramona Wascher
Corresponding Secretary	Ray Romano

In addition, Trisha Benedict will be acting as Events Coordinator and Verna Parino as Membership Coordinator. Jack Teeters is the Society's legal counsel. Also serving as Directors are June Carr and William Cord.

The Board is currently developing plans for the upcoming year's events, particularly on Society activities in conjunction with the Ring, and on exploring means of recognizing and encouraging the development of Wagnerian performers in the Bay Area. Members interested in either of these projects, or in any other involvement in the Society, are urged to contact any of the officers.

THE WAGNER SOCIETY

The Wagner Society is a non-profit corporation whose objectives are to develop and cultivate a wider public interest in, knowledge of, and appreciation for the works of Richard Wagner; to further education concerning Richard Wagner, his works, and the historical and cultural environment in which he worked; to sponsor and give assistance to Wagnerian musical and cultural programs; and to provide scholarships and fellowships to qualified persons.

Dues are \$30 per year.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

- I would like to be a member of the Wagner Society. Enclosed is \$30.
- I don't wish to join now, but please put me on your mailing list.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____

The Wagner Society, 462 Funston Street
San Francisco, CA 94118 415-386-9243

The Wagner Society Newsletter

VOL. 1 NO. 2

MAY 1985

THE RING IS COMING!

After a long wait, San Francisco's *Ring* summer is upon us. Finally, we need not travel to Seattle or Germany, for the gods and heroes have come to us. Yes, that is Wotan sighted outside the Opera House, and there is Mime across the lobby at the René Kollo recital.

We hope you have all managed somehow to get tickets. The sudden taking of Wagner fever by this city was quite a surprise. To those of you still searching, or wheeling and dealing, we can, alas, offer only encouragement and moral support.

It will be a very busy month. Many of us will be seeing two, and a few all three, of the cycles. But that is only the beginning. There are films and cartoons, chamber music and organ concerts, lectures and seminars, parties...and, for some, long sessions in standing-room lines. We feel sure that your mail has brought you news of most of these events, and taken away some hefty checks, so we will not try to list everything. But here, in brief, are the Society doings for the next few weeks.

The season begins off with our celebration of the 172nd birthday of Richard Wagner. Expanding on the tradition of the 171st, we are making this an opportunity to express our gratitude to the artists bringing us this extraordinary artistic event by inviting them to dinner and an evening of entertainment. There will be film, music, comedy, and surprises. Honorary member Jess Thomas will be with us, as will the noted satirist Anna Russell, whose name is, for some of us, as firmly tied to the *Ring* as that of Birgit Nilsson.

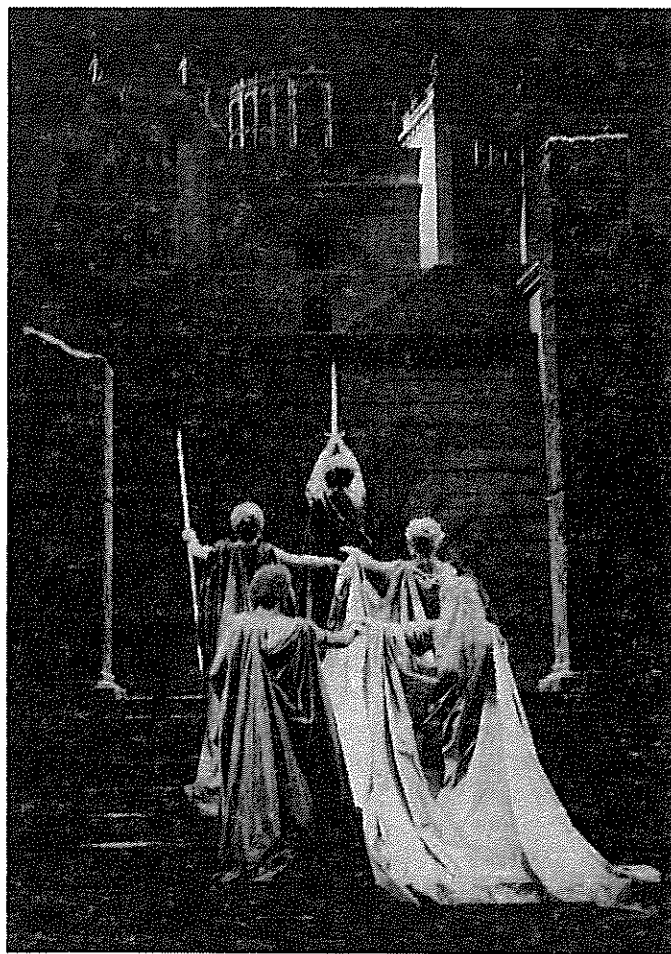
The other event of which we are most proud is the presentation of the American premiere of a film of *Tristan und Isolde*, made possible by the generosity and energy of WS member Claude Heater, who also happens to play one of the title roles. On June 6, true aficionados will be able to see *Tristan* as it was written - between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.

We will have several chances to meet members of other American Wagner groups coming to San Francisco. On June 9, following the matinee performance of *Walküre*, we will be at Rooney's with a large group from the Wagner Society of Southern California, led by *Opera Quarterly* editors Irene and Sherwin Sloan. Special guests will include Quizmaster Edward Downes, as well as some of the evening's performers. On June 16, we will be having post-*Siegfried* supper at the German Oak with Wagnerites from New York. Please let us know if you will be coming to either of these gatherings.

During the two-hour break in the *Wagner* film on June 22, we have arranged a private buffet lunch just across the street from the Opera House. This, we are sorry to say, is sold out. The next day, if we are still standing, we plan

to have a Society table in Stern Grove to hear Maestro Kurt Herbert Adler conduct an all-Wagner concert.

And, of course, we will be at the performances. As we go to press it appears we will have some tables reserved at the south box level, outside the Opera Shop. This will be the place to meet at intermissions for a glass of wine and a chance talk over the performances with old and new friends. We hope to be seeing many of you there.



TRISTAN, TOO!

The last few years have brought a number of successful film versions of operas - *Don Giovanni*, *Traviata*, *Carmen*. Wagner, however, has been represented only by the highly idiosyncratic Syberberg *Parsifal*. Now we have found a film version of *Tristan und Isolde* that presents a more faithfully Wagnerian vision.

(Continued p. 8)

THE RING IN BAYREUTH AND SAN FRANCISCO

By Steve Sokolow

Among the ten Wagner Society members who went to Bayreuth in 1984, almost all of us were experiencing our first Bayreuth Ring. The keen anticipation generated by the Bayreuth mystique was tempered by the reviews of the production we had read. The first year of Peter Hall's production (1983) had not been a critical success. What was worse, Sir Georg Solti had had to drop out of the production, and many of us had been looking forward to his conducting as the main attraction. Furthermore, we were attending Cycle III and we had heard that Manfred Jung had been roundly booed for his performances of Siegfried in the first two cycles (as we had heard him booed in the 1983 broadcasts). But productions of the Ring do change considerably at Bayreuth over the five years Wolfgang Wagner has decreed they shall be allowed to live, and so we went hoping for the best, but prepared for the worst.

Peter Hall's vision of the Ring was one dear to our hearts - one respecting the stage directions and attempting the scenic effects required by the librettist. Hall and William Dudley, the stage designer, claimed to be *reine Toren* concerning the deeper meanings of the Ring - they simply wanted to "tell the story." This attitude raised the hackles of the Bayreuth faithful, who have become accustomed to "concept" Rings. But even with this simple goal, Hall and Dudley came to grief through underestimating the difficulties of the stage effects they were attempting. These difficulties have been chronicled in an excellent book by American journalist Stephan Fay and photographer Roger Wood called *The Ring: Anatomy of an Opera*. This book is highly recommended, though its depiction of the antagonisms between Wagner, Solti, and Hall and Dudley may frighten Wagnerites. It caused me to wonder how productions of the Ring ever get mounted at all, so Wagnerian are the difficulties and personalities involved.

Hall's main problem was that he relied too much on technology to bring to life some of the seemingly impossible effects of the Ring - the first and last scenes, the rainbow bridge and the ride of the Valkyries are prime examples. The Bayreuth technical staff, wonder workers that they are, were not prepared for the sorts of elaborate solutions he and Dudley proposed. Hall and Dudley, for their part, were daunted by the small amount of time (one year) they had to mount all four operas of the new Ring. At Bayreuth, they did not have the luxury of building a new Ring production over several years, as in San Francisco. There just was not time to implement all of Hall's and Dudley's ideas. Originally, most of their effects were based on two huge, movable platforms, one comprising almost the entire floor (usually) of the stage and the other a backdrop. Too late, it was realized that the backdrop would interfere with the lighting and it had to be dropped altogether, meaning that many of the intended effects were only half realized. The fact that so much of the original plan had to be abandoned left us with a Ring which often looked like two patched together, one the romantic, "real-

istic" Ring promised by the director and designer, and the other a Wielandish empty-stage Ring. The inconsistency was often jarring, but it did not prevent individual scenes from working extremely well.

Rheingold began spectacularly. The *Rheintöchtern* actually nude, actually swimming, and actually singing was a spectacle I never really expected to see in the theatre. Even with the seams (and mirrors) showing, it was a wonderful effect, recalling the Rackham illustrations. Simple nudity on the opera stage turned out to be far more tasteful than the tacky body stockings and painted-on nipples we are accustomed to seeing. The ensuing Walhalla scene was good-looking but not particularly notable. The giants were on stilts, and sported huge mask heads which covered their faces entirely. This unfortunately gives little chance for Fasolt, the only really likeable character in *Rheingold*, to emoté as he really needs to. The scene was extremely dark, the background in flat black except for the usual sketchy castle in the background. We soon came to realize that all the scenes in this Ring were to have the same black background, even the awakening scene. This was in great contrast with the San Francisco Ring we had all enjoyed, with its many and subtle changes of lighting. Kudos (as usual) to S.F.'s Thomas Munn.

Nibelheim looked like a coal mine - reasonable enough, but we could see the stagehands blowing steam out of canisters, something that might have been intentional in the Chéreau Ring, but which certainly wasn't here. Alberich's Wurm was extremely unimpressive, but this is reasonable. Wotan, after all, is amused by Alberich's feat, and we may as well be. In my opinion, Lehnhoff's handsome Chinese dragon was equally inappropriate, and a lot more fun. The Bayreuth *Rheingold* produced nothing as original as Lehnhoff's *Hort-als-Dreck* in scene III. The piling up of the Gold in scene IV was made much easier by the fact that the Nibelungs had forged it into ingots shaped like Lincoln Logs. I'm still waiting for a successful staging of this brilliant piece of stage symbolism; the renunciation of love made visible. At the end of *Rheingold*, however, we were rewarded with the sight of the Gods really crossing the rainbow bridge - just excellent lighting and projection, resulting in the most stunning effect I've seen since the San Mateo High School mounted a little known *Rheingold* in the 60's which used shadow projections of Javanese-style puppets for this effect. We found the performances satisfying but not great. Hermann Becht's Alberich was the standout, and his performance became even more intense as the Ring progressed. Our fears about the conducting proved groundless, as Peter Schneider was wonderful in the pit, here and throughout the Ring.

On to *Walküre*, and a traditional enough hut for Hunding, dominated by a huge bare tree which bursts into leaf for *Winterstürme*. Siegfried Jerusalem and Jeannine Altmeyer were an exciting pair of Wälsungs. Act II was based on an abstract stage which worked very well. The

rocky cleft swooped back in a way which allowed the gods to enter and exit seemingly from empty space. Fricka drove an unusually realistic chariot and (static) team of rams. Grane was visible, looking like a great big chess piece, but this was the only time horses were seen in the *Ring* (another retreat from Hall's original ideas). Sigmund Nimgern (warming up considerably from *Rheingold*), Hanna Schwarz and Hildegard Behrens really made sparks fly in their long dialogues. The Valkyries began their flight lying on the moving platform which started out vertically at the top of the stage and swooped down slowly to become the floor - a nice effect marred somewhat by the click of seat belts as they dismounted from the "sky". This act, too, was set on an empty stage, Brünnhilde's six-inch high ring of fire looking a little too much like an electric hotplate. Nimgern (finally achieving true Wotan-hood) and Behrens impersonated father and daughter so convincingly (both vocally and histrionically) that nothing about the setting really mattered. The platform rose slowly up till it was completely out of sight during the final passage.

After last summer's *Siegfried* in San Francisco, it would have taken a lot to impress us, and we were indeed underwhelmed when Manfred Jung was clearly holding back his voice during the forging song to save it for the following acts. (His strategy, however, was successful as he later sang a very fine awakening scene). He was booed only slightly after Act I and later roundly applauded. Peter Haage as Mime and Becht as Alberich made their short scene very exciting, and the fight with the "realistic" red-eyed dragon was also satisfying. Hall's Fafner was different from Lehnhoff's, but just as effective. Personally, I missed the effect of Fafner returning to Giant form after being stabbed - something I thought Chéreau had added to *Ring*-staging forever. (Has anyone seen this before Chéreau? I'm just assuming he was the first.) Again, real water was used on stage, as Siegfried had to slosh through a brook to fight Fafner and drag his body back into the cave - a curiously effective piece of stagecraft. The Wotan-Erda scene was beautifully staged with the ever-mobile platform rising to reveal Erda tangled in the roots of the World-ash, and sinking down again at Siegfried's entrance. In Hall's original conception, Brünnhilde's

hotplate was to become a rotisserie, so that we would see the entire stage (with Brünnhilde on it) turn over while Siegfried crosses through the magic fire. Behrens was willing to start her performance upside down, but Wolfgang Wagner was terrified at the possible injuries, and vetoed this effect. Too bad! Instead, Siegfried crossed through the Magic Fire behind a black opera house curtain, just as he did in San Francisco. The awakening scene was beautifully acted and sung, but still provided a strong contrast with San Francisco (see below).

Act I of *Götterdämmerung* was marred by the nervousness of the Norns, strapped vertically to the platform, and also by Aage Haugland, who was otherwise a fine Hagen, stumbling through his watch on the Rhine. Also, unaccountably, the prompter was clearly audible throughout the house, just for this one act. A shrine Bayreuth may be, but perfection it is not. At Waltraute's entrance, Brünnhilde's rock rose to reveal the split-level cave below, where the sisters had their confrontation - a homey touch. If Act I was a mess, Act II was everything one could ask of a music drama. It started with Becht's terrifyingly intense Alberich, continued through Behrens' thrillingly sung and acted anguish, and culminated with a beautifully directed throng of Huns attending the double wedding, complete with a priest and altars set up to sacrifice to Wotan, Donner, and Fricka. Franz Mazura's Gunther was unusually regal and human, as striking as his Klingsor a week earlier. Nothing could follow Act II, but Act III was imaginatively staged with the platform used to good effect, rising and carrying the whole funeral procession with it. (In rehearsals, Wagner once asked Hall, "Doesn't the floor do anything in this scene?"). There was real fire at the end, striking if somewhat localized, but still enough to make Wolfgang Wagner extremely nervous for the safety of his house.

I suppose there are still two schools of thought about opera singing - those who make the singing absolutely paramount and those who will sacrifice musical beauty or accuracy for realistic acting. Personally, I want to be convinced that I am watching Brünnhilde or Wotan, and inaccurate or unbeautiful singing will jar me out of the illusion as much as bad acting. But given a certain standard, I will sacrifice vocal virtuosity for believable characterization. Dropping out of character, even subtly, destroys the illusion. By this measure, Behrens was a wonderful Brünnhilde. There is no question that Eva Marton was more exciting vocally (she is one of those rare singers who seems never to have to find ways around difficulties), but for total Brünnhildeness, Behrens takes the prize. Even where she had to work hard to project over the Wagner orchestra, she found ways to do so with no ill effect on her voice or on the flow of Wagner's music!

It was especially interesting to see the Hall production with Lehnhoff's San Francisco *Ring* (or 3/4 of it) fresh in our minds. There were similarities of intent, both directors aiming for spectacular scenic effects and both purporting to be creating a "realistic" *Ring*, but the differences were more notable than the similarities. One of the most striking was the unrelieved darkness of the Bayreuth *Ring* noted above. Surely, Mr. Hall, at least the

(Continued p.8)

Bayreuth

Mittwoch, 29. August 1984

„Ring“ in Frisco

Einen Scheck in Höhe von tausend Mark überreichten Mitglieder des Richard-Wagner-Verbandes aus San Francisco an Wolfgang Wagner. Gleichzeitig erhielt der Festspielchef ein in englischer Sprache geschriebenes Buch, das Mr. Cord, einer der amerikanischen Gäste, verfaßt hatte. Thema des literarischen Werkes ist der „Ring“. Die Amerikaner luden Wolfgang Wagner nach San Francisco ein, sich in der dortigen Oper den „Ring“ anzusehen.

THE RING ON RECORDS

By Ed Becker

More Ring recordings are available now than ever before. None is satisfying in every respect and no evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses will meet with approval from all.

To begin with stereo versions: The famous London/Decca recording (now available newly remastered on both vinyl and CD) is dominated by John Culshaw's varied and spectacular sound-stage engineering; the largely superb cast (especially Flagstad, Nilsson, Neidlinger and Frick); and Sir Georg Solti's straightforward, energetic conducting, which, nevertheless, lacks the degree of shaping and cohesion - from the single phrase to the whole act - that marks the best Wagner conducting. This deficiency, especially at slow tempos, is most evident in *Die Walküre*, least in the excellent *Rheingold*, *Siegfried* Act I, and *Götterdämmerung* Act II.

Herbert von Karajan's Ring on DG, the opposite of Solti's, is paradoxical: frequent attention to chamber music-like detail, yet with a blended, homogenized sound; a close, seamless knitting together of phrases, yet an insufficient sense of forward motion. There is an unemphatic quality, a smoothing over of attacks. At the end of *Die Walküre*, however, von Karajan does successfully achieve the suspended, interior quality that he is apparently aiming for most of the time. He can also at times become several degrees more vigorous and incisive: the scene of Brünnhilde's betrayal in *Götterdämmerung* Act II, or the beginning of Act I of *Walküre*, for instance. But for the most part, his approach vitiates the intensity of the work. The predominately light-voiced cast (Thomas Stewart, Helge Brilioth) are quite good vocally and dramatically, if not always outstanding. Fisher-Dieskau is miscast as the *Rheingold* Wotan. The one great performance is Jon Vickers' Siegmund. Unfortunately he is not helped by Gundula Janowitz's cold-fish Sieglinde. To hear him in a better environment, go to Knappertsbusch 1958 (see below) or to the *Walküre* conducted by Erich Leinsdorf (London, formerly RCA). Here an admittedly less developed Vickers is partnered by the vibrantly youthful Gré Brouwenstijn, the greatest Sieglinde since Lotte Lehmann. Leinsdorf's conducting is often exciting, but rigid, and George London's Wotan is rather colorless and unvaried. Too bad!

That a concern for beautiful sounds need not, as with von Karajan, lead to diminished dramatic impact or a loss of overall shape is shown by Reginald Goodall's account (Angel/EMI) with its deep, glowing sound. Exalted lyricism, a sense of mystery, and weightiness without ponderousness are the frequent result. But be warned: this is the slowest Ring on records, and some may be put off. The pace works against the performance at times, mostly in *The Rhinegold*, which tends to be a bit stodgy. But try *Siegfried* or *Twilight of the Gods* and listen for a long stretch; the cumulative power can be considerable. This is an English-language Ring in Andrew Porter's superb translation. The mostly English cast is surprisingly good: Norman Bailey as a frequently forceful Wotan, Alberto Remedios as a light-voiced but fresh and buoyant-sounding

Siegfried, and Margret Curphey as an involved young Sieglinde. But particularly outstanding are Rita Hunter's radiant Brünnhilde and Aage Haugland's sonorous Hagen.

I find it difficult to totally separate the audible portion of the Pierre Boulez-conducted Ring (in digital sound on Phillips) from the irritating distractions of the Chéreau staging. I don't remember the vocal contributions as quite so uneven, so painfully bad at times as the critics have said. (The dramatically varied and powerful Gwyneth Jones was especially taken to task for this.) But, then, the records were made from a different performance than the televised version. On hearing the *Rheingold* recording, however, my impressions of Boulez, though tempered, were confirmed: his Ring is incisive, transparent, possessing dramatic shape, but lacking both in grandeur and in the intensity of the better versions, a feeling reinforced by the fairly involved but second-rate cast. The best part of this Ring is the vocally superb Jeannine Altmeyer, well partnered by Peter Hofmann (and Boulez). The less said of Manfred Jung's Siegfried, the better.

The Bayreuth performance under Karl Böhm on Phillips (also on CD) is my recommendation for a complete stereo Ring. The conducting has a strong overall design and dramatic urgency that combines with a cast which, though not always first-rate vocally (e.g., Theo Adam as Wotan) is nevertheless highly involved. James King is sparked by Böhm and by a hot, if vocally wayward, Leonie Rysanek into a performance much better than on that for Solti. The great Birgit Nilsson also exceeds her efforts for Solti, as well as for Leinsdorf. Wolfgang Windgassen is at least as good as on Solti, as is Gustav Neidlinger. Erwin Mohlfart characterizes Mime as superbly as Solti's Gerhard Stolze and does more actual singing. Böhm does stint a degree of lyricism and sense of mystery, a limitation not alone attributable to fast tempos. Krauss (see below) is often as fast. But for me the drama is projected with a grasping intensity that exceeds any other modern recording.

Of the new Ring on Eurodisc conducted by Marek Janowski I have heard only *Die Walküre*. It is the strongest stereo performance outside of Böhm's. Janowski's conducting is incisive and dramatically strong, if a little inflexible and literal at times. The standouts in the excellent cast are Kurt Moll's dark Hunding and Yvonne Minton's formidable and varied Fricka. Jessye Norman as Sieglinde is deeply committed, but her majestic voice would better fit Brünnhilde. Jeannine Altmeyer is convincing in that role, in an unusually youthful-sounding way. Siegfried Jerusalem, if lacking the ideal vocal heft, is still a believable young Siegmund. Although Theo Adam's voice has declined a bit since his Wotan for Böhm, he projects the character specifically and powerfully.

The greatest glories in Wagner performance are to be found on older mono recordings. My favorite of all complete Rings is the 1953 Bayreuth performance under Clemens Krauss (on Foyer), whose conducting is clear of texture, brisk yet flexible, constantly and vividly alive to the dramatic situation. The sound, though poorly

balanced in favor of the voices, is perfectly acceptable mono. The cast is headed by Hans Hotter and Astrid Varnay, both in splendid voice, and both giving performances filled with dramatic depth and nuance. Listen to the way Varnay's Brünnhilde rides into her final pleading-changing-to-transport just before Wotan's farewell, and to the nobility and pathos of Hotter's Wotan as he sings of the one freer than himself who will awaken her. Neidlinger and Paul Kuen are the great Alberich and Mime one would expect. Joseph Greindl, who, like the above four, is on most Bayreuth recordings, gives perhaps his best recorded performance as Hagen, and Herman Uhde gives his beautiful, firm voice to dramatic accounts of Donner and Gunther. The only hitches are the rough-voiced and unsubtle Siegmund of Ramon Vinay and the unyouthful Sieglinde of Regina Resnik (who is more convincing in Acts II and III). A good supplement is the *Walküre* Acts I and II recorded by Bruno Walter in 1935 (Act II completed by Bruno Seidler-Winkler in 1938). Walter is fiery and warmly lyrical as the occasion requires; Lotte Lehmann sings with more youthful ardor, more emotional variety and subtlety than any other Sieglinde, and Lauritz Melchior, vocally secure and accurate beyond anyone else, is a heroically virile yet tender Siegmund, even if not ideally young sounding. This is the greatest Act I, hands down. Act II also features a secure young Hotter, Margaret Klose, and Marta Fuchs, all excellent. The Siegmund-Sieglinde scene, with Walter conducting, is the most searing ever recorded. The German EMI/Electrola recording of Act I has better sound than the Seraphim. The Act II is a part of a large Pathé-Marconi set entitled *Les Introuvables du Chant Wagnerien*.

Of the *Ring* that Joseph Keilberth conducted at Bayreuth from 1952-1955 (with substantially the same cast as Krauss led), the 1953 is available on Melodram. (Martha Mödl is Brünnhilde here.) My memory of sampling the old Allegro version impressed me, and, according to the critics, is fine for the most part. The 1952 is available complete on Melodram and is reportedly excellent throughout, though quite uneven in the *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. The only performance I know is the 1954 *Walküre* on Melodram. The first act is heavy, the pace lumbering. Martha Mödl is over-ripe and the aging Max Lorenz self-indulgent. (The 1954 set with Günther Treptow and Inge Borkh is certainly the one to get.) But the second and third acts are great when Varnay and Hotter are on stage. Keilberth, not radically different from Krauss, tends to underline dramatic points a bit more and, if a trifle less intense and cohesive, treats us to some of the best Wagner conducting.

Other outstanding recordings of Bayreuth *Rings* feature Hans Knappertsbusch as conductor. The 1958 on Melodram is superior in performance and recording to the excellent 1957 (complete on Cetra; *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* on Melodram), and is the one I will concentrate on. Kna's rough-hewn, unadorned style and slow pace may at times seem ponderous or lumpy (as at the end of *Walküre* Act I) but, taken over all, it has a structure and inner strength exceeded only by his famous *Parsifal* recordings. The cast is outstanding, with Hotter and Varnay again commanding, though in somewhat less good voice than they were under

Krauss; Rysanek and Vickers shown at their best in *Walküre* Act I; Windgassen giving his all (Bernd Aldenhoff is on the 1957); Franz Anderson an excellent Alberich; Stolze as characterful a Mime as on Solti; and Elizabeth Grümmer a perfect Gutrunne. The mono sound is excellent. I have not heard the 1956 *Götterdämmerung*, but it is reportedly outstanding.

One of the gems among Bayreuth recordings is the 1951 Act III of *Walküre* under von Karajan (on German EMI in remarkably good sound). What a different Wagner conductor von Karajan was at that time. What we hear is a Toscanini-like dramatic punch and momentum, with no suggestion of the later mannerisms. Sigurd Björling is a firm-voiced, solid, though somewhat lispy Wotan. Rysanek gives one of her most riveting performances and Varnay is not far behind. *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried* from that year are also available (on Foyer) and are reportedly of like quality, though I have not heard them.

In the fifties the *Rings* at Bayreuth seem to have been the property of the five "K's": Krauss, Keilberth, Knappertsbusch, Karajan and Rudolph Kepe, whose 1960 performance is distinguished by a subtle lyricism that is wholly individual. I have heard only the *Rheingold*, which is superb. The excellent cast is headed by Hermann Uhde, a solid-voiced and strong Wotan, though less varied than Hotter. (He also appears as the Wanderer in *Siegfried* but is replaced by Jerome Hines in *Walküre*.) Stolze is a wonderfully insinuating Loge - one of the best. Marga Höffgen as Erda is dark and imposing, though she has a little too much vibrato. Unlike the Bayreuth regular Maria von Ilosvay, she sounds like a true contralto. The rest of Kepe's *Ring* features Windgassen (as Siegmund), Hans Hopf, Varnay, Nilsson and Gottlob Frick.

If I were to recommend a *Ring* from the standpoint of conducting alone, it would be the La Scala performance of 1950 under Wilhelm Furtwängler. There are many magical and revealing passages, but what is most telling is the sense of inevitability, of utter rightness, which extends from the phrases and their interconnections to the larger span, no matter how wide the variation in tempo (which is usually brisk). This ebb and flow within a firm grasp of dramatic structure, so essential to great Wagner conducting, is what we rarely get today, and what Furtwängler at his greatest provides beyond all others. Most of the cast are not great singers, but they outdo their other recorded efforts for this occasion. For instance, Hilde Konetzni, a neutral Sieglinde for Furtwängler three years later, is here passionate and youthful. The greatest vocal attraction is the magnetic Kirsten Flagstad, still not that far from the top of her form, as Brünnhilde. Ludwig Weber brings subtlety to his black Hagen, as well as to Hunding and Fafner. Max Lorenz' *Götterdämmerung* *Siegfried* is vocally right - young and robust, though he mars his performance a bit by some interpretive exaggerations. This fault is not heard in the suitably boyish Set Svanholm in the *Walküre*, but his light voice is occasionally taxed. Ferdinand Franz and Joseph Hermann are solid and strong vocally and dramatically, though a bit monochromatic by comparison to Hotter. The Mime of Peter Markwort is a vivid charac-

(Continued next pg.)

terization, the Alberich of Alois Pernerstorfer well sung but not so vivid. The 1953 Furtwängler performance for Radio Italiana on EMI (formerly on Seraphim) with some of the same cast (exceptions being Martha Mödl and Ludwig Suthaus) is good, but inferior to the La Scala in about every respect except sound. Actually, the best *sounding* alternative is the 1954 studio recording of *Walküre* with the Vienna Philharmonic (now on Seraphim). Like the RAI, it is a good performance, but with a cast less consistent and involved than in the La Scala (Rysanek, Suthaus, Mödl, Franz), and with conducting slower and less intense. The sound of the La Scala set is shallow and constricted by modern standardise, though it is clean and listenable enough in the Fonit-Cetra version. The performances on other labels range from bad (Discocorp) to excellent (Everest, Murray Hill).

There remains one essential item: Furtwängler's performance of *Walküre* Act III from Covent Garden in 1937, which, along with excerpts from the *Götterdämmerung* of 1936 and 1937, is available on the Acanta set called *Furtwängler Conducting Wagner*, and on Discocorp. It is simply incandescent, one mighty sweep from the first note to the last, the greatest performance of the act I have ever heard. The main hero of the performance is Furtwängler. But Flagstad and Rudolf Bockelmann are at their peaks, singing with nobility, biting intensity, and an ease of accuracy, a sense of reserve power that is awesome. Maria Müller meets them with an impassioned and equally well-sung Sieglinde. (The same can be said of Frieda Leider, Flagstad and Melchior in the *Götterdämmerung* selections.) There is no barking or whooping; everything is sung as a melodic line without sacrifice of dramatic values. If you don't believe that Wagner performance has declined since, hear this!

My final recommendations, then, are the Böhm for the best stereo *Ring*, and the Krauss for the best overall, supplemented by the Walter for *Walküre* Acts I and II and the Furtwängler 1937 for Act III.

Good listening!

THE WAGNER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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REVIEWS

Der Fliegende Holländer

Hawaii Opera Theater

What might be expected? After having seen Dutchman interpreted as Senta's illusion in Bayreuth or, worse, as the Steersman's dream in San Francisco, I was ready for anything. Not to worry - Hawaii Opera Theater staged a four-square, traditional production (Honolulu, February, 1985).

Maestro Robert La Marchina led a competent, if not inspired, orchestra in Wagner's three-act version. Too bad, because the musical thread ultimately suffered with interruptions. Nevertheless, after a plodding overture, things picked up nicely and remained so throughout.

Baritone James Johnson, modest of voice but with the requisite range, realized his role as the Dutchman with a menacing presence. His portrayal effectively mixed the mystical and the human, and his character was colored by the weariness of a condemned man. Daland, sung by veteran bass William Wilderman, was the usual gruff sea captain, though an exceptionally convincing one.

The vocal tour-de-force was soprano Lou Ann Wyckoff's Senta. She has a full voice which is compelling but at times rough around the edges, particularly in the upper register. Nevertheless, her Senta was portrayed with enough compassion, or obsession, to redeem the entire 7th Fleet!

The remaining cast of young, unseasoned singers were light on inspiration and voice. Their parts needed and suggested more than they were capable of delivering. Included were Les Ceballos (Steersman), Rita de Carlo (Mary), and George Gray (Erik). Choral work was fine, except for unfortunate over-amplification of the ghost ship's crew in Act III. It cheapened the effect and marred an otherwise well-trained ensemble.

Considering the glut of directorial "interpretations" of *Dutchman*, Hawaii Opera Theater's conception was a revelation. Ships actually arrived and departed on stage! With judicious use of lighting, the entire production had a visual coherence and artistic sensibility not often found in today's ego-inspired directorial presentations. We have David Morelock and set designer Richard Gullicksen to thank for such relief. I wish Hawaii Opera Theater would set sail for San Francisco.

-Robert Grabowski

(Editorial note: The biggest fault we found with this production was the deplorable practice of seating late-comers, not only after the the music had begun, but also well into the first act. Brickbats to the Hawaii Opera Theater for allowing this disruptive and distracting practice.)

-T.B.

Rhinegold in Marin

BY Sally Gorham

During the school year 1983-84, my twenty fourth-graders at the Marin Waldorf School immersed themselves in Wagner's *Ring*. Each morning I told part of the story, trying to create as much drama and visual imagery as possible. The children created their own books on the subject, writing compositions and drawing illustrations.

Some excerpts:

After Siegfried went through the fire, he thought he saw a man in shining armor. He was right about the armor, but wrong about the man.

Wotan put his favorite daughter into a magic sleep and said to her, "The first man who comes along will wake you up and treat you like dirt."

Once a week we did a water color painting on that week's episode. They acted out the stories, making up their own dialogue. Lovely figures of Rhinemaidens, giants, dwarves, and all the gods were modelled out of colored beeswax. We listened to recorded musical highlights, mainly of the orchestral themes.

The climax of the year was the presentation in May of our class play, *The Rhinegold*, which I adapted (and shortened) from Andrew Porter's intelligent and beautiful translation. The play was given twice and double-cast, so the Wotan, Alberich, Loge, etc. were Nibelungs in the second cast. My Loges were both girls. The Rhinemaidens and Loge sang, but the rest was straight dialogue. We solved the technical problems of the transformations with an endearing toad and a borrowed Chinese-looking dragon. The Nibelungs were "transformed" at the end into a human rainbow bridge.

Sara, one of our Loges, announced to me one day that she was going to name her first-born Flosshilde, whether male or female!

The end of *Götterdämmerung* brought up a lively discussion of power, love versus greed, and man's abuse of nature. Some were reminded of Noah's Ark and the Flood, which they had studied the previous year. Apprehensions concerning nuclear fears led to a discussion of karma, reincarnation, and the "meaning of life". Anastasia, whose parents are Zen Buddhists, raised her hand and said, with the utmost sincerity, "I think the whole purpose of life is to die." Gina, more practical, responded with, "I think the whole purpose of life is to be nice to each other and have a good time."

Why study these works with children? In children of this age one sees the first stirrings of the adolescent to be; the critical faculty and the keen sense of questioning, as well as the cynicism. There lives also, in these times, an uneasiness, an apprehension, and a tension between the future and the past. So, we study these great works, which say that man is not powerless, not just carried along by

DR. CORD'S RING QUIZ

Many a Wagnerite prides himself on detailed knowledge of the great texts. But here are some questions that may send you back to your libretti to be ready for June's performances. Answers on page 8.

1. List four figures who are named in the *Ring* but do not make appearances.
2. Wotan has the byname of "Wanderer". Give two other figures called by secondary names.
3. In addition to toad, serpent, dragon, horse and bear, there is mention of many other animals and birds. Name twelve.
4. Several figures of the *Dramatis Personae* sleep or have slept. Name nine.
5. Identify the one character who has no familial relationship, either by blood-line or through marriage, to any other.
6. As Siegmund tells the story of his life to Hunding and Sieglinde, he makes reference to himself with descriptive names. List four of his names.
7. Of what is Siegmund's hunting horn made?
8. Before Siegfried delivers the fatal thrust of his sword to the Dragon's heart, he wounds another part of the animal's body. What part?
9. Who is the older, Gunther or Hagen?
10. Gutrune is awakened from a sleep during which she had bad dreams. What sounds had she heard in those dreams?

laws given from above, but has a determining voice in his own destiny - and in the whole evolutionary process. Mankind is no longer seen as a puppet, but as "co-creator" of his own destiny.

There is something hidden in these works that awakens the conscience within the children and reminds them that they are part of a destiny which they must help to fulfill in every constructive way possible. The "destruction" of the gods at the end of the Norse tales is only a transition and transformation to a higher order of life. The old ways are reborn, purified. The social structure is released to reveal a true humanity.



awakening scene demands a hint of sunlight! And remember the blaze of light at the end of Act II of *Siegfried* here.

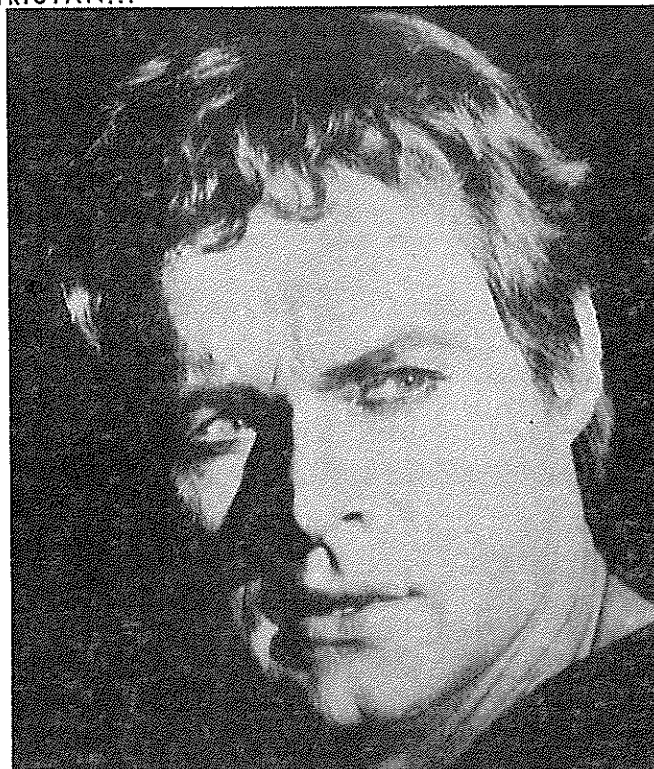
A more important contrast between the two *Rings* was the style of direction. Lehnhoff's style is closer to that of Chéreau, often relying on stage business to illuminate the characters and their relationships (Brünnhilde poking Wotan in the ribs with her spear, Mime's toy bear..). Hall's style is much less busy, more reminiscent of Wieland's admonitions to his singers to stand still so that when actions do occur, their intensity is amplified. Sometimes more stage action is appropriate, for example in the first two acts of *Siegfried*. But the more emotionally intense scenes are served better by Hall's more repressed direction. In the San Francisco awakening scene, Siegfried and Brünnhilde circled around each other constantly, his passion and her anxiety indicated with numerous gestures and motions. In Bayreuth, the scene was more static, but also more intense. In San Francisco, the Wälzung twins in Hunding's hut seemed to be passionately in love almost from the first moment. In Bayreuth, they took a little time to recognize each other and fall in love, and this made the drama sharper.

There is no such thing as a perfect *Ring*, and every *Ring* can't stir up our perceptions as much as Wieland's or Chéreau's. If the current Bayreuth production didn't change our understanding of the *Ring*, it certainly provided us with some particularly beautiful images of events in the *Ring* which we can carry alongside our own favorites for the rest of our lives. Every new *Ring* adds to "The Ring". So, on to San Francisco.

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. Sintolt the Hegeling, Wittig the Irming, Gibich, and Grimhild.
2. Erda (Wala and Ur-Wala) and Freia (Holda).
3. Boar, bull (ox), deer, dog, eagle, finch, fox, goat, ram, raven, sheep and wolf.
4. Wotan, Fricka, Hunding, Sieglinde, Fafner (as the dragon), Brünnhilde, Erda, Hagen and Gutrune.
5. Forest Bird.
6. Wehwalt, Wölfig, Friedmund, and Frohwalt.
7. Silver.
8. The tail.
9. Gunther.
10. Grane's neighing and Brünnhilde's laughter.

From *200 Questions and Answers on Richard Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen*.
By permission of the author.



This is a *Tristan* in a romantic style to match this most romantic of love stories. Made originally for Belgian television, it was filmed on locations including the castle of Ghent and the dunes of the North Sea coast. The cast is extraordinarily attractive. Claude Heater, who has sung the major heldentenor roles in most of the great houses of the world, is a handsome, brooding Tristan. He is matched by the lovely Isolde of Jacqueline Van Quaille. Josef Greindl, the only singer who does not appear in the film, is the voice of König Marke. The film was directed by Joseph Benedek, and the Orchestra of the R.T.B is conducted by Andre Vandernoot.

The film will be shown twice, June 6 and June 20, at the Palace of Fine Arts. Mr. Heater will be present at both showings.

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