

# LEITMOTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

## SEATTLE OPERA'S FIRST SONG CONTEST

*The International Wagner Competition Has an Auspicious Beginning*

It seems clear that Richard Wagner found that public song contests had merit: after all, two of his ten major operas (*Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger*) devote substantial attention to public singing competitions.

In these two operas, the intent is not exactly a search for unknown singers; but in both it *is* a competition. However, is this an effective method today to discover men and women capable of singing Wagner's works well – the presumed purpose of Seattle's competition?

Just about all Wagnerians would agree that there is a shortage of great singers – we all wish there were another Flagstad, Melchior, Nilsson, Thomas, Rysanek, and more. Can we reasonably expect, with near certainty, that every person capable of singing as well as Kirsten Flagstad is going to emerge from the huge number of would-be sopranos and thereafter grace our opera stages? How many potentially great singers become discouraged early on and decide to become computer programmers, etc.?<sup>1</sup> I know of no definitive studies on this matter, but my guess is that there are many potentially fine singers who bow out before they are recognized.

Therefore, any and all methods of unearthing tomorrow's greats need to be pursued.

Virtually all opera companies have always had *private* song contests, i.e.

they hold auditions for singers with whom the management is unfamiliar. But these events are attended only by a few of the company's key people.

Additionally, many opera companies assemble a dozen, or so, young singers in annual training schools (examples being San Francisco Opera's Mero-la and Adler Fellow programs). At the end of these schools a concert is given to introduce the young singers to an audience. But before training commences, the only contest element of these schools is held privately — to decide which of the contestants will be invited to participate in the school.

So Seattle's decision to have a contest for Wagner singers held before a large public audience was unique, at least in recent times.<sup>2</sup> Speight Jenkins, Seattle's general director, auditioned singers in Vienna, Berlin, London, Paris, Seattle and New York. After hearing forty-three men and women, he selected eight finalists and an alternate (in case any of the finalists became ill). This proved to be a wise decision because finalist Carolyn Betty unfortunately was indisposed on the day of the competition; Philip O'Brien, an alternate, stepped in.

The singers ultimately chosen to compete (the "Finalists") struck me as *all* being of quite impressive quality, each seemingly with considerable promise. However, one of the judges, Sir Peter Jonas, told me that he did not

agree with my assessment, although he seemed to feel that the winners were quite worthy. In my view, some of the contestants seemed to be more finished than others, but each of them came across, again to me at least, as having substantial potential: I heard no one argue about Speight Jenkins' selections.

### The Stage

The official name of this program was "International Wagner Competition" and it was held on the stage of the Seattle Opera house. The set from the second act of *Der Rosenkavalier* was used and it worked well in that it was dignified but not fussy (*Rosenkavalier* had been performed the evening before). In the pit was the excellent Seattle Opera Orchestra (primarily Seattle Symphony musicians) of about 75, led by the most impressive Asher Fisch.

Speight Jenkins made brief introductory remarks after which the first of the eight finalists came on stage and thereby the competition began.

### An Excited Audience

Tickets were sold at \$42–52 for orchestra level (only) seating. I had expected the auditorium to be maybe half full: I was wrong. It virtually sold out. The Company had planned to sell only the orchestra level, reserving all of the balcony so as to give complete privacy

*(Continued on page 6)*

*In this issue we present a report on Seattle Opera's recent song contest; an interview with baritone Juha Uusitalo; a review of the Munich Parsifal; a reminiscence of the late Astrid Varnay; an extensive review of the Toronto Ring; and an historic photo of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bayreuth production of Tristan und Isolde by Cosima Wagner.*

# JUHA UUSITALO ON THE DUTCHMAN, AMFORTAS

*Parsifal in Munich, July 2006*

On a warm and sunny afternoon in Munich, July 28, 2006, Juha Uusitalo kindly offered to speak with me. Earlier in the day on the telephone, he said he would like to talk about the Konwitschny production of *Parsifal*. We spoke in a quiet place in the Staatsoper; there was a little echo but I knew with Mr. Uusitalo's rich speaking voice the cassette machine would capture our conversation and it did, but also some other things, as well.

**rj:** *It is July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006, and I am speaking with Juha Uusitalo, who gave us our wonderful Flying Dutchman (and the Fidelio Don Pizarro) in San Francisco and will be singing Amfortas in Parsifal tomorrow. I say that I would like him to talk about anything that he wishes.*

**JU:** (laughter) So, first of all I am very much looking forward to coming back to San Francisco. I'm going to appear as the High Priest in *Samson and Delilah*. I felt that the *Flying Dutchman* production was very clean, in a way. Well, I — I would like to say that the character of the Dutchman himself, I would have been doing more — more of a suffering type. I think that Mr. Lehnhoff's character was maybe a little bit too noble, too [much a] gentleman (laughter) for my taste. But there are so [many] different ways to do it, if you are serious, if you really know what you are doing. The goal is for everybody to believe who you are. And, oh by the way, in this house, Bavarian State Opera, I did my *tenth* production of *Flying Dutchman*, last February and March. That was a Peter Konwitschny production. It was very intelligent; it was very musical. The first inspiration I realized immediately comes from the music, which is the most important inspiration for me. If somebody, some stage director, is doing or explaining some very high level ideas, I don't care. If the first in-

spiration doesn't come from the music, then the whole idea is lost. So, for me, that's the most important. Like Sir Colin Davis once told me: "Juha, you have to believe in the music. And never mind if the stage director [is] explaining some bad ideas. (laughter) The only thing that you have to trust is the music." That was very good advice for the future.

I think [that I do trust the music]. Tomorrow you will see the *Parsifal* production which is also by Peter Konwitschny. I have done it only twice before, but this is a revival for me, so the rehearsal period was very short. I really cannot [explain] the whole truth of the ideas of Peter Konwitschny. What I am missing is Mr. Konwitschny's personal guide — guiding as to how to find the character. Because I really believe and I really trust his deepest ideas. But that is what I am missing [is the stage director's guidance] at the moment. This is because these huge productions which appear here every night during this festival, the whole "opera machine", limits [the time we have] at the moment.

But anyway, the music which Amfortas is singing, I think must be enough for everybody. If I am suffering enough, like Amfortas is all the time, I think then we can reach the goal. And, well yes, during the opera festival this summer, I already did *The Flying Dutchman* and then *Fidelio*, as Pizarro, and now the *Parsifal*: three different productions.

*An unknown man enters:*

*Man: Guten Tag! [Good afternoon!]*

**JU:** Guten Tag!

*Man: Wie gehts der Wunde? [How is the wound?]*

**JU:** Schlecht. [Bad] (both men laugh heartily)

*Man: Amfortas!*

**JU:** Amfortas. (laughter)

**rj:** *Do you mind if I leave that in? (laughter)*

**JU:** Of course. Of course, no problem. I don't mind.

## LEITMOTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY  
OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Robert S. Fisher, Editor

Editorial Advisory Board: Liese Bauer; Lisa Burkett

Typography: Francisco Moreno

LEITMOTIVE is published by The Wagner Society of Northern California, a non-profit corporation. It is one of many benefits of membership in the Society. For information on membership, please write P.O. Box 590990, San Francisco, CA 94159. Written contributions of all kinds are encouraged — letters, articles, book and performance reviews, poetry and memoirs. Letters are subject to condensation. No payment is made for submitted material. Submissions should be sent to the Editor at: P.O. Box 8832, Emeryville, CA 94662. Telephone: (510) 985-0260. Fax: (510) 985-0261. E-mail: leitmotive@comcast.net. Views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily of the Editor nor of the Society.

Subscriptions: \$20 (\$30 overseas) for four issues, available only for addresses *outside* the ten San Francisco Bay Area Counties — San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Alameda, Contra Costa, Solano, Napa, Sonoma and Marin (all members receive LEITMOTIVE). Single copies, when available, \$5.00, postpaid in the U.S. and Canada. Except as noted, all contents are copyright ©2006, The Wagner Society of Northern California.

**rj:** *Das verstehte ich. [That I understand] Thank you for doing this in English, it makes it much better.*

**JU:** For me too.

**rj:** *Kurt Moll, it took three people to translate five minutes.*

**JU:** Oh really?

**rj:** *Yes. He spoke very...*

**JU:** Low. (laughter)

**rj:** *Low, but very complicated German.*

**JU:** OK, I see. So yes, this man who just asked how is my wound...

**rj:** *Die Wunde ist in der Seite, die Wunde in Amfortas. [The wound is in the side, the wound in Amfortas.]*

**JU:** Wunde, what's that in English? Wunde?

**rj:** *Wound.*

**JU:** Wound, of course, wound. Yes, that was Mr. Ronald Adler, who asked that.

**rj:** *And he is doing what?*

**JU:** He is the Betriebsdirektor [Business Manager], the Intendant's [General Director's].

**rj:** *The assistant to Sir Peter Jonas?*

(The title listed for Mr. Adler in the program is Künstlerischer Betriebsdirektor, which I believe is, in an American opera house, Artistic Liaison.)

**JU:** Yes. So, what else?.

(The following dialogue took place over a lot of banging and thumping as there was a rehearsal and, apparently, some scenic building taking place inside the house.)

**rj:** *You talked about Amfortas and you talked about...*

**JU:** *Flying Dutchman.*

**rj:** *Flying Dutchman. I also liked San Francisco's The Flying Dutchman very much. It was, as you say, very clean, I thought. I wish that I had seen the production here in Munich...*

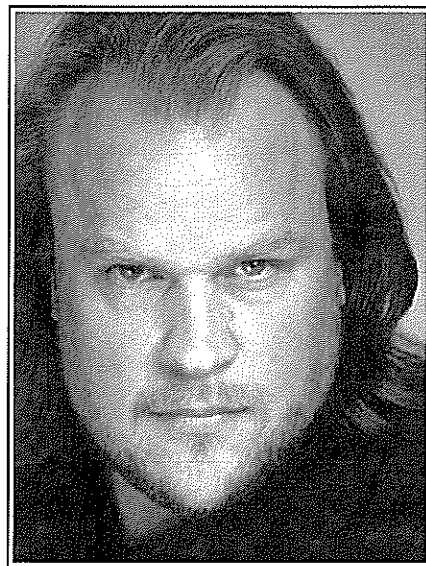
**JU:** Hm Hm...

**rj:** *I think you said there is not enough rehearsal time...*

**JU:** ...for this *Parsifal*?

**rj:** *Yes.*

**JU:** Well as you know, this huge part, like Amfortas must always reflect the ideas of the stage director, Peter Konwitschny. The assistant can't explain what the stage director wants as well as Mr. Konwitschny himself — for sure. And the personal relationship with the stage director is always important. You can get the idea. Oh, by the way, the Wunde, the wound. How do you pronounce it?



*Juha Uusitalo, photo by C Heikki Tuuli, courtesy IMG Artists Management*

**rj:** *Wound. Wound.*

**JU:** The wound, is not in the side — it's in the — trousers. (laughter)

**rj:** *That's actually where I believe it was supposed to be?*

**JU:** Yes, my legs are all in blood. So they have cut my — (laughter) my organs — and so I am bleeding all the time, from there. And I am almost naked under the coat. I have only [a] coat on, and then I have those, what's the name in English, what you put on babies?

**rj:** *Diapers.*

**JU:** Yes, diapers. (laughter) So, yes. Blood. What I am in, blood. Diapers.

Also Klingsor has the same...

**rj:** *We'll see that was — it was equal...*

**JU:** ...equal.

**rj:** *Because it was for the same reason.*

**JU:** Exactly. He did it. So, and in this production, Kundry sacrifices her life in the end. So, there are too many symbolic things which I really cannot explain. So I am very sorry about that. But I think that, well, you are going to see it so, so you will [come to your own conclusions].

**rj:** *When I speak with an artist like you, I write "descriptive articles". Reviews are different and express my thoughts after seeing a production.*

**JU:** Oh yes, OK.

**rj:** *Have you said as much as you want?*

**JU:** Well, if you have some questions I can answer.

**rj:** *No — no this is actually perfect, and the right length, and we can stop. I need to explain a bit about what LEITMOTIVE is and when it will come...*

**JU:** Yes.

**rj:** *And so: "Das Ende! Das Ende!"*

— Ruth C. Jacobs  
Munich, July 28, 2006

### Spring Parsifal Seminar In England

Ian Beresford Gleaves, editor of the British Wagner Society's WAGNER NEWS will present a weekend seminar April 6–9 in a village in the Cotswolds, England — an easy train-ride from London. Mr. Beresford Gleaves has given many seminars on Wagner's works. This long weekend will include a general introduction to the work with an elucidation of the musical and dramatic structure. Further information is available on the Internet: enquiries@FarncombeEstate.co.uk. England is generally quite beautiful in the Spring.

## PARSIFAL IN MUNICH

### *A Production for Mind and Heart*

After attending this performance, I felt I could die a happy opera lover, or that maybe I already had been to heaven. What an incredible experience! I was a little bit biased because I had spoken to Mr. Uusitalo the day before so I saw and heard him as a real person, not just as a performer onstage; I thought his was the most beautifully sung Amfortas I have heard. Clive Bayley as Titurel broke my heart because he looked just like my late father, in a cardigan, shaking his cane at Amfortas. Matti Salminen was an unending force of nature with his huge deep voice, and Christopher Ventris portrayed Parsifal's journey from innocence, through compassion, to exhaustion and wisdom. In Egils Silins, a singer of whom I had never heard, the Staatsoper [Bavarian State Opera] found a Klingsor whose vocal range was quite similar to Amfortas': crucial to this production. And Violeta Urmana demonstrated that she is now clearly a soprano. The two very young soloists from the Tölzer Knabenchor [Tölz Boy Choir] were phenomenally clear and strong. Sitting in the first row right in front of the trombones, tuba and timpani, with Adam Fischer conducting, was both transporting and terrifying.

The show curtain for the Peter Konwitschny production was a huge white paper on which had been inscribed "Erlösung dem Erlöser" [Salvation to the Savior] in many different languages and writing styles.

The overture was not too slow, but very legato, almost like *Das Rheingold* gradually unfolding, and eternally sad; I started out in tears. The orchestra setup was unusual, the brass were divided, trumpets and horns at audience left and trombones and tuba at audience right, string basses across the back of the pit.

#### Act I

Act I opened with a huge fallen tree against white stone walls. Salminen as

Gurnemanz wore a long coat, pants, and boots. He had an overwhelming deep sound. The tree was covered in white paper and in this production the Knappen were very young children. Salminen seemed to sing with those huge open eyes. The back wall rose, Kundry (Violeta Urmana) slid down the tree on a rough-hewn hobby horse, wearing flowered pants, a turquoise blouse and a green jacket with a western hat over her long red hair. The knights almost dropped Amfortas' stretcher; he wore a fur-collared long coat and, as Mr. Uusitalo had told me the day before, nothing underneath except bloody diapers: "Recht so! — Habt Dank! — Ein wenig Rast!" [Very good! — My thanks! A little rest, now] in his beautiful baritone voice. There was very little stage makeup so everyone appeared as a real person, all with superb enunciation. Kundry had an obviously affectionate relationship with Gurnemanz and clearly felt Amfortas' suffering. Some of the knights seemed to be in 19<sup>th</sup> Century military dress and tormented Kundry not just verbally but physically. This angered Gurnemanz as Kundry sewed a button onto his coat. "Ich — helfe nie" [I never help].

As Parsifal (Christopher Ventris) shot the swan (we saw him do so), he swung over the knights on a rope like Tarzan, and a piece of red paper fell from the ceiling. He was dressed, rather like I would imagine Siegfried to be, in sheepskin pants with a leather belt and suspenders and a headband with peacock feathers — an "American Indian" look. *He* was "das wilde Tier" not Kundry. The dead swan looked to be a real dead swan. Parsifal cut a red paper heart and gave it to Kundry "Das weiss ich nicht" [I do not know]. As he broke his arrows, he looked with obvious lust at her; he was fascinated by her wooden horse and climbed on it, laughing, as she mounted it behind him. At "seine Mutter ist tot" [his mother is dead] he

tried to strangle her, then curled up onstage in a fetal position, as Kundry covered him with her jacket: "nur Ruhe will ich" [I long only for rest].

Kundry's horse backed up into the wall "schlafen — ich muß" [I must sleep now]. Ventris' clear tenor asked "Wer ist der Gral?" [who is the Grail?] — he was totally bewildered. The tree slowly rose upright, leaving a stump out of the wall, as the brass were blazing and the spear was seen embedded in the tree. Instead of a Temple of the Grail, the entire stage rose to reveal the knights in a low, claustrophobic room underneath the tree, with the gongs offstage: "zum letzten Liebesmahle" as the timpani set my heart beating. Titurel (Clive Bayley) was an old man in a cardigan sweater shaking his cane: "Mein Sohn Amfortas..." [my son, Amfortas...] with a lean bass voice. Amfortas struggled to climb a metal ladder upwards toward the tree: "Mein Vater ... laß mich sterben!" [My father...let me perish!]. When he opened his coat to reveal the wound the knights recoiled in horror. Finally he struggled up the ladder to the level of the tree and with great difficulty opened a door in it to reveal Kundry, dressed in blue and white as the Madonna, holding a live white dove in her hand, with the paper heart on her breast and two children at her side: "O heil'ge Wonne!" [Oh rapture from Heaven!]. The children descended the ladder with baskets of wafers and jugs of wine for the knights, and then closed themselves, and Kundry, back in. The knights' room descended, leaving Amfortas alone with his hands on the tree. Amfortas stretched his hands out to Parsifal, who backed away, as Amfortas staggered off in agony. As Gurnemanz asked "Weißt du, was du sahst?" [Just what have you seen?], he threw the arrows back at Parsifal as an alto voice, from inside the tree, sang "Durch Mitleid wissend der reine Tor" [through compassion made wise — the pure fool].

## Act II

At the Act II overture my heart was racing; I could feel the magic of the music, it had such power. There was a small blue statue of the Madonna lying onstage. In this production, Klingsor (Egils Silins) is Amfortas' "evil twin" dressed in the same coat and bloody diaper: "Die Zeit ist da!" [The time has come!]. He has the spear which was embedded in the tree: "Dein Meister ruft!" [Your master calls!] He cut the paper in the tree, which had returned to its horizontal position, in the same place where Amfortas opened it in Act I, and descended into it. Kundry had the paper heart from Parsifal and wore the same clothes: "Sehnen — Sehnen!" [Longing — longing!] in her clear strong soprano. Klingsor (Egils Silins) was also still in pain and bloody: "Teufel mein" [you devil]. Kundry gave Klingsor the paper heart "verfluchtes Weib" [accursed woman].

Falling bright paper cutouts and tossing pillows heralded the arrival of the Blumenmädchen [flower maidens], who wore a variety of modern light colored lingerie, put on makeup, all with painted-on black tears. Parsifal entered as did Kundry in the first act, without the horse, but with a bloody walking stick; he seemed as baffled by them as by the Grail. Then the tree became a bed for about 20 Blumenmädchen trying to seduce Parsifal. "Par-si-fal" was sung by Kundry, in a long black gown with red accents and the heart stuffed into her décolletage. She caressed him as she told him of his childhood and took her jacket off. "Wehe! Wehe! [sorrow! sorrow!], he finally embraced her. Ventris was in very strong voice here, as he climbed onto her for his "Der Liebe — ersten Kuß." [Love's first kiss.] Still holding her he cried out "Amfortas! — Die Wunde!" [Amfortas — the wound!]. He did not grab his crotch but it was obvious he felt sensation in the same place: "Erlöse, rette mich!" [Redeem me, rescue me!]. Kundry picked up the Madonna statue but he grabbed it from her. She returned the heart to him and he tore it in half. The tree slow-

ly retreated into the wall; "zu Amfortas...!" [to Amfortas...!]. He smashed the statue; she grabbed his staff. This was war! Klingsor tried to stab Parsifal: "Meisters Speer!" [Master's spear] but Parsifal grabbed it. All the paper flowers which had represented the castle fell to the ground at "Du weißt — wo du mich wieder finden kannst!" [You know where you can find me once again].

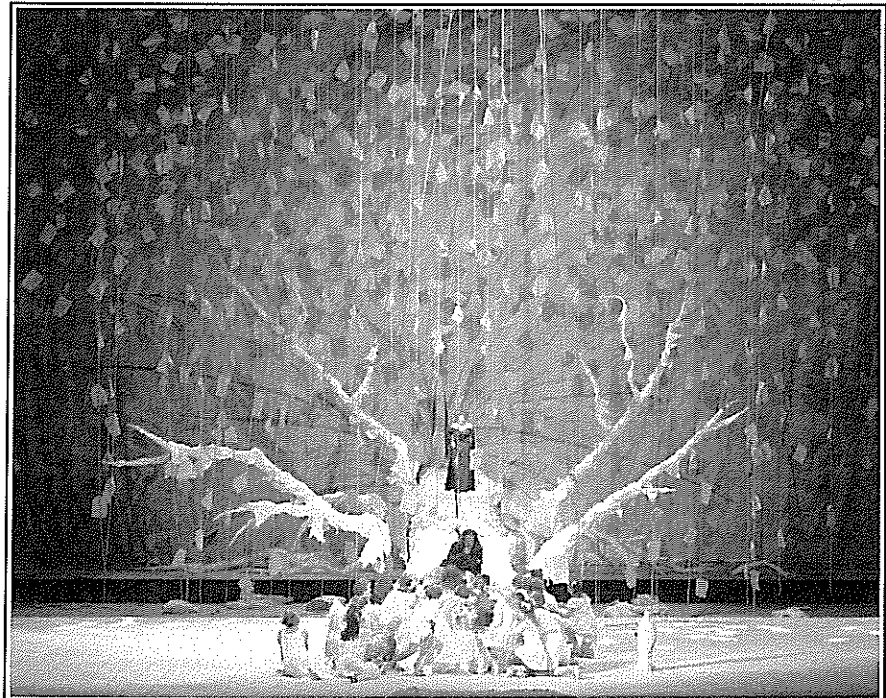
## Act III

The Act III overture was "langsam, langsam, mit Tränen" [slowly, slowly, with tears]. The set had white walls with an outline of what appeared to be the tree, black and branchless, in the middle, but was actually an opening in the walls. Kundry still wore her black and red gown, but torn and tattered and her hair was loose. Salminen kissed her hand and then leaned over her to kiss her forehead; he is an enormous man but showed great gentleness: "Du tolles Weib!" [you crazy woman!]. She responded only "Dienen ... Dienen!" [Service, service] with a great deal of determination, rather than resignation. Parsifal entered, with halting steps, in the same clothing, worn and patched, a

silver mask covering his face. Kundry removed the mask — he appeared to be in shock from exhaustion, staring blankly ahead. Gurnemanz kneeled and grasped the spear; Parsifal was wounded (from the spear?). He fell into Kundry's arms from fatigue, not passion. Gurnemanz embraced him: "Dein harret seine Ritterschaft" [the noble band awaits you still] with Salminen's incredible low notes. Parsifal revealed his half of the torn paper heart.

Kundry offered him water in her hands but he rejected it. They both helped him up as Salminen continued sonorously leading them "zu Amfortas." [to Amfortas]. Kundry removed Parsifal's fleece over-trousers and Gurnemanz his jacket. Kundry tore part of her dress, and wet it to wash Parsifal's feet and Gurnemanz his wounds; Kundry kissed them dry. Gurnemanz covered Parsifal with his own coat and offered Kundry water from his hands which she took. At the Good Friday music, the bright dome of the Staatsoper was illuminated. Salminen's voice got stronger and stronger; he brought an olive branch and broke off parts of it for Parsifal and Kundry. Bells sounded backstage, as the knights assembled behind the wall.

*(Continued on page 16)*



*Parsifal (Christopher Ventris), Kundry (Violeta Urmana) with Flower Maidens, photo C Wilfried Hösl, courtesy Bavarian State Opera.*

## THE FINALISTS



**Jason Collins**

Mr. Collins is a tenor from Columbia, South Carolina.



**Dorothy Grandia**

Ms. Grandia sings soprano and is from Mt. Kisco, New York.



**Paul McNamara**

Mr. McNamara is a tenor from Dublin, Ireland.



**Miriam Murphy**

Ms. Murphy is a soprano born in Tralee, Ireland. (She won the British Wagner Society's Bayreuth Bursary in 2002).



**James Rutherford**

Mr. Rutherford is a baritone from Dulwich, England.



**Andrew Lindsay Sritheran**

Mr. Sritheran is a tenor from Wellington, New Zealand.



**Carsten Wittmoser**

Mr. Wittmoser sings bass and was born in Essen, Germany.



**Philip O'Brien (alternate)**

Mr. O'Brien is a tenor born in London, England.



**Carolyn Betty**

Carolyn Betty is a soprano from Wilmington, Delaware and was also a finalist. Unfortunately she was indisposed on the day of the competition.

## SONG CONTEST

*(Continued from page 1)*

to the official judges. However, the demand for tickets was so great that they had to open additional seats in the balcony, but a good distance from where the judges were sitting. Not only was the audience much larger than expected, but the level of excitement was extraordinary.

The program lasted about two hours with one normal-length intermission. Each singer sang once before intermission and once afterwards. When the singing was completed, the judges met privately; they were to choose the two best singers, each of whom would be awarded a \$ 15,000 prize.

### Audience Participation

Unexpectedly, members of the audience also had the opportunity to express their choices of the best (one) of the eight singers. This inclusion of the audience was clever of Jenkins and served to further raise the level of anticipation.

Upon entering the hall, everyone was given, in addition to a conventional program, a slip of heavy paper about the size of a large postcard with color photos and the names of each singer printed on it. After the competition, to vote one went into the lobby where there were several sets of eight corrugated cardboard boxes, each with a slot to receive the postcard-like audience ballots. Each box had the name and photo of one of the contestants. So it was only a matter of putting the voting slip into the appropriate box: very simple and apparently understood by all.

The audience voting period was about intermission length (25 minutes or so), which also gave the official judges time to reach their decisions (as it turned out it was much more time than they needed. After the competition was over, I asked one of the judges if there had been much discussion [or even argument] among the judges. The response was "Almost none. We arrived at a unanimous decision in about ten seconds!").

The audience was then called back into the auditorium. Speight Jenkins was on stage and introduced each of the five judges to the packed hall (see sidebar). Each of the judges spoke briefly and all appeared very enthusiastic. Tension mounted.

Jenkins announced that the orchestra had also asked to participate with its own selection. They felt that they had a special situation in that they could not see the contestants, but could only hear them (although not clear to me, it seems they thought this made their judgement less biased).

Speight Jenkins told us that he thought each of the finalists had done well and he commended them for their bravery. He said, "I couldn't possibly come out in front of an audience like they each have tonight, even if I had only to sing Happy Birthday!"

### The Awards

Next, each of the contestants was invited, one at a time, to come on stage where they were presented with flowers and a certificate of participation. When they had all been introduced, Jenkins first announced the audience's selection: it was James Rutherford from Dulwich, England. Next the orchestra's choice was announced: also Rutherford. Finally the official judges' decision of two singers was presented: Englishman James Rutherford and Miriam Murphy of Dublin, Ireland.

My own view was that Rutherford was outstanding and soon will be heard on all of the major stages. But I found making a choice for the second winner to be more difficult. Had I been an official judge voting for the second winner (but I am not qualified!), I would have selected Dorothy Grandia of Mt. Kisco, New York. She is a soprano whose sound and demeanor reminded me a great deal of the late Leonie Rysanek, an all-time favorite of mine (we all have our prejudices). But I do not mean to diminish the arresting performances Miriam Murphy gave us; they were exhilarating, especially her ultra-dramat-

(Continued on page 8)

## THE JUDGES

### Stephanie Blythe

Ms. Blythe, a mezzo-soprano, has sung leading roles in most of the world's major opera houses, including the Met, Covent Garden, Santa Fe, Paris, Philadelphia and more. She sang Fric-ka in Seattle Opera's *Rheingold* and *Walküre* in 2000, 2001 and 2005. Prior to the competition she expressed that her evaluation of the singers would include the quality of their diction and whether or not they "owned" the role they were singing.



### Dr. Dorothea Glatt

Frau Dr. Glatt has served for 28 years as an assistant to Wolfgang Wagner in Bayreuth and as a consultant to many opera companies throughout the world. When she spoke to the audience just before the awards were made, it was clear that here was a person with enormous depth in the area of Richard Wagner.



### Sir Peter Jonas

Most recently Sir Peter retired as general director of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich having held that position since 1993. Previously he led the English National Opera and also served as the artistic administrator of the Chicago Symphony. He has received many honors.



### Peter Kazaras

Mr. Kazaras is both a tenor and a director. As a tenor he has performed at the Met, La Scala, Vienna State Opera, San Francisco Opera and many other companies. He sang Loge in Seattle in 1995, 2001 and 2005. He has directed in Seattle and many other places.



### Stephen Wadsworth

A renowned director, he is perhaps best known for his remarkably moving, but true-to-Wagner rendition of the *Ring* in Seattle (2001 and 2005). Mr. Wadsworth has also directed at the Met (*Rodelinda* which received immense critical acclaim). He has been heavily involved with auditions at the Met for a number of years. Some other companies at which he has directed include La Scala, Covent Garden, and Vienna State Opera. He also is active as a director of plays and recently was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government.<sup>3</sup>





## SONG CONTEST

(Continued from page 7)

ic rendition of *Isolde's Narrative and Curse* – her acting was hair raising.

The competition was over perhaps three hours after starting. The audience duly left the auditorium, but more slowly than is normal. The lobby did not clear for quite a while – everyone wanted to discuss what had happened. It was a unique and energizing experience for the audience and one not soon to be forgotten.

Afterwards, at a reception, official judge Sir Peter Jonas pointed out to me that the contestant of my personal choice for the second prize, Dorothy Grandia, was 39 and that new singers should be younger than that. Sir Peter managed the Munich opera for more than twelve years and English National Opera before that (he has only recently retired). Thus he has about as much experience as anyone ever: there can be no question but that he was right, considering the circumstances. But I still liked Ms. Grandia and I hope to hear her again soon.

### Is It Effective?

But will Seattle's International Wagner Competition actually increase the number of singers able to perform the Wagner canon? One has to wonder if those 43 singers who auditioned for Jenkins would not have been auditioned by other companies and, if found to be good, soon engaged? Obviously it is hard to say, certainly some of them would have found their way, sooner or later, to the opera stage. But it seems to me that the primary merit of this or any contest lies, not with exciting audiences, but rather with exciting many young, new singers. At least 43 singers were excited by this competition, and it seems probable that the number who became aware of the competition and seriously considered auditioning was much higher (all to the good!). In time, as Seattle's competition is repeated and becomes more broadly known as a major event for young singers of Wagner's music, I predict more and more aspir-

ing talent will participate. I would not be surprised if in a very few years there will have to be two levels of auditions: preliminary and finalist rounds.

Any singer who was chosen to participate as a finalist at Seattle immediately had a new feather in their cap – it was a distinct honor plus a greatly increased probability of being offered a contract.

For someone who can sing well to decide on a career in opera is one of the most important and consequential decisions they will ever make. The very existence of young singer training programs, contests, and prize money all are importantly encouraging to neophytes.

New singers are indispensable and supportive events for young singers are essential if opera is to thrive, especially Wagner opera with its often unusual demands of its singers. Any young singer with aspirations to do Wagner operas would be thrilled to be involved in this competition and the prestige created simply by being a finalist will, I am sure, by itself be a major motivator for such singers. Finding singers is a constant up-hill battle for all general directors. Certainly, general directors around the globe will respect and act upon the conclusions of Seattle's distinguished panel of judges.

Seattle Opera's competition therefore is a positive new step in the right direction. It was heartening to hear an obviously thrilled Susan Hutchison, the executive director of the Charles Simonyi Fund for Arts and Sciences (which had provided the major grant that made the whole process possible)<sup>1</sup> publicly and spontaneously state, just before the winners were announced, that the Simonyi Fund would be supporting a second competition in 2008. Bravo!

Seattle Opera has again forged an important new element in the Wagner world!

— Robert S. Fisher

### NOTES

1. The first Arizona *Ring*, held in 1996 in Flagstaff, was outstanding and directed

by a newcomer, Claus Koenig. He had the supervision, of course, of Glynn Ross who had been an intern at Bayreuth when Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner were just getting started after World War II. So that helped. Nonetheless, Koenig was impressive, understanding and communicating to the singers how to act and move. Even though it was his first *Ring* the results grabbed all of us lucky enough to be in the audience. He unfortunately did not return in 1998 for the second round: he had become discouraged with the field of opera directing and had gone into computer work.

2. Jenkins wrote that "...I was told by many general or artistic directors [in Europe] that a Wagner competition like this for young singers had not, in their experience, happened before." He also noted that it appeared that Seattle's competition was more highly touted in the European press than in the U.S.

3. Seattle Opera graciously held a Press Luncheon the day of the competition and I was most lucky to have been seated next to Stephen Wadsworth, one of the judges, but more importantly one of the greatest living directors of Wagner opera, including his current wonderful Seattle *Ring*. The extended conversation totally confirmed my earlier judgement about the remarkable abilities of this man who sees his role as one of curating works of art, not unlike the roles of art gallery curators. See LEITMOTIVE Volume 18, No. 3, Fall 2004 for an in-depth interview including his many ideas concerning the most effective presentation of opera.

4. The Wagner Society of Northern California donated \$1,000 to the competition.

### Hal Sarf's Last Book

We recently received the following comments from Mr. Lawrence Lueck, president of the Wagner Society of Hawaii about Hal Sarf's last book, *Richard Wagner, Disciple and Master*:

"...I have struggled (mostly unsuccessfully) in the past to read both Schopenhauer's *magnum opus* and several of Nietzsche's essays, but really got very little from any of these attempts. Hal's book provides easily understood explanations and commentary on what these philosophers are really talking about, and his book helped me a lot in augmenting my own understanding. I shall recommend Hal's book to everyone...It's a book that everyone interested in Wagner should read. The book's excellence serves also to illustrate how much we have lost in Hal's much too early passing..."

Sarf's book is available from the Wagner Society of Northern California.



**Profile:** Honorary Member

## ASTRID VARNAY: 1920 – 2006

### *How I Happened To Come To Know Her*

I would never have met Astrid Varnay, nor had the opportunity to become quite well-acquainted with her, had it not been for a truly unique set of circumstances. After Astrid's father passed away at a very young age, her mother, Maria Javor Varnay, who had been a respected opera singer in the 1920s, eventually remarried and with her new husband spent the last years of their lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, where I currently reside. During the 50-plus years of Astrid's active life as an opera singer, her mother had collected literally thousands of newspaper articles, reviews, and critics' analyses on and about her very famous daughter. After Maria passed away, this collection of articles was apparently bundled together and stored away someplace, where it was forgotten and gathered dust for what must have been at least 25 years or more.

Finally, in the Spring of 1999, in what must have been a house-cleaning, the package of articles was sent to a flea market, where a member of our Wagner Society (Honolulu), seeing the name "Astrid Varnay" on the package, purchased it out of curiosity and sent it to me. For anyone interested in Wagner's music, this package was a true treasure-trove of articles, family photos, and private letters. Despite some mildew, everything was in remarkably good condition, so I cleaned everything that I could, organized the articles chronologically, contacted Gudrun Wagner to obtain Astrid's home address, and sent the entire collection off to her with a note explaining how it happened to come into my possession.

Not long after, on a Saturday morning in June 1999, my phone rang. "This

is Astrid Varnay in München," the voice said, "and I am overwhelmed by what you have sent me." During our conversation I mentioned that we would soon be in Germany to attend that year's Festspiele, and Astrid immediately insisted that we meet for lunch or dinner at her favorite Italian restaurant on Maximilianstrasse. A date was set, and soon after we were sitting in

*Life in Opera*, was very well received.

We had several occasions in the years following to meet with Astrid and Donald, always in Munich. Although Astrid was already 82 years old when we first met her, and was 85 at our last meeting, she was always full of life, really quite a feisty gal, with crystal-clear memory, a good appetite, and a story-telling ability of the first order! She regaled us continuously with stories of her early days with Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner in Bayreuth, of her memories and opinions of some of the great male (and female!) singers she performed with over the years, and much more. These conversations, always lively and always fascinating, reflected her own experiences in one of the great eras of Wagnerian opera and Wagnerian singers. I only wish that they could be collected and published as an addendum to her autobiography.

Astrid could be critical but was never derogatory. She had her own opinions about virtually everything, but was always prepared to defend and support these opinions. In short, she was just a lovely lady, one of the truly unique persons I have had the pleasure of knowing, and one who could never be called "old" despite her actual age. She was

a delight, and we mourn her passing. But Astrid was ready; Donald tells me that her last words were, "I don't like this world any more." The world Astrid Varnay had lived and worked in was no longer in existence. It was time to say goodbye.

— Lawrence Lueck

*Mr. Lueck is the founder and president of the Wagner Society of Hawaii.*



*Astrid Varnay during her career*

that restaurant having lunch with one of the greatest Wagnerian singers of the 20th Century! Donald Arthur, a close friend of Astrid's who helped her edit her autobiography, also attended that luncheon. It was there that we decided if we could help Astrid and Donald publish the original version of her autobiography, which had been written first in English and then translated and published in German. The English version, published in 2000 under the title *Astrid Varnay — 55 Years in Five Acts — My*

## THE 2006 TORONTO RING

### *Performed in a Marvelous New House*

The Canadian Opera Company in Toronto has been presenting operas of the *Ring*, beginning with *Die Walküre* in 2004, in their old Hummingbird Centre until this year when they inaugurated their brand new opera house, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, with three complete *Ring* cycles — a daunting challenge for any opera company.

This \$181 million (Canadian) facility is a stunning success: the simple, box-like exterior in grey manganese brick sports a glittering glass lobby which takes in the dramatic Toronto skyline, dominated by the CN Tower to the south and overlooks the charming Osgoode Park to the north. The interior of the lobby is mainly wood, with a lattice screen of European beech and floors of Canadian maple with tracery in dark oak to highlight stairs or changes in elevation. The inner theater, designed with the Munich Staatsoper as a model, is more rounded, with five rings of curved boxes (each with six chairs), enclosing the space with an intimate feeling which belies its 2,043 seating capac-

ity. The comfortable chairs are all light maple with light grey upholstery. Sightlines are perfect from any seat....and, most important, the acoustics, probably due to the extensive use of wood and plaster in the hall, are absolutely phenomenal. This is true for both the softest string passage as well as one of the majestic brass statements — countless details are projected with brilliant accuracy. The orchestra pit is enormous, holding 109 musicians playing 122 instruments (compared to only 70 in their old hall). The string section alone comprises 16 first violins, 14 second violins, 12 violas, 10 cellos and 8 double basses! Three rows of the theater seats were removed to make room for this expanded orchestra; and the floor for the orchestra is lowered so the musicians are hardly seen by the audience on the main floor. When they choose to play Mozart, they have the ability of raising the orchestra pit 36 inches, making for a smaller, more intimate presence. Equally astonishing, the vocal projection from the vast stage is clear and distinct though the proscenium is im-

mense: 40 feet high and 52 feet wide. Architect Jack Diamond and Acoustician Robert Essert deserve to be quite proud of this stellar achievement. This may be the finest theater for Wagner... certainly in the Western Hemisphere.

Highest praise goes to Richard Bradshaw, the British-born conductor who has been the Music Director of the Canadian Opera Company since 1988 and was made General Director of the company in 1998. His campaign to get the Provincial government (and countless donors) to back this project was beset with years of disappointment, but he persevered. He has not only been responsible for the building of the new opera house (a magnificent accomplishment in itself) but also the building up of the orchestra to a level of proficiency which should rank them among the finest opera orchestras in the world. He has managed the musical direction of this *Ring* since its inception in 2003 and was in total control for all three cycles. This is a remarkable achievement on all levels.

This Toronto *Ring* week was augmented by a series of special lectures and performances to complement the experience. Sandra Molyneaux led a contingent of WSNC members for the Second Cycle who attended a special luncheon graciously hosted by the Toronto Wagner Society (special thanks to Yvonne Chiu and Leslie Barcza for their hospitality). A full-day symposium on Wagneriana took place on one free day while another event featured pianist Jean-Philippe Sylvestre who played transcriptions of Wagner arranged by Glenn Gould (another famous Toronto musician).

However during these *Ring* cycles the Canadian Opera company was bedeviled by a host of unforeseeable calamities: the artistic administrator (Philip Boswell) broke his right foot and was on crutches; the Wotan sched-



*The New Toronto Opera House. Photo by John B. Reed, MD.*

*(Continued on page 12)*

uled for the first three operas (Pavlo Hunka) was diagnosed with diabetes and had to return to England, requiring a frantic search for replacements; one of the Valkyries (Elizabeth Stannard) took a fall during a rehearsal and bruised her ribs; the Fricka (Judith Németh) had to cancel the First Cycle as Fricka in *Die Walküre* due to complications from dental surgery; and finally the Sieglinde (Adrienne Pieczonka) broke her foot playing tennis and sang wearing a cast. Opera management is not for the timid.

### *Das Rheingold*

Canadian Opera has chosen to use four different directors for each of the separate music dramas (not unprecedented) which has its merits and potential drawbacks. The unifying principle was to have one designer, Canadian Michael Levine, design all four operas. Since he was also the director for *Das Rheingold* this should have shown the clearest conception — there is always a dilemma when the director and the designer are at odds.

Levine's conception for the opening scene was to show in the sides of the stage a series of dark steel light stanchions full of hundreds of aluminum floodlights. Since these are normally put out of view of the audience, the intention here (I am guessing) is to exaggerate the concept of theater at all times.

The Rhine was represented with the walls of the side stage and rear stage draped in undulating pale blue silk — at the conclusion of the scene they fell to the floor and were pulled under the stage in the center (appearing almost like a bathtub emptying). It worked well for us but I heard in the First Cycle one of the drapes wouldn't release properly and a stagehand had to walk on-stage and yank it down, knocking a light sideways in the process.

The Rhine Daughters rolled on the floor, sensuously curled up in the silk drapes and playfully batted around balloon-like pillows — this more resembled a sorority pillow-fight than sprites

cavorting underwater. As the stage was not raked in this opera, the action on the rear stage was not easily seen from our seats.

One curious directorial flight of fancy was seen early on: director Levine had Alberich (Richard Paul Fink) pop out of a rocky area in center stage.... and he seemed joined at the hip to another person who stayed resolutely asleep — by the next scene we figure out this is Wotan (John Fanning, the Gunther who came in at the last minute to replace the ailing Pavlo Hunka). We learn later in *Siegfried* (Act I, Scene Two) of the duality of 'Schwarz-Alberich' and 'Licht-Alberich', referring to a kinship (or Jungian shadow) between Wotan and Alberich....but establishing this so soon, and before Wotan is even meant to enter into the drama, I think gives us more complications than we really need. Wotan should be sleeping at the beginning of Scene Two, dreaming of Valhalla, not experiencing erotic fancies about the Rhine Daughters in Scene One.

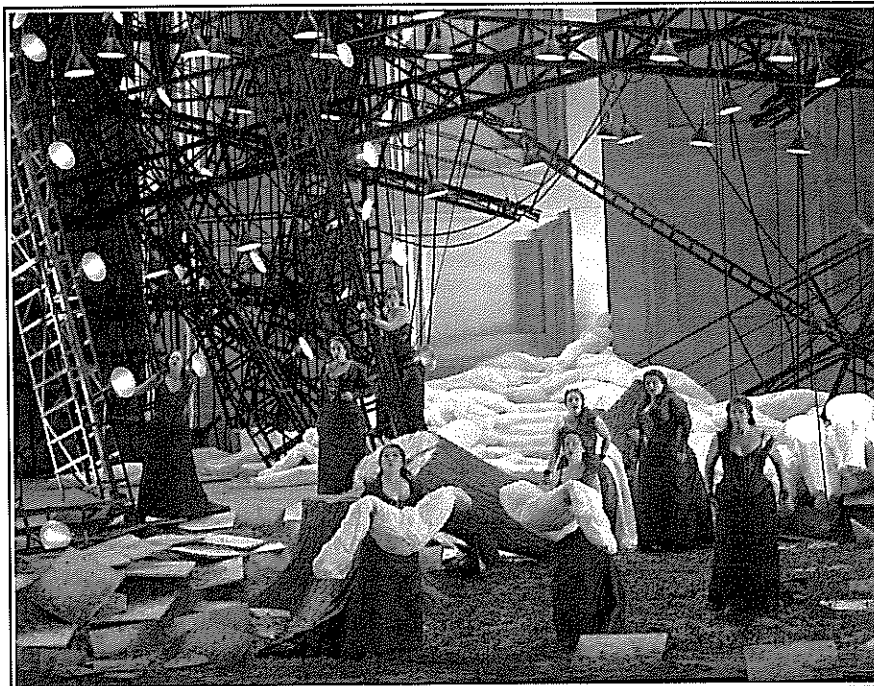
Valhalla was represented as a huge model on several tables on wheels — it looked like the model Albert Speer had proposed for Hitler's monumental new capital building in Berlin (to be

renamed 'Germania', but never built). During the descent to Nibelheim the stagehands/dancers went whirling around the stage with the individual sections of the model on rolling tables and expertly whisked them off-stage through the maze of light stanchions. This effect seemed more a vaudeville prank and I thought detracted from the majesty of this thrilling orchestral interlude which was brilliantly performed by the orchestra.

Loge (portrayed by Richard Berkeley-Steele) was by far the most interesting characterization in this music drama. He was a wily, conniving force who, with his bald head and Vandyke beard, looked Mephistophelean. But the director/designer did not allow him to exhibit any pyrotechnics except to light two cigarettes (Ray Walston's fiery antics in *Damn Yankees* came to mind).

The giants were cleverly conceived as two singers (Robert Pomakov and Philip Ens) on the shoulders of two small mobs of proletarian insurgents dressed in 1930's garb. Occasionally they were set down on tables (to give their carriers a rest) but they always remained a threatening presence. Fafner (Philip Ens) has an especially powerful

(Continued on page 12)



Act III, *Die Walküre* showing the many body bags and the exceedingly difficult footing problem. Both production photos courtesy Toronto Opera.

## TORONTO RING

(Continued from page 11)

bass voice.

Donner (Julian Tovey) was surprisingly strong in voice and manner, in a role that is usually one-dimensional and tepid. Freia (Julie Makerov) was impressive as the desperate hostage. Erda (Mette Ejsing) was in fine voice, but the director/designer denied her any kind of supernatural aura (usually employing eerie blue lighting)...she just walked in, sang and then walked off-stage. Wotan (John Fanning) was a capable last minute substitute. Alberich (Richard Paul Fink) sang well and used a bullwhip with malicious verve.

Again, the director/designer chose to downplay the 'magic' in Alberich's two transformations with the tarnhelm: when he became invisible, we could still see him clearly — apparently Loge and Wotan couldn't....and when he became a dragon, the golden hoard he was standing in front of began to mysteriously move around.

We saw the Nibelungs crawling around but they didn't make the usual scream (typically from lots of spirited kids) that one might expect. When Alberich taunted Wotan that he will amass enough gold to lure the goddesses to slake his lust, he used a prop to make an obscene phallic gesture. Another touch was to have Wotan seemingly chew off Alberich's ring, leaving blood everywhere; Loge had to mop it up with a handkerchief. And most odd was the entry into Valhalla: Loge, rather than 'nonchalantly joining the gods' (Wagner's stage direction), made an impudent gesture of disgust and defiantly walked away from the gods. This is at odds with the fact that Wotan continues to have him serve under his power.

Considering all of the lights in the light stanchion on-stage, the set remained largely monochromatic (with the exception of the blue curtain for the Rhine and the gold curtain for the gold). And the costumes (Michael Levine and Victoria Wallace) were dark grey, with all of the women in drab Victorian garb — always in jarring contrast to the abstract imagery in the surrounding set.

One could argue that all the color is in the orchestra (and it surely is!), but why deny the audience of the visual splendors the score suggests? A perfect example is the thunderclap and rainbow bridge which usually provide a great opportunity for stage magic. Here the thunderclap was more visual than aural — a veil in front of the huge neo-classical wall of Valhalla falls down and the wall opens up slightly like an enormous door (it actually weighed 7,000 pounds). But instead of prismatic color, all that is revealed is a muted yellow light. It was disappointing that the director/designer seemed to excise the magical elements.

### *Die Walküre*

I will not re-describe this opera since I reviewed it in LEITMOTIVE in the Spring 2004 issue (Volume 18, No. 1, page 10). There were to be several cast changes, but due to the unprecedented number of injuries and cancellations, the cast for this performance was almost identical to that of the earlier performance.

The notable exception was the truly remarkable performance of Adriane Pieczonka as Sieglinde. She had already arrived in Canada fresh from Bayreuth where she had sung this same role to glowing acclaim and was praised for her intense portrayal in the First Cycle. *Opera Canada* said Wagner would have renamed this opera *Der Triumph der Sieglinde* after seeing her performance. News that she broke her ankle and was in a cast sounded ominous: one story said she would stand on the stage and sing, while a stand-in would mime her role; but she gamely decided to go on with the performance alone. Truly, if one had not known of her injury, one would not have guessed she was at all incapacitated. She received a most well deserved standing ovation at the end.

The Hunding (Philip Ens...we heard the night before as a stirring Fafner) was virile and quite attractive (despite his brutish nature)...some unusual stage action where he forcibly beds down with Sieglinde behind the fallen tree made me wonder, for the first time, if Sieglinde's child actually might have

been actually fathered by Hunding. Peteris Eglitis sang Wotan as a last minute substitute and managed as well as could be expected, but his characterization was not powerfully etched and he became almost inaudible by the end of Act III.

Designer Michael Levine created a set (used in all three acts) which should win a dubious award for being, easily, the most precarious staging ever devised. He created what looked like the *Rheingold* stage set after it had been bombed to smithereens... there appeared to be shards of a blasted Valhalla too, but it is not supposed to be destroyed until the end of *Götterdämmerung*. No explanation for this cataclysm is given — are we to infer this is the result of Wagner's theatrical revolution?

All of the singers had nightmarish problems trying to walk around the heaps of broken tiles. One of the Valkyries took a fall in the dress rehearsal and bruised her ribs; Wotan (Peteris Eglitis) fell in the First Cycle in his entrance in Act II and he took a bad fall in the Second Cycle as he tried to leave the Magic Fire in Act Three. It was like a ballet over a minefield.

This production continued to avoid creating special effects like lightning, thunder, or magic fire.

The greatest difference between the two performances I witnessed was the astonishing contrast in the acoustics! The older theater, with a smaller (70) orchestra and poor acoustics, sounded like a wax cylinder recording in comparison to Richard Bradshaw's superb reading with this huge orchestra (104). The storm scenes were galvanic; the mighty Farewell had a symphonic majesty and propulsion that left one exhilarated at the end. During moments like the Ride of the Valkyries it was thrilling to hear each individual voice ring out over the dense web of orchestral sound. And the six harps in the orchestra pit could be heard with crystalline clarity during the Magic Fire music.

### *Siegfried*

The curtain opened with Siegfried

(Christian Franz) sitting on a huge tree stump. He was looking quite pensive (one could say he was 'stumped'); he was more sullen and pensive than the the boisterous, bumptious teenager we usually encounter. There was no anvil, either large or small. Above Siegfried was a suspended wire sculpture containing hundreds of fragments: pieces of Valhalla, bits of gold, broken lights, human bodies in random contortions (some upside down, sprawled) — all of this seemed to be an explosion of something frozen in time. It filled the entire upper stage and was in many layers to give it a three dimensional effect. These objects were all fragments of things or symbols we had seen in *Das Rheingold* or *Die Walküre*; and individual items were spotlighted to give added emphasis when the particular object is mentioned in the drama. This suspended sculpture could be said to be symbolic of Siegfried's confused mind...and lighting the different elements acted like neurons being activated.

From far above Mime (Robert Künzli) was lowered to the ground on wires through this crowded maze of symbols and somehow detached himself. Shortly thereafter the bear (Siegfried's playmate) was lowered but his harness got stuck in the sculptured maze before it could be released and removed. This also was a very tricky set to negotiate ... designer Levine seems to enjoy creating this challenge.

The director for *Siegfried* was François Girard and he added a most controversial element: the bear, who usually comes in with a boisterous Siegfried at his first entrance and is immediately shooed off. In this production the bear remained on-stage throughout the First Act, for no reason I could ascertain. Worse, it was not merely a bear, but a kind of composite: a bear's body clad in tight white pajamas and an old man's head. Initially the bear embraced Siegfried almost erotically which was a foolish subtext. The bear was on a long rope and occasionally would stalk over to Mime and frighten him. Lon Cheney's wolf-man came to mind. Finally he got his rope tied up around the tree stump

which got him out of the action, but he remained intrusive the whole act.

Now why do this sort of thing? First and foremost, it is distracting — this act is basically about dialogues between two people and the continual presence of the bear interferes. Secondly, the bear is meant to be an element of pure nature, showing the innocent 'noble savage' side to Siegfried. Making the bear threatening gives the wrong signal about nature...and will further undercut the purported menace of the dragon in the second act who is hardly as scary.

Wotan (Peteris Eglitis) didn't descend from above as did Mime and the Bear; surprisingly the 'sky god' popped up from under the tree stump. Wotan, after his questions with Mime, doesn't leave as the stage directions indicate, but he goes over to sit on the other side of the stump from the bear.

Mime (Robert Künzli) made a fine job of the wheedling dwarf. He showed some true compassion when describing how Sieglinde died, adding a sympathetic side to the character.

One astonishing touch of stage-craft came when Mime told Siegfried about his parents: lights would spotlight the body of Siegmund or Sieglinde in the hanging sculpture above...and the body

would move! It was a live actor, strung up forty feet high off the stage and meant to stay perfectly still until the moment of movement.

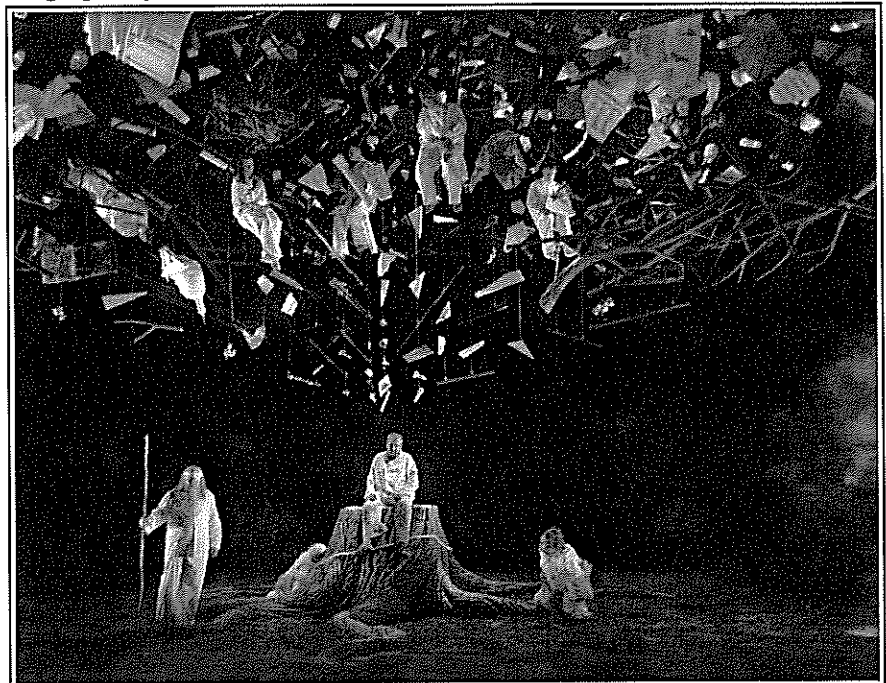
Mime's forge was a pit in the ground into which he climbed to cook or forge. All you could see was his head above the ground. Later when Siegfried was to forge Nothung, ten human arms emerged from Mime's fire pit and waved snake-like in the air, simulating flames. Despite his words, Siegfried made no effort to file away the shards or do any smithing whatsoever — he just waved the sword in the fiery arms while an off-stage anvil player hammered away.

Costumes were almost all white pajamas making the cast look like people who had escaped from a mental hospital.

Our audience for this *Ring* has been praiseworthy for their rapt attention, but in the middle of the first act a cellphone rang out in the audience, despite the repeated requests to turn off cellphones printed on the 'surtitles' prior to each opera.

Act II had a different set from the first but similar in concept with Neidhöhle — a concentric circle of broken images and shattered remnants. On the floor was a mass of bodies all in white pa-

(Continued on page 14)



Act I Siegfried. From left to right: Wotan, Siegfried, and Mime. See text.



## TORONTO RING

(Continued from page 13)

jamás. Alberich rose from this mass, wearing a dark overcoat over his pajamas. The interchange with Wotan (all in white including a white eye-patch) and Alberich was thrilling. Alberich was venomous in his anger, and Wotan somewhat jocular and cunning in his manipulation of his old enemy.

High praise is due the French horn player for a flawless solo which wakes the dragon.

The dragon is always a theatrical challenge, with results from very effective to ridiculous. Here the director chose to raise a pyramid of bodies from the floor three levels high, using wires to support them. It might sound like a mere acrobatic stunt but it was thoughtfully designed and well choreographed. Philip Ens had his great bass voice amplified to majestic effect.

The Forest Bird (Laura Whalen) first mimed the role walking on-stage flapping her gossamer wings and later sang. I learned later that she was supposed to 'fly' in Act II but the apparatus didn't work on time....so she was allowed to extemporize this scene during the prelude of Act III. This prelude was a stirring reading of that rich *mélange* of leitmotives, but I thought the flying Forest Bird pantomime detracted from this noble symphonic moment.

It was a wonderful scene with Wotan and Erda — Peteris Eglitis in stronger voice than he was in *Die Walküre*. Wotan's sparring with Siegfried began as humorous until Wotan becomes angry with this impudent boy. The splitting of the spear was shattering, especially since Wotan's spear had become thin and gnarled (due to carving runes and treaties perhaps).

The stage was empty of clutter, just a mass of twenty-eight white pajama-clad dancers bundled together in a circular mass. For the Magic Fire, the group of dancers rose and raised their hands. They were lit up with fiery light and 'became' the fire, not realistic but striking. When Siegfried finally locates Brünnhilde, she is lying in the dark (the roadway flares which the Valkyries

surrounded her with at the end of *Die Walküre* had long burned out).

The dancers retreated to the rear stage and remained on as witnesses. But I have always regarded the final scene of Siegfried with Brünnhilde as intensely personal — this crowd seemed out of place. Eventually they began to separate, finally leaving the two principals alone.

Everyone knows what an unfair competition the final duet of *Siegfried* is... Siegfried has been singing for four and a half hours and is usually near exhaustion while Brünnhilde has been asleep for twenty years (or at least has had a day off) and is fresh as a daisy. But in this performance, Christian Franz was absolutely amazing, in glorious voice and with no pitch problems, perfectly able to match Frances Ginzer phrase for phrase.

An overall observation: most directors of "Siegfried" make an attempt to make this opera somewhat comical, as Wagner's intention was to create a comic foil to the tragedy of the last opera. But this director erased any shred of potential humor. He did not even print the translation to "Das ist kein Mann!" — one of Wagner's sure-fire howlers. A few in the audience, who knew the line, giggled; but the house remained virtually silent at this hilarious moment. Possibly this was to keep in the spirit of general gloom of the sets.

### Götterdämmerung

The Norns, one of them wearing glasses, appeared like suffragettes in severe dark overcoats. Was Director Tim Albery trying to make a statement about Women's Rights?

They were twisting three skeins of red yarn into a larger rope, which was cleverly choreographed. Above them was a tangle of thick ropes or cables crisscrossing the entire upper stage space — this image of cables (representing transmission of electricity or communication) was an integral part of the set during the entire opera — ugly and symbolic of our technologically advanced era. But they also could sug-

gest, at different times, waves or clouds as well.

When the Norn's rope broke, one of the cables above them split with an explosion of sparks and fire and came crashing down to the stage floor....this was thrilling stage-craft!

In Part Two of the Prelude, Brünnhilde and Siegfried have become quite domesticated on their fiery mountaintop: they have acquired a large double bed, evidence of their conjugal status.

The orchestral passages of 'Siegfried's Day' and the later 'Rhine Journey' are lush readings — in the latter, all of the inner voices of the woodwinds during the counterpoint were well defined while the string sound was lush and opulent.

Act I: the Gibichung Hall (Burgundian) was a modern office setting, dominated by a large aluminum desk replete with a flat-screen computer station (bright red screen). At the other end of the stage was an ugly, uncomfortable-looking low sofa in a hideous red ketchup color. In back there was just a simple white curtain.

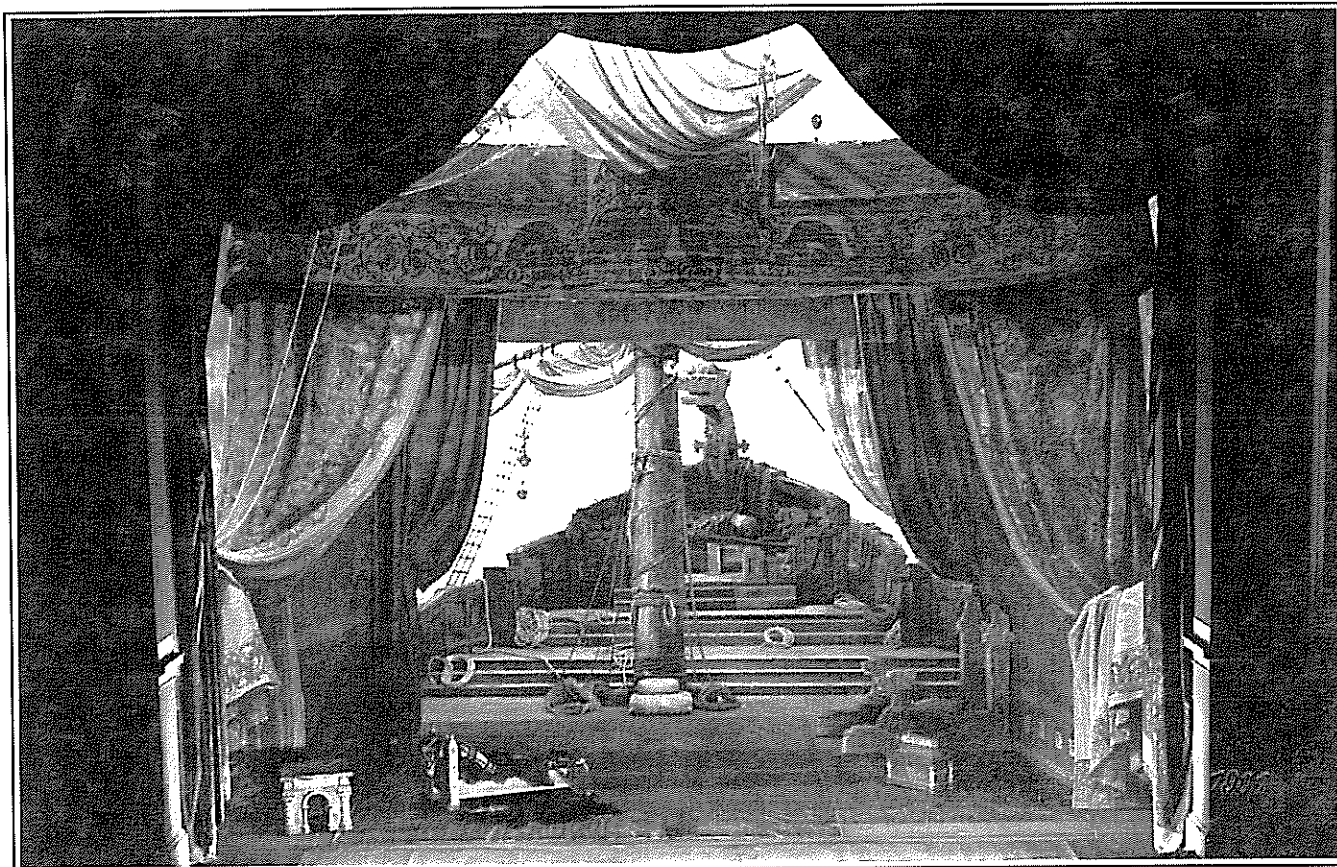
Gunther (John Fanning) was dressed in a proper business suit; with his mustache he looked like a middle-aged Clark Gable. Guttrune (Joni Henson) was a buxom blonde dressed in a 1950's style women's business suit. Hagen (Mats Almgren) was striking with his bald head and Vandyke beard — as he slinks around the office, constantly looking back on the others, he looked like a cobra studying its prey. Gunther enjoyed taking liberal pours of whiskey from a bottle into his cocktail glass.

The Blood-brotherhood Scene was done with water in a clear cocktail glass which became darker red with each added blood donation — a clever graphic touch. Hagen also settled into Gunther's chair watching the proceedings with malevolent glee.

'Hagen's Watch' was powerful, even as he assumed a position of sleep. The brass played faultlessly at full throttle.

Back at the Brünnhildenfels, things have become really domesticated: Brünnhilde, in a pink peignoir, was setting a dinner table for two, including

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BAYREUTH: 3



*This is the Act I set for the 1885 Bayreuth production of Tristan und Isolde, the first new work for a now-energized Cosima. Only Parsifal had been presented since Wagner's death. With the 1885 season, Cosima took full control of the festival. She had studied what Wagner had done in the first production in 1865 (in Munich). The several requirements of the action seem well served by her design. From the Ogden collection.*

two wine glasses and a bottle of wine (apparently she was expecting Siegfried home from work). There was some incongruity in the scene with Waltraute (ferverently sung by Mary Phillips) between the '50s Danish-modern furniture and Waltraute's Victorian dress.

Waltraute's entrance and exit are usually marked by heavy thunderclaps. If they were there at all, they were downplayed.... thunder was hardly noticeable in this entire *Ring*. Father M. Owen Lee points out how thunder was an essential element in the early Greek plays (especially in "Prometheus" by Aeschylus which heavily influenced Wagner's *Ring*).

Clever directorial (Tim Albrey) touch: Siegfried stood at the side of the stage wearing the tarnhelm (a Gothic crown) and sang while Gunther mimed the part of 'taking' Brünnhilde. But things got carried away when Gunther upset the table and glasses, knock-

ing a hanging pendent lamp (borrowed from the climax of 'Psycho'?); then he dragged Brünnhilde to bed and put Nothing between them. This is confusing....is this a forced rape or not??

A further quibble here: when Gunther came to claim Brünnhilde he says "Brünnhild'! Ein Freier kam" which Spencer/Millington translates, "Brünnhild'! A suitor has come"....the COC surtitle read "Your husband has come".

Act II. In the interim, Hagen's desk has grown much larger — enough to include a second computer station for Alberich (even though he was a spirit, he was dressed in a suit with a vest, ready for the corporate world). This scene was deliciously portrayed as the two compete at being the nastier.

As the vassals are summoned, banks of fluorescent lights descend to flood the stage with light. Hagen's large desk is moved around and serves as a plat-

form upon which all of the principals can later present themselves. All of the vassals appear in business suits with white shirts and matching ties, perfect exemplars of 'middle management'. Hagen has taken off his coat and loosened his tie....and when the vassals understand what is to be done, they all take off their coats and loosen their ties too (a bit silly).

There also is the perennial problem when an opera is updated to a different era (from the primitive past to the present) of mixing metaphors: what on earth are modern day business executives doing with a bunch of spears??? (nice sleek aluminum ones at that).

The chorus sang magnificently with excellent diction and precision in the antiphonal passages. Those who remember Richard Bradshaw's work at San Francisco Opera as choral director during the Adler years would not be

*(Continued on page 16)*



## PARSIFAL IN MUNICH

(Continued from page 5)

Kundry carried the spear as Gurnemanz guided Parsifal. The walls slowly opened. There was a blackened scar in the wall where the tree had emerged. A black stump of tree rose as the brass and timpani grew more powerful. Amfortas was on the floor as the knights threatened him "zum letzten Male!" [the final time!]. The timpani actually were so loud they frightened me. Titurel was in an open coffin as the knights turned away in horror. At Amfortas' "Mein Vater!...Dir gab ich den Tod!" [My father..to you I brought death!]. Uusitalo was magnificent as he crawled to him; I was weeping. "Endlich ... den Tod!" Amfortas caressed Titurel, as was done in the Lehnhoff production, but Amfortas dragged Titurel's corpse among the knights as they demanded "den Grail!" [the Grail!].

Kundry placed the paper heart on the end of the spear and showed it menacingly to the knights who backed away. As Amfortas released Titurel, drawing the spear downward, toward the wound: "Den heil'gen Speer — ich bring' ihn euch zurück!... [The Holy Spear — I bring it back to you!]. Kundry carried the spear as the knights surrounded her, they parted and she lay dead with the spear on top of her as a white paper dove descended. I was weeping again, even as I wrote this. "Die Heilige Musik — Wagner bringt sie euch zurück!" [The Holy Music — Wagner brings it back to you!].

— Ruth C. Jacobs  
Munich, July 29, 2006

### NOTE

1. All quotations from Universal-Bibliothek No. 5640, © 1950 Philipp Reclam jun. GmbH & Co., Stuttgart.

## TORONTO RING

(Continued from page 15)

surprised. COC choral director is Sandra Horst.

In the final trio of vengeance, the three singers moved to the front edge of the stage and sang out over the boisterous orchestra — their individual voices clearly audible. This was singing of the highest order!

Act III. The Rhine Daughters appeared in similar suffragette overcoats as the Norns had earlier on (which still baffles me); and like the Norns, one of the Rhine Daughters wore glasses. They sat in chairs and filed their nails. Then they removed their overcoats to cavort around the stage in their underwear (teddies, camisoles, nighties). They played an almost erotic slapstick in and under a huge bed on center stage and donned electric-blue wigs. This was kinky fun but without any suggestion of water or swimming whatsoever.

The horn-calls in the pit and off-stage were note perfect, but Siegfried carried none as a prop.

The vassals were summoned and all sat down to bottles of wine. In Siegfried's Narration of the Dragon Slaying, Christian Franz again proved, as he had in *Siegfried*, to be a singer of superhuman endurance. The tone quality of his voice is not altogether pleasant at times and there is an element of bellowing, which can be grating. But for sheer energy and stamina he is phenomenal.

At the moment when Siegfried is surprised to see Wotan's raven, someone ran through the set ...and later we see the Forest Bird from "Siegfried" brought in ...dead. She is escorted by two men/birds all in black (who are presumably Wotan's Ravens). But who killed the Forest Bird and why?! And why is the Forest Bird (an elemental symbol of Nature) brought back into

this story and just at this moment?? I found this directorial touch a bit heavy-handed, adding more confusion than meaning to the drama.

In the powerful Funeral music, brilliantly played with careful build-up to each climax and terrific brass playing, there seemed to be some backstage noise — voices, possibly from the audience, as well as a kind of pinging hammering sound. I am still not sure of the source of this, but it was unfortunate.

The following scene with Guttrune brought in more fluorescent lights when Hagen called for it; and the crowd began to bring in bits and pieces of Valhalla (why?). As Brünnhilde took charge and got the ring, Hagen looked like a cornered rat, desperate and exploding with rage. Siegfried and Gunther (once killed) were both taken off-stage to be immolated, not in center stage as is usual. There was a disconnect between Brünnhilde's words that she would join Siegfried in the funeral pyre...and her actions where she joined the Rhine Daughters, dancing a kind of quadrille. Brünnhilde handed the ring back to the Rhine Daughters and walked off, disappearing into the crowd. Hagen made a lunge for the ring and drowned with balletic grace.

No pyre, no flames, no smoke.

The crowd turned their backs to the audience to look at what seemed to be a new dawn...or maybe a dusk. The light fades out completely as the last of the magnificent finale drifted into silence. Then came resounding, well-deserved applause.

This was a *Ring* without much visible magic, basically grey to look at. But musically this was magnificent. This was Bradshaw's *Ring*.

— David Marsten

The Wagner Society of Northern California  
P.O. Box 590990  
San Francisco, California 94159-0990

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Mill Valley, CA  
Permit No.163