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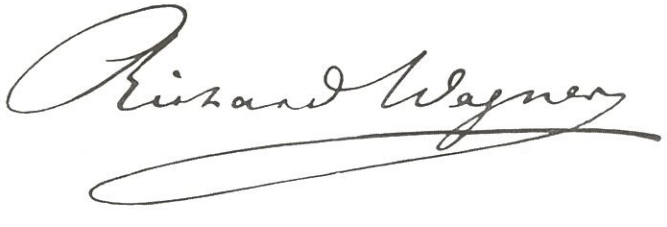
Leitmotive

The Wagner Quarterly



Volume 26, Number 4

Winter 2012–13 ISSUE 100

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

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ISSUE 100

The Editor's Thoughts

Issue Number 100

Although this issue does not differ significantly from past issues, its nice, round number of 100 is hard to ignore—at least for those who have had the responsibility to produce those many issues.

Being a quarterly, 100 represents at least 25 years of publication.

Of much more importance is that for so long a great many authors have worked so hard to provide us with essays to publish. Writing an article is very time-consuming—after which I often question the veracity of historical statements in their work.

And, an even more sensitive issue is when I ask for more clarity in the author's prose. I am not an academic and many of our authors are. Frequently they have had major books published and thus question my suggesting that their work is not clear!

In every case of which I am aware, each author has, in the end, agreed that clarity is critically important—for everyone.

Surely, some articles that we have published have greater merit than others; some are more interesting than others.

But I wonder if you, dear reader, have a favorite—not just recent ones, but any that we have ever published? Please let me know of the one (or more) that you liked best: it would be most helpful.

For myself, one that stands out boldly is Bryan Magee's "Is Wagner's Work Really Chauvinistic?"—Fall 1993. It was originally a lecture that Magee gave (in Seattle at a symposium) and which brought about quite an argument with Barry Millington.

Please tell me: Which article is your favorite?

LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY*

Robert S. Fisher, Editor
Typography: Francisco Moreno

ISSN 1097-2358

LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is a journal intended for all persons interested in the works, life, and influence of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Although many of our authors and readers are scholars affiliated with academic institutions, many are informed lay persons with a keen interest in Wagner studies.

LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is published four times a year as Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter issues. Actual publication dates can vary, but all annual subscriptions to this journal are for four issues. There are no "double" issues. Views expressed are those of the authors of the specific articles in this journal, and are not necessarily the views of the Editor or the Publisher.

We invite all interested persons to submit articles for publication: please see the back cover.

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The Publisher of LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is the Wagner Society of Northern California, PO Box 590990, San Francisco, California 94159.

David Dalto, Founding Editor (1985–1989) Paul Schofield, Editor (1990)

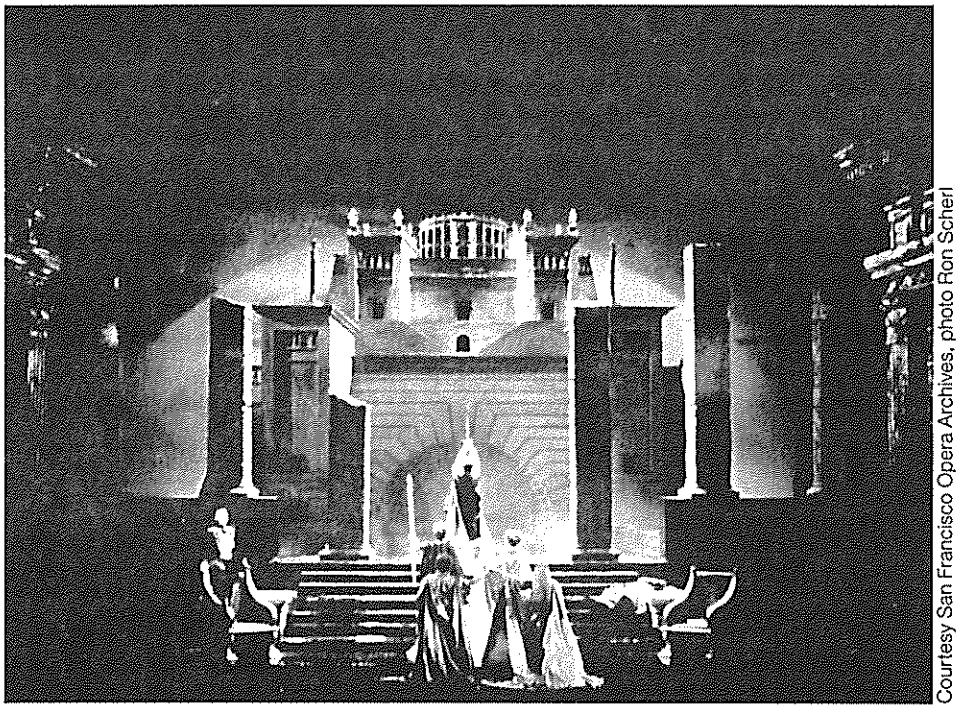
About the Authors

Sue A. Stephenson ("General Director Lotfi Mansouri and Wagner") is a public relations professional and writer specializing in profiles of interesting people. A graduate of the University of Michigan with a Masters in Communication from the University of California at Berkeley, the first opera she attended was *Die Meistersinger* (a spectacular production conducted by Kurt Herbert Adler in San Francisco in the early 1980's and one which set the bar very high for her for all subsequent operas). She has had the good fortune to experience seven Wagner operas at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and many others at the San Francisco Opera and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

Verna Parino ("Shocking in Palermo—Another Modified Production") has travelled world-wide to many performances of the *Ring*. She writes regularly for the Finnish Wagner Society's journal, *Wagneriaani*. She was President of the Wagner Society of Northern California for years, as well as a member of its Board of Directors. Ms. Parino has been active in the San Francisco Opera Guild for a very long time. For 28 years she was Preview Chairman with the responsibility of locating and engaging scholars to speak about each opera in the San Francisco season at each of the several chapters of the Guild. She selected over 200 such speakers from all over the United States and Europe. She has published many articles including a number in LEITMOTIVE–*THE WAGNER QUARTERLY*. Ms. Parino is 94 years of age and exhibits no signs of slowing.

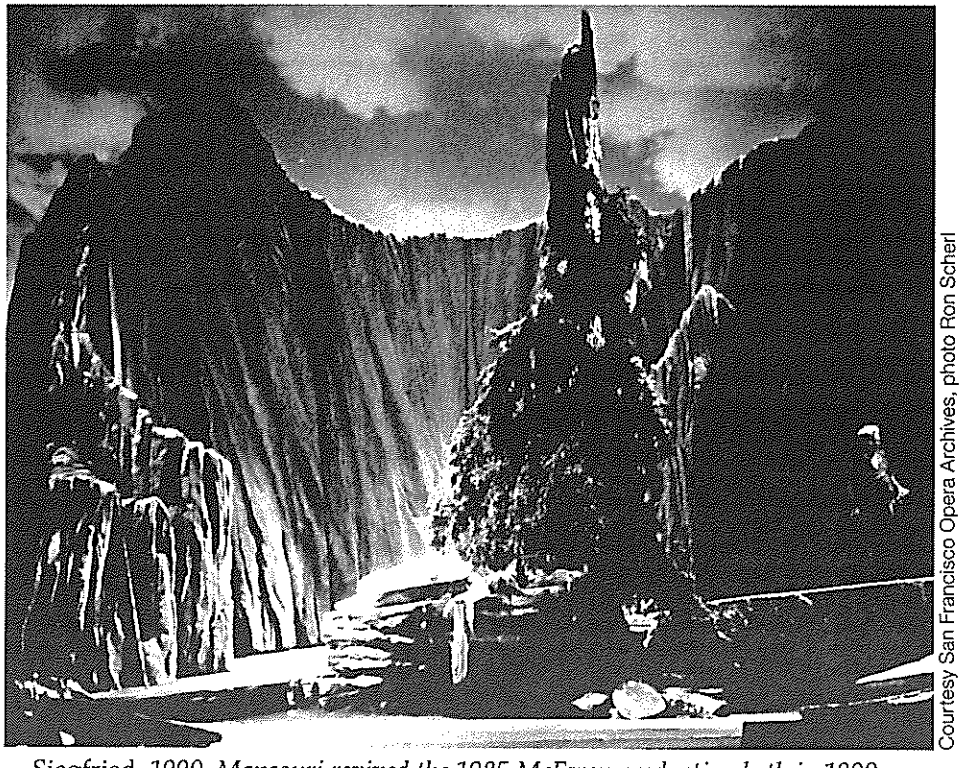
Paul Dawson-Bowling ("Wagner at Meiningen") a retired medical doctor, is a Wagner scholar who lives with his wife Elizabeth near Canterbury, England. He has published (in England) his long-awaited book on Wagner, "The Wagner Experience and Its Meaning To Us." It is 900 pages in two volumes and in a slip case. It will be available in the United States soon.

Roger Lee ("Paul Dawson-Bowling–The Wagner Experience") is currently the Editor of "Wagner News", the monthly publication of the Wagner Society in London, England.



Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Ron Scherl

Das Rheingold, *1990, San Francisco. These sets were first used in 1985, Terence McEwen, General Director, staging by Nikolaus Lehnhoff.*



Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Ron Scherl

Siegfried, *1990. Mansouri revived the 1985 McEwen production both in 1990 and again in 1999.*

General Director

Lotfi Mansouri and Wagner

Mr. Mansouri served as General Director of the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto from 1976 until 1988 and as General Director of the San Francisco Opera from 1988 until 2000, taking over from an ailing Terence McEwen. Born in Iran, Mansouri came to the United States and attended college in Los Angeles where he earned a degree. From 1960 until 1976 he worked in opera at various European opera houses.

In the process of his lengthy career, early on he had sung the role of Siegmund in Die Walküre *and had many other experiences with the works of Wagner. He graciously spent almost three hours with our author, Sue Stephenson, recounting some of the Wagner-related episodes in his career—which follow here. He has recently published two highly entertaining and informative books concerning his professional life.*[1] —Ed

As a college student at UCLA, Mansouri majored in psychology but also (to improve his finances) sang comedy duets with Carol Burnett at Beverley Hills luncheons (earning all of $5 a gig). Not long after, his promising tenor voice landed him a role in a UCLA Opera Workshop musical presentation again opposite Carol Burnett. Only after graduating with a B.A. degree from UCLA, did he experience his first complete opera, *Madama Butterfly* at the Hollywood Bowl. This was one of those relatively brief events that turned out to be career-changing. Soon thereafter, he became active in the opera field, including both singing and directing. Later, after he directed his first complete opera production, *Cosi fan Tutte,* at Los Angeles City College, he was offered an academic teaching position at UCLA's Music Department. It was 1957.

Friedelind Wagner

Three years later, Friedelind Wagner, granddaughter of Richard Wagner, wrote to him at UCLA requesting a favor. He recalled his excitement at receiving a letter from such a distinguished person. In it, she was asking that he set

1. Lotfi Mansouri, *Lotfi Mansouri, An Operatic Journey* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Northeastern University Press, 2010). Lotfi Mansouri, *True Tales from the Mad, Mad, Mad World of Opera* (Tonawonda, New York: Dundurn, 2012).

up auditions for her of his young student singers in Los Angeles.

Friedelind was then living in England, the only member of her family who had denounced the Nazis and left Germany during World War II. In the early 1950s her brothers, Wieland and Wolfgang, had taken over the Wagner Festival and in 1957 she was starting master classes there. These master classes were to be a summer-long series of workshops and instruction for young artists. As requested, Mansouri scheduled Friedelind to audition young artists in Los Angeles. "She was very gracious," he said and between auditions he took her to lunch. When Friedelind left Los Angeles, she took two sopranos with her from the UCLA Opera Workshop. Later she sent Mansouri a thank you note and also asked if he too would be able to come to Bayreuth. She needed a stage director for the summer Master Class program — which was not just for singers, but also for students who majored in the architecture of opera houses, student conductors, and student directors. Friedelind offered Mansouri a scholarship, as she knew he couldn't afford it otherwise. "I'd be more than honored," he responded to her offer to spend the summer in Bayreuth. He wanted to observe Wieland Wagner's conceptual productions, particularly because he understood that they were very psychological with minimal staging.

Mansouri (like almost everyone else) found Wieland's productions to be brilliant, and said, "His production of *Parsifal* absolutely devastated me. I started crying in the First Act. Wieland had a wonderful cast, of course, but the way he had the male chorus enter, still gives me chills. It was just unbelievable."

As part of the Bayreuth Master Class summer experience, students were expected to attend lectures by a man who had written a book about Wagner. If students did not attend these lectures, Friedelind would not give them a ticket for the dress rehearsal. "She would stand at the door like the guard at the River Styx, the gate keeper," Mansouri said. Unfortunately, the lecturer was disrespectful of Wagner, saying things like, "You know what Dickie would do, he'd get himself into all these debts and Minna was just livid..." Mansouri, with his several years of opera-involvement and teaching at UCLA, decided he probably knew more about Wagner than the lecturer. However, he still wanted to see the dress rehearsals. "I wanted to see what Wieland Wagner was doing and how he was doing it because I was in awe of him," he said. So, he did a little sleuthing and found out that they locked the doors leading into the dress rehearsal and then took away the brass door handles and stored them in the prop department. Therefore he managed to sneak into the prop department on the pretext of seeing something else. While there he swiped a door handle. Then he would sneak into the rehearsal and climb up the light-

ing tower ladder, off stage. "I would look down onto the stage, from about the third floor," Mansouri said, "and I would see Brünnhilde on the rock and hear the orchestra from the pit and it was incredible. It was miraculous. It was something that wouldn't happen in Los Angeles where we didn't even have an opera company at the time. So, as a young stage director, being in Bayreuth and watching Wieland's dress rehearsals was like being Alice in Wonderland. I *was* in Wonderland!"

Eventually, he was forced to leave his perch when he got caught — high up on the light tower. "I don't remember if it was *Tristan and Isolde* or one of the *Ring* operas that they were rehearsing," he said, "but I saw these hands coming up the ladder and then, all of a sudden, Wolfgang Wagner said in German, "What are you doing here? Get out!"

A couple of decades later, Wolfgang and his wife came to Washington D.C. to hear an incredible Finnish tenor sing the role of Tristan. The German consulate hosted a luncheon to which Mansouri and his wife were invited and he was seated next to Frau Wagner, Wolfgang's wife. At some point during the luncheon, Wolfgang turned to Lotfi and said, "Mr. Mansouri, where have you been? We've never met before." And Lotfi said, "Yes, Herr Wagner, we've met. I don't think you remember, but in 1960, you threw me out of a dress rehearsal, from the top of a lighting ladder at Bayreuth." Wolfgang laughed.

Walter Felsenstein, a Great Austrian Director

Friedelind thought the master class should be exposed to Walter Felsenstein, one of the greatest stage directors in Germany. So the class went to East Berlin. At the time, Felsenstein was spending nine months (!) rehearsing *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Because the opera is all about animals, Felsenstein made the chorus sit in a dark cinema every morning for six weeks, to watch films of chickens walking slowly.

When Felsenstein produced *Othello*, he took his chorus to a factory and had them walk in a tunnel against the wind for a couple hours a day so they would get a sense of the storm in Act I. "And my dear," he said, "You really felt the wind in that production. It was brilliant." The only problem with Felsenstein's method of directing was the difficulty of getting really good singers to commit nine months to one role.

When Felsenstein learned that Lotfi had earlier been a tenor and had experience singing the role of Monastatos (in Mozart's *Magic Flute*) Felsenstein used Lotfi as a prop for the three sopranos singing the role of Pamina. Felsenstein took a whole day to explain the background of Monastatos, the war and

the father. Mansouri was fascinated and when he asked Felsenstein where he got all his information, Felsenstein responded in German, "It's in the score!" They spent the next two days working on one line. At the end of the master class in East Berlin, Felsenstein looked at Mansouri and in German said, "Well, you'll never have a career."

The Bayreuth master class "was like a cult," he said. "You were not allowed to say anything critical. Not one word." So when he left Bayreuth, he'd had enough Wagner for a while. "I thought, 'My god, in the arts there is a whole scale. Not everything is Valhalla.' So for a few years, I didn't touch Wagner." he felt that he needed an emotional break from Wagner and that he had a lot that he needed to learn from the other repertoires.

Mentored by Dr. Herbert Graf

The following fall (1960), Mansouri went to Zürich to work with Dr. Herbert Graf (the General Director of the Zürich Opera) as his stage director. "Dr. Herbert Graf was my mentor," he said, "I adored him." Estranged from his father at the time, Mansouri considered Graf to be like a father to him.

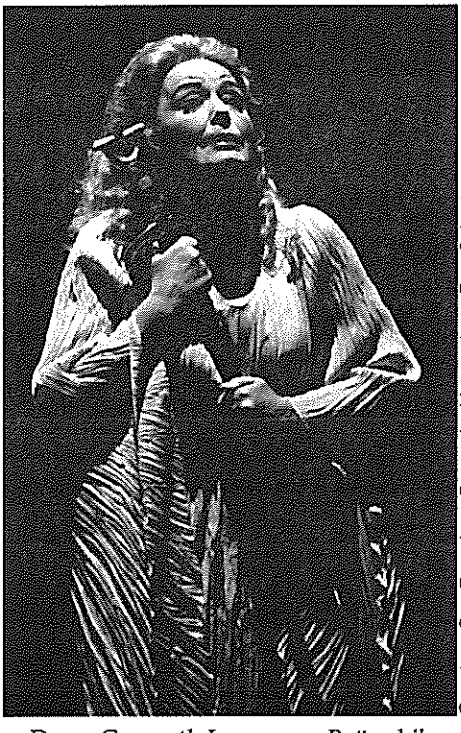
And in 1965, when Graf was appointed General Director of the Geneva Opera, Mansouri joined him as Principal Stage Director. It was in Geneva where Graf produced the *Ring* with Mansouri, doing whatever needed to be done.

When asked if he had any advice for a young stage director, Mansouri said to start at the bottom. "Opera is a mosaic and it has dozens and dozens of parts in it," he said, "When you put it all together it makes this magnificent whole. Everything is in opera: text, music, lighting, everything. And it's best if one can "immerse themself in the work of stage directing with a knowledgeable and generous mentor like Dr. Graf was to me.

General Director, Canadian Opera Company in Toronto

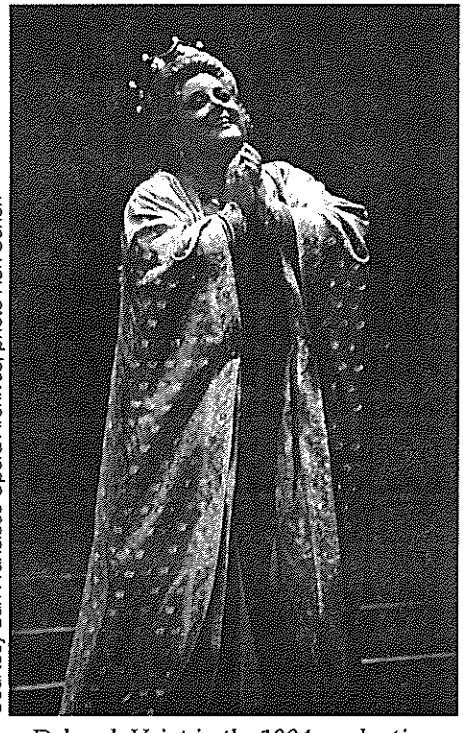
In 1977, Mansouri became General Director of the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto, Canada, and since *Tristan and Isolde* was his favorite of all of the Wagner operas, he decided to create a new production. This was a first for him. "The music really gets under your skin," he said. He assembled a cast which he found to be outstanding, hiring American soprano Johanna Meier to sing her first Isolde (a role she would go on to sing at Bayreuth), Spas Wenkoff as Tristan, and mezzo soprano Maureen Forrester as Brangäne.

He also engaged a Swiss woman to design the sets, which she did mostly with projections. "One of the toughest acts is when Tristan and Isolde sing



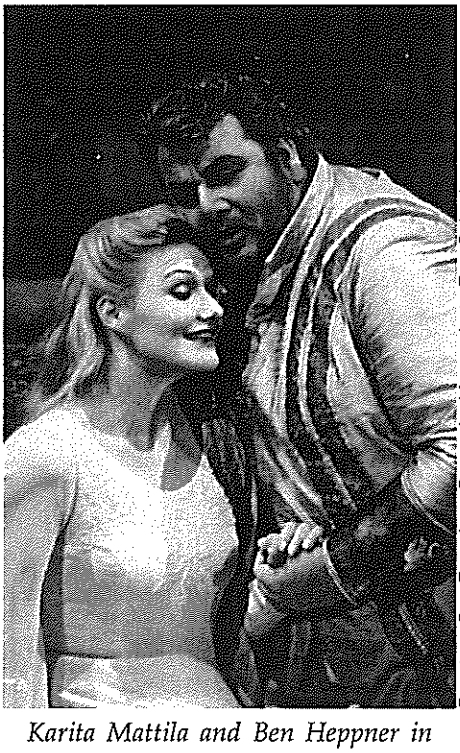
Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Ron Scherl

Dame Gwyneth Jones sang Brünnhilde in the 1990 Götterdämmerung.



Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Ron Scherl

Deborah Voigt in the 1994 production of Tannhäuser.



Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Ron Scherl

Karita Mattila and Ben Heppner in the 1996 Lohengrin.

Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Pete Peters

Jon Vickers and Siw Ericsdotter in the 1963 Die Walküre *directed by Mansouri during Adler's term.*

their duet. They should not move. They're in a trance, but you simultaneously want to show something that's like a journey," Mansouri said. To achieve this his designer began the scene with a full moon, and very slowly, through the entire duet, she eclipsed the moon.[After directing *Tristan and Isolde*] "it was like breaking a barrier and I got the guts to direct another Wagner opera, *Die Meistersinger,* "which I fell in love with."

Offers to produce the *Ring* early on in his career were turned down because the only way he wanted to do the *Ring* was if he could have someone like George Lucas, Pixar, or Walt Disney work with him to create the special effects. "I want to see the Valkyries' horses flying," he said, "because I believe you need the magic any of them could have helped to create — in the underground world of the Nibelungs, the land of the giants, and the home of the gods."

Years later, when he was producing *Lulu* (by composer Alban Berg) in San Francisco, he approached George Lucas about creating computer generated images for the three and a half minute interlude (in Act Two, between Scene One and Scene Two) during which Lulu gets arrested, is put into prison, and finds a way to escape. Mansouri sent Lucas a tape and a scenario of the interlude to which Lucas responded, "We'd be more than delighted to do this. It's going to cost you $900,000."

"That's about $300,000 per minute!" Mansouri observed, shocked at the price. It didn't happen.

After seeing a Pixar movie, he wrote them a letter saying he thought it would be wonderful to work with them to produce a new *Magic Flute.* "I didn't even get an acknowledgement," he said, obviously disappointed. "They could have said, 'Thanks, but no thanks.'"

Thank you Midge for Opera Supertitles!

One evening, Mansouri and his wife Midge, were watching the *Ring* on television, and it had subtitles. Midge had never been a fan of Wagner's operas, but after a while, she turned to her husband and said, "You know, this is really not as dumb as I thought it was." And Mansouri said, "that is how I got the idea to put supertitles above opera performances in the theater". I felt that opera needed to be able to better communicate with the audience," he said.

At the time, Lotfi was General Director of the Canadian Opera Company of Toronto, Canada, so that's where opera supertitles were introduced, appearing for the first time above the proscenium for Richard Strauss' *Electra.* "It's a wonderful play, but it's difficult to understand the psychological text

written by librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal," he said. "But, with supertitles, the audience got it. They had a powerful emotional experience and jumped to their feet with applause at the end of the performance."

Quite a few journalists attacked him for putting supertitles in the opera house. An editorial in an English opera magazine called supertitles "the plague from Canada." The music critic of the Los Angeles Times said Lotfi had "vulgarized opera." And the New York Metropolitan Opera's General Director James Levine's response was that his opera house would have supertitles "over my dead body."

Despite the initial resistance, supertitles found their way to the United States via Beverly Sills. She had seen them when she attended a performance in Toronto and immediately realized their value. At the time she was the General Director of the New York City Opera, so they were the first to have supertitles in the United States. Then supertitles found their way to the West Coast thanks to San Francisco Opera's General Director at the time, Terence McEwen.

Years later, after the Metropolitan Opera had installed individual monitors on the backs of each seat displaying subtitles, Levine told Mansouri, "What I meant to say, Lotfi, was that I did not want supertitles on the top of the proscenium."

"It is important to have literary people create the supertitles because you don't translate Verdi the way you do Mozart. Every opera must have its own style," he said, "and every director must have his own idea of the nuances of the text, so they really must scrutinize the titles to ensure they are true to the score and libretto."

And all this because Mrs. Mansouri had not connected with Wagner before she saw a televised performance with titles (like most people, she had never been inclined to study the librettos). What an important and beneficial advance this was!

Mansouri went on, "Sometimes stage directors misuse supertitles to have them say what they want them to say, not what is written in the libretto. I think that's cheating," he said, "If you want to say something that is not in the libretto, then create another opera."

He encourages young people not to put their personal concept on an existing opera. However, he realizes that some stories are eternal, are legends, and so he encourages directors to find a modern composer to create a score that matches their concept, instead of trying to shoehorn their concept into an existing opera. He cited an example of the *Marriage of Figaro* set in Harlem. Per the libretto, a character says, "This pheasant is delicious," but in the Harlem

version he's eating a Big Mac. In addition to this incongruity, Mansouri said, "Mozart's music isn't the right music for Harlem. Rap or jazz would be better.

Another example was Mozart's *Cosi fan Tutti* produced in 1920's flapper era style. "It's OK to use the story of *Cosi fan Tutti*," he said, "but if you want to put it in the 1920s, then commission a composer to write jazz music to tell this story."

"You need the right music with the setting," he said, "Otherwise you're seeing one thing and hearing another that just doesn't go with it. It's like you've put the wrong clothes on the wrong person. They don't fit."

"The great thing about opera is its totality," Lotfi said, "If you bring all the elements together, you make a whole. And opera is the greatest art form ever. Things can go wrong and they do, but that's why it's such a special art form. Because when it does work, it's magic!"

Philosophy of Theater

"The whole basis of theater is communication," he said. "Opera is music theater, it is communication. Any time you have to explain (in writing) your understanding of the work in the program notes, you have failed."

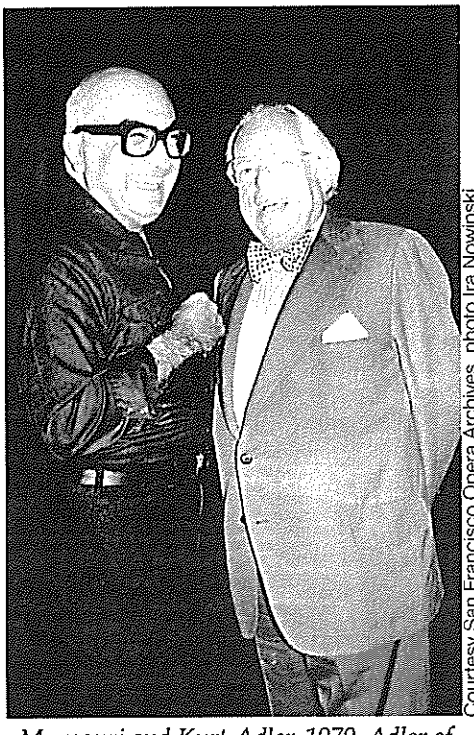
As a stage director, his goal was to involve the audience, emotionally and intellectually. "I wanted to give them a journey of some sort," he said, "I didn't want them sitting there saying, 'I wonder what all this means?'"

"I'm always thrilled when I see a performance that pulls me in, that involves me," he said, "because if it is to succeed it has both to involve me intellectually as well as emotionally. If it is just intellectual, I would rather read the libretto or play the CD and close my eyes and fantasize," which is something he does often as a collector of the many CDs he has acquired. One of his favorite *Tristan* performances is from a home recording of a radio broadcast from Bayreuth with Herbert von Karajan conducting Ramon Vinay as Tristan. "The last act is devastating. Just listening to it is devastating," he said transported, back to this fond memory.

Two Swords in the Tree: *Die Walküre*, Act I

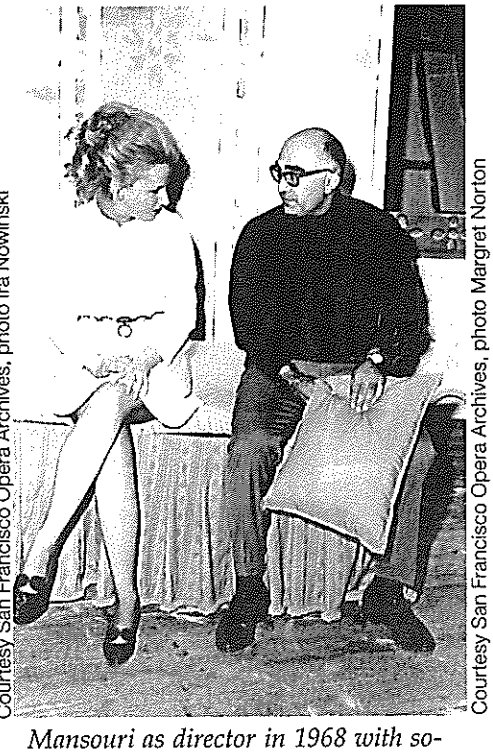
In the blink of an eye, more than two hours had passed and it was time to wrap things up, but not without two stories about the scene in *Die Walküre* where Siegmund withdraws the sword from the tree.

In the first story (taking place early in his career), Mansouri was himself singing the role of Siegmund in a production staged by the world-famous soprano Lotte Lehmann. During rehearsal, the sword was loose so he com-



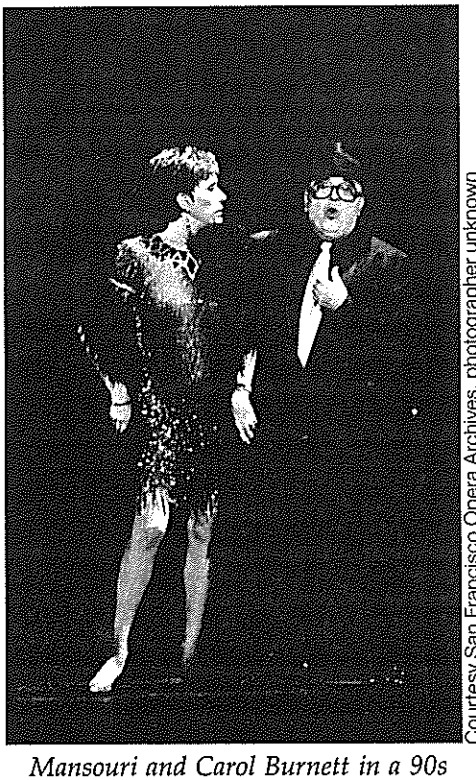
Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Ira Nowinski

Mansouri and Kurt Adler, 1979. Adler often engaged him to direct starting in 1963.



Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photo Margret Norton

Mansouri as director in 1968 with soprano Mary Costa.



Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photographer unknown

Mansouri and Carol Burnett in a 90s AIDS benefit.

Courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives, photographer unknown

Joan Sutherland sang with Mansouri directing The Merry Widow, *Sydney, 1980.*

plained to the prop master that the sword was wobbling in the ash tree; this did not make a convincing case that it was only a great hero who could remove it. The prop master then installed a hook to hold the sword firmly, but forgot to tell Mansouri how to unhook the sword when it came time to remove it from the tree. So when the time came for Siegmund to dramatically withdraw the sword from the tree, it balked and remained in the tree, which Mansouri, in his anxiety, managed to hoist overhead, causing the audience to erupt in much laughter.

The second story about the sword in the tree occurred a few years later in 1963, during one of Mansouri's first (and highly successful) assignments as a stage director at San Francisco Opera. SFO's renowned but difficult General Director Kurt Herbert Adler had given Mansouri six productions to direct. Among them was *Die Walküre.* Siw Ericsdotter was Sieglinde and John Vickers was Siegmund. "John's *Notung* (the aria at the end of the first Act which he is singing as he withdraws the sword from the tree) was unbelievable," Mansouri recalled, "Vickers could hold it forever and shake the rafters."

Having sung the role of Siegmund himself, Mansouri knew the importance of the sword. Understandably nervous about his first season working with the San Francisco Opera, he engaged the lighting designer of Bayreuth to help him make his lighting plot. During the first Act, the minute the leitmotiv for the sword (Notung) occurred, a very strong amber light would shine on the sword in the tree. A table was placed next to the tree and Siegmund would jump onto the table to sing those incredible notes and withdraw the sword.[2] "I thought 'Wow!'" he said very proud of his direction, "This is so Wagner!"

Opening night comes. Everything is going nicely. John is in wonderful voice. And Mansouri is pacing at the back of the house in the standing room only section. The Notung leitmotif comes. The light shines on the sword in the tree. Siegmund (John) jumps onto the table. Then, to Mansouri's horror, the light has come loose and slowly tilts down, stopping at John's crotch! Mansouri is mortified. John is unaware and sings fantastically.

As the Act ended, Mansouri rushed downstairs to the bar and ordered a double scotch thinking, "I'm going to be crucified. "Instead, a group of Wagnerites came up to him and gave him a big hug, saying, "Oh Mansouri, that was psychologically brilliant! The idea, the fact that you equated the sword with the phallic symbol of Siegmund himself — just brilliant! "Oh yes," he said, taking the compliment and thinking to himself that now he could do anything with Wagner because the Wagnerites are always looking for the

2. I remember well this 1963 special and unusual illumination of the sword and how electrifying it was. Most other subsequent non-illuminated productions always seem to be just a little disappointing. - Ed.

profound, psychological meaning. I love that they're so incredibly serious!"

* * * *

When asked if he had a favorite production, he couldn't pick just one. "They're like your children," he said, "I like pieces that move me, that touch me personally, that make me get emotionally involved, that mirror the human experience. Such productions enrich me."

Thank you Lotfi, for the many ways you've enriched *our* lives with your many wonderful productions.

— Sue A. Stephenson

Wagner Operas performed in San Francisco under the General Directorship of Lotfi Mansouri

1988	Der Fliegende Holländer
1988	Parsifal
1989	Lohengrin
1990	Ring Festival – Das Rheingold
1990	Ring Festival – Die Walküre
1990	Ring Festival – Siegfried
1990	Ring Festival – Götterdämmerung
1991	Tristan und Isolde
1993	Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg
1994	Tannhäuser
1995	Die Walküre
1996–1997	Lohengrin
1997–1998	Der Fliegende Holländer
1998–1999	Tristan und Isolde
1999	Ring Festival – Das Rheingold
1999	Ring Festival – Die Walküre
1999	Ring Festival – Siegfried
1999	Ring Festival – Götterdämmerung
1999–2000	Parsifal

Shocking in Palermo

Another Modified Production

Graham Vick used unforgettable shock technique for his opening scene in *Die Walkiire* at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, Sicily on February 21, 2013. Taking Sieglinde's sad tale of how Hunding's drunken kinsmen had abducted and forced her into marriage, the opening orchestral prelude of the storm chase accompanied a gang of inebriated revelers in modern dress carrying in Sieglinde (Ausrine Stundyte) in a short white dress and bridal veil, strapped to a chair with heavy rope.

The chair was hoisted onto a table with the celebrants jumping thereon, harassing the frightened and cringing girl until Hunding (Alexei Tanovitski) shooed them away. He then untied the huge rope and used it as a whip, violently slapping it onto the table with a loud crack next to his bride. This sound was augmented by the orchestra. It was brutal as it was meant to be illustrating the sadistic cruelty of the groom's treatment of what he considered to be his property. It was so violent that it was difficult to watch, particularly in dramatic contrast to the love music soon to follow.

Wotan, as a mysterious (and unscripted) intruder, was shown thrusting the sword into the great ash tree and the many attempts to unsuccessfully withdraw it.

Opera directors in both Europe and now sometimes in America use gimmicks to sensationalize their productions, but is it Wagner? Imagination and interpretation can be challenging, so followers of the *Ring* delight in new productions, provided they stick reasonably close to what Wagner wrote. Throughout this opera the view of our modern world was brutal, negative and pessimistic with scenes in the performance often distracting one from Wagner's libretto and music.

The opening setting created by Richard Hudson used this theater's huge

stage to much dramatic advantage with a high rock slide on the side of the stage with a tree trunk growing out from the bottom of the slide. Also, there was the glow of a fire at its base. In Act II the slide had become a rock avalanche. The relationship with nature became distorted when Sieglinde brought a drink for the thirsty Siegmund in a large basin, placing it on the floor by the fire with a liquor bottle beside it. (John Treleaven, replaced Simon O'Neill, originally scheduled for the role). The two, then kneeling, slurped the drink like beasts.

Bottles showed up in many scenes, particularly those with Wotan (Franz Hawlata). There was nothing grand about this god. He was costumed in working clothes (Richard Hudson designer), like the other male figures, often similar in stature, making it frequently difficult to distinguish the characters, one from the other.

In Act II Wotan's dilapidated trailer (reminiscent of the Cologne *Ring*), was set at the foot of an avalanche of rock with camping chairs and many liquor bottles, this for his monologue envisioning the fate Erda had predicted. He was a hard-drinker.

The base treatment of women was disturbing. In Act I, as Hunding sat with Siegmund at the table during the woeful tale of family disruption, he forced his wife onto his lap, demonstrating his ownership and permitted abuse. Later in the opera, Wotan even man-handled his favorite daughter, hitting her, shoving and forcefully throwing her to the ground in his anger. Fricka was given the usual unsympathetic, nagging treatment for her quarrel with Wotan.

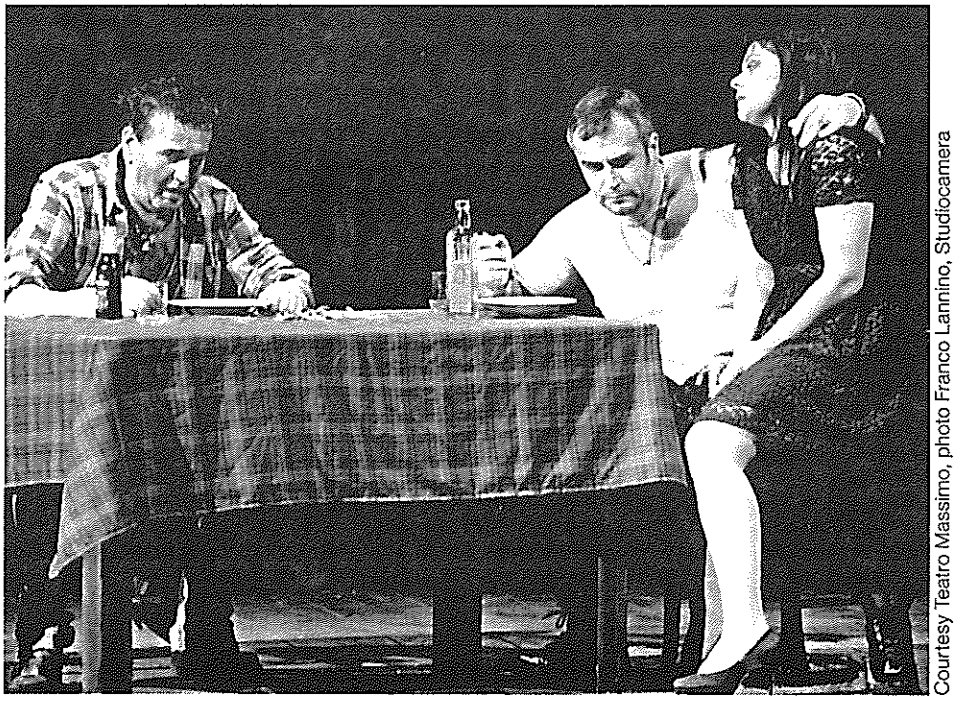
Sex versus romantic love became an issue in this production. Sieglinde was an aggressive pursuer of her new friend, actively dominating the scene, toppling him onto the floor, and later onto the table with demonstrative passion. When she sang her lovely "Du bist der Lenz", Vick illustrated the bursting forth of love in Spring with an additional couple on stage and six couples intruding in the aisles of the audience, hugging, kissing, completely distracting us from the music of the love duet.

A review in the "Giornale di Sicilia" headlined "stupor e baci gay" which my little knowledge of Italian sounds like "astonishment and gay kisses". There was no discernible audience reaction for this scene except for the nervous turning of heads and bodies to watch the show. In fact the well-dressed audience, perhaps more enthusiastic for Italian opera than German, was under-demonstrative with its applause for the performances.

Horses were an issue. When Brünnhilde (Lise Lindstrom) appeared on the battle scene in Act II, she was sitting side-saddled on the shoulders of her

Courtesy Teatro Massimo, photo Franco Lannino, Studiocamera

Act I: Sieglinde and Siegmund with the drinking bowl.



Courtesy Teatro Massimo, photo Franco Lannino, Studiocamera

Act I: Siegmund and Hunding with his property, Sieglinde, on his lap.

Grane a bare-chested supernumerary holding a chair as legs. She was dressed in punk attire, a black sleeveless T-shirt and tight pants. With her short blond hair style, she had a lively, androgynous appearance.

In Act III the other Valkyries likewise each had a human horse. They were dressed in varying military uniforms or business suits, were vain, dominating, sadistic, leader-stereotypes, slapping their riding crops at their horses. A confusing battle scene was back-dropped with a scrim of a field of red poppies, reminiscent of the World War I poem "On Flanders Fields the poppies blow between the crosses, row on row", so familiar to older generations. The assault on the wounded and dead warriors in Act III, and the anger shown by Wotan at Brünnhilde for her disobeying him were distracting from the action of the story, and confusing. During this final scene the huge stage was crowded with all of the warrior maidens, their "horses", and helmeted fighters who clashed their weapons in violent struggles. Two combatants, as Sintolt and Wittig, (implacable foes), were shown in a separate fight and were pulled apart—but why such mayhem with all the other warriors?

The answer came from the program synopsis: "On the battlefield the Valkyries, by order of Wotan, incite heroes to kill each other" (one might wonder if it was the already slain heroes that Mr. Vick intended to kill each other, or what?). As the Valkyries chose their candidates for Valhalla, some men, many women, stripped to bare underwear. Distinguishing them on the crowded stage was both confusing and depressing. Later the helmeted fighters ran in a large circle as though doing their exercises, engulfing the huge stage. The usual jovial scene at the beginning of Act III with the Valkyries laughing and mirthful with its "Ho-yo-to-hos" was lost. This production was completely in contrast to the delightful portrayal of Grane in the 1990 Brussels *Ring* where Brünnhilde's faithful horse accompanied the moods of his mistress with body moves, happy or sad, and lost his magical power unicorn exactly when his mistress lost her godhead. This was definitely a tear-jerking moment in Brussels.

Graham Vick's world of Wotan was not a happy world. In fact Wotan was shown as a heavy-drinking persona, a "red-neck, low-brow", living in his run-down trailer, dressed in workman's clothing, quick to be incited, angrily throwing furniture, and man-handling his favorite daughter. One wondered about the bruises Lise Lindstrom must have suffered as she was hurled about. With a production of so many discouraging aspects of mankind's baser characteristics, will the audience have the experience, the tear-filled emotional impact of Wotan's farewell to his daughter? Of course, the music itself develops the psychological setting. However, seeing Brünnhilde strip, get into

a morgue-like body-bag as though dead and see it completely zipped closed, was another shock.

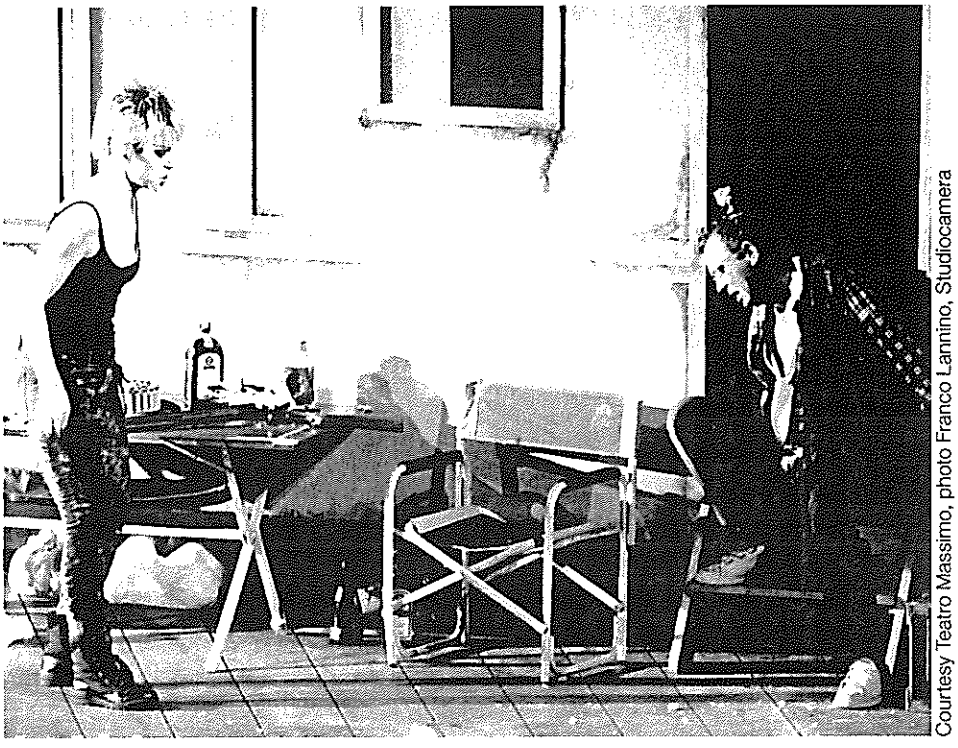
Wotan dragged the bag into position for the forth-coming awakening scene. In this production, Loge insolently appeared when summoned. He then summoned his cohorts who sat on chairs encircling the bag, each lighting up a cigarette, puffing away. The enveloping smoke symbolized the fire that soon would surround Brünnhilde in her long sleep.

With so many diverging reactions from the stage action, the music of this music drama was an issue in itself. The orchestra led by Pietari Inkinen seemed subdued, and not just so as to allow the singers space. During scenes of the violent storm as in Act I, the fight at the end of Act II, and the "Ride of the Valkyries", one expects some bombast, but the excitement was missing, perhaps from lack of Wagner performances at the Teatro Massimo. Exceptional praise is deserved for Lise Lindstrom, not only for her exciting portrayal of the tempestuous warrior maiden, but also for her right-on dramatic soprano vocal rendering, managing all the high notes of the difficult score easily. Additionally, she "kept the show going" by managing to energetically act the role, (which was so well prepared), especially toward the end when she was ill with an attack of the flu and a temperature of 102 degrees. At that time, Caroline Whisnant was brought in to sing while standing at the side of the stage. Lindstrom reprised the role with great success for the subsequent performance.

Ausrine Stundyte was highly applauded for her Sieglinde. John Treleaven who has been an outstanding heldentenor on most of the great stages today, had no trouble with his Siegmund. Hawlata, a Wagnerian veteran, as Wotan was in control of his role dramatically, but seemed unsure vocally at times. Alexei Tanovitski's powerful Hunding portrayed the cruel nature of his role both vocally and in stage presence. The Valkyries were also powerful portrayals as they dominated the stage and side stage extensions watching for Wotan's return in Act III. They were not women one would like to have as friends.

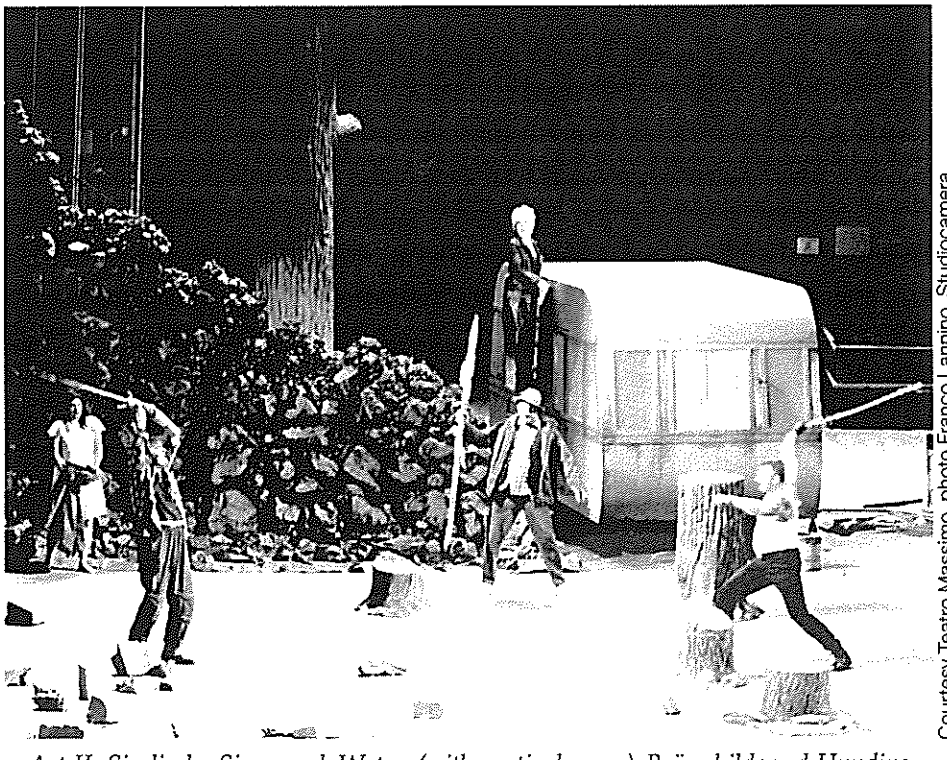
The Wagner connection to Palermo, as lauded in the theater's publications for its first-ever staging of the *Ring* (for the celebratory bicentennial year), references Wagner's stay at the Grand Hotel et des Palmes, and then the villa of the Prince of Gangi in Porrazzi near Palermo from November, 1881 to March of the following year while he completed the orchestration of the third act of *Parsifal*.

The schedule for the four operas was set in January, February, October and November, thereby preventing travelers from afar from conveniently attending the entire cycle. This writer chose *Die Walküre* since Lise Lindstrom



Courtesy Teatro Massimo, photo Franco Lannino, Studiocamera

Act II: Brünnhilde upset with Wotan's despair (note liquor bottles).



Courtesy Teatro Massimo, photo Franco Lannino, Studiocamera

Act II: Sieglinde, Siegmund. Wotan (with vertical spear). Brünnhilde and Hunding as Siegmund is about to die.

was debuting the role of Brünnhilde. Her portrayals of Turandot, Senta and Salome had been extremely impressive both vocally and dramatically. She did not disappoint.

Aside from the common associations of Palermo with the Mafia (now being combated by the "Addiopizzo" youth anti-extortion movement), and the scene (in the film *The Godfather),* of the Teatro Massimo, the city has a rich mixture of the many cultures that have been part of its history from the Phoenicians in the 8th century B.C., to the Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Arabs, Normans, (see King Roger y Szymanowski), French Angevins, the Aragpnese, the Allies of World War II, and finally reconstruction. Each has left its mark on the city's architecture.

The theater was reopened in 1997 and is the largest in Italy, third largest in Europe. It is located on Piazza Verdi, has a sculptured bust of Giuseppe Verdi beside the large, impressive entrance stairs, but the association with Verdi is from that composer's opera *I Vespri Siciliana,* composed in Paris for the Opéra, to a libretto intended for others, about the insurrection of 1282. Although this year the Palermo theater was celebrating Verdi with his classical operas, and it has modernized its technological approach to presentations, this production of Wagner was not one that anyone would find to be an amusing, light-hearted evening of entertainment.

Not that *Die Walküre* ever is light-hearted, but in Palermo Graham Vick looked in through the back door of the dark side of life. He depicted people who make the news headlines of today, not necessarily the people of our acquaintance in the *Ring.* The ugly side of today's world is increasingly disturbing resulting in a rising tide of protests, and Vick personalized this aspect with his characterizations of the male protagonists. The loving father-daughter music is there, but it has an edge, setting the stage presumably for what is to come in the following episodes of the cycle. It anticipates a not-too-pretty view of our world today.

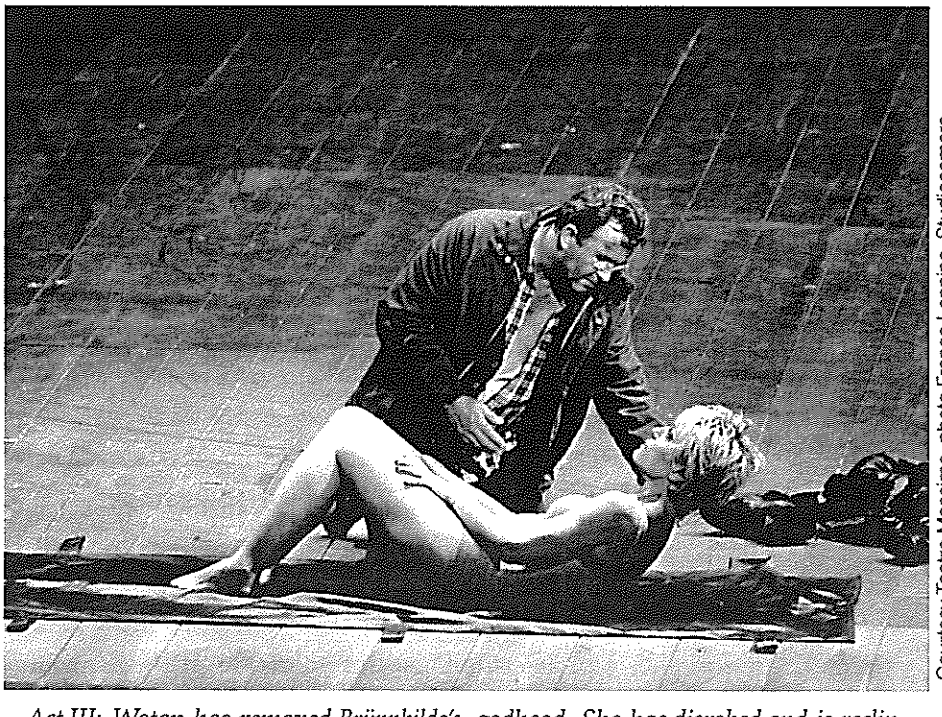
It is a thought-provoking theater experience, one to which an audience with a national history of having been for centuries at the cross-roads of territorial conquest, would intuitively relate.

Wagner spoke to our subconscious, often helping us to see ourselves with misgivings, in the personages on the stage, as in ancient Greek theater. How do we find fault for what goes wrong in life? Wagner spent a lifetime searching for answers, as we today look to new concepts in *Ring* productions to find his answers about how to bring about a better world.

—Verna Parino

Courtesy Teatro Massimo, photo Franco Lannino, Studiocamera

Act III: Women in business attire and military uniforms are Valkyries, men are their horses. This production has more than usual nakedness.



Courtesy Teatro Massimo, photo Franco Lannino, Studiocamera

Act III: Wotan has removed Brünnhilde's godhead. She has disrobed and is reclining on a body bag that Wotan will soon zip closed.

WAGNER AT MEININGEN

28th February to 4th March 2013

Sitting in the gallery of the theatre in Meiningen with its superb sound and sightlines, I gazed in a mix of gratitude and disbelief at the 15 Euro price marked on our tickets. Bryan Suitters, a leading figure of The Music Club of London, had again provided Simpson's standards at burger-café prices. Here at Meiningen was another opera house which was a gem, and it was the setting for a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in a different league from any ones in the UK for a long time. It was better conducted (by Philippe Bach), better sung, better played and far better staged (by Gerd Heinz), even outclassing the one at Glyndebourne. As for Covent Garden, that house of shame, the less said of its *Tristan* productions since Peter Hall and Colin Davis, the better.

Act I had the prow of Tristan's ship rotating 180 degrees for the decisive shifts of focus between the two pairs of principles, Isolde and Brangäne, Kurwenal and Tristan, but otherwise the production was of the utmost simplicity, not much more than some shallow steps set diagonally across the stage for Act II, and a tree, a low couch and a chair for Act III. Some atmospheric projections, some subtly suggestive lighting and the gripping acting supplied the magic, along with the producer's willingness to present us with Wagner's creation instead of some bizarre concoction of his own. The Tristan (Andreas Shäger), was terrific, at times almost too loud for the orchestra, although its opulence of sound was amazing, and the whole evening was crowned by one of the most meaningful and moving versions on the *Liebestod* I have encoun-

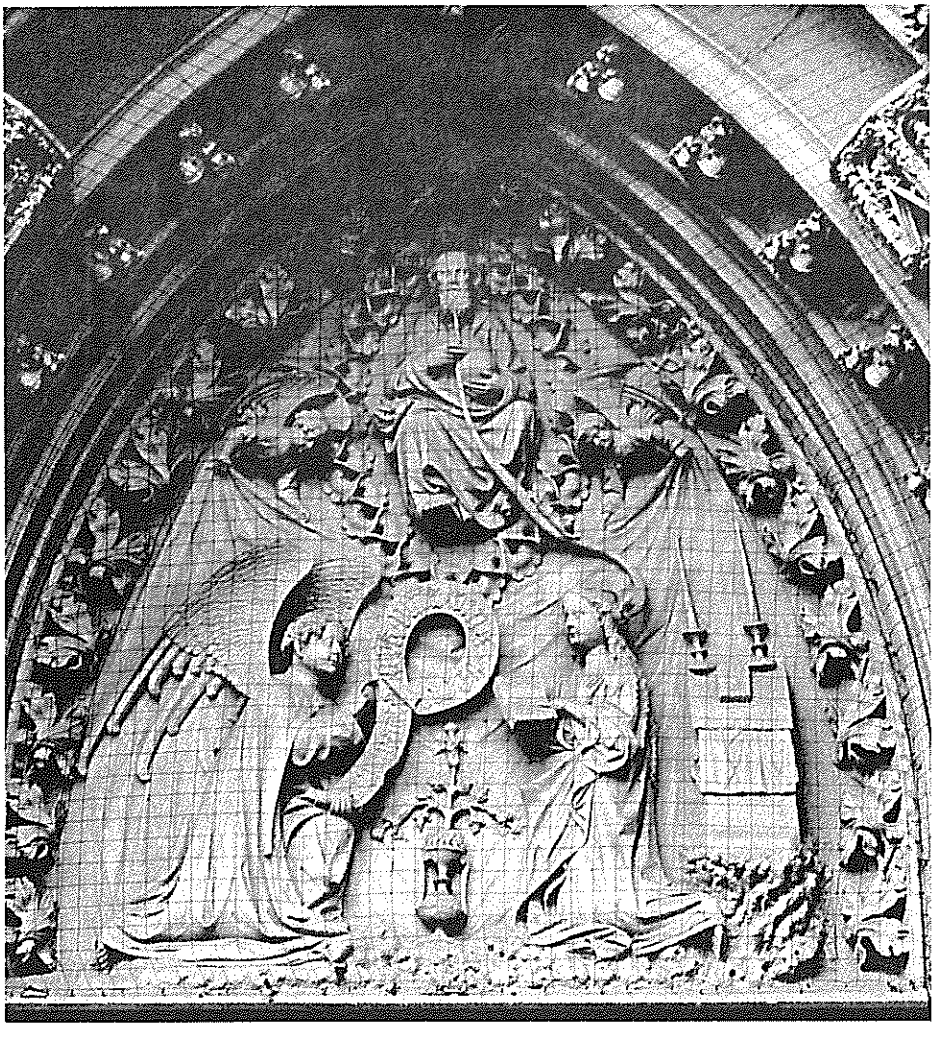
tered. After the Isolde, Ursula Füri-Bernhard had sung her final 'Lust'—exquisitely—she turned her back on the audience to embrace and lean against the tree, and the hues of her cloak merged with it so perfectly that she seemed subsumed back into nature even as she slipped lifeless to the ground.

Two days later there was another superb performance—generally—of Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot*. One of the benefits of having opera and the straight plays on the same premises is that Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, the source of Wagner's opera, was being played over the same period. This allowed comparisons and an understanding that are impossible with any U.K. theatre organisation. To be sure, *Das Liebesverbot* was considerably cut, but the performance demonstrated, as the famous recording from the 1970s by Sawallisch had done, that this is a remarkable opera. If people did not know it was by Wagner and did not draw contrasts with his stupendous achievements of later, a performance like this would have the experts going round claiming to have discovered a lost masterpiece. The stage setting was clever, something like a tiered Roman arena that did both for Friedrich's palatial hall and Palermo's town square, as well as providing nooks for the more intimate scenes. Space forbids the mention of as many excellent artists individually as their quality deserves, but I must single out Dae-Hee Shin whose magnificent bass and sheer musicality had already been a joy as Kurwenal, but whose portrayal of the repressed, puritanical Friedrich bore the stamp of greatness. Nothing is perfect and the generally effective staging was ruined by a bit of producer's crackpot vandalism at the end. Ansgar Haag is the man who should go in the stocks. Wagner's joyous conclusion, with everything coming right for every one and every one forgiving every one, was suddenly stood on its head when hidden snipers meaninglessly and inexplicably shot half the principle players. This left the stage strewn with corpses; heaven knows who was meant to be doing what to whom, or why! None of the Meiningen audience whom we asked were any wiser; and it made as much sense as if half the cast of *Figaro* or *Fledermaus* had shot the other half at the end.

The two operas were the visit's nodal points, but our three days at Meiningen would have been lovely and happy simply on their own account, so enchanting is this unspoilt treasure of a town with its Fachwerk and medieval eating houses, its theatre and music museums. There was also a trip to Würzburg on the day which had no opera, which brought a personal benefit for me. In Wagner's essay, *Art and Religion*, from the same period as *Parsifal*, he draws a contrast between what he plainly saw as art of fatuous religiosity and art that was true religious revelation. He gave as an example of the former (perhaps he was being rather hard) the *bas relief* at St Kilian's cathedral in

Wurzburg, which showed, as Wagner tells us, God the father transmitting the embryo Jesus down a blow-pipe into Mary. In fact he had misremembered the details and the location; it was not at St Kilian's but the nearby Marienkapelle. It shows the tiny child being transmitted to a dove sitting on Mary's shoulder, (and thence to her ear?). There is now a picture in my book, as there is of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which Wagner knew from the Zwinger at Dresden, and which he took as his example of an art that conveyed true religious feeling and revelation.

—Paul Dawson-Bowling



Paul Dawson-Bowling:
The Wagner Experience and Its Meaning To Us

With 800 pages of text plus 100 more of illustrations, this monumental work invites comparison with Ernest Newman's 736 page *The Wagner Operas*, its predecessor by 64 years which provided this reviewer's epiphany regarding Wagner's canonical output. Wagner News readers who are familiar with the work of Paul Dawson-Bowling are likely to have positive expectations of his *magnum opus*. As one whose fairly diligent reading over the last 20 years or so has resulted in an accumulation of the "usual" yard and a half shelf-full of Wagner books I was not expecting *The Wagner Experience* (to use a less unwieldy version of its title) to provide me with another such epiphany. I should declare at the outset that it has succeeded in doing exactly that.

The distillation a lifetime's work which has clearly been a labour of love, this book is organised as two beautifully illustrated volumes. The first deals with Wagner's output as a whole and attempts (very successfully, in my view) to explain what the author terms "the miracle of the music". Those of us who struggle for coherence when asked what the secret is of Wagner's hold over the imagination and the intellect will find such chapters as the boldly-titled "Towards a definition of Wagner's fascination" to provide much assistance. One may have reacted sceptically to the prepublication blurb which claimed that this is a book like no other on the subject, but the fact that it is written with the benefit of a lifetime's experience as a medical practitioner alone brings an abundance of justification for such a claim. The biographical chapters in particular provide a doctor's insight into Wagner's psychological development and the influences upon his work which can be traced back to his earliest childhood and beyond.

The work and life of "the supreme artist of dramatic psychology" are illuminated for the author by the psychologist Carl Jung. We are told that Wagner never escaped a compulsive tendency to be self-centred to its pathological point of narcissism. "Narcissists are often aware of exactly how different people work and how they are likely to respond, but exploit this awareness overwhelmingly for their own interests." So Wagner came to have an insight and a feeling for character that was extraordinary, "as outsiders often do".

Throughout the book original angles of approach provide freshness, but one chapter in particular may come to be seen as revolutionary. Would you have expected "Femme inspiratrice, femme fatale" to be about *Minna* Wagner? With this chapter the author has to justify its opening sentence: "Of all the experiences which went into the making of Wagner, Minna Planer was the most far-reaching." He adds: "The importance of her role is impossible to exaggerate, and yet it goes unrecognised." The 39 meticu-

lously researched pages which follow cover the ground of comparing her influence with that of Cosima Wagner. Although he concedes; "It was Cosima that made possible what is for me the most extraordinary achievement of Wagner's life, the fulfilment of *Parsifal* down to its staging within a year of his death." He continues: "It was Minna who became the source of all the heroines in Wagner's dramas. Cosima, and briefly Mathilde, would re-invigorate the paradigm of woman as life's ultimate fulfilment which Minna had instilled in Wagner. But it was Minna who had forged it in the first place."

The chapter: "Puzzles, Obstructions and Objections" addresses the matter of the hostility which the music itself can call up. "When Wagner stirs the depths what comes welling up can be ecstatic and liberating, but it can also take the disturbing form of dark phantoms that come screaming out of the blackness. Not many people are happy to recognise any shadow or disunities in themselves." He explains that this is not the only inner problem which some people foist outwards onto Wagner. Another objection to Wagner apparently represents another pathology: "it is bound up with the lure that Wagner holds for anyone who is looking for shortcomings in greatness and feels satisfaction from finding them. To do this is the mark of a neurosis, a compensation mechanism for people who cannot accept that others exist who are more significant than they are themselves. Wagner's towering greatness and his great faults provide these people with a ready target." Two important refutations are adroitly provided in this chapter, namely that Wagner's political views ("he always remained far away to the left") were in some way compatible with Hitler's and that the composer's anti-Semitism is present in his musical output. We are provided with a useful tool to test the work to determine whether or not it qualifies as "anti-Semitic art".

Volume 2 is a guide to each of the ten "great dramas". The author throws medically-informed illumination upon many of Wagner's characterisations in a 21st Century handbook which is likely to become as indispensable as that of Ernest Newman. The author avoids dry presentations of the stories by integrating narrations with the points of discussion which they generate at the very places in the plots where they come up as he does with the music examples. Those who are unable to read musical notation are catered for with the verbal descriptions of motives, etc. which are also provided.

Space allows the picking of no more than a couple of exemplar cherries. Remember that each of the following claims have closely-argued support. We are told that, thanks to its music, "*Tristan und Isolde* describes romantic love and erotic passion more vividly than any other story or description in existence. Because of the music *Tristan und Isolde* is more than a description; it creates the actual feeling within us. Through the music it creates the very experience in the imagination. It conjures up all that love might be, even for people who

have never known it, switching on the mind to ecstatic possibilities that may previously be unimagined but are innate, and to the hope that they may be realised."

Of the author's favourite work, *Parsifal*, he writes: "Our encounter with Montsalvat comes with a demand that we accept its standards for actual life. The experience of *Parsifal* enjoins kindness, compassion, loyalty, generosity, integrity, responsibility, a willingness to get involved and act, and a willingness to leave well alone."

Paul Dawson-Bowling has written powerfully succinct conclusions to the Volume 2 chapters, each covering one of the great music dramas. If I may be permitted an editorial quibble it is that, with one exception, (*Parsifal*) the effect is spoiled by the fact that before the reader can sit back and contemplate the chapter now completed it starts up again with a list of performers of the work's first performance at Bayreuth! Let me challenge the wisdom of this editorial decision with the example of *Götterdämmerung*. Who would want to move on to the 1876 cast list immediately upon reading the following? "*The Ring* as a whole is a compelling validation of human existence, a secular redemption. Simply to have lived life in all its richness and variety is an experience of such value that is not negated by the fact that it must end. The prospect of it ending does create a degree of regret; yes, that is there in *The Ring*'s final eight bars; but it still establishes the conviction that to have lived life is an experience so worthwhile that not even the prospect of total, eternal oblivion can detract from that worthwhileness."

—Roger Lee

Letter to the Editor

Editor,

Thank you for publishing my interview with Jane Eaglen. It is always a pleasure to talk with the wonderful people who are so dedicated to training and mentoring gifted musicians.

Jane Eaglen has accepted a position in the Opera/Voice Department at the New England Conservatory of Music for the 2013-2014 academic year and she will move to Boston.

Ms. Eaglen told me that she and her husband really love living in Ohio and will miss it, but she also said she missed working with the advanced, graduate vocal students. The New England Conservatory position will allow her that opportunity.

Wagner Intensive will remain in Ohio for the time being. However,it is possible that Wagner Intensive will relocate to Boston at some future date.

Ms. Eaglen and Dr. Mussard remain committed to the continuation of the Wagner Intensive program and thank the WSNC for its support.

—Terri Stuart

AUTHORS' SUBMISSIONS

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All articles are subject to the approval of the editor and one or more members of the journal's Editorial Advisory Board. Articles are subject to editing; however, an edited draft will be available for review by the author. The author's response to the edited draft must be returned to the editor within one week or it will be concluded that the edited draft is approved by the author.

There is no compensation for published articles, however, up to one dozen copies of the published issue will be made available without charge to authors, if requested before printing.

It is recommended that prior to spending significant time writing an article for this journal that prospective authors contact the editor to discuss the proposed article, determining thereby the probability of publication, desirable length, and similar issues. All inquiries will receive a prompt reply.

The preferred method of submission is by e-mail with the text as an attachment. Virtually any Macintosh or Windows word processing program may be used.

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