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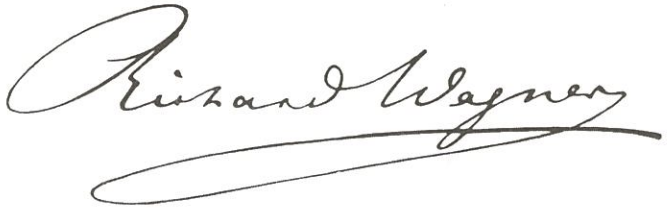
Leitmotive

The Wagner Quarterly



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ISSUE 104

The Editor's Thoughts

The Flying Dutchman always poses a most serious staging problem. For me at least, Wagner's libretto requires the very end to be the dramatic climax of the entire work. The Dutchman has returned to his ship having judged, once again, that he has failed to find a mate. Senta tries to follow him, but is physically held back. However, as his ship begins to move from the harbor, she tears herself away, runs to an overhanging cliff and plunges into the sea. At that moment the Dutchman's ship sinks and he and Senta, who has been faithful unto death, rise together, transfigured.

Ernest Newman wrote that they "...clasped in each other's arms, are seen rising above the wreck, soaring heavenwards."[1]

Unfortunately, this ending is almost impossible to stage. George Bernard Shaw hilariously wrote of a London production in which Senta jumped from the cliff, but apparently fell onto a trampoline and bounced back up so that the audience could see her. The overwhelming emotional effect of true love that Wagner had sought to achieve was thereby ruined.

Of all the great many productions I have seen (except for one[2]), the climax of the work has been totally lost and the wonderful emotional satisfaction one hopes for never materializes. Instead, we are rudely brought back to reality and a completely empty ending.

Why was the triumph of love faithful to death so important to Wagner? Was depicting it then vital to him because he was unsure of Minna's devotion? One wonders.

1. The Wagner Operas. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 49.

2. The 2003 San Francisco Symphony semi-staged version.

LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY*

Robert S. Fisher, Editor
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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.

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

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Lisa Burkett ("It's Been a Great 31 years...") has been a member of the Wagner Society of Northern California since 1982. She served three terms on the Board of Directors and is a frequent contributor to *Leitmotive—The Wagner Quarterly*, for which she served as Associate Editor from 2007–2012. She attended her first *Ring* production at Seattle Opera in 1980 and has experienced more than 60 productions at the company.

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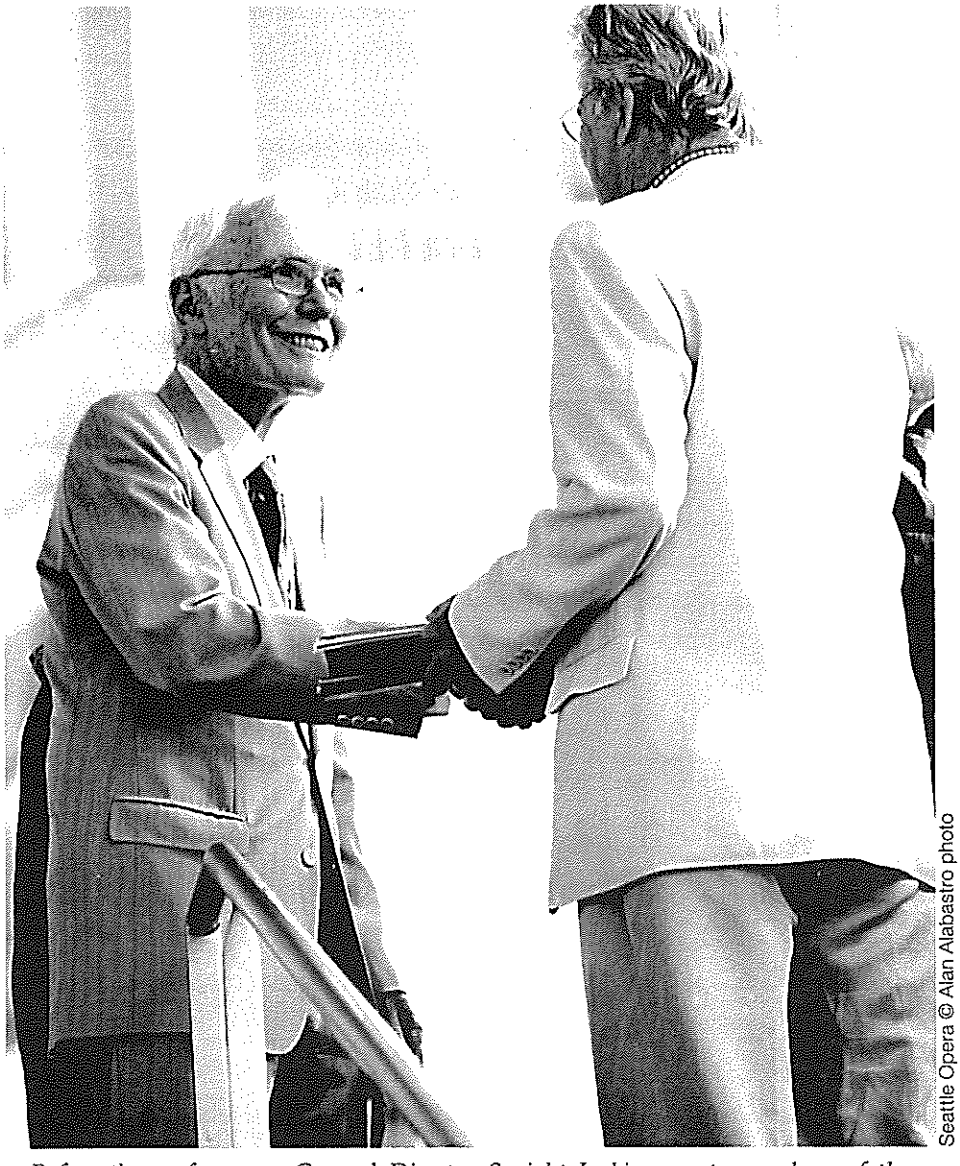


Seattle Opera © Alan Alabastro photo

Before the performance General Director Speight Jenkins greets members of the audience at the top of the grand staircase. One of his many lasting achievements for Seattle Opera was the extensive and magnificent new construction of the house—a major remodeling—transforming it into a world class facility, happily with incredibly fine acoustics.

"It's Been a Great 31 Years... and You Haven't Missed It!"

The words of Speight Jenkins, General Director of Seattle Opera, following the final performance of the last opera of his tenure, Offenbach's Les Contes d'Hoffmann, *on May 17, 2014.*

After curtain calls, Speight was brought onstage to address and thank his audience, and turned around to find not only the principals and chorus but the orchestra, crew, and administrative staff who had stormed the stage to pay tribute to their beloved boss.

An era in Seattle and in the larger opera world is about to come to a close. Speight passes the sword to his successor, Aidan Lang, on September 1, 2014. A future issue of *Leitmotive—The Wagner Quarterly* will feature an article on the August events slated to celebrate Speight's remarkable career: the International Wagner Competition on August 7th with eight promising dramatic voices, among which are four Merola Opera Program alumni and two recipients of WSNC William O. Cord Memorial Grants, and the August 9th 'Speight Celebration' concert and gala featuring artists closely identified with the company.

In his typical magnanimous manner, Speight accepted my invitation to an interview. We spoke in early March during the run of Menotti's *The Consul,* the penultimate production of his general directorship, which showcased the talents of nine alumni of the Seattle Opera Young Artists' Program. Speight was named the company's General Director in 1983. Up until that time, he had been an opera critic, assistant editor of *Opera News,* host of *Live from the Met,* and a lecturer on opera. The Board's Search Committee invited him to a meeting while he was in Seattle that summer lecturing on the *Ring.*

"I was only told that there was a Search Committee and they wanted me to come and answer some questions," Speight explained. "I didn't know if it was about Wagner or about the *Ring.* I never *ever* thought it had anything to do with the General Director because I didn't know how Boards worked.

I'd always been on the press side and I didn't know how Search Committees worked. So when I went, I had no idea I was going to talk about a General Director."

"It was a three-hour session at the end of which (Seattle Opera Trustee) Beverly Brazeau came to me and said 'I think you should be a candidate.' We got in the car and I said to her, 'Beverly, I've never put *La bohème* on the stage' and she said, 'Yes, but I know you can do it.' I said, 'Well, let me think. Maybe I can.' I don't know whether it was in that first ride back or later that I said I've got to talk to some people in New York and see what they think about this." During his signature post-opera Q&A session with audience members, Speight credited his friend, Metropolitan Opera Music Director James Levine, with encouraging him to pursue the role.

"It was that night, supposedly, that Beverly said I came to her and said 'I can do it.' It was she who shepherded me through. Beverly is 80 or 90 percent responsible for my being General Director. One person always does it. That's what happens in these situations."

Speight was nominated to become Seattle Opera's second General Director due in part to a life-long devotion to opera and a tremendous knowledge of Wagner, a necessity as it was the annual production of the *Ring* that had put the company on the map and brought audiences from outside the Puget Sound region to Seattle. His visionary predecessor, Glynn Ross, began the festival in 1975 with complete cycles in both German and English, running through 1983. Did intuition play a part in appointing Speight to this role, given his lack of management experience of an opera company—or any organization?

"I had not been in a management role at all. I suppose you could say that in the Army, as an officer, I had people under me. But they (the Board of Trustees) believed it could be, and everybody thought they were crazy. And there were people in the business who were very snide about it. I've always said the fortunate thing was lots of people here in Seattle approached both critics: Richard Campbell, who was then the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* critic, and Melinda Bargreen of the *Seattle Times,* and asked 'Well, what does he know? He's only a critic!' That immediately put them on my side when I came in here. I had a built-in good feeling from the critics."

The Seattle Opera Board of Trustees wanted change in seeking and naming a new General Director. What was the primary change Speight sought to effect when he assumed the role? "Theatrical viability," he quickly responded. "Obviously, I had to create a new *Ring.* Let me say that Glynn had done a marvelous job starting the *Ring* and making opera a real factor here in Seattle, but in my mind, the theatrical quality of what was being done was not very high.

My job was to build the theatrical quality, which meant building the staff who could accomplish that, and create opera on an international scale. That had never been the intent here before. The intent had been to do good regional opera, and I never wanted just to do that. I came in with the idea of creating a company that would stand up with any other company in the world. Nobody told me to do that—that was just my thought."

How would Speight describe his first few years as General Director? "It's a funny thing. I can't explain what happened in those early years, but it never seemed hard to me," he replied. "Nothing about it seemed hard. I thought it was fun and exciting. I started a number of things that I still do but I didn't know that other General Directors didn't do. For example, my coming frequently to rehearsals, my deep involvement in the process—nobody instructed me in anything. Everything I had to do I just did because I thought it was a good idea. I didn't know how to fundraise but I did it. I've always said to people the only thing about fundraising that's important is to believe in your product and to sell it. It's just like selling anything else. You've got to sell opera; you've got to sell specifically what you're doing. There's no magic to fundraising. And the longer you're there, you have to get to know people and make them like you. But when you start out, you just have to sell what you're doing."

"I did learn a tremendous amount," Speight recalled. "I didn't know what actually went on backstage in the theatre. I was as dumb as critics are. I didn't know why something happened. I've always said that a good critic is a person who instinctively knows that something is wrong and oftentimes doesn't really put their finger on what it is, but they can sense whether a show is good or not. Sometimes critics are very good and can put their finger on it; sometimes they don't get it exactly right. That's what I had to learn—what comes together in a show, what makes it work, how to correct errors, and how to keep bad things from happening. And I believe, and it goes to most people in my business, that from day one my responsibility is to the audience. I absolutely will not ever have anything on my stage that I don't believe in or I can't stand for. When I first dealt with a General Director of a major company, he complained bitterly about a production in his own theatre. I thought to myself I will *never* do that because if I don't like it, I will keep it from happening or I will modify it. And I've done that for 31 years because I believe that's my job—it's what I think I'm paid to do. Now, a lot of people don't think that. The modern view is that you hire a director and they choose a designer and let them go. I just don't. I've never done that. So anything that the public really hates is my responsibility—not the director's, not the designer's, not anyone else's responsibility. It is I who must take the blame. That's the way I've worked all these

years."

It is extraordinary for a General Director of a major opera company to remain in such a role for over 30 years. A notable exception to the rule is David Gockley, who served as General Director of Houston Grand Opera for 33 years prior to assuming the same role with San Francisco Opera, over which he has presided for the past eight. During the early years or perhaps at other times along the way, did Speight ever consider stepping aside?

"Oh, never!" he exclaimed. "From day one I've loved it. I love the work. I've never wanted to leave. I don't want to leave now—really. I mean, I don't and I do. I'm the one who decided when I was going to retire. I decided in 2005 that, after I turned 77, I shouldn't have the responsibility for so many people. Now, thank heavens, I'm in very good health. I feel good. Theoretically, I'm no different than I was five years ago. But there is a difference. I get more tired. No question about it. But I've never wanted to give up. And the only reason I'm happy to retire now is I'm tired of fundraising and the economic side of the opera. These last five years have been horrible. I've had to change nine operas, many of which were already cast, and one of which I had to pay for because I'd already sent out contracts. It's just awful in that way. And then I've not been able to do much Wagner. I wanted very much to do Wagner every summer in the five years before I left. As you know, we've done one *Ring* and one *Tristan* and that's it. And that's just because we've stayed afloat. We've balanced our budget and we're OK, but it's been hard."

Since the discussion turned to Wagner, we segued into Speight sharing impressions of two productions, one from early in his tenure and one more recent. The first Wagner work he produced from the ground up was the 1984 *Tannhäuser,* staged and designed by Robert E. Darling. As an audience member at this production, two images that stand out in my mind underscored the title character's dilemma—his quest for the spiritual and the carnal and his inability to reconcile the two. The Venusberg scene contained a large torso of Venus which, when rotated 180 degrees, appeared hollow. In the third act, during which Elisabeth offers her prayer, the stage was dominated by a statue of the Blessed Virgin surrounded by scaffolding. The sets sadly were water damaged while stored in the warehouse, precluding a revival. What were Speight's remembrances of the production, and why did he select *Tannhäuser,* given its difficulty to cast? What did he seek to accomplish with his first new Wagner production?

"I hadn't thought about that (the two images) in years!" Speight remarked. "*Tannhäuser* had not been done here and it's always popular. My charge, as I had told the Board, was not just to work on the *Ring* but other Wagner, with

Seattle Opera, photo © Bill Mohn

When asked if, by attending most rehearsals, Speight is intrusive, Ring *director Stephen Wadsworth (left) replied, "He is always intrusive...but never invasive."*

which they were pleased. *Tannhäuser* just came about—I don't know what I was thinking in those days. It is a hard one to cast. But after all, we had just come through a decade of marvelous *Tannhäusers* in New York in the '70s, notably the '77 production with Rysanek and McCracken with Jimmy (Levine) conducting that had been done so many times in the prior decade. It probably didn't seem as hard to me then as it would now that I know more."

"I had a crazy idea which the director tried to do: show that the people in the Venusberg were totally empty. This was after all in the '80s, and the depravity they had experienced in the Venusberg had played these people out completely. Well, I didn't realize that in a big theatre you never can show that. But that was one of the ideas I had and I wanted to show how Tannhäuser was so torn between the two. What I remember most about the production, besides the two images you mentioned, was I loved the brightness of the Hall of Song and there were beautiful gauze curtains that at first shielded the stands for the guests and then Elisabeth ran through them to sing "Dich, teure Halle." And of course, also, one of the reasons I presented it was that I was very enthusiastic about Dale Duesing, and I thought he would do a great Wolfram. I think he did and I was happy to have him here to do that. And Ed Sooter was a better singer in many respects than people give him credit for. He did a good Tannhäuser. It was certainly an exciting experience for me."

Speight frequently has stated that he seeks to play up to an audience rather than down. A classic case was the 2010 production of *Tristan und Isolde.* This production was conceived when it proved fiscally impossible to revive the Francesca Zambello production from 1998 due to its scope. That production, following its Seattle premiere, traveled to the Lyric Opera of Chicago and was slated to be presented by San Francisco Opera until technical challenges precluded the company's doing so.

"What happened with that production (the Zambello from 1998) was, when we originally started talking about it, Chicago was interested but then they pulled out. If they had kept in it, it would have been designed in such a way that it would work in Chicago and San Francisco. Now, the administration in Chicago got very cross with us because they then decided to take it and they were mad because it didn't work on their stage, but the problem was they hadn't contributed to it in the beginning. So when this *Tristan* was built, it was built just for our stage without the thought of it going to another company. That was unfortunate: it was bad for us because it made Chicago mad at us—I don't think justifiably—and we would have gotten more money out of the production if we had done it that way. But it would have cost maybe $75,000 or $100,000 more in those days to make it work in Chicago and here, which we would have made back on several rentals. But if you don't have a partner who will put money into it, then you can't afford to do that, and you don't know if it's ever going to be rented. And I've always been sorry because I thought Alison (Chitty) did a marvelous design for it and Cesca's production was wonderful, and I've really hated that we haven't repeated it. We still have the sets and I won't throw them away because I hope Aidan will do a *Tristan* with that production."

When he made the decision to move forward with producing *Tristan und Isolde* in 2010, Speight engaged his frequent collaborator, Peter Kazaras, as stage director. Peter's premise for his production was the short story by Ambrose Bierce, *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,* in which the protagonist experiences vivid imaginary events between the time he is hanged from the bridge and his death. To me, this production elicited a much more cerebral than emotional response. It required the audience to stop and think every minute, not to sit back and let the music wash over us. As a case in point of Speight playing up to his audience, what did he seek to achieve with this unique way of presenting Wagner's monumental work?

"In the long run, looking back at it, I'm not sure it was the wisest idea because of the amount of thinking that you, as a Wagnerian and a person who goes to Wagner everywhere, had to do," he responded. "We do play to a gen-

eral audience. I think it was too much of a challenge because it wasn't exactly clear, or easily clear. But I'm glad we did it. I think it was a good idea to challenge people but I think, in all honesty, it went further than I normally have gone and more than I think needs to be done." From the standpoint of some audience members, to be fully appreciated, this production required understanding the background and reading the director's notes. "That's right, and I'm not a big one on that. I don't believe in that particularly. I thought when we were working on it that it was going to be a lot clearer than it was, not that they (the production team) did anything that I didn't want them to do, and I have taken responsibility for that in every way. I certainly know *Tristan* backwards; I felt there were certain things in that production with which I should have done more. I regret that I didn't do some things with it that I wish I had done."

During Speight's tenure, he produced two *Rings* as different from each other as two productions could be: the François Rochaix Brechtian-style staging, which ran from 1986-1995, and the Stephen Wadsworth production, familiarly known as the "Green *Ring*," which debuted in 2001 and was presented most recently in 2013. "And if I had a third one, it would be just as different," Speight declared. "I think the *Ring* needs to be looked at from many different perspectives with only one caveat: Whatever you do, you have to tell the story and you cannot work against the music. If you don't follow the music or don't tell the story, then you're not doing your job. Within that sentence, there are thousands of ways to produce the *Ring*."

During the symposium Seattle Opera hosted during the third cycle of the 2013 *Ring* production. former San Francisco Opera General Director, Pamela Rosenberg, offered a presentation illustrated with video clips on two contrasting *Ring* productions: Patrice Chéreau's centennial staging from Bayreuth (1976–1980), and Ruth Berghaus' 1985-87 production at the Frankfurt Opera. Some members of the audience were heard murmuring "Eurotrash," to which Speight took exception. How does he define following Wagner's or any composer's intentions?

"I think that, as I just said, that when a director stages a production for me, I have to feel that he or she is carrying out the music," he replied. "The work that is done the most crazily is the *Ring*. In *Die Walküre*, you don't have to have a rock or a mountain. But you do have to have eight women who are obviously a group and they have to be working for the man who gets mad. And you have to have a relationship between Wotan and Brünnhilde that is intense—absolutely intense. Wotan has to be furious. He has to be furious at the sisters, he has to get rid of them wherever they are, and that scene has got

to be moving. The audience has to be moved by a father who cannot say he's wrong—will not say he's wrong—to be overwhelmed by a smart daughter and finally, at the very end, to realize one way that he can at least keep his position and yet protect her. When you have a production of *Die Walkiire* where the Wotan and Brünnhilde do not even look at each other, where there is no reaction whatsoever, when they're on different levels—there are just so many crazy things in these productions! I just don't understand it. It doesn't make any sense to me because the words tell us *exactly* what they need to do. And if people think that's boring, well, fine! Then bore them because we know the audiences aren't bored. We're very clear here. Now, I don't think the only way to do it is to have a big rock and do all the things with the fire. You don't have to do everything. But the basis of it is that the words must make sense. The characters cannot be singing something and doing something else."

"I never saw the *Meistersinger* that Katharina Wagner did in Bayreuth because I don't go there very much anymore. Everything I read about it doesn't make any sense to the music—none. Zero!" Speight exclaimed. "I don't believe in that. Let me get out of Wagner for a minute. I've said this to the audiences so many times here. There are certain operas that belong in a time and place. There are a lot of other operas that are mythic, for example *Rigoletto, Carmen, and Faust.* Most of Verdi is actually mythic. If you can make any sense out of *Forza* at all, it can be done at any time, I suppose. *Un ballo in maschera* certainly can be done at any time. Now when you get to *Der Rosenkavalier,* some directors now are setting it in the year of composition. Well, what really happens in *Rosenkavalier*? Although they certainly had servants, does it really work in 1911 Vienna? Maybe it does, but I find it very hard to believe if it is not set in the 18th century. And *Fanciulla*? Are you going to move it into modern day Los Angeles? Is that sensible?"

"*Bohème* is mythic. I've always wanted to do a *Bohème* on the University of Washington campus. There is nothing in it that doesn't work at any time. But in *Tosca,* people have always wanted to move it around. Well then, somehow you've got to take out those references to Napoleon and Marengo and what are you going to put in?" What would Speight's solution be to setting an opera in one era when its text clearly references another—change the text or drop all references from supertitles? "That's the point. No one wants to change the text. And yet, they sing about Napoleon and they set the opera in 1950? It's just crazy. It doesn't make any sense to me."

"There are so many operas you can set in different times and places, but the ones you can't, in some ways, seem to be the ones with which directors more perversely want to do it. Let me take an extreme example. One of the

worst productions I've ever seen, of anything, and I'll be very clear about this, was Calixto Bieito's *Abduction from the Seraglio* at the Komische Oper in Berlin. Putting prostitutes on the stage who are somehow connected to the harem? And at the end with Mozart's music playing the way it is to have Konstanze take a pistol to her head to kill herself? What in the world are they talking about? It was an exercise in pornography, and I don't care how many people tell me that Bieito is a nice man and I'd like him a lot. Well, maybe I'd like him personally, but he's done many things like this that to me are just pornographic and ridiculous and they don't belong in opera. And I don't care if that makes me sound old-fashioned. I just think it's wrong because we are doing a musical art form, and if we deny the music, if we forget the music and put anything we want to onstage, then it isn't opera. We shouldn't be doing it as far as I'm concerned."

When casting a production or selecting key individuals for other roles, does Speight employ intuition? "Well, that is right. I hear somebody and I like them or I see their work and I think they're right for the piece. I choose them and I don't worry about it. Sometimes I've been wrong and sometimes I'm right. I was in an audition in Berlin a few years ago. I had planned a *Kát'a Kabanová*, but the recession was getting worse in Seattle because the Northwest does not experience any recession as quickly as the rest of the country. We're slower to enter it and to get out of it. I do not know why, but that's happened over these 30 years. At this point, the recession was getting worse here and I knew it was going to be terrible. I knew that we wouldn't sell *Kát'a* because it's not the kind of work that sells a lot of tickets, so we had to change it. IMG (an artists' management company) said I had to hear a singer, Christiane Libor. I went to hear her in an audition and Patrick Summers was in town conducting and asked if he could join me. She started off with singing an aria—I don't recall which one. I thought it was a good voice; it was impressive. Then she offered to sing "Abscheulicher." Well, anyone who offers that to me will get a chance to sing it because it's pretty nervy to do. She started singing it and Patrick and I just looked at each other. It was breathtaking. When it was over, I said 'That's a person to do *Fidelio* for.' Then when we made the change out of *Kát'a,* I thought we hadn't done *Fidelio* in a number of years and I've found one if I can get Christiane Libor. I called immediately and she was free and we brought her (for the October 2012 production.) That was a clear case of choosing an opera because I knew a singer."

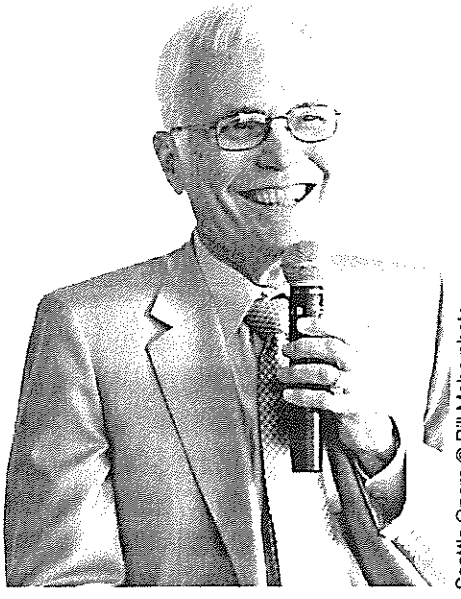
"When we did that *Tristan* in 2010, I didn't have a person chosen for Isolde," Speight explained. "I went all over Germany to find somebody I liked, but nobody I heard really turned me on. Then I heard Annalena Persson in Liver-

pool, who I thought did a beautiful job, and I asked her on the spot to do it."

"I was looking hard for a Brünnhilde for 2013, and I listened to everybody who was known for the role. Nina Stemme (Brünnhilde in the 2011 San Francisco Opera *Ring*) and several others were busy. So I didn't know what I was going to do. An agent from London I do not know called to say I had to hear this woman. He chased me. He called me three or four times because I thought I don't want to hear somebody who hasn't sung Brünnhilde and I don't necessarily want to bring that person to Seattle. Finally, I said I'd be in Frankfurt on a certain day and he said Alwyn (Mellor) would be there to sing for me. She started off with Isolde's Narrative and Curse. This sounds extreme, but she knows this story so I don't mind telling it. She went on to sing the War Cry, part of the Immolation Scene, and the 'Liebestod,' all of which were wonderful. What sold me on Alwyn forever was how she ended the verse of the Narrative and Curse where Isolde says what she was left with was 'Vasallen.' ('Nun dien ich dem Vasallen!'—'Now I remain in service to the vassal!') Everybody I know from Flagstad through Nilsson and Traubel—everybody who put any spunk into *Tristan*—at that point always sang "Vasallen!" (indicating anger), which makes perfect sense. When Alwyn did it, she said (introspectively, indicating devastation) "Vasallen"—she was crushed by it. I thought, you are my girl! You're willing to do something that nobody does because you've thought it out yourself. It's absolutely right. No more right than the other way, which is right, too. This is a way of thinking—it proved her mind worked. She also had, of course, the voice to pull it off. She's gone on to sing a lot of them (Isoldes and Brünnhildes.) I immediately sent her to New York to work with Stephen (Wadsworth) for two or three days, and he loved working with her. I thought Alwyn did a wonderful *Ring* for us last summer."

"I've heard singers about whom I immediately knew in an audition they really were good," Speight declared. "Why do you know this? I don't know. I've been fortunate enough to bring quite a few new people to Seattle who have not worked in America before, or Americans who have not worked in a major situation. I know when I hear somebody who's really good. And one thing I do know—this is where you say 'intuition'—I think it may be a little different. I completely act on my instinct. Just like with Alwyn. I knew when she sang that (her unique 'Vasallen'), I never had to do anything else as long as I could hear her sing."

"It sounds so conflicting. Obviously first a singer has got to have the notes and the right kind of voice—these things go without saying. But a lot of people have that. It's what they do with the small things. I've got to know the person has technique but from there is where I can make the decisions. There are a lot



Seattle Opera © Bill Mohn photo

Speight was invariably generous with his time—after each performance of every opera he conducted a Question and Answer session (which always seemed to be standing room only).

of people who have great technique and even a big-sized voice, but they don't have what it takes, as far as I'm concerned, to sell me on it."

What about the ability to fill a large hall—much more common in the U.S. than in Europe—such as Seattle's McCaw Hall? "Or to fill a large hall. Or to inspire people to pay attention to what goes on. That's what I want. I want to make people involved in what goes on. What worries me most about opera today is that more and more people are hiring safe singers. And I, after all, was a Callasiano[1] before it was even popular. And I've always loved Rysanek. Much as I loved Nilsson, which I did, Rysanek and Callas are what I believe in. What I care about in opera is the interpretation of the words. Do you have to have a good technique? Yes. But do I care about perfect singing? If I've done one thing in Seattle in 31 years it is to make this audience not have to be subject to the *bella voce* singer who just makes pretty sounds. That drives me crazy. I want to hear somebody like Aleksandra Kurzak, who could sing a perfect Lucia but could also seem mad—absolutely crazy. She could scare you by being mad. That's one of the greatest Lucias I've ever seen in my life. There are *bella voce* people in the past that are so amazing that I respect them tremendously. Joan (Sutherland) was not a person who did a lot of interpretation, but there was not a singer any greater than she. I loved her first Norma, the Lucias—they were marvelous experiences. What worries me most about opera today is that a lot of companies are interested in getting the curtain up with someone they know will always be there, be ready, and will always perform but not be concerned about whether the person is temperamentally right for the role. That is what I care about more than everything else."

Apart from ensuring artistic excellence and theatrical viability, one of Speight's great legacies was the transformation of the Seattle Opera House

1. The name given a devotee of the great singing actress, Maria Callas.

into McCaw Hall in 2003. Approximately 70 percent was new construction, resulting largely from seismic issues, as Seattle sits on an earthquake fault. "That was the blessed reason we got the money!" Speight interjected. He sought to improve the audience experience overall, not the least of which was a substantial increase of women's restrooms. During a future conversation, Speight stated that he has requested that his name be attached to women's facilities, just as other elements of the hall are named for individuals closely affiliated with the company. The hall's transformation resulted in much more audience-friendly access and egress plus expanded lobby spaces.

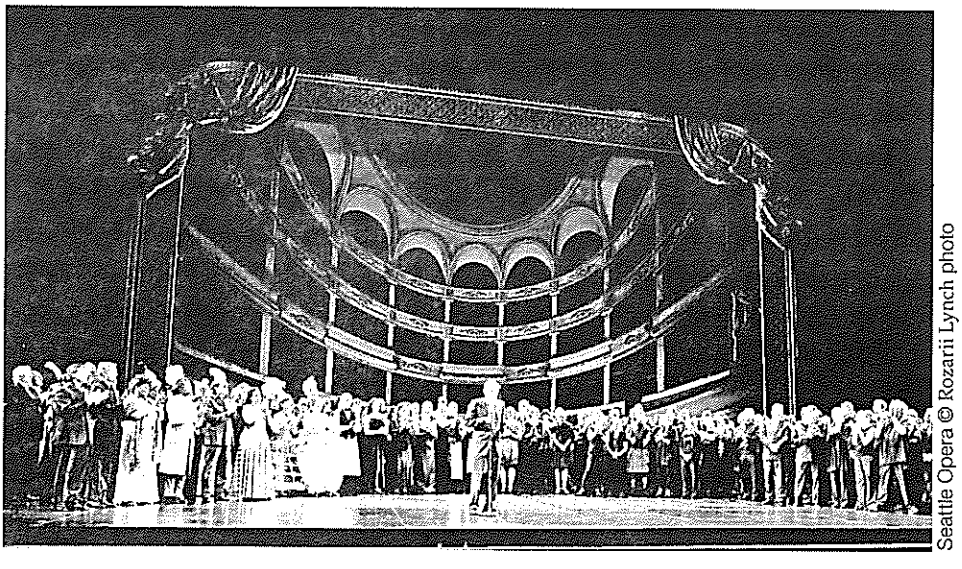
In addition, the stage in the old house did not contain any traps. McCaw Hall includes an impressive trap that was showcased in the production that very appropriately inaugurated the hall, Wagner's stage consecration festival play, *Parsifal*. The trap enabled Klingsor's tower to collapse by descending several stories below the stage level. Backstage facilities also underwent a considerable upgrade. "The Seattle City Council went through the old hall and said their jails are better than this (the dressing rooms and artists' facilities), Speight recalled. "That was one of the things that convinced them—they said 'This is horrible!'"

"When I started out this hall, I said I wanted to create a hall that nobody would think of doing anything to until it was 100 years old. And I think we've done that. The hall to me is as perfect as I could ever hope for. I never in my wildest dreams dreamt we could get the acoustics we have. I threatened the acoustician with chasing him all over Connecticut with an axe, as I was afraid he'd make them worse. All I asked for was the same acoustics, and of course what turned out were what Asher Fisch (conductor of Seattle Opera's *Parsifal, Tristan und Isolde,* the 2013 *Ring,* and numerous other productions) says are the best acoustics of any opera house in the world. I don't know if he's right about that, but we certainly stack up with any opera house. This was the greatest gift that was ever given to me. The acoustics are just unbelievable. But all I really started out to do was get the same acoustics, which were OK but not great. It was a paradise to me—what happened."

Every General Director has war stories, and some of Speight's during his long tenure are legendary. The Wagner Society of Ohio aptly titled a presentation he delivered "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Ahead of the 1991 *Ring,* the originally scheduled Siegfried cancelled to be replaced by William Johns, who turned in an excellent performance. Three years later, Carol Vaness was slated to make her role debut as the title character in *Norma,* only to be injured and replaced by an up-and-coming soprano, Jane Eaglen. In 1995, many of us arrived for the first cycle of the final presentation of the Rochaix

Ring production to learn that the Siegfried became indisposed after the dress rehearsal, forcing Speight to search the globe for a miraculous substitute. The result of his efforts was the debut of the astonishing Wolfgang Fassler. It was in this *Siegfried* production that the fire-breathing steam shovel Fafner, operated by numerous stagehands, also made his debut—an arduous foe for any tenor to battle let alone one who was just dropped into the cast. Of all the challenges Speight has faced in his 31 years at Seattle Opera, was there one that stands out as the most overwhelming and of which he was the proudest to overcome?

"I think you've already named them. The two biggest challenges came in those two years. The first was *Norma* because Opera America was holding its annual conference here for the first time in my tenure, and we had made the mistake—which we have *never* done since—of publicizing all over town that Carol Vaness was going to sing her first Norma. I'd never done that before. Unlike a lot of companies, I started out never boosting one particular singer. We do operas—we don't present a singer. That was a change when I came here. We had boosted Carol, and when she got hurt and couldn't do it, I didn't have the least idea what to do. I'll never forget sitting in that chair upstairs in the middle of the night when I got home from a rehearsal. I was really frantic. I was desperate. The artists' manager, Caroline Woodfield in New York, is very close to me and saved me on this. I did not have any idea where to go. I had heard of three people who had done Norma including Jane, and Caroline is one of two people's ears in the world that I trust. I called her up and asked if



Seattle Opera © Rozarii Lynch photo

The entire company of Les Contes d'Hoffmann *and the Seattle Opera staff assemble for a rousing cheer to their retiring General Director, Speight Jenkins.*

she ever heard of Jane Eaglen. She said, 'I've not only heard of her but I heard her do Norma. I went to Scottish Opera to hear my singer doing Adalgisa and Jane was the Norma—she was marvelous. If you can get her, take her!' That's all I needed to know. I called and I got her."

"I met Jane at the airport and brought her in. It was in December and we had one or two days of rehearsal and then the Christmas break. She went down to Los Angeles to visit with the conductor, John Mauceri, because she was a good friend of him and his family. One of his children had a cold which Jane had caught. *Norma* had a peculiar schedule because, unlike any other opera before or since, we did not do a great number of performances but spread them out so she could do almost all of them. We had very little time after Jane came back—and she couldn't sing. She did the rehearsals. She got onstage—still no singing. In the orchestra tech, the conductor Edoardo Müller couldn't hear her do a thing. We got to the dress rehearsal and she still couldn't sing—she walked through it on the stage. And she said to me 'It's a lot better. I didn't want to use it.' I did not think that the second (alternate cast) Norma would be appropriate for what was going to happen with Opera America. You don't have that many Normas in the world."

"On the day of the performance, Jane said, 'I'll give it a run.' So I took her to the rehearsal hall and she sat at the piano to see how see how she felt. And I couldn't stay in the room because I was too nervous. I came back and she said, 'Yup. I'll do it.' Of course, I didn't know Jane that well, but she's that way. And when she went on opening night (fortunately Opera America wasn't there, but was coming the next week), I had never heard her sing the role. In 31 years here, that has never happened before or since. And no one else had heard her, either. She was incredible. What almost nobody knows, as she tells the story, in those days the Arena (Mercer Arena, the adjacent building) was used for graduations and rock concerts. One of the big Seattle bands, Nirvana, was in there that night. The accompaniment to "Casta Diva" is very soft. So when Jane came out to sing it, with no rehearsal, all she could hear was the beat of the band next door. She said had she started off pitch, she would have remained off. When we got through and I went backstage, it was so exciting and I told her how wonderful it was and she said 'Thank you, but it's not my Norma.' I asked what she meant and she replied 'I'm still not quite over it.' I said I'm happy with this and then two performances later, we had her Norma."

"That was one of my biggest challenges and the second one was the *Siegfried* in 1995," Speight recalled. That's the last time I went on without a good cover. I'd had a cover, but he quit, and I just hadn't hired anybody else. So that

night, it was after the dress rehearsal, that New York agent Alan Green told me about Wolfgang Fassler and said he could come. But until I got Fassler on the phone, and that didn't happen until two or three o'clock in the morning, I was so terrified I could hardly breathe. The *Ring* was coming and I didn't have a Siegfried! Those are certainly the two most terrifying experiences I ever had in all these years."

To celebrate the future of Wagner performance, in conjunction with Speight's retirement, Seattle Opera programmed the third International Wagner Competition in August 2014. What are Speight's thoughts on the future of Wagner singing, and did he select the singers for the competition in the same manner as for casting a production? "Yes...are they exciting? It's a little different when you're casting a production, but in a way, I can't even differentiate it. I chose the singers for the competition because they really excited me and I saw that they had a lot to offer. I tried very hard to have every one of the eight people exciting, and that is why I was very depressed at first. In the years gone by, we've chosen most of them in Europe, and this time we auditioned singers in Munich and London and we only really found three that we liked. One of those was a person we knew. And I was scared because I thought this was terrible. But then in New York it was fantastic—we heard such great people. It was clear when somebody would get up and do something really exciting. There was one woman in Munich over whom I absolutely flipped out and would have brought her here in a second. It turns out she was already doing a Rhine daughter in Bayreuth, so of course she wasn't available. She qualified in every other way—she had never done a big (Wagner) role—but she was marvelous. I wish I could put into words what I look for. I have to get inside the voice, and have to make sure the German is good. It's excitement. There's a sense of whether a singer can sing Wagner or not."

How exactly does Speight define a Wagner voice? For instance, in the case of a soprano, it is easy to classify an aspiring Brünnhilde or Isolde as a Wagnerian, but is a potential Elsa or Eva also a qualified candidate? "That's right," Speight responded. "Some of these people (International Wagner Competition contestants) are not *hochdramatische*. That's what you have to listen for—for everything. When you say Wagner, of course, you're thinking just as much about Eva and Elsa as you are Brünnhilde and Isolde."

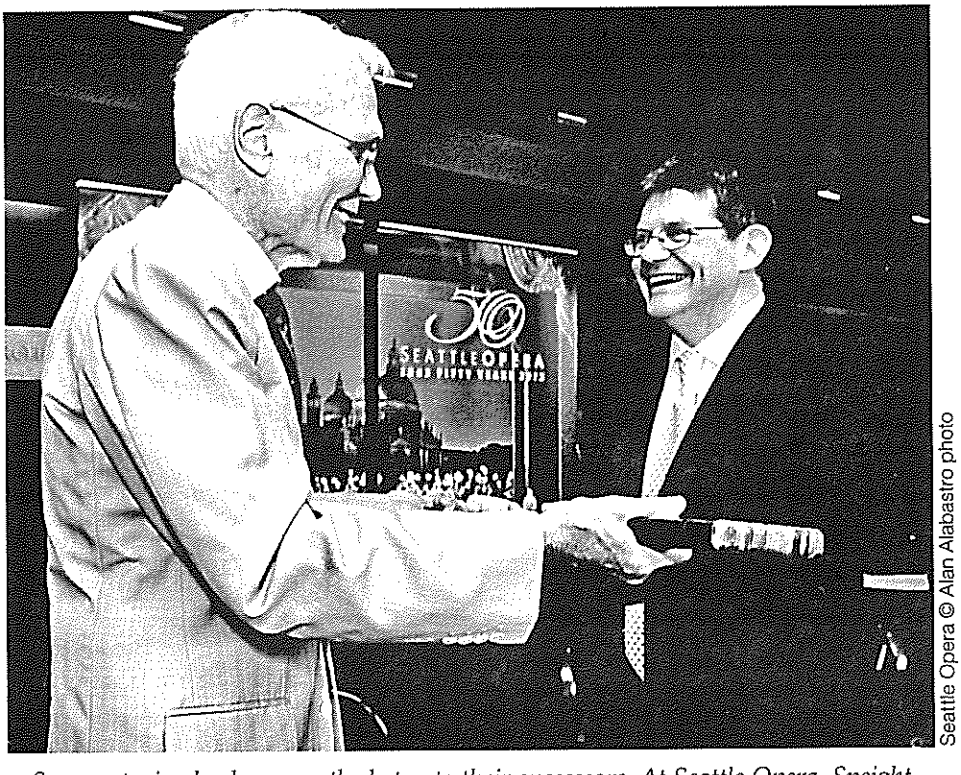
If Speight could offer one piece of advice to his successor, Aidan Lang, what would it be? He thought carefully about his answer. "I've already said he's a committed Wagnerian. I suppose the only thing I would say as advice is to make sure the *Ring* comes back as soon as possible."

And what is the next chapter in Speight's life? "At this point, I wish I could

tell you a lot of things. The only confirmed engagement actually involves the Bay Area. Stanford University has asked me to come down next year in the winter quarter to give a series of lectures on opera in their continuing education program. This will be for the next three years starting in January. But other than that, I'd like to do lecturing; I love radio work, which I've done since 1962; I'd love to do work in finding new artists and looking for voices, if that's available to me; and of course writing. That's all I can say right now. I wish I knew more. For 31 years I've known exactly what I was doing, and it's kind of driving me crazy that I don't." For the latest insights from Speight, follow him at http://www.artsjournal.com/operasleuth/.

On behalf of the Wagner Society of Northern California and Wagnerians worldwide, Bravo, Speight, and thank you for 31 amazing years of intriguing opera productions and your unwavering commitment to the works of Richard Wagner. *Hojotoho!*

—Lisa Burkett



Seattle Opera © Alan Alabastro photo

Some outgoing leaders pass the baton to their successors. At Seattle Opera, Speight passes the magic sword—Nothung—to General Director Designate, Aidan Lang.

Seattle Opera Wagner Productions, Concerts, and Competitions during Speight Jenkins' Tenure as General Director

1984 *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (final *Ring* production from Glynn Ross' era)

1984 *Tannhäuser*

1985 *Die Walküre*

1986 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

1987 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

1989 *Der fliegende Holländer*

1989 *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

1991 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

1994 *Lohengrin*

1995 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

1998 *Tristan und Isolde*

1999 All-Wagner Concert featuring Jane Eaglen

2000 *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*

2001 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

2003 *Parsifal*

2004 *Lohengrin*

2005 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

2006 International Wagner Competition

2007 *Der fliegende Holländer*

2008 International Wagner Competition

2009 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

2010 *Tristan und Isolde*

2013 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

2014 International Wagner Competition and Speight Celebration

Inside the Mind of Senta: A Psychoanalyst's View

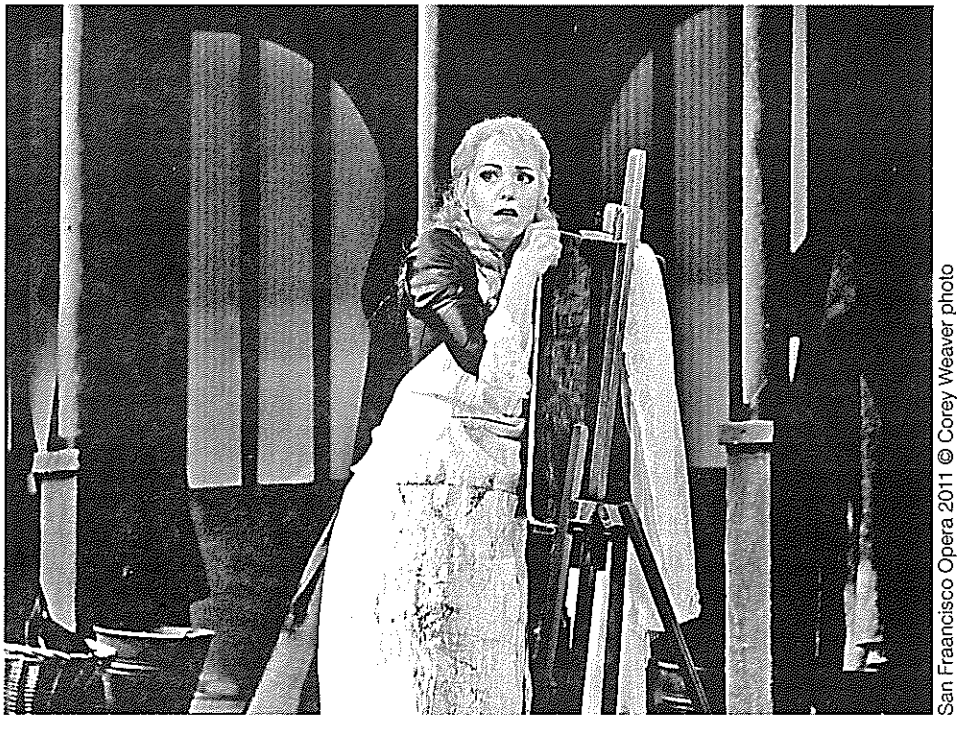
Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*, as always, carries complex elements of the human experience, including passion, jealousy, avarice, love and longing. In the San Francisco Opera 2013 production, Senta's dream of the Flying Dutchman takes center stage. During the overture, we see her gazing into the portrait of the Dutchman and we feel her dreamy rapture through the music. As I studied the libretto, I began thinking about teenage girls with posters of male icons on their walls, gazed at with the same dreamy rapture Senta shows. Psychoanalysts might interpret these deeply felt though impossible loves as a developmental passage, a way the girl can safely, in fantasy, explore her own emerging sexuality and yearning. The passionately desired and loved idol can safely contain her love for her father, without plunging her too quickly into the real world of developing boys. We can even see in Senta's recognition of her wish to save the Dutchman a wisp of the illusion that she is the special one, the woman who is perfect for him, better than all the other women who have failed him, an allusion that shows to a psychoanalyst, the girls' identification with her mother and also her wish to outdo her mother by realizing in herself the ideal woman for her father. Then we can also observe her position as a girl, tied to hearth and home, with no real scope for her romantic and passionate longings. All of us can identify with the search for true meaning in our lives and this is one of the ways Wagner brings us into sympathy with Senta. All of this we can see in Senta, but I propose there is something more, something that grows beyond a transitional developmental stage of her life into a genuine capacity to submerge her own subjectivity into the others' desperate need. I will describe this more fully below.

Early on we learn that Senta, to the dismay of the housekeeper (her mother

figure), languishes in sorrow and pain, thinking of the Dutchman's agony, doomed as he is to sail forever unless the curse is lifted as she gazes into his portrait. The workaday world encircles her but she is absent-minded and in another universe, dreaming of the tragic fate of the Dutchman. Then she begins to sing of him in a beautiful, lyrical ballad, enchanting her audience with his story. We understand that she is enchanting herself as well as us. We are focusing here on Senta, not the Dutchman's character, his arrogance and grandiosity that landed him in such trouble: later we will touch on the redemption theme embedded in Wagner's retelling of the old legend.

Introduced by the powerful and compelling theme of the Dutchman, Senta sings the tragic tale. Her audience is deeply moved, as is she. All bemoan the fate of the Dutchman and Senta is struck with inspiration: she will be the one to rescue him! Here we see her transported by the glorious idea of being the one true woman who can save him from eternal pain. Some have interpreted Senta as being mad.[1] Others might take for granted the sacrifice of a woman to a man. I argue for a fuller understanding of Senta, one that includes a human capacity to transcend the narrow interest of the self at times of great crisis or danger.

1. Boston Lyric Opera, 2012.



San Fraancisco Opera 2011 © Corey Weaver photo

Lise Lindstrom as Senta. In the 2013 San Francisco Opera production, Senta not only stares at the portait of the Dutchman, but also she creates the portrait. Here she is seen leaning on her easel that holds her portaint of the Dutchman.

First we see the realization of Senta's dream of romantic love when her father brings them together, glibly and coaxingly introducing them as they gaze at each other both struck to silence. He finally notices and leaves them. They sing together in a beautiful romantic duet, reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*: "O. She doth teach the torches to burn bright!...Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."

There is a first hint of Wagner's redemption theme in this duet as the Dutchman cautions Senta about her terrible fate should she love him. She of course brushes this aside and claims her place as the woman who will save him! Another Shakespeare play comes to mind: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed and I loved her that she did pity them." (Othello, speaking of Desdemona).

Senta's passionate desire to save the Dutchman grows as she meets him in reality and they fall in love. Emmanuel Ghent, a psychoanalyst, describes surrender, not as defeat, but as a transcendent experience that is with "all one's heart, with one's soul, and with all one's might."[2] For me, this captures the ecstatic certainty Senta brings to her betrothal. Of course, other issues are present, such as Senta's avaricious father who plans to sell her to the highest bidder. Also present is her local suitor, Erik, who would tie her to a life of drudgery as we witness in the women of the household if he can come up with the bride price. We can understand the attraction of the mysterious stranger and blame young recklessness and romanticizing. Wagner takes the story beyond these more recognizable and ordinary themes. In giving herself to the Dutchman, Senta becomes a hero herself, the one woman who can save him from his sad, despairing wandering and the recklessness that brought the curse on his head; this through her ultimate sacrifice.

In our modern culture, the idea of self-sacrifice is usually deemed masochistic and unhealthy. We can hardly fathom a sacrifice such as Senta's and can easily fall into the trap of thinking of her in modern terms, a girl who fails to think of her own interest, who doesn't see the danger to herself, who is blinded by passion in her acceptance of the Dutchman. We live in an age where the self is idealized, and recognition of the claims of the other on us is considered masochistic. I would argue that Senta's pity for the Dutchman, her passion to release him from his endless sailing through her love can be seen in the transcendent terms of surrender, the surrender of her narrow self-interest in life to the sublime wish to save her lover. She doesn't know that her sacrifice

2. Eigen, Michael. "The Area of Faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion." International Journal of Psychoanalysis (1981) 62: 413–433. Quoted in Ghent, Emmanuel. "Masochism, Submission and Surrender: Masochism as a Perversion of Surrender." Contemporary Psychoanalysis (1990) 26:108–136.

will bring him relief and unite them in heaven, but she boldly and freely casts herself over the cliff with belief, not knowledge, and Wagner unites the lovers as the ghost ship disappears sending all who strove into peaceful oblivion.

Returning to the idea sketched briefly earlier, that Wagner's libretto carries a theme of redemption in the Dutchman's emerging ability to think of Senta and not just ruthlessly (as he always had done in the past), but understanding she was sacrificing herself to his hopeless longings. Though he was angry at first when he overheard Erik courting Senta and believed her to have betrayed him, something happens, something changes, in the Dutchman and in the music. He sings to Senta that too many have died for him and he cannot bring himself to condemn her to death and everlasting torment. He is glad that she is not bound by the curse since final vows had not been taken. Here is a touch of empathy and identification with Senta as a separate person for whom he can feel love and give up something of himself. In the past, he has ruthlessly used any woman he encountered to attempt his release from the curse without concern for her terrible fate. Now he sings that he is glad she has been spared this fate even though it is so harsh for him, returning to the endless seas. Perhaps he even feels a touch of remorse?

Wagner argues in this libretto for passionate surrender and for love, as Senta casts herself from the cliff, ending her earthly life and joining with the Dutchman in a final transcendent unity.

—Eileen Keller

WAGNER WROTE...

I forswore my model, Beethoven; his last Symphony I deemed the keystone of a whole great epoch of art, beyond whose limits no man could hope to press, and within which no man could attain to independence. Mendelssohn also seemed to have felt with me, when he stepped forth with his smaller orchestral compositions, leaving untouched the great and fenced-off form of the Symphony of Beethoven.

From the Autobiographic Sketch *(included in the volume titled "The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works," (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) pp9, 10. Translated about 1895 by William Ashton Ellis.*

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