

WAGNER NEWS

Wagner News is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

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TWS CALENDAR

Monday, September 28
8.00 p.m.

A VERY SPECIAL EVENT OPENS OUR SEASON

Video extracts from the new
Katharina Wagner directed
Tristan and Isolde at Bayreuth
will be shown.

TWS members who attended
the Bayreuth Festival will
provide commentary.

Monday, November 16
8.00 p.m.

Stephan Bonfield will speak on:
**Siegfried: Identity and
Memory in the Nineteenth
Century**

Meetings at Arts and Letters Club,
14 Elm Street
unless indicated otherwise

Die Walküre in Munich -

two perspectives Jim Warrington, Pierre Couture; *pages 2, 3*

The *Regieoper* controversy -

two opinions Joseph So, Michael and Linda Hutcheon; *pages 4-6*

Kinder, macht Neues!- *Regieoper* and Wagner

Richard Rosenman; *page 7*

Scandal at Bayreuth,

Frances Henry; *page 8*

Festival days in Berlin -

2015 Hans-Jürgen Lötzerich, Kassel Wagner Society; *page 8*

Munich *Tristan und Isolde*; July 8, 2015

Richard Rosenman; *page 9*

Bayreuth *Tristan und Isolde*; August 2015

Frances Henry; *pages 10, 11*

Where is Bayreuth going?

Richard Rosenman; *page 12*



Aubrey Beardsley,
from the cycle
Le Mort Darthur

Die Walküre in Munich; one performance, two perspectives...

Battle of the Brünnhildes

Jim Warrington

Or, how two distinctly different role interpretations and performances underline the importance of concept and craftsmanship in two recent Die Walküres.

The day after we saw the COC *Walküre* in February, we set off for a family visit in France, and hopped over to Munich in early March for the same opera at the *Bayerische Staatsoper*. What a great opportunity to compare two productions in less than three weeks!

There is good news and bad news.

Bad? The Andreas Kriegenburg Munich production is the original *Walküre* from the new 2012 well-reviewed Munich *Ring*, with a couple of cast changes. The excruciating under-performance of Evelyn Hertlitzius in the title role clouded any chance for this to be a memorable evening. There were great things happening here; she just got in the way.

Good? In both cases, the orchestras shone, the score won the day and, in the case of COC, the thorough re-think of the third time around Atom Egoyan production created a breathtaking night of Wagner, world class. And in Christine Goerke, we have the next Nina Stemme or Birgit Nilsson as Brünnhilde. Nice!

Much has been written about the COC's run of this *Walküre*. Auspicious stage debuts for Goerke, Siegmund understudy Isaacah Savage, and a rare ensemble singing and acting cast that clearly loved the journey. There was huge chemistry and it showed, particularly in Act III as the acting and singing by Christine Goerke distinguished her as the next great Wagner actress and soprano. She met her match in Johann Reuter as Wotan; they projected the ultimate father/daughter crisis Wagner had intended. Kudos to Mr. Egoyan for wrestling such touching, believable performances.

The COC set design and lighting is still annoying, but this time around it didn't get in the way, it seems. The Valkyries in Act III were outstanding; singing, acting and stage presence/movement that took full advantage of one of opera's greatest feminist ensemble pieces.

Heidi Melton was a soaring Sieglinde, and Dmitry Ivashchenko, a malevolent Hunding. Janina Baechele was a dramatic Fricka. Clifton Forbis, under the weather health-wise the night we saw *Walküre*, was the only cast member not up to the ensemble's exciting magic. His strong acting and commanding presence were solid, and compensated.

So, to Munich.

There were a lot of wonderful things going on as the *Staatsoper* orchestra, under the able direction of Kirill Petrenko, company Music Director, soared through the wonders of this score with strong, energetic pacing and superb understatement when needed. They continue to be world-leading Wagner interpreters, and this aspect kept us enthralled, at least until Act III.

In Anja Kampe, you have the best Sieglinde I have ever seen or heard. Her nuanced acting took us from child to wonder woman as needed, convincing and engaging in every movement and expression. Her stage presence was locked up with a glorious, strong sound, both sharp and fluid throughout her range. She sang the role in 2012, and is obviously at ease and excited to be back.

Thomas Mayer as Wotan is also back for this 2015 *Ring*. He was regal, strong of voice and nuanced as his character progresses from absolute god to absolute father. He channeled power, despair, love and anger as appropriate. Stoic, but solid.

Siegmund was Christopher Ventris, replacing Stuart Skelton who had bowed out. He is a strong Parsifal (I saw him in Paris in the role several years ago), and his sweet, higher range voice suited the demands of Act I well. His *Winterstürme* was lyrical and heartfelt. The Petrenko fast-pacing was a tad speedy for this touchstone

aria, but overall, an excellent performance for a stand-in.

Other leads were excellent, and the Valkyries sang well, despite the awkward tap-dancing entrance of Act III. (A good 5 minutes of tap-dancing meant to represent galloping horses, even before the Ride music starts, led to boos and audience talking and mumbling, portent for the troubled Act III to come).

So what happened with Brünnhilde?

Evelyn Hertlitzius is, simply put, not a Brünnhilde. She is youthful in form, she dashed about a lot and was stern-faced when serious events were taking place. Over the top acting, in my view. But the voice demands of the role got to her, and by Act III, she was rasping at the high end and hesitant in her lower range. It was as if her battery was low. There was also little chemistry coming from her towards Dad (Wotan), making Act III less convincing and a disappointment. Her gap in performance made me question the casting decision here. When you add the all white box, boring look of the Act III set to the static, face-the-audience directing, it was a huge disappointment. The saving grace was the imaginative magic fire sequence, incorporating Valkyries as part of Brünnhilde's "imprisonment."

The production soared in Acts I and II. The sets were imaginative and timeless. The tree in Act I with its branches of bodies set the scene for the god and mortal battles to come. Lighting was crystal sharp, almost halogen and definitely strategic and integral to the unfolding story. Act II's dominant office picture becoming a set within the set was absolutely brilliant. In this staging aspect, Munich's *Walküre* wins the Battle with the COC version.

I wished we could have stayed for the rest of the *Ring* in Munich. Maybe next time. Meanwhile, we have a *Siegfried* with Christina Goerke to look forward to in Toronto.

May the Battle of the Brünnhildes continue!

...can both be right?



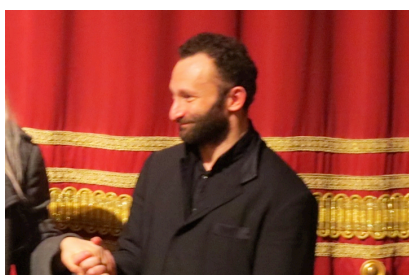
Kirill Petrenko



Evelyn Herlitzius



Stephen Gould



Revisiting Munich *Ring*

Pierre Couture

In 2015, the noticeable difference between Andreas Kriegenburg's revival of the Munich *Ring* cycle and the opening production back in 2012 lays with the conductor Kirill Petrenko. Although the Kent Nagano reading was far from problematic, his approach was more distant, cool, tight, competent, yet rich and at times complex. This time around, I managed to see *Die Walküre* (28 February 2015) and *Götterdämmerung* (2 April 2015) only; whether it is the quality of the Bavarian State Opera Orchestra or the musicians' obvious respect for their admired maestro Petrenko, some of the sounds that emerged from the pit were simply incredible and hauntingly beautiful. My unforgettable Bayreuth 2014 experience with Maestro Petrenko prepared me for that. Some silences and soft passages are riveting, and the sound of this gorgeous music can easily give you teary eyes.

Besides Petrenko who always receives the warmest and loudest applause of the evening, Klaus Florian Vogt and Anja Kampe both got a tremendous reception from the cheering crowd. Vogt's very lyrical Siegmund was well supported by Petrenko's approach to the score. He looked beautiful on stage and sounded young next to his older sister Brünnhilde; interestingly he and Anja Kampe's Sieglinde looked so alike physically they could indeed be brother and sister after all, and their voices certainly blended so well together.

The second act of *Die Walküre*, in my mind has always been about power, and this production's setting of a domineeringly large desk where characters walk in front and behind, highlights the family power struggle. Elisabeth Kulman's powerfully sung Fricka clearly dominates the stage in her scenes and Thomas Mayer's strongly sung Wotan establishes his influence in fighting for his authority, as well.

I had traveled to Munich mostly to hear the Brünnhilde of Evelyn Herlitzius who impressed me so much last December in Zürich as the Dyer's Wife in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Despite some difficulty in the middle voice and the lower part, her small body exhibits an enormous stage presence and she is vocally exciting as a superb singing actress, delivering with an intense tone often reminiscent of the great Inge Borkh (I unfortunately never saw her on stage) or the magnificent Leonie Rysanek. Needless to add, the Munich audience loved her !

As in 2012, just before the Act II starts, there was the very controversial scene of "dancing a

cappella", without singing and music, where the dancers, dressed very similarly to the Walküres, stomped in a rhythmic gymnastic style. Needless to say, this intense display did not please everyone and drew some strong booing from dissatisfied patrons shouting "Wagner", but obviously pleased others who applauded loudly every time a negative reaction was heard.

Götterdämmerung shows a whole different aspect of the *Ring*; Kriegenburg replaces nature, heroes, and gods, with certain aspects of the self-destruction of the world coming to an end as a result of excess of greed. There is a very busy stage with mobile phones, and cameras, the representation of nuclear disaster, financial collapse, and the abuse of capitalism by a gold euro-symbol-shaped rocking horse, leading us to some sort of apocalyptic disintegration.

Gibichung Hall is represented by a large living-room where Gunther (Alejandro Marco-Buhrmester) manages to satisfy his sexual needs. The curtain opens Act II as he receives oral sex from one of the maids, and he hides behind the bar shortly after having sex with another servant; I don't remember ever hearing about an "oversexed" Gunther before, but I suppose this is part of the overall "end of the world" concept behind this production. Anna Gabler's strongly sung Guttrune has gained in vocal authority and stage presence since 2012, and the same applies to our powerful Siegfried, Stephen Gould, who sounded more relaxed and less forced than three years ago, building on his strong Tristan heard at the Royal Opera House last December.

The 2015 revival of the Kriegenburg *Ring* featured three different Brünnhildes - Catherine Naglestad sang in *Siegfried* and Petra Lang sang in *Götterdämmerung*. Lang's past experience with dramatic mezzo-soprano parts must certainly help her delivering a very rich lower register - witness her Cassandre on the almost legendary 2002 recording from the Barbican featuring our own Ben Heppner. The sheer size of the voice truly impressed me but some of the high notes, particularly during the immolation scene, could not match the effect and intensity produced by Nina Stemme back in 2012, in the same part. I must also mention the impressive vocal performance of Hans-Peter König's Hagen and the richly sensitive voice of Okka von der Damerau's Waltraute.

Once again, Petrenko reveals himself as the singers' conductor - very much like Pappano in London - and supports his forces in a beautifully integrated masterpiece. At times he gives you the feeling of creating a unique work of art, just like an impressionist painter, with his palette of sonorous notes.

The whole feels so much more integrated than the original production back in 2012.

At the very end of the opera, once established that greed and the struggle for gold have brought total destruction, the final scene is very moving in setting the whole cast of extras, dressed in white, embracing the sole survivor, Guttrune, as the curtains draw closed.

...to Regie or not to Regie - these are the answers; two sides of current controversy

My thoughts on *Regieoper* Joseph So

When Richard Rosenman, editor of *Wagner News* and a good friend, asked me to write an opinion piece on *Regieoper*, or director-driven opera, I jumped at the chance. Perhaps there's nothing that generates more contention and passion among opera fans than the issue of re-interpretation of the standard repertoire. Simply put, there are two diametrically opposed – and fiercely divided and fiercely defended – schools of thought. The “revisionists” argue that the re-imagining of historical works serves to take the art form out of the museum into the 21st century, making it relevant to contemporary audiences. The “naysayers” feel any radical change can only result in misrepresentation or worse, a betrayal of the original intentions of the composer. Is there a middle ground?

I know there are TWS members more qualified than I to offer a history of the rise of *Regieoper*, but suffice to say that if you don't count the post WWII abstract symbolist staging of Wieland Wagner, modern *Regieoper* probably began in the early 1970s, coinciding with the rise of Postmodernism in the visual arts, theatre and academic circles. I remember being intrigued and puzzled by the Patrice Chereau *Ring* for the Bayreuth Centenary of 1976, which I saw on PBS. Of course by 2015 standards, the Chereau *Ring* is tame in all respects, but at the time it was considered revolutionary. By then I had started traveling to Europe for opera, to London, Munich, Vienna, Berlin, and Bayreuth. I remembered vividly the Kupfer *Ring* and other re-interpretations of the standard repertoire, which was more daring than the Chereau a dozen years earlier. Indeed, with each passing year, the directorial styles became more extreme and often bewildering to the audience.

With a few exceptions like Peter Sellars' staging of the Da Ponte Trilogy Stateside, one only encounters radical *Regieoper* in Europe. But this trend is becoming more and more prevalent this side of the pond in recent years. Even the Met audience, where many attendees seem to relish calling *Regieoper* “Eurotrash,” is dragged kicking and screaming into the domain of director-driven opera staging, witness their recent *Tosca*, *Un ballo in maschera* and *Rigoletto*; the replacement of the representational Otto Schenk *Ring* with the Lepage machine; the retirement of their beloved Zeffirelli warhorses like *Cav and Pag*; and the hiring of radical directors the likes of Dmitry Tcherniakov last season and Calixto Bieito next season. And of course we all know *Regieoper* has already arrived at the Canadian Opera Company years ago with productions like the Dmitry Bertman *La traviata*, the Tim Albery *Aida*, not to mention *Rigoletto*, *Semele*, *Un ballo in maschera* and *Don Giovanni* this season.

As a “classical music omnivore,” I enjoy many different operatic styles and different directorial approaches, as long as the staging makes sense to me and it serves to illuminate the music and the text. It's important to make a distinction between different forms of *Regieoper*. One form is essentially a visual, design-focused approach, which does not substantially alter the thematic material and the emotional relationships and interactions of the principal characters. I consider the Lepage-Levine *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung*, Robert Carsen's *Orfeo*, and the COC *Ring Cycle* to be good examples of this. Though the set design may be abstract, the time and place indeterminate, the costuming unconventional, directorial touches that are unconventional or absent in the original staging, these productions are essentially “traditional” as there are no radical changes that go against the original intentions of the composer.

The second *Regieoper* style refers to productions with radical time/place changes, creation of new characters, elimination of characters and adding/cutting/re-arranging of the music (as in the case of COC *Semele*), and substantial alterations to the thematic content. For example, in the Weimar *Ring* a dozen years ago, additional scenes and music were added on before the actual opera started. The most extreme case I can cite is the Calixto Bieito *Madama Butterfly* in which Cio-Cio-San, instead of killing herself, stabs the child, slashes Suzuki, and waits behind the shoji screen with a big knife for Pinkerton's arrival. Another head-scratcher was the Dresden *Daphne* I saw last fall, where the character from Greek mythology is superimposed by another historical figure, that of Sophie Scholl, an anti-Nazi activist who was hanged in WWII. Apollo in this production is the Gestapo. COC audiences will remember Handel's *Semele* two seasons ago with many extraneous characters created, including two Sumo wrestlers and a Tibetan throat singer, while the authentic, original Handel *finale* was completely cut out. My question is – are these operas truly by Puccini, Strauss, and Handel?

I want to share with the readers an article I wrote a year ago in *Opera Canada* on Michael Cavanagh, a respected Canadian stage director who's done highly praised productions such as *Beatrice Chancy* and *Svadba* in Toronto, *Nixon in China* in San Francisco, Vancouver and Dublin, and more recently *Susannah* for San Francisco Opera, where he's returning next fall to direct a new *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In two lengthy interviews, I asked him for his thoughts on *Regieoper*. While Cavanagh does most of his work in North America, he was trained in Hamburg, heart of *Regieoper* country. Cavanagh is committed to re-interpreting traditional works, either through judicious updates or a complete deconstruction. He believes that when done with care and respect to the composer and the work, the result can be revelatory. But he also cautions: “The farther you stray from the stated intentions of the creators, or start tinkering with the thematic material, the higher the bar is raised and it's harder and harder to get it right.”

I asked Cavanagh what he thought of the complaint that directorial changes often lead to contradictions between stage action and what's in the libretto. To this, Cavanagh is emphatic: “I don't do it. A staging with submachine guns while they're singing about swords doesn't work. I refuse to change the text or the surtitles. You need to give a piece the respect it deserves. I have concentric circles of responsibilities – to the creators, to the audience, and to my performers.” I feel what he said makes a lot of sense. Updating can be refreshing and maybe even necessary, bringing a new perspective to something created centuries ago. But it must be done with care and respect.

The COC winter productions of *Don Giovanni* and *Die Walküre* are excellent examples of the two divergent approaches. In DG, director Dmitry Tcherniakov has created interrelationships among the characters that are non-existent in the original Da Ponte: Zerlina is Anna's daughter from a previous marriage; Anna and Elvira are cousins; Elvira is married to Don Giovanni; Leporello is a young relative living in the household. The point is to create one hard-drinking, bickering and totally dysfunctional family. This back-story has resulted in many contradictions that go against the libretto, so much so that there are moments when the stage action defies logic. The addition of a very noisy drop curtain, with projected explanations of the timeline adds absolutely nothing to the drama except to impede its natural flow. The same can be said by deliberately slowing the *recitativo* to a crawl, making an already long opera seemed almost interminable. To top it off, Don Giovanni does not die in this production, and the “ghostly apparition” is actually an actor pretending to be the Commendatore rising from the dead. All

this mess is not helped by the use of an unchanging unit set – the Commendatore’s library/dining room – never mind that it makes no sense dramatically for many of the other scenes, such as the Massetto-Zerlina wedding. Why Don Giovanni continues to hang out at Commendatore’s home after having raped his daughter is anyone’s guess. Readers may remember the recent COC *Ballo* set in a hotel lobby, similarly the Munich *Pelleas et Melisande* I saw in July, starring Canadian baritone Elliot Madore. When the setting is so radically changed, the bar is set so high that it’s very difficult to get it right, as Michael Cavanagh states so eloquently. The Munich *Pelleas* was so vociferously booed by a hostile audience opening night audience that the telecast was cancelled and the opera not revived for next season.

If the radical productions are so unpopular, then why do singers go along with the stage director? Let’s take a look at this closely from a singer’s perspective. I recently interviewed Finnish soprano Soile Isokoski who was Madame Lidoine in the premiere of Tcherniakov-directed *Dialogues of the Carmelites* for the Munich Opera. Both Richard Rosenman and I saw it live. In my interview with the recently retired Isokoski, she was honest and forthright in her assessment. The Poulenc opera is based on a historical event in which 15 Carmelite nuns went to their deaths by guillotine during the French Revolution. Poulenc’s music and libretto reflect this. In Tcherniakov’s production, Blanche saves the other nuns while she dies by gas explosion. There’s no guillotine, and no sounds of the falling blade as notated by the composer in the score. Isokoski feels (as I do) that not only is this not Poulenc, it is not the history on which this opera is based. In the last act, all the nuns are housed in a hut. During rehearsals, the singers objected to this structure because it serves as a psychological barrier between the performers and the audience, as well as a sound barrier because it absorbs the voices. Isokoski said the singers asked the director to modify the set in such a way that after the curtains rises showing the intact hut, the walls then should open up. He refused. Isokoski told me: “we tried but he was too strong for us.” This example serves to underscore how often

Halt the *Regie*-cide: Tcherniakov in Context

Michael and Linda Hutcheon

Why is it that German opera houses, for the last century, have led the way in presenting opera as a musical theatrical art form? We could start by blaming Wagner, of course, with his revolutionary insistence on the coordination of singing, acting, design, and stage action. But it was really after the Second World War that two directors with complete control of two important German houses changed opera production forever. In the West, Wieland Wagner staged his grandfather’s works at Bayreuth as psychodramas in spare abstract settings, jettisoning the (now Nazi-associated) traditional naturalistic scenery and acting. In the East, at Berlin’s *Komische Oper*, Walter Felsenstein brought psychological realism together with the power of the musical score, demanding that his singing actors convince the audience that their parts could be communicated only in song. Both directors’ productions frequently polarized audiences, but their impact was decisive in moving opera further along the path to being real theatre—that is, to entertaining, yes, but also to moving, inspiring, even (as Brecht hoped) changing audiences.

Our personal “Eureka” moment with what is called *Regieoper* (or Director’s Opera) came with Harry Kupfer’s Bayreuth *Ring* (1988-92). Having never experienced live opera with such intense emotional power, combined with such intriguing interpretive insights, we felt we were experiencing Wagner’s work anew—indeed, as he himself might have wanted it performed for today’s audiences. As you’d expect at the *Festspielhaus*, the conducting, orchestral playing, and singing were superb, but what was clear to us was that, with a gifted director at the helm, everything could work together to make great theatre.

That said, not all directors may be this gifted. When Sebastian Baumgarten set his Bayreuth *Tannhäuser* (2011) in a bio-

in *Regieoper*, staging decisions serve the stage director alone, not the performers, and certainly not the music nor the composer.

On the other hand, *Die Walküre*, premiered in 2004, is the kind of updating that works. The set design is best described as a sort of post-apocalyptic chaos. With the stage floor strewn with rubble and a criss-cross of catwalks on top and on the sides, it looks like the aftermath of some disaster. Upstage is a huge expanse of stately white paneled wall, suggesting Valhalla behind. The Walsung twins live amongst the rubble, with the ash tree already cut down. The lighting in act one is deliberately murky, not helped by the many floodlights on stage, designed not to illuminate but to unsettle and annoy the audience, with a couple aiming directly into the auditorium. These contemporary theatrical tricks are unorthodox in opera, but if you decode it carefully, the Atom Egoyan-Michael Levine production is actually traditional at heart, essentially faithful to the story, with no altering of the thematic material and no tinkering of the emotional relationships of the principals. Unlike *Don Giovanni*, the single unit set in *Walküre* works quite well. Every bar of music remains unchanged – and brilliantly played by the COC Orchestra under Johannes Debus, a remarkable achievement given it’s his first *Walküre*. Unlike Tcherniakov’s direction that serves to obfuscate rather than illuminate, the many little directorial touches by Egoyan make perfect sense. Let’s take the example of the two overcoats. Tcherniakov has Zerlina looking orgasmic while sniffing and caressing Don Juan’s coat in a scene between her and Masetto, an action that goes against the text. On the other hand, Wotan takes off his coat, roll it up and use it as a pillow for the sleeping Brünnhilde, a touching action by a loving father. This little example crystallizes for me the difference between a willful directorial touch that disregards the original, versus a re-thinking that is respectful of the original intent of the composer/librettist.

So, what’s my bottom line on *Regieoper*?

Sure, bring it on. Opera is more than realistic sets and heavy period costumes. But bring some sense to the proceedings!

.....
gas waste factory, offering no apparent reason why recycled human excrement should have anything to do with Wagner’s story of love and art, our irritation forced us to think through the good and the bad of *Regieoper*, not to mention what it was that we have actually come to expect from opera directors today. Then came this invitation from Wagner News to comment upon Dmitri Tcherniakov’s production at the COC of *Don Giovanni*—a perfect test case for sorting out the good and the bad of *Regie*--all within ONE opera production.

We suspect it is safe to say that none of us nowadays would countenance singers standing in fixed hierarchical positions on stage, surrounded by the chorus in a semi-circle, wearing costumes from their own personal wardrobes, and playing in generic sets. That is opera’s past. Things changed when, in those post-war years, the director permanently joined opera’s creative team (historically made up of a composer and librettist, musicians and singers, to which were added over time scene designers and painters, and subsequently a conductor). Opera is a collaborative art, requiring all these different artists to work together. In fact, unlike a painting, where what we see is what the artist placed directly on the canvas, opera requires many other artists, first to interpret and then to embody on stage the composer’s notes and the librettist’s words—in short, to translate black marks on white pages into live dramatic action.

Because the operas most often staged around the world today are the canonical works of the past, like *Don Giovanni*, rather than new operas (as was the case in earlier centuries), there is now a temporal gap between the creating of the score and libretto and our experiencing of their embodiment on stage. We can never know the creators’ original intentions, but we can safely guess that men of the theatre like Verdi and Wagner would not have wanted to see outdated 19th-century productions of their work in the 21st century. As Wagner said in rehearsal: “My children, make it new!”

Conductors, singers, and musicians interpret the score, and today directors have taken their place as the equivalent of cinematic

6 auteurs: as interpretive artists responsible for the entire staged drama in all its complex aspects. But as the early twentieth-century drama theorist Vsevolod Meyerhold made clear: “a unified artistic purpose was not enough; it was the director’s responsibility to develop a style or idiom specific to the theater within which every element became a significant bearer of meaning.” There are obviously many ways for directors both to offer a coherent interpretation and at the same time to speak directly to that specific audience in that particular theatre at that moment.

Some will interpret—for they *always* interpret, even when they appear not to do so—within the range of traditional performance practices. Their “concept” will thus be a familiar one, sanctioned by time and habit. However, there is no Ur-production to be “faithful” to in this case; there are only earlier interpretations or concepts, sometimes hardened into tradition or convention by years of repeated staging. And indeed, some audiences are most happy with the familiar, though even they might expect something to be added by a director today. And, indeed, Stephen Lawless’ recent COC production of *Roberto Devereux* would be a good example: the audience was given an inventive framing (literally) of the characters during the overture.

However, other directors feel that the canonical repertory of the past must be made to speak anew in our modern world—perhaps by offering believable psychological motivation for the characters or by translating the story to an updated time or a recognizable place to which we can more easily relate. Needless to say, like the heeding of tradition, such desire for innovation is no guarantee of successful music theatre. But when an innovative “concept” is rooted in a minutely detailed reading of both music and libretto—as it was in Patrice Chéreau’s famous centenary Bayreuth *Ring*—singers can be transformed into actors in a moving and intense, if not totally familiar, drama. The resulting, often radically new, stage visuals—action, sets, costumes—were shocking to the first Bayreuth audiences, whose responses were as visceral and hostile as they had been to Wieland Wagner’s first psychodramas. But five years later, Chéreau’s production was considered the most successful and important one in the history of the festival. It was filmed, televised, and widely disseminated, setting the bar for Wagnerian productions the world over. It was Chéreau’s *Ring* as much as Wagner’s or Boulez’s.

When *Regieoper* works well, then, opera can come alive as *theatre*; when it doesn’t, it fails. The same is true of traditional interpretations, of course, but the ire of audiences is more likely to be directed against a failed innovation than against a boring standard production. But what makes for *successful* Director’s Opera? Our personal take on this question is that we expect to be able to make sense of the interpretation that we are witnessing on stage. We assume that everything we see and hear is there to contribute to the whole, as Meyerhold had claimed, and that the production team’s framing of the story is thus coherent (even if accepting of Brechtian contradictions). We also expect some level of convergence between what we see and hear and the libretto and score. For us, we realize, a successful staged interpretation has to respect and pay attention to both the libretto and the score, and thereby to go the next step and proceed to illuminate some aspect of the work by coming at it from a different perspective. As Canadian director Robert Carsen has noted, the “essence” of an opera may not always be in its historically specific story, but perhaps in the thematic or emotional resonances of the “subtext”.

Tcherniakov’s *Don Giovanni* is intriguing for us in this context because of its ambitious intentions: to make us ask new questions about this famous and familiar work and its titular hero. Updating the action and uniting the characters within one bourgeois family unit have the potential to offer a new perspective on a class-based social world distant and different from our own. Changing *Don Giovanni* from the attractive young rake of tradition to an older, experienced but jaded, sex-addicted roué also was suggestive—providing the audience could be made to believe in his charismatic attractiveness that makes women fall for him and men want to emulate him.

Does it live up to this potential? The director certainly got amazingly committed performances—acting and singing—from all the cast. But aside from that, the production’s successes were at best partial, and its shortcomings manifest. This Don did not convince us of his allure. The Brechtian curtain—used to elongate the time frame of the story—broke up the musical and dramatic momentum. Having all the action take place on one set made the confusions of identity in the plot nonsensical—and dramatically static. While there was little of the desire to shock for shock’s sake indulged in by many “Eurotrash” productions in Berlin, there were moments when dramatic experimentation appeared to serve no obvious purpose or generate any useful meaning, and inconsistencies in staging sometimes puzzled more than illuminated.

And yet...there were some brilliant dramaturgical moments that worked well. The first meeting of Donna Elvira and Don Giovanni—usually performed with the latter in hiding—was directed with sublime and character-revealing irony: the abandoned wife enters, and sings—*directly to him*--of her intentions to tear out the heart of the philandering rogue, if she ever finds him; he responds with shrugs, engaging smiles, kisses on the cheek—knowing full well what she thinks of him and why, but attempting to appease her nonetheless. Another moment that made us rethink the emotional dynamics of the opera occurred in Act II, when Zerlina sings her “*Vedrai, carino*” aria not to Masetto, as usually staged, but to Don Giovanni’s coat, which she holds lovingly: it is his coat that touches her and feels her heart beat.

Don Giovanni may be a canonical opera, but it is a notoriously difficult one to stage convincingly in our times: how many of us really expect philanderers or even rapists to be cast into hell at the end? Tcherniakov established the frame of the opera (before the overture began) in a family meeting, headed by the Commendatore—an image to which he returned at the end. There, the presence of a paid actor, convincingly disguised as the deceased Commendatore, is used to frighten the Don to death: his solitary hell—dying alone on stage—is masterminded by the entire family, who all turn against him.

We admit that we enjoy making sense of productions, and expect to do so. Opera is more than just beautiful music; for us, it is also theatre. We too enjoy seeing and hearing our favourite operas on stage, but we want to experience them with new eyes and ears; indeed, we enjoy that oscillation between the comfort of the familiar and the invigorating charge of the new.

Not all of you will feel the same way; different audience members will have different expectations and thus different experiences—the first-time viewer will want and need different things than the experienced one. But when the curtain goes up, most of us respond, first, to something unfamiliar, unexpected—usually the directorial framing of the opera (though that isn’t all the director is responsible for, obviously). Instead of immediate rejection, what if, as with the Tcherniakov production, we waited to the end to see if the dramatic presentation of the whole, as it goes along, might work *as theatre* for us—not as the experience we’re used to, perhaps, but something different, perhaps interesting and even enlightening? Might the new perspective offered by this directorial framing give us a new and intriguing angle from which to view the opera’s familiar story? For us, Tcherniakov succeeded in part--and in parts.

Unlike in Mozart’s day, new operas are a rarity today, and are most likely to be chamber operas for smaller and less costly forces. Therefore the task of keeping the canonical operatic repertoire new and fresh has fallen to the director. In order to present these familiar stories to present-day audiences, directors and their production teams are charged with finding ways to prevent opera from becoming both an expensive “museum” artifact and what director Peter Brook once called “Deadly Theatre.” The best of them succeed in making staged opera a living theatrical art speaking to the mind and the emotions, to the eyes and ears of today’s audiences.

Long live *this kind of Regieoper.*

...and what does Wagner think about it?

KINDER, MACHT NEUES! *Richard Rosenman*

A recent book, published in German, "*Kinder, macht Neues!*", edited by Reinhard Schäfer-ton and Rüdiger Pohl (Hans Schneider, Tutzing, 2013, 248 pages), takes up in Pohl's prologue once more what is likely the most abused and hackneyed phrase ever uttered by Richard Wagner and which most of us had, one time or another, used to legitimize our own partialities.

With excerpts from a letter Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt in Weimar, on September 8, 1852, this book tries once and for always to explain what Wagner really meant by it.

Throughout all the years since that September date, everyone who had to do with directing, staging and in some way interpreting Wagner's music-dramas, used it to justify and excuse their departures from the composer's intentions, from mild changes as, say, a change in the period, to a complete disregard of stage directions, as in the Chéreau's *Ring* and even more so in Schliegiensief's *Parsifal*, to mention just two. As someone put it more strongly to describe it: "...exhortation which is invariably quoted out of context by Eurotrash Regies to justify their grotesque outrages in the staging of Wagner's music-dramas".

Although the book contains 13 sections, each authored by a different person and which treat such diverse themes as 'The musical expression in *Parsifal*', or 'The Golden Age of Wagnerian singing in recordings', it is the Prologue that discusses what concerns us here, namely what Wagner really meant by what he said.

The phrase in its entirety goes like this: "*Kinder, macht Neues! und abermals Neues! - hängt Ihr Euch an's Alte, so hat euch der Teufel der Inproduktivität, und Ihr seid die traurigsten Künstler!*", or, in translation of Francis Hueffer (in his anthology "Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt): "Good people, do something *new, new*, and once more *new*. If you stick to the old, the devil of barrenness holds you in thrall, and you are the most miserable of artists."

According to Pohl, if this exhortation is used in context then it reads quite differently and should not give rise to any misapprehension. Earlier in the letter Wagner mentions that he heard Berlioz was working on changes to his "*Benvenuto Cellini*", composed twelve years before, as well as Joachim Raff (composer now forgotten) also working on changes to "*König Alfred*", produced the season before. His indignation is that Berlioz would have been involved in such "*galvanischen Wiedererweckungsversuche*", such galvanic tentatives of resurrection: "Berlioz, in God's name, should write a new opera!" "What about Raff? I thought he was writing a new work, but no; he is remodeling an old one. Is there no life in these people? Out of what can artist create if he does not create out of life, and how can this life contain an artistically productive essence unless it impels the artist continually to creations which correspond to life? Is this artificial remodeling of old motifs of life real artistic creativeness? How about the source of all art unless new things flow forth from it irresistibly, unless it is wholly absorbed in new creations?"

To Pohl it clearly means that the "*neues*" can only be the creation of new works. Everything else, modifications or adaptations, or new *mise en scene*, has nothing in common with creative activity. What Wagner suggests is that older operas cannot be made "new" through new, no matter how unusual or provocative, stagings. He does not relegate these activities to an inferior level but just not catalogues these as works of creativity.

To understand why Wagner is raging against the "status quo" and demands the "new" is the general attitude of the public of his time to music. The "status quo" of that time was satisfaction with the past, the "classical" repertory and a distaste for and rejection of living composers and their work.

Having made a demigod out of Beethoven, the European concert going public was losing interest even in the most vital living composers. A critic wrote in 1859: "New works do not succeed in Leipzig. Again, at the fourteenth *Gewandhaus* concert a composition was borne to its grave". It happened to be Brahms's First Piano Concerto, and it did not receive any applause after the first movement. It was the same in other metropoli.

Alex Ross, "New Yorker" columnist, critic and blogger, in his column "The Rest is Noise", talks how Wagner, in another letter to Liszt (1850), railed against the "monumental" character of music of his time, "clinging firmly to the past". "I have felt the pulse of modern art and know it will die...it is not art in general, which will perish but only our own particular type of art - which stands remote from modern life ... The monumental character of our art will disappear, we shall abandon our habit of clinging firmly to the past, our egotistical concern for permanence and immortality at any price;... we shall live only in the present, in the here and now, and create works for the present age alone." (translation by Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington)

Alex Ross, ends by saying: "If you really wanted to be true to the spirit of Wagner, you would stop playing him and focus on new work instead".

It is no small irony that despite his protestations Wagner *did* tinker with his works without apparent misgivings and feelings of self betrayal, and he did himself organize the production of his works in different stagings, most notably the *Ring*, staged before in parts, now with novel technology and effects not seen nor attempted before by any other composer/producer.

Tannhäuser remains his most reworked opera. Sensing from the first production that neither he nor the public were convinced by it, he returned to it again and again, changing, cutting, replacing and adding elements, to such an extent that even the two official versions, the Dresden and Paris, are difficult to find staged in their original pristine state, but are so bowdlerized, mixed and matched by the all powerful self - righteous directors, that it is difficult to categorize them as one or the other.

The other irony is that Bayreuth, the temple of Wagner's music, created by him and maintained with strict discipline by his widow Cosima, and which does not allow work by another composer, new as Wagner desired or even old, has been forced by the invisible laws of merchandizing to dress the same animal in always new and ever changing clothes, an activity so condemned by him.

Should Bayreuth want to follow his precepts it would, of course, become just another opera house, with the distinction of producing only *new* works. Sadly, it would quickly run out of repertory and public. So, is to stop playing Wagner and bringing in the *new*, the prescription?

Critics, music directors, musicians and the public are divided on that matter. Efforts to revive old dramas without changing or adding to the text (but yes, cutting parts is allowable) spawned the director's theatre - *Regietheater* - dividing on this all involved. The prescription is no more "*macht Neues*", but the degree to which it is acceptable to depart from the composer's instructions, this being in itself not a bad thing since it energizes people to experience again and again the same repertory.

Perhaps Katharina Wagner's steps are a surreptitious effort to put in place her great-grandfather's wishes. But according to his words that is not the way, it seems.

The prescribed way, strange as it may seem, is to listen to Alex Ross, and stop playing Wagner and concentrate on new works.

But, of course, and thankfully to add, it is not being done.

Scandal at Bayreuth this year, *Frances Henry*

Ever since Winifred Wagner took over the administrative and even most of the artistic direction of the Bayreuth Festival denying her son Siegfried the opportunity, there has been discord, dissent and dysfunction among future generations of Wagner heirs. Wieland and Wolfgang, the grandsons, were frequently at odds with each other and while Wolfgang, the benevolent dictator ran the festival with an iron hand no challenge to this authority was allowed. Nor did he permit his son Gottfried to inherit the leadership. Gottfried, meanwhile, vociferously denounced his father and the family for their complicity during the Nazi period and was subsequently banned from Bayreuth altogether. At the same time, his two half sisters and their cousin contested the leadership after Wolfgang's death, leading to an uneasy shared leadership between Katharina and Eva Pasquier Wagner. About a year ago Eva announced that she was leaving at the end of August 2015. It was surprising therefore that in early June her lawyer received a letter from the Festival Board saying that she was no longer responsible for decision making and actually banning her from attending rehearsals nor any other activity related to the Festival.

The German media and even some of the foreign press reported this decision as 'shunning' or ostracism. Rumours began flying and soon it became apparent that Christian Thielemann, closely associated with Katharina, was behind this move. A German newspaper reported that Thielemann refused to conduct while Eva was still there and that there were many indications that he did not want her present at rehearsals. Two other powerful musical giants of conducting, Daniel Barenboim and Kirill Petrenko waded into the combat. The former angrily declared that the treatment of Eva was 'degrading and inhumane' and Petrenko declared himself speechless at the unprofessional attitude towards Eva and also included the dispute between the administration and Lance Ryan which led to Ryan's resignation and the engagement of Stefan Vinke just a short time before the opening of the Festival. (It may be no coincidence that Ryan was a protégé of Eva who was instrumental in getting him to Bayreuth). Petrenko also said that it was only due to the short time before the Festival's opening that he would remain as *Ring* director this year. Meantime, a number of replacements have also been announced including Anja Kampe, Petrenko's partner, who will remain as Sieglinde but after a row with Thielemann withdrew from Isolde which has been taken over by Evelyn Herltzius. The roles of Wotan and Mime have also been replaced this year. After all of this turmoil, it was no surprise to hear that Christian Thielemann has been appointed director of music only the second time that this position has been filled.

Festival Days in Berlin - 2015 *Hans-Jürgen Lötzerich, Kassel Wagner Society*

A double Wagner program took place this year at the 2015 Berlin Festival Days- *Tannhäuser*, a revival of last year's production under the direction of Sasha Waltz and a new production of *Parsifal* directed by Dmitri Tcherniakov, both conducted by Daniel Barenboim. *Tannhäuser* is staged here in the middle of a concave semi-circular hole, an inside of a dome, Half naked dancers emerge to ensnare or entangle *Tannhäuser*, Peter Seiffert. The attractive Venus, Marina Prudenskaya, appears in their midst and sings with a gorgeous sound. Peter Seiffert sings the role in an outstanding manner even though one notices the 60 year old singer vocally tired toward the end of the evening. The young shepherd, flawlessly sung by Sona Grane, *Tannhäuser* and the Wartburg singers - in late 20th century costumes - appear on the empty stage enveloped in a fog. It becomes increasingly clear that this opera should have been entitled "Wolfram" because Christian Gerhaher sings this role like no one else while also dominating the rest of this production. The Landgraf last year sung by the wonderful René Pape this year is sung by Kwangchul Youn. The highlight was the third act and Wolfram's song created a small sensation. Both the choir and Peter Seiffert's tortured Rome monologue were excellent. The chorus and the conducting of the *Staatskapelle Berlin* were worthy of this festival even if the opinion about direction was somewhat mixed.

A day later, on Good Friday, a new *Parsifal* opened, directed and stage designed by the Dmitri Tcherniakov. This *Parsifal* is directed in his characteristic modern style which gives one much to think about. After a prelude in broadly based tempo, one sees a dilapidated sacred space located either today, the future, or even perhaps at the end of time. Gurnemanz, sung by the strong voiced René Pape, tells the story using slides from previous Bayreuth *Parsifal* productions. Parsifal, an

appealing youth, appears as a backpacker, a tourist in this strange environment. The set does not change for the Grail ceremony which takes place in between wooden benches. The Grail attendants wearing wool caps and beards refresh themselves by drinking blood which has been skimmed off Amfortas' wound into the Grail cup. They then go into a state of ecstatic rapture while Titurel lies vampire-like in a coffin. Klingsor is depicted as a psychopath, perhaps a pedophile petty bourgeois, and is wonderfully sung and acted by a greasy-haired, sweater-clad Tomas Tomasson. Kundry strongly sung by Anja Kampe, here may be a daughter of Klingsor. The Flower Maiden numbers are augmented by the presence of many little girls wearing flowered dresses. They dance around Parsifal who has climbed through a window into the room still wearing his backpack. Act II contained strong sexual themes. As Kundry starts with her monologue "I saw the child on its mother's breast ...", a young Parsifal appears with his first love, making tentative sexual advances, but is interrupted and scolded by his mother. This moment of sexual remembrance, shown in another room, ends Parsifal's sexual union with Kundry. When Klingsor approaches with the spear, Parsifal wrenches it away from him and kills him straight away.

Act III takes place again in the rundown Grail temple. Parsifal's greeting is directed to Kundry rather than to Gurnemanz since she is the one who threatens the system of these sexless men. While Parsifal appears with the spear she embraces intimately the suffering Amfortas. And while she kisses him more and more passionately, she is stabbed from behind by Gurnemanz. Parsifal then leaves with the dead bodies. All told, this *Parsifal* on Good Friday was one of those really great opera evenings that you will remember for a long time. Daniel Barenboim conducted his *Staatskapelle Berlin* at the highest level. He always had a very good grasp of this overall complex piece and used his own tempos (related to the staging). He showed that the *Staatskapelle Berlin* is one of the best opera orchestras in the world. In this production, you can hear a singing ensemble that strongly outdoes the last Bayreuth *Parsifal* for quality. It was shown on European TV and one hopes for a DVD release.

Tristan und Isolde, Munich, July 8, 2015 *Richard Rosenman*

This *Tristan und Isolde*, at the National Theater in Munich, was a convergence of several coincidences, intended or not. The original premiere took place 150 years ago at this same theatre; the present Konwitschny version, premiered also here seventeen years ago, featuring in title role Waltraud Meier, the same Isolde that was singing it now. In further development this is to be her swan song in this role, originally planned for Berlin in 2014 but postponed to coincide with the 150 year anniversary in Munich.

Despite its venerable history and multiple reruns I never managed to see this production; so, for me personally, it was a case of unfinished business. Throughout the years of its reruns I visualized it as *per* the advertising poster, an image of a yacht deck in summery Matisse Mediterranean blues and whites, bringing to mind the Art Deco posters of transatlantic liners.

So it was a surprise, and not a welcome one, to see the opening scene a travesty of Isolde's fateful voyage, to see her sprawled in a deck chair of, if not an ocean liner, then a luxurious private yacht, and a further travesty to see the Steuermann reduced to serving cocktails to the two women, all the while singing his haunting tune. So much care had been dedicated to this misguided *mise-en-scene* that it included the preciosity of clouds moving on the azure background.

Whether in itself it made sense or not, it was logical to expect this scene to continue in spirit in the following acts. However, there was to be a disconnect between all three of them and as the performance progressed I felt a creeping gloom and disappointment bordering on depression.

To give it all away right here, it was downhill all the way till the love duet and the appearance of King Marke for it to reassert itself at the end of Act II, and reward us with an unforgettable Act III.

Act I. Transposing action to the 20th century added nothing to the meaning of it. It was a choice of decor and nothing more.

Waltraud Meier, a veteran of this role, her low tones swamped by the orchestra in the first minutes, quickly reasserted herself with the fussy Brangäne, a companion cum servant, bright and energetic but never overwhelming. Meier's voice still has that endearing vulnerability that I always admired. What changed, perhaps, is her diminished low register and the few high notes, audibly forced.

Kurwenal, Alan Held, large and loud and impetuous, yes, overwhelming Tristan.

Tristan, Robert Dean Smith, who replaced Peter Seiffert in this run, has always seemed inadequate no matter in what role, always lacking an imposing image. Here I found to my regret that the passage of time has not helped; he had not grown in stature, authority or power but, yes, in circumference. The voice, as always, possesses all it needs, inflection when required, pathos where called for, but not the decibels.

Damn! The potion was served in tall cocktail glasses. How can I take it seriously?

Act II. Where one expects mystery, mood, intimacy and the thrill of anticipated disaster, once Isolde's torch is extinguished we get a formalized scene with overkill lighting in jarring red, the tired symbol of passion, and all the house lights on.

For veterans of T&I it is almost a given that Act II should be played out mostly on a darkened stage. The love duet is all about mood - audience's attention tends to be on the words and the music not on the minutiae of the staging or, for that matter, the protagonists, some of whom, historically, were better not seen. Here, to its detriment, these precepts were totally disregarded, or blatantly challenged. Just before Tristan appears, a sofa is literally tossed onto stage from the

right side and dragged by him to its centre. Now everything is perfectly symmetrical, the row of stylized trees in a semicircle, the sofa facing the audience. The two lovers sit stiffly and sing at us without looking at each other. Only by "*O sink hernieder.*" the lights dim and the magic of the music takes over

Act III. An unforgiving, spartan cell corner, whitewashed, its tall walls relieved only by a window and a door, was one that reflects common vision and expectations. Tristan in an armchair watches scenes of his past projected on the wall.

Tristan dies in Isolde's arms, only to leave with her the scene within the scene, and to watch from its foot and in her company the fight and Marke's pardon. The pair, now identically clothed, closes the red curtain. At last peaceful, the reclining Tristan looks up at Isolde. She sings the *Liebestod*.

With relation to the director's work there was a palpable disconnect among all three acts. They did not maintain temporal or aesthetic continuity; each was on its own and, in my opinion, only Act III has captured the spirit of the work and with such intensity that it made me forgive the missteps of the previous two acts and restored my faith in this production.

In few words: Act I - out of place; Act II weird; Act III- right on!

It was notable how the very inadequacies of two singers added enormously to their success in this production.

René Pape has a glorious, incomparable bass-baritone, but his wooden bearing is legendary. Here, as King Marke, it translated into authority and regal bearing. His long monologue, boring to some, was a lesson on how to hold the audience rapt with voice only.

Robert Dean Smith, underpowered as he is, did not need to overreach himself in Act III. The level of intensity fitted his voice and vice versa. Here he was a memorable Tristan in a performance that made up for all the shortcomings I saw in his performance up to this point.

Waltraud Meier once more has shown why she is one of the memorable Isolde's. She has retained all the attributes that made her so, the acting ability, the *sui generis* personal beauty and the quality and timbre of her voice, so much her own, that even the minor hitches could not break the spell. Mindful of reaching the age of sixty next spring, she took the decision to quit while still at the top. In a way she is leisurely closing the shop. By spring she will have also sang her last Kundry in Berlin.

Her decision to give us her Isolde this once more was lucky for all of us considering that this staging was not one of her favorite. In her own words, she finds this Konwitschny's production "banal and psychologically wrong". For all its worth I agree wholeheartedly.

The applause continued for almost half an hour, most of it directed at her. Even the cast in front of the curtain repeatedly joined the audience in applauding Waltraud Meier, the star of the evening. Goodbye Isolde!



Waltraud Meier; (more photos on last page.)

Tristan und Isolde;

Bayreuth, 2015

Frances Henry

This season's most eagerly awaited production was *Tristan und Isolde* directed by Katharina Wagner. Her only other direction took place in 2007 when she directed a *Meistersinger* to a mixed, mainly negative reception by both critics and the public. This time her production was very favourably received by the critics and audience alike. Of course the superb conducting of Thielemann who approached the score head on bringing out tremendous climaxes which reverberated through this superb acoustical hall while keeping the quieter passages slow and languorous certainly helped! I found his general tempo a bit on the fast side but that's also the way I like it. The incomparable Bayreuth orchestra under his very precise direction sounded other worldly playing with a shimmering ethereal sound.

Central to Katharina's direction is an entirely new concept of *Tristan und Isolde* from which all the action flows. She refers back to their earlier encounter where they are already strongly attracted to each other and presents us with two people who are already in love with each other but must fight to keep apart. The cleverly designed stage set - a huge steel structure composed of interlocking stairs and platforms which move up and down - actually keeps them apart despite their attempts to reach each other. Eventually Act I ends with Isolde's summoning Tristan and they actually are able to meet face to face presumably to drink the potion. However, this is where Katharina's concept of their natural, unforced love comes into play because they decide they don't need the drugged drink and Tristan lifts up the vial and slowly lets its contents drip onto the floor. They then fall into each other's arms to the riotous sailor's announcing their arrival at King Marke's country.

Act II carries forward the theme of natural love because the lovers are thrown into a prison watched closely by the King's guards holding powerful klieg lights. Brangäne and Kurwenal who tries desperately to escape are also imprisoned. The opening of the love duet is therefore sung facing the back of the stage and their jailers rather than each other or to the audience in what appears to be a calculated move to proclaim their love as publicly as possible. This is not a hidden private love.

Much has been made of the director's interpretation of King Marke usually portrayed as an elderly, sad, disappointed man. Here the King, beautifully sung by Georg Zeppenfeld in a striking mustard yellow long coat and feathered hat, orders their imprisonment and watchful guarding. And at the very end, he brutally wrenches Isolde off the body of the dead Tristan and forcefully drags her off presumably to his bed! This characterization makes a great deal of sense since the lovers have so openly rejected his orders and displayed their love.

Act III opens on an entirely dark stage. At one corner, the wounded Tristan lies on the floor surrounded by Kurwenal, the Shepherd and a few other village men. As Tristan comes to consciousness, he gets up and walks around rather than cradling his wound while lying and rolling around the floor. This Tristan, even with a deathly wound - which we don't see - is a proud and assertive man except that his mind is altered and his hallucinations are actualized. Projected in the dark are a series of 6 or 8 blueish triangles each of which contains dummies of Isolde and one is actually a manikin whose head falls off when the crazed Tristan attempts to embrace her. These were very striking and clearly made it appear that the absent Isolde was haunting Tristan in his anguish. Tristan dies and is carried back onto the stage on a bed and Isolde sings the *Liebtestod* over his dead body. At the very end, she pulls him towards her in an embrace as his body flops lifelessly against her. It is from this awful position - the dead body of Tristan leaning against her as she sits next to him - that Marke finally grabs her arm - as Tristan's body falls back - and drags her off.

I found this to be a masterful interpretation of this great story which brought forward a new perspective to this classic tale. However, as with any new production even one as effective as this one, there are weaknesses. For me, the major problem was the Isolde of Evelyn Herlitzius who sang very loudly, shrieked the high notes and generally portrayed a vocal edginess that I found both unpleasant to listen to and which was not consistent with this conception of Isolde. Her voice also seems to break in strange places which creates a croak-like timbre. She has very good stage presence and portrays her character with a strong intensity but the vocalization leaves much to be desired. Steven Gould's Tristan was powerfully sung throughout including his third act where he maintained the image of Tristan's strength. His stage presence is, however, somewhat stiff and stodgy which conflicts with his vocal sound. Both Christa Mayer as Brangäne and Iain Patterson's Kurwenal were very well sung. Singing both the Seaman and the Shepherd was newcomer Tansel Akzeybek who displayed a lovely lyrical tenor voice.

I would have been incredibly happy with this production were it not for the soprano.



Act I; above- *Tristan*; left- Christa Mayer/ *Brangäne*;
Evelyn Herlitzius/ *Isolde*



Act II; Stephen -Gould/ *Tristan*; Georg Zeppenfeld/ *King Marke*;
kneeling: Evelyn Herlitzius/ *Isolde*; Raimund Nolte/ *Melot*

Bayreuth; *Tristan und Isolde* August 2015

Photos: Enrico Nawrath



Act III;
Tristan and one of numerous
visions of Isolde

NEWS and COMMENTS

Where is Bayreuth going, or has it arrived already...?

Richard Rosenman

By coming to Bayreuth this 2015, I missed, by design, the Soylent Green *Tannhäuser*, but did get three seasoned by now productions - *The Dutchman*, *Lohengrin* and the *Ring*, and *Tristan* too, not only brand new but also by Katharina Wagner, Bayreuth's new absolute boss.

Some updating of the *Dutchman* makes sense and can be applauded. The original spinning girls presumably had all gone to China and its textile plants. The replacements on the Bayreuth stage now work for Amazon and are packing small electric fans in cardboard boxes. Boxes, in fact, are everywhere and are the main design element.

Lohengrin is rat infested, black clad, pink clad, white clad rats. The audiences do not ask why and rather like them because they are "cute". It seems to be the only current production that was not booed. People understand rats; they boo unfamiliar concepts.

The *Ring* is known by the name of its director but we should not read into it too much because all productions are now so described without this necessarily being a mark of distinction as it was in time of Chereau. Thankfully, the music and the text are inviolate so any attempt to put a new face on an old animal is just a cosmetic makeup or disguise, more or less severe, but the animal is always the same if we dig deep enough. Such is the case with this *Ring*. It matters now how far it is distanced from the original Wagner instructions and we catalogue where it coincides and where it departs. Almost as if "you can't fool us".

Castorf did a miraculous job of piling up an incredible amount of detail in the short time he was allowed to put it all together, some of it to disguise the core, and some to throw us off the scent, and some

with a cruel deliberateness to destroy the mood, to bar sentimentality, to turn poetry into prose. Again and again he sabotages Wagner's, often Teutonic but still lyrical, bursts of emotion. It is as if he were emulating Wagner's contemporary critics who denied entirely or could not find any emotion in his musical writing. So, for instance, the glorious awakening of Brünnhilde - "Heil dir, Sonne! Heil dir, Licht!" takes place in a darkened, what can be described as a garbage heap, a pile of colourless rags from which Brünnhilde digs herself out.

But then, as if to confuse us even more, the incomparable duet pre Siegfried's journey, is not monkeyed with and still capable of bringing tears into the eyes of the sentimental among us. But, you heard the one about the exception that confirms the rule.

This is the third year of this *Ring* and the last to be conducted by Petrenko. Speaking to someone who saw and heard all three, we hear: "first year I did not like it, the second year I did not mind it and now I am beginning to like it".

You may say that the audience voted the same way. The first year it was violently booed; in this, the third year, there were some isolated boos by what sounded like a small clique, and only after one act of *Siegfried*. It does not mean that the audience begins to like it (like my interlocutor). It means, in my opinion, that the audience, and he, are getting used to it. Only time will tell if a production survives the test of time. Chereau's is the classic example. The average audience here can charitably be described as superficial. They come for many reasons and listening to the music and celebrating the outstanding, when such occurs, is only a part. They come to be seen and to stare - see how they dress - and are willing to sit on hard seats in a 36 degree outside weather without air conditioning, as it had happened in the second cycle. They want to like what they are seeing.

There is an anti capitalist visual rhetoric in Castorf's *Ring*, a tiresome at times, tongue in cheek condemnation of consumerism. (You never know when he is serious). There is *Stasi* in it as there is *Stasi* in Katharina Wagner's vision of *Tristan und Isolde*, understandable perhaps in his case but less so in hers.

A short time perspective seems to tell us that the Castorf *Ring* changes the rules of the game. That now all is acceptable. If it is so we may expect more and more daring experiments until a reaction sets in and it all begins anew. Historically it has been like this.



Richard Rosenman,

Frances Henry

Toronto Wagner Society, Bayreuth 2015



Pierre Couture,

Frances Henry,

Richard Rosenman

Stephen Drury

Alfred Chan

SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 2015

Listings correct to SEPTEMBER 2015. For further information check with opera companies

Das Liebesverbot
London, Cadogan Hall;
25 Oct. CP

Der Fliegende Holländer
Vienna; Staatsoper; 5 - 11 Sept.
Dresden; 18 - 25 Sept.
Wiesbaden; 25 Sept. - 23 Oct. NP
Bonn; 27 Sept. - 25 Dec. NP
Minsk; 8 Oct. - 14 Nov.
Milwaukee; 24 - 26 Oct.
Oslo; 5 - 21 Nov.
Vienna; Theater; 12 - 24 Nov. NP
Berlin; Staatsoper; 12 - 24 Nov.
Seoul; 12 - 22 Nov. NP
Vilnius; 26 Nov.
Frankfurt; 29 Nov. - 19 Dec. NP

Lohengrin
Sao Paulo; 8 - 20 Oct. NP
Bern; 24 Oct. - 29 Dec. NP
Amsterdam; 18 - 20 Dec. CP

Tannhäuser
Gent; 19 - 27 Sept. NP
Antwerpen; 4 - 17 Oct. NP
New York; Met; 8 - 31 Oct.
Berlin; DO; 31 Oct. - 15 Nov.

Das Rheingold
Ruhr Triennale; 16 - 26 Sept. NP
Kiel; 26 Sept. NP
Tokyo; 1 - 17 Oct. NP

Die Walküre
Oviedo; 10 - 19 Sept.
München; 28 Nov. - 5 Dec.

Siegfried
Palermo; 18 - 29 Dec. NP

Götterdämmerung
Nürnberg; 11 Oct. - 27 Dec. NP
München; 13 - 19 Dec.

The Ring
Halle; 30 Oct. - 8 Nov.

Die Meistersinger
Berlin; Staatsoper; 3 - 22 Oct. NP
San Francisco; 18 Nov. - 6 Dec.

Tristan und Isolde
Ljubljana; 4 Sept.
Dortmund; 6 Sept. - 22 Nov. NP
Amsterdam; Concertgebouw; 12
Sept. CP

Parsifal
Wroclaw; 4 Nov.
Buenos Aires; 4 - 11 Dec. NP

CP - Concert Performance
NP - New Production

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URGENT

The Wagner Society requires the services of a technician skilled in managing a website to assist our Webmaster who is, at times, very busy. If you can provide this assistance or know somebody who would be willing, please contact our Secretary, Edward Brain, at wotanbrain@hotmail.com. or Jacky Finch, at jackyfinch@sympatico.ca.

If you have an e-mail address and if you have not as yet informed us about it, please communicate it to Richard Horner at tristundisold@gmail.com.

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ACT I Isolde and Brangäne - Waltraud Meier and Michelle Breedt



ACT II Tristan and Isolde - Robert Dean Smith and Waltraud Meier



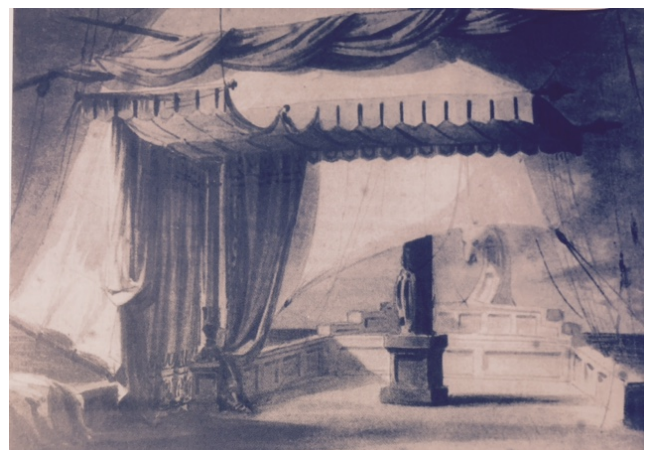
ACT III King Marke and Brangäne - René Pape and Michelle Breedt...
Tristan and Isolde at the foot of the stage.



The original model for Act I of the Konwitschny *Tristan und Isolde*, in 1998, by Johannes Leiacker

Tristan und Isolde in Munich

Photos: Wilfried Hösl



Act I stage set for the Munich premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865, by Angelo II Quaglio