

# WAGNER NEWS OF VICTORIA



NEWSLETTER OF THE  
RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY INC.

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

**A**fter the *Ring*: Opera Australia's *Ring* cycle scooped the pool at Melbourne Green Room Awards, winning 'best' in the categories of opera production, conductor, director, leading female (Lise Lindstrom), leading male (James Johnson) and supporting male (Graeme Macfarlane), and the Melbourne Ring Orchestra received an accolade of excellence.

The Melbourne *Ring* was favourably reviewed by Wagner scholar Barry Millington for *The Wagner Journal* in an article called playfully: 'Gold struck once again in Victoria' that praised the company's "high level of playing and singing".

Our *Ring* volunteers might savour Millington's nodding approval that "Armfield was brave to attempt to incorporate amateur talent, thus rooting the venture in the community—rather as Wagner originally intended", although Millington also expressed reservations about it.

Millington's general observations on the *Ring* frequently resonate

with those made by our membership at the 'Ring Reflections' function, which gave us the opportunity to freely express our views, under the considered moderation of Janice Carpenter. This event is reported on Page 3.

**Newsletter:** Our secretary Susan Cumming planned the present issue of the newsletter to focus on Melbourne Opera's forthcoming production of *Lohengrin*. Susan requested contributions and managed their acceptance. This was a reprise of her role for the single-themed February issue.

Our editor Stan O'Loughlin and our layout designer Dawn Volz co-produced the newsletter, as they have been doing for our Society over the past 14 years. Stan planned its structure, and Dawn, drawing upon her expertise in book editing and proofreading, performed the page layout.

We will be asking members at renewal time to state their preferences for receiving the newsletter in print or electronically (in PDF form) as a means of limiting our

postal costs. Although we asked members previously, the committee was then hesitant to proceed on members' individual preferences.

**Website:** You will have noticed recently that our website is reacting far more responsively. Our webmasters, Tom and Ruth O'Dea, have transitioned it to a new web-hosting service.

Tom and Ruth are collaborating with a web sub-committee to streamline our website. Its improved performance opens up options for enhancing its visual appearance and simplifying its user functionality. Implementation will continue throughout the coming months.

**Youth Initiative:** The youth initiative with Heath Lees, that was planned for 1 July, has been temporarily postponed. Its organisers, Kate Kimpton and Gavin Cornish, are planning a very special event, and our Society fully supports them. Details will be advised on our website.

• *Continued on Page 2*

## EDITORIAL

This newsletter is largely devoted to the forthcoming Melbourne Opera production of *Lohengrin*. Thanks go to the many contributors of the interesting articles. Keep them coming. ~Stan O'Loughlin

### • Continued from Page 1

**New Zealand Road Trip:** I recently toured the four New Zealand Wagner Societies of Auckland, Wellington, Dunedin and Christchurch to deliver a two-hour lecture on 'Richard Wagner and Visual Art'.

I spoke to more than half of the New Zealand Wagner Society membership, and on two occasions I lectured to full houses. I trust that this national tour enhances our links with all the cross-Tasman Wagner Societies.

(My road diary is on the website at <http://wagnermelb.org.au/articles/>. The talk will appear at a later date.)

**Lohengrin:** Melbourne Opera is performing *Lohengrin* at Melbourne's Regent Theatre on Monday 7, Wednesday 8 and Thursday 9 August and at Robert Blackwood Hall, Monash University, on Saturday 19 August.

It is produced by Greg Hocking, directed by Suzanne Chaundy and

conducted by Dr David Kram. The lead role of Lohengrin is played by Romanian tenor Marius Vlad, who was Tannhäuser in Melbourne Opera's production last year.

Our Society is contributing funds to support Melbourne-born soprano Helena Dix in the lead role of Elsa. This is Helena's first appearance on an Australian opera stage for 15 years. She is currently in New York at the Met, covering Electra (Elettra) in Mozart's *Idomeneo* under James Levine. (See Susan Cumming's article about Helena on Page 5.)

Our Society intends this initiative to be the first in a long-term association with Melbourne Opera's Wagnerian productions. In return, our members may purchase tickets to *Lohengrin* at reduced rates on the Ticketmaster website by using the offer code 'ELSA'. (At the time of writing, the Regent Theatre seating plan was not accessible to users of Apple's Safari web browser.)

**Production Support:** Our Society, in pursuance of its principal purpose of supporting the production of the works of Richard Wagner in Australia, is contributing funds to Opera Australia for its Sydney concert performance of *Parsifal* in August, and we plan major support of Opera Australia's Melbourne-only production of *Meistersinger* in November 2018, with Stefan Vinke, Warwick Fyfe...

Given our financial obligations in line with our charter to support local Wagner productions—such as our recent major support of the Melbourne *Ring*—I remind our members that any donations they wish to make to our Special Productions Fund are tax-deductible.

~ Trevor Clarke  
President



## THE 2016 RING VOLUNTEERS



**Back row:** Colin Pyman, William Firth-Smith, Leigh Oldmeadow, Neil Day, Kay Cooper-Ward. **Middle Row:** Sophia Errey, Maxine Cooper, Liz Oley, Justus Lewis. **Front Row:** David Valentine, Shirley Breese, Michael Wright, Masha Slattery. **Absent:** David Dorward, Myma Hepburn, Ruth Rodell, Perri Hammond. **Inset:** David Dorward.

# MELBOURNE RING REFLECTIONS FORUM

## ~ 19 FEBRUARY 2017 ~

Sixty-one members and friends of the Society attended our Forum to reflect on the 2016 Melbourne *Ring* and the other Wagner events held at the same time. For many of us the period in November and December 2016 was a mini-Wagner Festival.

A short film of photos and videos taken during the *Ring* and other Wagner-related events by Janice Carpenter, and stills of the operas taken by Jeff Busby—to the music of Siegfried's Journey down the Rhine—set the scene for our discussions.

Among those present were *Ring* patrons Maureen Wheeler AO and Hans Henkel, Opera Australia's Catherine McElhone, The Parlour's Karen Van Spall, and numerous *Ring* volunteers.

Janice Carpenter led a Forum titled 'Melbourne Ring Reflections'.

There was general agreement that the number of lectures, symposiums, films, talks and concerts relating to Wagner and his music were a wonderful addition to Opera Australia's three *Ring* Cycles.

'Exploring the Ring with Heath Lees', a series of lectures held each morning before the *Ring* operas, was organised by the Society. The attendees praised Heath's great talent for entertainment while providing a valuable introduction to the opera that night.

The focus of the Forum then turned to the Melbourne *Ring* directed by Neil Armfield. Most people commented that the 2016 production appeared to be much improved on the 2013 production.

Orchestra Victoria was praised by Gavin Cornish as having a "glorious sound, better honed and more cohesive than 2013".

Maureen Wheeler informed us that the conductor, Pietari Inkinen, brought 12 section leaders, hand-picked from his orchestras around the world, to add experience and leadership to the orchestra.

The singers were praised, particularly Lise Lindstrom and Stefan Vinke, for their leading roles. It was agreed that James Johnson as Wotan lacked vocal strength; however he acted well and provided a stronger Wanderer in *Siegfried*. Amber Wagner was an excellent Sieglinde.

Attendees agreed that Opera Australia must continue to provide opportunities for our local singers to develop; however, we need to bring the best overseas singers that we can afford for the leading roles if we want to provide a world standard production.

One of the most contentious criticisms of the Armfield *Ring* was the use of the 'sea of humanity' volunteers to send Siegfried down the Rhine with dance and rowing gestures. Several of the volunteers, Perri Hammond, Colin Pyman and Liz Oley, defended this segment of the production, saying that it was part of Armfield's vision of the connection with humanity of the *Ring*. Liz Oley commented that this was a celebration of the last occasion that Siegfried and Brünnhilde were happy together.

The volunteers were hurt by the comments of reviewers such as Michael Rose. Stan O'Loughlin, however, defended his view that the use of the volunteers in this way detracted from his enjoyment of the music. He said that he preferred to close his eyes so that he could enjoy the music.

Various opinions were expressed regarding Armfield's interpretation of iconic moments during the *Ring*.

**The Magic Box:** Most people approved of this theatrical device to overcome a difficult section of the *Ring* when Alberich is transformed into a dragon and then a frog.

**The Sword:** Not everybody approved of a sword standing alone circling the stage.

**The packaged Brünnhilde in Siegfried:** Maureen explained that Stefan Vinke (Siegfried) did not want

to sing in the atmosphere of smoke from the 'ring of fire' so Armfield devised a solution in keeping with the conservation theme.

**The Spiral Ramp:** We had differing opinions on the use of the spiral ramp.

**The Standing Corpse:** Once again, some loved it, others hated it.

In conclusion, Shirley Breese and Libby Smith provided some useful comments comparing the Armfield production with their favourite production of the *Rings* they have enjoyed around the world. Some virgin *Ring*-goers told us how inspired they were by this *Ring*—their first, but certainly not their last.

~ Janice Carpenter



Trevor Clarke with Janice Carpenter



Janice at work



Susan Cumming and Janice Carpenter

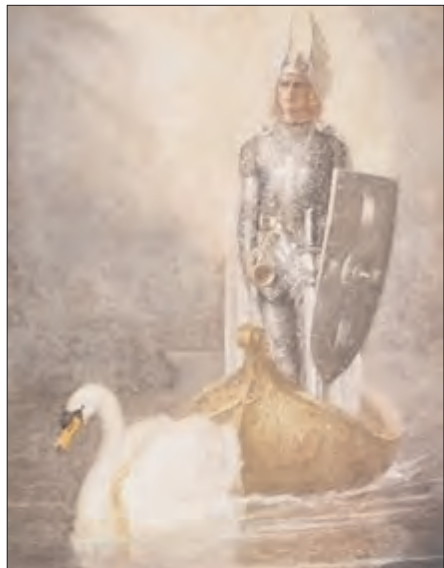
# IMAGES OF LOHENGRIN

## Lohengrin the Nobleman



One of the most famous images of Lohengrin is this one painted on the walls of the King Ludwig II's living room at Neuschwanstein, his castle in Bavaria. Ludwig loved myths and he also loved Wagner's music. He first attended a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* in 1861 in Munich. When his father died in 1864, Ludwig became king, a role for which he had not been trained for and which he did not enjoy. As he retreated from court life he commenced his castle building with Neuschwanstein his masterpiece. He decorated the castle with themes from Wagner's operas.

## Lohengrin as a knight in shining armour



In the libretto of *Lohengrin*, Wagner's stage directions for the scene as Lohengrin arrives, state, "The boat, drawn by the swan, reaches the bank, centre back; Lohengrin in gleaming silver armour, helmet on his head, shield on his back, a small golden horn at his side, is standing in it, leaning on his sword."

Most productions of *Lohengrin* over the years have followed Wagner's instructions and depicted the hero in shining armour.

Other productions hint of the knight by dressing Lohengrin in a modern-day dress of silver material.

## Lohengrin as a troubled man



Many recent productions of *Lohengrin* have interpreted him as a complex and unhappy man trying to find his way in the world rather than a being from another world.

Hans Neuenfels' infamous 'Rats' production, staged at Bayreuth in 2012, has Klaus Florian Vogt as Lohengrin (in the image above) dressed in trousers and white shirt for most of the opera.

## Lohengrin as a modern hero



The Bavarian State Opera, in a production directed by Richard Jones in 2009, introduces Lohengrin (Jonas Kaufman) as what might be interpreted to be a football star, dressed in T-shirt and tracksuit pants.

As the opera progresses the Men of Brabant begin to idolise Lohengrin and in their enthusiasm follow his style of dress.

## Lohengrin as a swan



The 2016 Kasper Holten production of *Lohengrin* (Klaus Florian Vogt) at Deutsche Oper Berlin moves back to a more mystical interpretation of Lohengrin. Here he has taken on the wings of the swan. His costume beneath the wings seems quite medieval in design. James Karas states in his blog, "He looks like an angel and I have some reservations about that appearance."

~ Janice Carpenter

# Helena Dix debuts as Elsa in 2017 Melbourne Opera production of *Lohengrin*



The Richard Wagner Society is thrilled to be supporting Helena Dix's debut as Elsa in Melbourne Opera's new production of *Lohengrin*. This is the first time Helena has sung in an opera back home in Australia in 15 years.

Romanian tenor Marius Vlad, Melbourne Opera's Tannhäuser in 2016, is returning to play Lohengrin opposite Helena.

Helena has an impressive CV. She represented Australia in the 2005 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World, then won Best Young Singer at The International Opera awards.

Her international acclaim was assured with brilliant reviews singing the title role of Cristina Regina di Svezia at the Wexford Festival Opera in 2013.

Helena's previous Wagner roles are as a flowermaiden in ENO's *Parsifal* and Isabella in *Das Liebesverbot*. Winning the London Wagner Society's 2012 Bursary Competition, she performed in the 2012 Bayreuth Stipendiatenkonzert at the Festspielhaus and as part of the International Wagner prize in Karlsruhe.

The first opera Helena heard at Bayreuth was *Lohengrin*. She says she was overcome with emotion when

hearing the wonderful Bayreuth orchestra playing the overture in the unique Festspielhaus auditorium.

She was then nominated to enter Seattle Opera's International Wagner competition. Making the finals landed Helena her first contract with The Metropolitan Opera (The Met). Currently she is covering lead roles at The Met including Electra in *Idomeneo* under the baton of James Levine. She will be covering Norma in The Met's September-December production of *Norma*, with Carlo Rizzi conducting.

Born in Wheelers Hill, Helena studied at the Melba Conservatorium on a full scholarship, studying with Margaret Nisbett. She says whenever she sings around the world people ask where she developed such a solid vocal technique. Helena credits Margaret as the person who gave her everything she needed to have an international singing career.

Helena says Elsa is a brilliant role that sits beautifully with her voice and is a career milestone. When she was starting her career in Melbourne, the late Richard Dvall insisted she learn Elsa's aria 'Einsam in trüben Tagen', prophesying that

she would play the role one day.

Helena says the major challenge in learning the role of Elsa is the character of the virginal leading lady. This is in sharp contrast to her recent bel canto roles of mostly feisty women.

Helena loves the beautiful music of Elsa and is delighted that she can share her talents with her hometown audience.

Not only will Margaret Nisbett be part of an enthusiastic audience, so too will be many of the Society's members and opera fans around the globe and back home, who have followed the career of this incredible young singer.

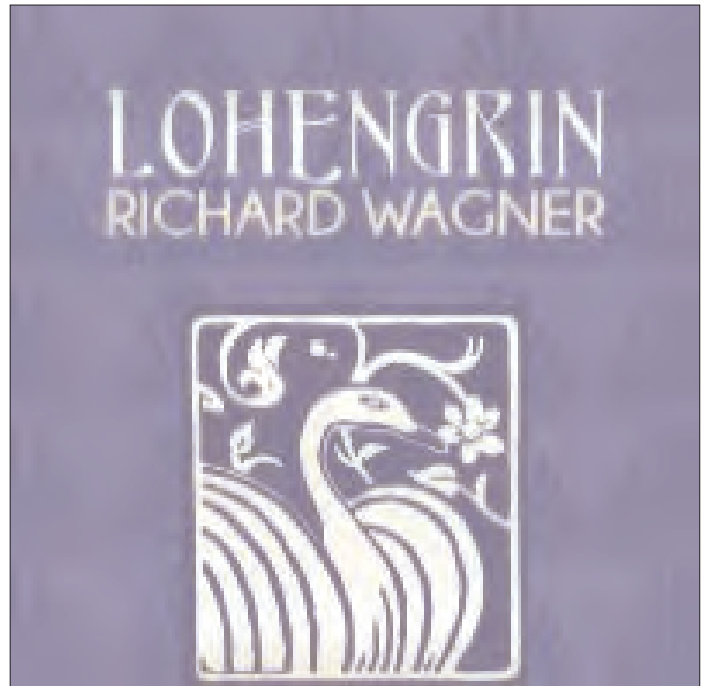
The Melbourne Opera production of *Lohengrin* will be held at the Regent Theatre, Melbourne on 7, 9 and 10 August. and Monash University's Robert Blackwood Hall on 19 August.

*Lohengrin* is produced by Greg Hocking, directed by Suzanne Chaundy and conducted by Dr David Kram.

~ Susan Cumming



# LOHENGRIN DIRECTOR'S NOTES



Wagner set his Romantic Opera about the Swan Knight in Brabant, a duchy in the 10th century in what we now know as Antwerp. Much of Belgium and the Netherlands were part of the large number of diverse communities which comprised a non-unified and still quite 'tribal' Germany under the Holy Roman Empire

I am reading Brabant as a deeply traditional society on the brink of change. The arrival of Lohengrin is the miracle that Brabant has been waiting for. It is a divided and distressed community, facing oncoming war and pushed to the brink, desperately in need of a saviour. King Henry the Fowler has arrived in Brabant as he is recruiting a massed army in an attempt to unite Germany against the invading Hungarians.

Brabant's rightful leader, the child-Duke Gottfried, has vanished, possibly murdered by his own sister, Elsa, who has retreated into the protection of the new religion, Christianity. Under the care of holy women, she could be innocent or guilty, mad or a visionary.

The current leader of Brabant, Count Friedrich von Telramund, was Guardian to these rightful heirs following the death of their father. He was to marry Elsa but, horrified

by her possible fratricide, has married Ortrud, daughter of Radbod of Friesland. King Radbod was the last great pagan ruler. In visions Elsa has seen a pure and holy Knight who will be her saviour. This champion is summoned by King Henry to appear and successfully defend Elsa or she is to forfeit any right to be Duchess of Brabant.

The people want to believe Elsa; she is pure, devout and appears innocent. Then in something akin to an incidence of mass hysteria after they wait and wait following the summoning of the champion, the holy knight and saviour emerges, drawn by a swan from the enshrouding mists.

The triggers into *Lohengrin* for me are fragility and the ephemeral. Fragility is present from the outset as the shimmering strings of the prelude transport us to a distant and yet familiar world. This story is set over just two days and nights. We see how, in the blink of an eye, the fate of a person and a whole nation can change. Fragile power structures and deep-seated human frailties of doubt, suggestibility and mistrust are explored in great depth within the microcosm of Brabant.

The influence of Schopenhauer is very present in the polemic. His beliefs in what motivates human

action, the 'Will zum Leben', and base desires in the face of faith and transcendence are a chief premise. Fundamentally this is a battle of belief and is crystallised into the simplest and also most complex of questions: 'What is your name?'

Our production will be set with the suggestion of period and uses cutting-edge contemporary technology to create an ephemeral and mysterious world that expresses this setting and poetic, but lives, breathes and speaks to our 21st century audience. We are symbolically representing a world in transition as the Yggdrasil (the World Ash Tree) shifts from view and a liminal passageway to Christianity emerges. *Lohengrin*, described as 'eine Romantische Oper' is undoubtedly a Romantic work with all the trademarks of the Romantic movement, the power of nature, nationalism and the supernatural, where we have also drawn our inspiration for the design.

~ Suzanne Chaundy

Suzanne  
Chaundy is  
Director of  
Melbourne  
Opera's 2017  
Lohengrin  
production



# LOHENGRIN: WAGNER AT THE CROSSROADS

In Dresden in March 1849, a few months after Richard Wagner had completed his 'Romantic Opera in 3 Acts', *Lohengrin*, the actor Eduard Devrient wrote the following in his diary: "Met Kapellmeister Wagner on The Terrace, another discussion about his theories for changing the world. He still thinks that only by destroying property is it possible to civilise mankind... He believes in the absolute and original perfection of the human race, a perfection lost only as a result of the state. Finally he had to agree with me that only moral amelioration can put an end to our misery and that this would produce the right types of state, based on the law of love."

Consciously or not, in his conversation with Devrient Wagner was justifying his impending involvement in the May revolution. No wonder Bakunin regarded him as an impractical dreamer! However, his remarks also reveal much about his state of mind when creating *Lohengrin* and his attitude to its principal characters. If the Grail is in the world but not of the world, so too is its servant the Swan Knight Lohengrin who comes mysteriously into the lives of Elsa, Ortrud, Telramund and the other Brabantines.

Elsa needs him as her champion but Lohengrin needs her even more, for he seeks the love that is perfect trust. With all his heart he wishes to marry her, but such a marriage is doomed from the start because, to put it bluntly, Lohengrin is of the spirit and Elsa of the flesh. It is the hopelessness of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable that is at the heart of this beautiful and poignant opera.

Wagner came to recognise the same dilemma in his own life and works, and underwent a personal and creative transformation after the failure of the Dresden revolution and resulting exile and encounter with the writings of Schopenhauer.

The juxtaposition of the spiritual and the temporal in *Lohengrin* is nowhere more apparent than in the abrupt descent from the mystical realms of the prelude to the very tangible realm of King Henry the Fowler in which Act I begins. Trumpet fanfares, the Herald's announcements, the King's summons to war against the Hungarians and prosaic comings and goings, are a long way from the angelic hosts and dazzling Grail



Citadel at Antwerp—in the distance is the River Scheldt

conjured up by the prelude. Nevertheless it all marks an advance on the rather dull recitative and spoken dialogue that would once have been typical operatic fare.

Wagner's practice was to bring together a variety of legends and ideas when fashioning his operas, and this was certainly true with *Lohengrin*, which combines the legends of the Swan Knight, the forbidden question, the identity of Lohengrin himself and, of course, the Grail.

The legends of the Swan Knight were well known in the 12th century, born perhaps of a need to ascribe a supernatural origin to a ruling house. An unidentified stranger arrives within a community, becomes their ruler and then disappears again. It was often a way of explaining the unexpected appearance of an heir—dramatised in the opera by the mystical transformation of the swan into the boy Gottfried. The oldest literary version of the legend relates to the 13th century French house of Godfrey of Bouillon and contains many of the narrative features of the opera, including the arrival of an unknown knight in a skiff drawn by a swan.

The 'forbidden question' myth goes back to the ancient Greeks and the story of Zeus and Semele, as Wagner himself noted in 'A Communication to my Friends' of 1851. The legend of Lohengrin is referred to in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, where the knight is identified as Loherangrin (Garin of Lorraine). His father was Parzival and his mother the beautiful lady Condwiramurs. Wolfram tells how the Duchess of Brabant was approached by many suitors but vowed to take only the husband whom God had chosen for her. Then Loherangrin was sent from Munsal-

aesche (Monsalvat) and brought to Antwerp by a swan. The people declared him to be beautiful and manly, courteous, generous and innocent of all wrongdoing. He said, "My Lady Duchess, if I am to be the lord of this country, hear what I am about to ask of you. Never ask me who I am; then I shall be able to remain with you. But if I am subjected to your question you will lose my love."

"There are many people in Brabant even now," says Wolfram, "who know of these two, of her welcome and his departure, and how her question drove him away.

He left much against his will."

Act 2 of Wagner's *Lohengrin* has many remarkable musical/dramatic features that anticipate what is to come in the *Ring*, particularly in *Götterdämmerung*. The atmosphere of the opening scene with Ortrud and Telramund at the citadel of Antwerp by night foreshadows the scene in which Alberich and Hagen plot the downfall of Siegfried. The music is heavy with bitterness and revenge. We hear a theme associated with Ortrud and then, on the cor anglais, a reminder of Lohengrin's warning to Elsa. In *Götterdämmerung*, the doom-laden atmosphere is broken by the aural equivalent of moonlight breaking through the clouds. In *Lohengrin*, the evil communion is disturbed by bursts of gaiety from the knights' quarters within the citadel.

Wagner's handling of his musical themes in *Lohengrin* is simpler and more direct than in later works, but this doesn't detract from the appropriateness of the themes and the skill with which they are orchestrated. Above all, they match perfectly the long poetic lines of the text and the opera's general air of romantic melancholy. The graceful lines and end-rhymes could hardly be more different from the short, pithy lines and alliterations that we find in *Das Rheingold*, whose text was completed in 1852.

Wagner was never more lavish with his melodies than he was in *Lohengrin*, and one is bound to say that anyone who denies that he was a melodious composer has never listened to this wondrously beautiful work.

~ Peter Bassett



# TREMBLING ON THE BRINK: OLD AND NEW IN *LOHENGRIN*

Wagner finished the score of *Lohengrin* in 1848, at the age of 35. If you fast forward another 35 years you arrive at 1883, the year of the composer's death, which means that *Lohengrin* marks his life's exact mid-point.

In a striking parallel, *Lohengrin* also marks the mid-point of Wagner's growth as a composer for the theatre. To put it very bluntly, you might say that pre-*Lohengrin* you get romantic opera; post-*Lohengrin* you get music-drama.

For Wagner himself, *Lohengrin* was very much pre- rather than post-, an end rather than a beginning. In his title page he announced the work as a 'Romantic Opera in Three Acts', and, soon after its completion, he consigned it firmly to the past, with an almost embarrassed tone. In 1851, in a letter to the journalist Adolf Stahr, he actually dismissed it as a "snake-skin" that he had sloughed off and left behind.

But probably the most telling indication that *Lohengrin* was an end rather than a beginning were the five years of almost complete musical silence that followed the opera's completion. *Lohengrin* had demonstrated to the composer that he needed to reconfigure his musical language, and to re-draw his theatrical goals. So, over the next five years of searching thought and hard-won theory (think opera and drama), Wagner was to position himself for his first real music-drama, which was *Das Rheingold*.



sources like Wikipedia jump the gun and state that *Lohengrin* was actually Wagner's first music-drama. But only two reasons are given. First is the lack of musical 'numbers' that traditionally marked out recitatives, choruses, duets etc. Yes, Wagner did dispense with these progressive counters in *Lohengrin*, but if you scratch the opera's apparently 'seamless' surface you will quickly find the many breaks where one typical number gives way to another. The fact that the numbers aren't printed doesn't mean that they aren't there.

Wikipedia also points to the leitmotif, in particular the doom-laden 'forbidden question' theme. But here Wagner is simply using the device of a 'motif of remembrance' that was already common in the operas of the day. His later development of the leitmotif was light-years away from this. In the works of his last 25 years

—all post-*Lohengrin*—the leitmotif was not just a musical statement but a musical embodiment of a person or a thing, "an instinctively enthralling moment of feeling", as Wagner was to put it in *Opera and Drama*.

Later, the developed leitmotif's most unique quality lay in its ability to transform itself into myriad guises at any moment, and to allude subtly to other leitmotifs. It is not fair to retro-project this developed type of leitmotif so as to transform Wagner's romantic opera of the 1840s into a music-drama of the 1850s or '60s.

But there are undeniable music-drama moments in *Lohengrin*—moments that strain so hard against traditional practice that they 'tremble on the brink', thrillingly poised on the edge of a great leap forward towards what will become Wagner's Music of the Future.

Take the traditional Italian bel canto opera. *Lohengrin*'s two famous solos—the Farewell to the Swan in Act 1 and, in Act 3, the Grail Narration—are both very lightly accompanied, and pre-suppose a tenor voice of luminous charm and tonal purity à la Bellini rather than the normal Wagnerian requirement of passion wrapped up in strong delivery.

But turn to Elsa's prayer in Act 1. She too begins softly in a vocally radiant bel canto style, but when she recalls her dream, a totally original harmony surges out. Enharmonic changes tumble over each other in an astonishing mixture of keys and chords such that the music acts out the idea of an intermixing of two



different worlds. For a moment, the old bel canto opera has suddenly lit up with the future flame of music-drama.

Wagner's use of the chorus in *Lohengrin* is another example of new direction. In this very 'public' opera, there are many occasions when the massed choral tableaux of, say, Spontini and Meyerbeer are suggested. Act I begins with a large choral presentation of stereotyped military greeting by King Henry's armies, and the act ends with loud choral farewells, all built around the typical theme of general rejoicing.

But in the centre of the act, listen to the way Wagner splits up his choir at the dramatic moment of the swan's arrival: first a few soft voices, then others, more definite, join in to lead the transition from amazed perception to gradual acclamation. The chorus evolves from its initial, tentative make-up of individuals. It is not merely relaying events to the audience; it gradually becomes the audience, and its music swells into life, seemingly of its own volition.

This is an exciting glimpse of what Wagner was to describe in *Opera and Drama* as the ideal function of the chorus. Contrary to what most people believe, he did not ban the chorus. What he deplored was the kind of chorus he had inherited from the old school, with its overpowering spectacle and large choral mass. "A mass can never interest but only dumbfound us," he said.

What he wanted was the gradual appearance of "the surface of melody out of the depths of harmony". The arrival of the swan is a fine example, but so too is the soft, choral awe that greets Elsa's first arrival, or on a larger

scale, her gradual (interrupted) procession to the Minster in Act 2.

Not all of *Lohengrin's* forays into the future were successful. In trying to treat the traditional ensemble in the same new manner as the chorus, i.e. as an increasingly growing blend of individual strands, Wagner composed semi-independent lines of such difficult harmony that singers usually find it impossible to keep in tune. Listen to a live performance of the ensemble 'Herr und Gott' prayer before the duel in Act I, and you'll hear vocal wobbling and sliding from the second phrase onwards. By the

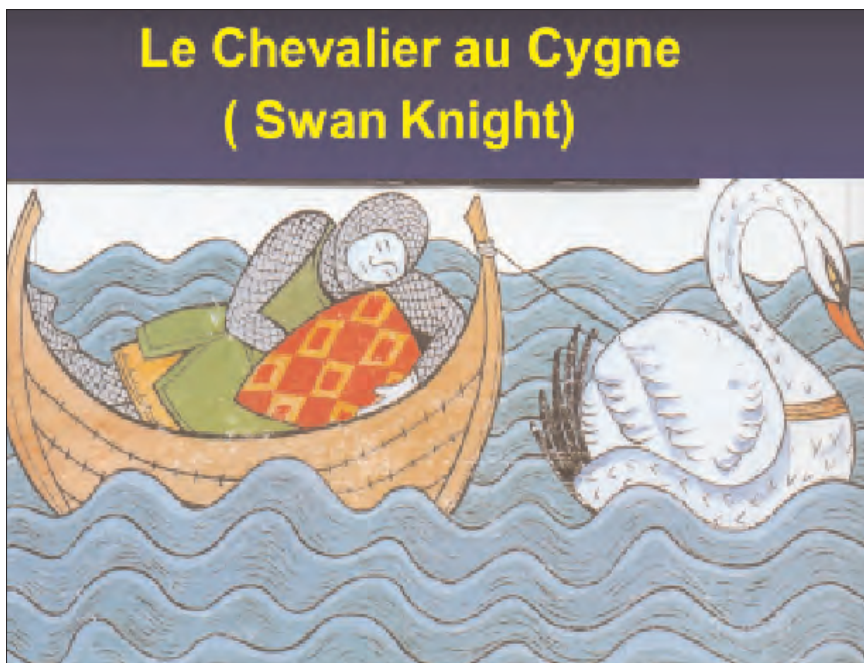
shape. *Lohengrin's* A-major Prélude (no longer 'just' an overture) is a wholly new conception, and a masterpiece of sculptured sonority. The music does not move forward along a horizontal story-line or a linear path of development. It seems to arrive from above and spreads itself out in three-dimensional space, beginning sky-high with barely perceptible violin harmonics that gradually grow into a heavenly sphere, filling the orchestral space with an increasingly warm bath of sound, before slowly draining away, leaving only memory behind.

So *Lohengrin* is not yet music-drama. As Wagner affirmed right at the start, it is a romantic opera. But, yes, in many parts it is uniquely forward-looking, and it was to provide Wagner with the most tangible springboard yet to his new musical language. It is not an opera of the past nor is it music of the future. It is rather a music of Becoming.

The Viennese critic Hanslick was closer to the truth than he realised when he mocked Wagner for not writing the kind of 'Music' that he understood. With curled lip he dismissed Wagner's oeuvre by saying, "There's music in it, but it isn't Music."

In terms of *Lohengrin*, we can fix this for him just by adding the word 'drama', to read: "There's music-drama in it, but it isn't Music-Drama." At least not yet. In fact, *Lohengrin* shows us Opera trembling on the brink of Music-Drama. And it's this 'trembling on the brink' that makes it such a unique and fascinating work.

~ Heath Lees



end, the common-chord entry of the male chorus appears like a rock in a storm.

On the other hand, Wagner's use of instrumental sonority in *Lohengrin* was never miscalculated. It was unique, continually futuristic, and utterly musical. *Lohengrin* shows conclusively that Wagner had an unerring instinct for blending together moods, feelings and ideas in perfectly chosen instrumental wrappings and naturally suited keys. And this gift begins from the first notes of the Prélude, and continues to the end. Indeed, it continues after the end, and flows over into all the later works, including *Parsifal*.

It's in *Lohengrin* that Wagner's special kind of 'sound-cathedral' (to use Debussy's phrase) first takes



# SIEGFRIED IN KIEL...SO FAR

The Wagner Society supported Bradley Daley singing Siegmund in the 2016 Melbourne *Ring*. The following report arrived in early March. Bradley debuted as Siegfried in Kiel in mid-March.

It seems such a long time ago now since our pre-*Ring* get-togethers in Melbourne. Kiel in Germany is treating me very well. The weather is much colder than you are experiencing back home.

The company has supplied me with a lovely central apartment with enough room for my wife and two daughters to come and visit during the school Easter break. They have also loaned me a bike, which is a wonderful way of getting around Germany (even in sub-zero conditions). A good scarf is indispensable!

I have just finished my fourth week of rehearsals for this new production of *Siegfried* and during that time we have basically blocked the entire opera, except for Fafner's scene which requires seven puppeteers to operate the dragon.

It is a wonderful international cast, with many newcomers to their prospective roles, like myself. The role of Mime is shared by Jose Montero, wonderful Spanish tenor,



Bradley Daley in rehearsal

and Michael Müller, a young German singer on fest contract here. We have a Finnish Fafner (Timo Riihonen), Alberich (Jörg Sabrowski) and Brünnhilde (Kirsi Tiihonen), an Argentinian and German Vöglein (Mercedes Arcuri and Karola Schmidt), a Russian Erda (Tatia Jibladze) and an American Wotan (Thomas Hall). So it's quite a menagerie. Such is the wonderful egalitarian world of opera. If only the world, at present, could learn something from this.

Our director Herr Karasek (son of the notable art critic Hellmuth Karasek) comes from a straight theatre tradition and is also Generalintendant of the Schauspielhaus. He is a very busy man and, like Neil Armfield, he likes his opera real. Herr Karasek also enjoys practising his Spanish. So because two of our cast members speak Spanish as their mother tongue, our rehearsals often operate within a strange hybrid of German, Spanish and English.

We rehearse a 20-minute drive away from the Kiel Opera House at a venue strangely named the

Fisch Markt. This is because the rehearsal stage is not large enough for the set, which in Act I consists of a wonderful apparatus of Willy Wonka proportions. Mime uses this machine to forge Siegfried's various swords that I keep breaking.

Fortunately I still get to forge Nothung myself with a big hammer and traditionally (tuned) anvil for the famous Hammer Lied. Next week we start rehearsing on the main stage with orchestra. It is only two weeks until opening night.

Before we started proper rehearsals, I had the luxury of two weeks solid music rehearsals with the head of music, Herr Reinhard Lindon (a wonderfully experienced and canny Wagner technician). I also worked in depth on the music with Herr Fritzsch (Musikalische Leitung) and brother of our very own maestro Johannes Fritzsch, who I have worked at home with at Opera Queensland. "Piccolo mondo".

I am loving every moment of this wonderful experience.

Thomas Molke in his review of the Kiel *Siegfried* wrote, "The Australian tenor Bradley Daley gives his debut as Siegfried in Kiel and convinces with a strong heroic presence, even if his performance is affected by the frequent searching of the visual contact to the conductor. In some places, he forges the sword a bit too sharp, but he has enough vocal reserves to bring the forging to a brilliant conclusion."

~ Bradley Daley



Kiel Opera House



## A SHORT HISTORY OF MELBOURNE OPERA

Melbourne Opera was founded in 2003. It was born out of the dissatisfaction felt by a large number of Melbourne opera lovers resulting from the perceived failure of the merger between the Victorian State Opera and Opera Australia.

This year the company celebrates its 14th birthday. This is a significant achievement for a professional opera company which has received no recurrent funding from any arm of government. No opera company anywhere in the world is able to survive on box office receipts alone.

Melbourne Opera offers freelance employment to a pool of more than 150 singers, musicians, technicians, directors and designers. The company has only one full-time employee, our business manager Robbie McPhee, who has become adept in all areas of an operatic business.

The company has to date produced over 40 seasons of 29 different operas. The company has recently ventured into the Wagnerian repertoire, having performed a concert version of *Rienzi*, and last

year a full-scale performance of *Tannhäuser*. This year the company will be performing *Lohengrin*.

The company has been able to continue because of the generosity of individual patrons, coupled with stringent financial control.

A major contribution to the cultural life of Victoria has been the company's touring programme. For the past 14 years Melbourne Opera has performed extensively throughout outer suburban and regional locations, offering the full operatic experience, including orchestra and chorus.

The company has nurtured a large number of young artists who have gone on to successful operatic careers with the national company and overseas. These artists include Antoinette Halloran, Steven Smith, James Egglestone and Elena Xanthoudakis.

The company has a particularly strong community involvement through its chorus, which is made up of volunteers who have a love of singing and theatre. Competition is fierce for a place in the chorus.

The company has for the last six

years enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with Monash University. The company provides educational assistance to undergraduate and postgraduate students, and stages three or four performances a year at the university. This has built a substantial new audience in the outer south-eastern suburbs. In return the university provides some financial assistance and the financial expertise of its CFO, Mr David Pitt, who is a member of the Board.

The administration of the company is lean and highly efficient. It is able to channel 95 per cent of revenue from both box office and donations directly back into production costs. This efficiency ratio is unlikely to be matched by any opera company elsewhere in the world.

~ Michael Wright  
QC



*Michael Wright, a member of the Wagner Society and Melbourne Ring volunteer, was chairman of Melbourne Opera up until 2016.*



## Melbourne's Ring production honoured

Opera Australia are delighted to announce that the Melbourne *Ring* cycle received multiple accolades at Melbourne's Green Room Awards on 21 March. Opera Australia received an award in each of the opera categories and a special award for orchestral excellence was presented to the Melbourne *Ring* Orchestra. Many artists from the *Ring* were honoured, including Pietari Inkinen, Neil Armfield, Lise Lindstrom and James Johnson.

## Debus on Wagner

Canadian Opera Company conductor Johannes Debus is frank about his relationship with the music of Richard Wagner.

"I always tried to avoid Wagner," he says. "There is something in this music that is so sick. Something in it that takes you over and doesn't let you go. It manipulates you. Of course, there are those moments of ecstasy that are so powerful, so strong. And yet, sometimes you don't want to get close to that, because it's somehow dangerous. There's a reason why that music has been used and abused in our history—in German history."

But Debus has been unable to avoid Wagner any longer. Over the past three years, the Canadian Opera Company has presented three of the four operas of the *Ring* cycle, with Debus leading the orchestra, and soprano Christine Goerke—the next great Brünnhilde—featured on stage. Two years ago, it was *Die Walküre*. Last year, *Siegfried*. And, in February this year, the last of the cycle, *Götterdämmerung*.

## Jonas Kaufmann

Tenor Jonas Kaufmann will sing his first Tristan in a concert performance of Act 2 of *Tristan und Isolde* in Boston, in April 2018.

As we know, he is singing *Parsifal*

in concert performances at the Sydney Opera House on 9, 12, and 14 August. Originally Kundry was to be sung by Jacqueline Dark, but, for mysterious reasons Ms Dark has been replaced by Michelle DeYoung. Aware of Kaufmann's common withdrawals due to medical conditions, we hope there are no further cast changes.

## R.I.P.

**RICHARD DIVALL**  
9.09.1945 – 15.01.2017



Professor Richard Divall AO OBE, music director of the Victoria State Opera for over 30 years, conducted hundreds of concerts, recitals and operas. Even battling cancer in 2015, he managed to lead Melbourne Opera's acclaimed production of Donizetti's *Mary Stuart*. He will be fondly remembered by Wagner Society members as conductor of our *Lohengrin*, directed by the late August Everding in 1985.

He was the consummate classical music man, a multi-talented maestro who conducted more than 150 operas and nurtured the careers of Australia's finest classical singers

**KURT MOLL**  
11.04.1938 – 5.03.2017



Renowned German basso profundo Kurt Moll has died at the age of 78. He was one of the most respected Wagner singers of his time.

Kurt Moll made his debut at the Bayreuth Festival in 1968, as *Nachtwächter* in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and sang there for several years as *Fafner* in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Marke* in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Pogner* in *Die Meistersinger*. *Gurnamanz* was his signature Wagner role.

He retired from the stage in 2006, after singing the *Nachtwächter* at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich.

~ Stan O'Loughlin

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