



Wagneriana

Wo ich erwacht, weilt' ich nicht;
doch wo ich weilte, das kann ich dir nicht sagen.
-*Tristan und Isolde*

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From the Editor

Tristan und Isolde Excerpts in a Concert Performance

Be sure not to miss our first recital of the season on September 10. If you love *Tristan und Isolde*, you will be in for a treat. Four singers and an accompanist (see Jeffrey Brody's note on page 5) will perform the most compelling excerpts from this enchanting and mesmerizing opera.

When *Tristan und Isolde* was first performed in 1865, several members of the audience, upon hearing the bewitching notes for the first time, fell in a swoon. Wagner's friend and later enemy Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of the opera: "I simply cannot bring myself to remain critically aloof from this music; every nerve in me is atwilt, and it has been a long time since I had such a lasting sense of ecstasy as with this overture." Even after he broke off his close friendship with Wagner, Nietzsche wrote: "Even now I am still in search of a work which exercises such a dangerous fascination, such a spine-tingling and blissful infinity as *Tristan* — I have sought in vain, in every art."

At his deathbed, Giuseppe Verdi said that he had stood in front of this opera in "wonder and terror." And according to Richard Strauss, the

opera "would kill a cat and would turn rocks into scrambled eggs from fear of [its] hideous dischords." Later on, however, Strauss reconsidered: "I have conducted my first *Tristan*. It was the most wonderful day of my life." And still later he wrote: "*Tristan und Isolde* marked the end of all romanticism. Here the yearning of the entire 19th century is gathered in one focal point."



Tristan and Isolde on board the ship

The conductor Bruno Walter heard his first *Tristan und Isolde* in 1889, when he was still a student. He wrote:

"So there I sat in the topmost gallery of the Berlin Opera House, and from the first sound of the cellos my heart contracted spasmodically. . . . Never before has my soul been deluged with such floods of sound and passion, never had my heart been consumed by such yearning and sublime bliss. . . . A new epoch had begun: Wagner was my god, and I wanted to become his prophet." Walter went on to conduct numerous performances of Wagnerian operas, many of which are available on CD.

From a musical standpoint, *Tristan und Isolde* was revolutionary in its atonality. According to Boston composer Mitchell Hampton (interviewed in the December 2003–January 2004 of *Wagneriana*), “In *Tristan und Isolde* . . . Wagner pushed the tonal system to its point of highest expressivity.” The opera is also known for its

use of harmonic suspension, a musical device that Wagner used to great effect to create a sense of desire and longing until almost the end of the opera. And of course the Tristan Chord is known throughout the musical world (see below).



The Tristan Chord

Hans Hotter’s Memoirs

On October 23, the wonderfully entertaining Donald Arthur returns to Boston to give a presentation on the great Wagnerian singer Hans Hotter. Arthur, an American who resides in Munich and Malta, collaborated with Hotter in the writing of his memoirs and has numerous anecdotes to relate. The book, simply titled *Hans Hotter: Memoirs* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2006), with forewords by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Zubin Mehta and translated and edited by Donald Arthur, will be available for signing. Arthur’s previous book was Astrid Varnay’s biography, *55 Years in Five*

Acts: My Life in Opera (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), which he introduced to the Boston Wagner Society in October 2005.

Hans Hotter is one of the foremost Wagnerian bass-baritones of all time and taught Donald Arthur voice when the latter was still a singer. No one deserves the epithet Wotanissimo (Lauritz Melchior was called Tristanissimo) more than this fine singer. Hotter has such magnificent stage presence, unlike any other singer’s, that we are fortunate to be able to watch and listen to rare excerpts of his performances.

New Program Coordinator

The Boston Wagner Society is pleased to announce the appointment of Linda Barlow as Program Coordinator. A member since 2004, Barlow brings her organizational skills to this volunteer position. We are thankful for the time and effort she has been devoting to

the Society. The position of Publicity Manager is still open. The person who volunteers for this job will publicize our Society and its programs, will send press releases to the media, and will distribute flyers. If interested, please call or e-mail.

In This Issue

In this issue, you will find a review of the Paris *Ring* Cycle last spring, a review of an educational CD on *Tristan und Isolde*, and a letter that

Wagner wrote explaining his method of composing operas.

–Dalia Geffen

The Paris *Ring* Cycle

Der Ring des Nibelungen, April 8, 10, 12, 15, 2006, a co-production of the Théâtre du Châtelet and Opéra de Zurich; conductor: Christoph Eschenbach, Orchestre de Paris; mise en scène, scénographie et lumières: Robert Wilson; costumes: Frida Parmeggiani; lumières: Kenneth L. Schutz
Wotan: Jukka Rasilainen; Alberich: Sergei Leiferkus; Mime: Volker Vogel; Fasolt: Franz-Josef Selig; Fafner: Günther Groisseböck; Fricka: Mihoko Fujimura; Erda: Qiu Lin Zhang; Siegmund: Endrik Wottrich; Hunding: Stephen Milling; Sieglinde: Petra-Maria Schnitzer; Brünnhilde: Linda Watson; Siegfried: Jon Fredric West and Nikolai Schukoff; Hagen: Kurt Rydl; Gutrune: Christine Goerke; Waltraute: Nora Gubisch



The Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris

As relatively recent Wagnerian converts, my wife and I worked hard to prepare for the four-opera experience in Paris. We read all we could about Wagner and the *Ring*; we read the librettos; we played CDs with lectures on the *Ring*; and we listened to the music, especially on videos of the Metropolitan Opera's performances of the 1990 *Ring*, conducted by James Levine. The last had the advantage of English subtitles, enabling us to follow the text with the music. That was a great help, since we had heard that in Paris the supertitles would be in French.

Not surprisingly, the special feature of this Paris *Ring* was the staging, lighting, and direction of acting by Robert Wilson. What extraordinary effects he created on the stage. We had seen some of his work before at the Met and at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, so we knew what to expect. But in Paris, his massive backdrops lit up with very slowly changing colors, his minimalist scenery with only hints of designated objects, his requirement that the singers move with the utmost deliberation, almost as if they were advancing under water, and the sheathlike costumes with muted colors made for a most unusual metamorphosis of Wagner's work. Even though Wilson's aesthetic contradicted much of what we had read about Wagner's insistence on a stage full of scenery and on acting in the most literal and realistic ways, it made it possible for

the audience to pay attention to the music and the singing.

The conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Christoph Eschenbach, led all four performances and showed skill and nuance in his interpretations of the score. (We had the good fortune to meet him after one of the performances, and he exhibited all of the urbanity typical of internationally recognized conductors.) One voice that came through with special force and dramatic effect was that of Endrik Wottrich as Siegmund. (Again we had the good luck to meet him in a restaurant after *Die Walküre*, and he gave us his views of the highly competitive opera scene in Germany. We also learned that he was the boyfriend of, or married to, Katharina Wagner, the great-granddaughter of the Maestro himself.) None of the other singers struck us as particularly outstanding, but then we might have been spoiled by having heard on the videos the voices of the great dramatic soprano Hildegard Behrens as Brünnhilde and the celebrated American soprano Jessye Norman as Sieglinde. These voices are beyond most comparisons.

Finally, in our reading, we had come across a phrase that kept springing into our minds during each performance. "The essence of the *Ring* comprises 'the beauty of the sadness of loss.'" Indeed, one way to tie together the multitude of relations and events in the *Ring* is to see them as experiences of loss — of love, of money, of

power, of a daughter or a son or a husband, of the Ring, and on and on. Wagner, of course, highlights many of these losses with leitmotifs, each with musical phrases that sing with poignancy and yearning. I found them very affecting. This is the way it should be, and it confirms the view of the great Wagnerian George Bernard Shaw: "You use a mirror to see your face, you

use works of art to see your soul." In addition to heeding Shaw's dictum, we used the *Ring* to become true believers in the genius of Richard Wagner.

—Richard Hunt

Richard Hunt and his wife, Priscilla, are new members of the Boston Wagner Society.

A Lesson in Futility on *Tristan und Isolde*

"An Introduction to . . . Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*"; written and read by Christopher Cook, with Sean Barrett as Richard Wagner, Elaine Claxton as Minna Wagner, and Laura Paton as Mathilde Wesendonck

Royal Swedish Opera Orchestra, cond. Leif Segerstam

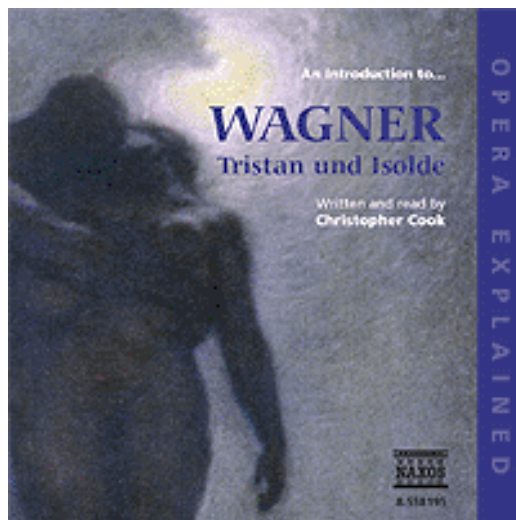
Tristan: Wolfgang Millgram; Isolde: Hedwig Fassbender; King Mark: Lennart Forsén; Kurwenal:

Gunnar Lundberg; Brangäne: Martina Dike; Melot: Magnus Kyhle

1 CD, 79:33 mins., Naxos 8.558195

Part of the Opera Explained series by Naxos, this CD introduced by Christopher Cook, a BBC Radio regular and a music critic, seems rather pointless. Experienced Wagnerians will be irritated by the superficial and gossipy treatment of one of Wagner's most profound operas, and novices will be baffled by the glib explanations and truncated excerpts.

The CD begins with a dramatization of the relationships among Wagner; his first wife, Minna; and Mathilde Wesendonck, a financier's wife with whom Wagner was in love. The readers Sean Barrett, Elaine Claxton, and Laura Paton present excerpts from the three principals' letters to each other. This three-and-a-half-minute snippet gives a cursory background of a complicated ménage à trois that would take an entire chapter to explain and adds very little to our knowledge of the opera. Inexplicably, Cook then proceeds to introduce excerpts from *Lohengrin*. Why he sees fit to include these is a mystery. Another mystery is the identity of the musicians in these *Lohengrin* excerpts. Cook then goes on to explain that *Tristan und Isolde* is "an opera about desire and death," surely a sophomoric comment that may constitute a good



opener for a discussion of the metaphysical aspects of the work, except that it stops right then and there. Further, there is no mention whatever of the famous Tristan Chord, and not much of a discussion on the importance of this opera in the history of music. The few musical motifs that are included can be perplexing to a listener who has never heard the opera before, since very little explanation accompanies them. And the Liebestod, the

long-awaited resolution and apex of this work, is given short shrift, with only a two-and-a-half-minute snippet, which is likely to infuriate some listeners. Overall, the choppy presentation of short excerpts fails to convey the grandeur and long musical lines of this work, rendering the whole enterprise an exercise in futility.

The musical samples on the CD are taken from Naxos's own recordings (no date is given). The Royal Swedish Opera Orchestra, conducted by Leif Segerstam, sounds thin at first, but the Prelude to Act 3 is satisfyingly resonant. Hedwig Fassbender is a vocally hefty and pleasing Isolde. Lennart Forsén's rolling notes in the too-short excerpt from King Mark's lament sounded quite pleasant. Wolfgang Millgram as Tristan sounded rough, remote, and out of tune, al-

though his ravings in Act 3 were quite convincing. The tenor who sings the Young Sailor is not identified anywhere. And there is no libretto for the excerpts, German or otherwise, which any rudimentary introduction to an opera ought to provide.

The best part of this CD is the cover art, surely one of the lesser aspects of any release.

One is left wondering what Naxos hoped to achieve with this jumble of musical scraps and half-baked explanations.

-Dalia Geffen

Wagner on the Art of Writing Operas

The following is a letter written by Richard Wagner to Karl Gaillard, Dresden, January 30, 1844.

I really lay no claim to a poet's reputation and assure you I at first took to writing for myself of necessity, since no good librettos were offered me. I could not now, however, compose on another's operatic text for the following reasons. It is not my way to choose some story or other at pleasure, get it versified, and then begin to consider how to make suitable music for it. For this mode of procedure I should need to be twice inspired, which is impossible.

The way I set to work is quite different. In the first place I am only attracted to matter the poetic and musical significance of which strike me simultaneously. Before I go on to write a verse or plot or scene I am already intoxicated by the musical aroma of my subject. I have every note, every characteristic motif in my head, so that when the versification is complete and the scenes arranged, the opera is practically finished for me; the detailed musical treatment is just a peaceful meditative after-labour, the real moment of creation having long preceded it.

Furthermore, subject matter ought to be selected that is capable of musical treatment only. I would never take a subject that might be used

just as well by an able playwright for spoken drama. As a musician I can choose subjects, develop situations and contrasts, which must for ever remain outside the province of the poet as playwright. Here and now we arrive at the point where opera and drama should definitely part company, each amicably pursuing its own distinct path. It is the province of the present-day dramatist to give expression and spiritual meaning to the material interests of our own times, but to the operatic poet and composer falls the task of conjuring up the holy spirit of poetry as it comes down to us in the sagas and legends of past ages. For music affords a medium of synthesis which the poet alone, particularly in association with the stage, has not at command. Here is the way to raise opera to a higher level from the debasement into which it has fallen as the result of our expecting composers to take as their subjects commonplaces, intrigues, etc., things that modern comedy and drama without music are far more successful in presenting.

-From *Letters of Composers: An Anthology, 1603-1945* (New York: Knopf, 1946), pp. 174-75.

A Note from Our Music Adviser



The final notes of *Tristan und Isolde*

It gives me great pleasure to play *Tristan* (on September 10) from the copy of the original Breitkopf und Härtel edition given to me in 1984 by the late Osbourne McConathy, conductor, librarian, and chorus master of Sarah Caldwell's Opera Company of Boston. The piano reduction is that of Hans von Bülow, who conducted the first performance of the opera. With the viability of the opera assured, the publishers suppressed the difficult von Bülow reduction and issued another vocal score with a simplified (and not terribly pianistic) version by Richard Klein-

Michel. With the expiration of the copyright, other publishers issued vocal scores with either the Kleinmichel reduction or the exceedingly complicated reduction by Felix Mottl. The von Bülow reduction was made by a first-class pianist who knew how to write for the instrument. Although considerably more difficult than

Kleinmichel's, the von Bülow rendering is far more pianistically rewarding and provides a truer orchestral sound. Mottl's encyclopedic version, like all of his Wagner reductions, offers the pianist excellent practice in the art of deciding what not to play.

-Jeffrey Brody

Historical Singers: Torsten Ralf (1901-1954)



Endowed with an irresistibly attractive voice combining great sweetness and heroism, the Swedish heldentenor Torsten Ralf hailed from a musical family. Two of his brothers had successful singing careers

in Sweden but did not reach the heights of international fame that Ralf won. Trained as an engineer, Ralf eventually began his vocal studies with Haldis Ingebjart, who had taught the soprano Kirsten Flagstad and the bass Ivar Andréson. After moving to Germany, he made his debut as Cavaradossi in Stettin. Karl Böhm hired him for the Dresden Opera, where he sang Apollo in the world premiere of Strauss's

Daphne. In 1935 he made his debut at Covent Garden, replacing an ailing Lohengrin. For this engagement, he was unable to book a flight to London and traveled by ship and train instead. Even though he arrived just three and a half hours before the performance, he sang exceptionally well. In the following London season, the Wagner biographer Ernest Newman lauded Ralf's Parsifal as the best he had ever heard.

During the war, Ralf sang with the Berlin State Opera. He made his debut at the Met in 1946, singing Lohengrin under the baton of Fritz Busch. He also received great praise for his Walther von Stolzing, a role to which he was ideally suited. In 1952 he received the title of Court Opera Singer in Sweden.

Ralf died unexpectedly in 1954, but his voice lives on in several recordings he made. His Lohengrin excerpt "Das süsse Lied Verhallt" (recorded in 1939), with Tiana Lemnitz as Elsa, must be heard for its great subtlety and smoothness. It is available on Preiser's Lebendige Vergangenheit series.

-Dalia Geffen

Upcoming Events

Wagner Recital

Extended excerpts from *Tristan und Isolde* (Acts 1-3)
Soprano Joanna Porackova, Heldentenor George Gray,
Mezzo-Soprano Gigi Mitchell-Velasco, Tenor Noel
Velasco, Pianist Jeffrey Brody
September 10, 2006, 7:30 p.m.
St. Paul's Church, Brookline, MA
Members: \$15; nonmembers: \$25; students: \$5
A reception will follow

Presentation by Donald Arthur

Translator and editor of upcoming book *Hans Hotter: Memoirs*, with forewords by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Zubin Mehta
Audiovisual illustrations and book signing
October 23, 2006, 7 p.m.
Newton Free Library
330 Homer Street, Newton Centre, MA
Free and open to the public

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