

## **Bass-Baritone Alan Held Makes His Boston Debut on May 28**

*The great bass-baritone Alan Held will come to Boston to sing Act 1 of Siegfried on May 28, 2016, at Old South Church. This will be his first performance in Boston. His colleagues will be Daniel Brenna (Siegfried), David Cangelosi (Mime), and Jeffrey Brody (piano). See also our interviews with Brenna and Cangelosi here.*

**First off, let me convey to you my huge gratitude for coming to Boston and singing the Wanderer for the Boston Wagner Society. It is such a special treat for us. We can't wait!**

**You began singing Wagner at an unusually young age, in your late twenties. Like Jane Eaglen, you were told in your late teens that someday you would sing Wagnerian music. What did it take for you to fulfill this early promise? Did you have a big voice to begin with? Or did it grow slowly? And how did you have to train to get to the point of singing Donner (at 29) and then Wotan (at 31) on the Met's stage, which is quite remarkable?**

I come from a family of fairly large voices, and the frontal voice placement is inherited as well—yahoo!!! But one has to be careful with these gifts, to not rush them along too soon. The most important thing I did, regarding becoming a Wagnerian, was starting to study the style and history of the operas long before I started singing them. I studied the language, articulation, pacing, character development, etc. I learned the motifs and the relationship between characters. This served me so well. Yes, I was told very early on that I'd probably someday sing Wagner, but singing opera in the first place, let alone Wagner, was not something I was really after.

I started as an instrumental major (tuba) and planned on being a music teacher. I had come from an outstanding high school music program and went to a university that trains so many fine music teachers (Millikin University). At that time, it hadn't been turning out all that many opera singers. During my senior year, I sang for a man who encouraged me to begin my graduate studies in performance and recruited me to study at Wichita State University (where I'm now on the faculty). It was a great opportunity that allowed me to continue to develop slowly and to gain a lot of necessary stage time, singing Mozart, a bit of Puccini, and some 20<sup>th</sup>-century repertoire as well. These have become staples, along with Wagner, of my career to this day.

After my days in Wichita, I headed east and found my voice teacher, Richard Cross, who slowly caressed the voice more and more into the heavier repertoire. But the biggest thing that brought me into Wagner was getting hired by the Met. They offered me Donner when I was still only around 28 years old. My first production of *Rheingold* was with James Morris as Wotan and Christa Ludwig as Fricka. So many Wagner legends were in that *Ring*. I covered Gunther as well (it was still a bit early for me to sing onstage, but I was ready for it). I was so fortunate to be a part of that *Ring* at the Met in 1990, which was preserved forever and broadcast on PBS. It's a classic.

People may not know that I'd been hired, even before that *Rheingold*, to sing my first Wotan. I knew early on that I shouldn't take on Wotan, Dutchman, Hans Sachs, and a few other roles until I was at least 40. For the most part, I paid attention to that knowledge—but the *Rheingold* Wotan is not such a hard sing. I was able to take it on in 1991 in Brussels. Vocally, it was fine, but there was a maturity factor that I was probably still not quite ready for. The next time I sang it was three years later in Frankfurt—those few years of aging made a world of difference. And the

next time I returned to it, in Vienna, was a huge jump in ability. I now feel very comfortable with all the Wotans and these heavy roles because I took the time to learn them all and spent time with them off and on the stage. I was able to sing all the smaller roles, which help build a singer into a bigger-role singer. And, along with all the Wagner, came all the Strauss . . . all those Jochanaans, Orests, etc. I am very grateful for my repertoire and for the composers that put it all together, and I've never lost touch with Mr. Mozart either.

**What is your favorite role to sing? And who is your favorite Wagnerian character, whether you sing it or not?**

My favorite role to sing—that's tough. I love all my roles. I greatly enjoy singing Amfortas, Wotan, Scarpia . . . it's hard to pick one role. There are moments of Sachs that so greatly touch my heart—the “Flieder Monolog” is such an incredible piece of music, as is the “Wahn Monolog.” But then, there are all those other moments that Sachs has to sing . . . it's a long night.

**On your web site, I was surprised to find that in addition to Wotan, Hans Sachs, and the Dutchman, you sing Amfortas and Kurwenal, which are in the baritone range. You obviously have a wider range than most bass-baritones. Is it an adjustment for you to sing in a higher range? Is there any special preparation you have to do for those higher roles?**

Amfortas and Kurwenal do lie higher—especially Kurwenal. However, Kurwenal is one of my most performed roles. I have an ability to get into the top range—and it didn't come easy—patience and good teaching really paid off. During a rehearsal period, one caresses the voice into the range and tessitura for the roles (as long as you have those notes to begin with). However, when I was learning Sachs, I was singing Kurwenal at the time. About halfway through the run of *Tristan und Isolde*, I had to stop singing Sachs in my practicing. I had to only work on the text without singing. The combination of working on a lower role like Sachs was difficult when trying to sing the higher tessitura of Kurwenal. I had to be careful. After the *Tristan* run was over, I was fine and the voice fell into place for *Meistersinger*. I also had *Meistersinger* and Sachs fairly strongly in my ear, as I had already sung the Night Watchman (with Ben Heppner during his first full run of *Meistersinger* in Seattle in 1989) and Kothner (several times at the Met).

**Do you sing bass roles as well? I am thinking of King Mark, Gurnemanz, and so on.**

No, and I probably won't. They just don't line up with my voice or with my disposition.

**You say that for you singing Verdi is harder than singing Wagner. For many singers, the opposite is true. What makes singing Wagner so special and, I guess, relatively easy for you?**

I have a voice that cuts through a Wagner orchestra—if you have that, it is easier to sing Wagner. In addition, the tessitura in Verdi operas is higher—it gets high and stays high. Wagner comes up and goes down. The vocal range in Verdi roles is also higher and more extreme. Wagner fits the meat of my voice far better. Wagner also incorporated the voice more into the orchestral palate of colors. Verdi is more exposed. When the orchestra gets loud, the singers push to get over it. With Wagner, I feel more a part of the entire *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total artwork] and more of a consistent part of the musical presentation. Maybe this goes back to my years in the orchestra

as a tuba player, but I feel that Wagner wanted all of his forces to mesh—not stick out alone.

**How do you prepare yourself to get into a Wagnerian character’s frame of mind?**

I don’t really approach getting into a Wagner character’s frame of mind any differently than getting into any other composer’s opera character’s mind. These are characters I’m playing—they are not me. I have to live in their shoes during the preparation and rehearsal process; then, going from one to another doesn’t take so long. I can switch back and forth pretty quickly these days—familiarity breeds content. I do take a bit more time with things like *Wozzeck*—thank heavens I’m not much like that guy. Basically, it’s all in the score. One studies the character and his quirks, history, and goals. You don’t anticipate what the other characters in the opera are going to say or do. You react, you LISTEN, and you apply it to the character that you’ve built in your own mind and with the director. Hopefully, you’re all in agreement.

**In Wagner’s operas, the text and the music are intimately connected, perhaps more so than most other composers. Does the Wagnerian text you sing affect the vocal production and vice versa?**

Not really. Wagner wrote, especially in the *Ring*, with a music language that was all his own, and at times with a German language that was all his own. He set text beautifully—the only comparison I could make that would come close to Wagner’s mastery of this skill would be Benjamin Britten. Nobody set the English text better than Britten. I feel that way about Wagner and German. One only needs to look at the long second-act monologue of Wotan in *Die Walküre* to see what I mean. The rise and fall of the pitches, the alliteration, the adherence to a spoken line through musical expression—it’s all on the page.

**In your online journal ([alanheld.com](http://alanheld.com)), which I love to read, by the way, you write:**

We sometimes, as singers, expect perfection. I constantly have to remind myself, and my students [at Wichita State University and master classes], that perfection does not belong to this earth. We have to allow ourselves to have singing experiences that aren’t our best. We can’t be afraid to fail. It is the difficult times that teach us the most. It is through struggles that we grow. Maybe that’s why I’m 6’5”.

I evaluate every performance—the good ones and the ones that aren’t so good. I want to know WHY stuff happens. When nights go well, I want to know what made everything tick.

**These are such refreshing comments! It is not only singers who expect perfection, but also the audience. When a singer is not at his/her best, people can be extremely critical, forgetting that these gods and goddesses are actually human! How do you deal with critical comments after a less-than-stellar performance? Like a lot of singers, do you avoid reading reviews?**

Nobody in the press or in the audience can be nearly as critical about my performance as I can be. There is not anything that someone else can say about how I performed that I don’t already feel or understand. That’s just the way it is. I’ve been singing professionally [for] 30 years (in fact, this performance in Boston will close my 30th year as a professional). I know how my voice works (and when it doesn’t). I am a student of the theater and a singing actor—I know when things don’t work well or come off clearly on stage. I review every performance that I sing from start to

finish after a performance. I'm constantly evaluating. I think this is so important for a singer—for any artist, anyone in any position.

The hard thing, at times, for audiences is that they don't get the luxury of the entire creative process. They only see glimpses of what is sometimes days, weeks, months, or even years of preparation. It doesn't always work. Sometimes, our interpretations don't gel with the maestro or with the director. There can be all kinds of outside factors. But we truly give out best on each given day, and we do appreciate that the audience knows this. And the audience, in addition, can have much to offer us as well. I don't mind criticism in the least. But those criticizing sometimes need to know the entire picture.

I really like what Bayreuth does. Since they do the productions over several years in a festival atmosphere, the artists have a chance to build from year to year. We don't have this luxury very often in most productions—it's rehearse, perform it, and put it away. Sometimes you get another crack at the production, but not always. Returning to a favored production is always a great thing and allows more freedom. In 2008 I sang my first Dutchman in Washington [DC]. I thought it went pretty well. However, over the next several years, I got to sing the role in a great production in Munich in two or three different seasons. Last year, in 2015, I got a chance at the Washington Dutchman again. I couldn't believe how much easier it was and how much more I was able to bring to the production. I guess it's sort of like a fine wine—it had to age (or maybe I'm more like an aged cheese).

**You share your love of animals with the Master. How did you decide to become a singer instead of a veterinarian, a decision for which all Wagnerians are immensely grateful? Though I am sure you would have made a terrific veterinarian.**

I grew up in a very rural area. My love for animals was developed at a very early age. However, music came early into my life as well. I had the influence of fine music teachers from a VERY early age. They fostered my music growth, they led me to the right school; they have been active supporters of mine since those first days. I've always had a lot of very encouraging people in my life—family as a child, my dear wife, my incredible children, friends, colleagues, etc. Once you start singing, you realize there is nothing else you want or can do. I still have the joy of spending a lot of time with my animal friends as well. And when I'm on stage with an animal, which happens from time to time, it's a complete love fest. Oh, and also, perhaps I spent too many days working on an enormous chicken farm—that can turn anyone off being a vet very quickly.

**You have sung with a great many distinguished orchestras and in many famous opera houses. Have you ever sung in Boston? Or will the May 28 performance of Act 1 of *Siegfried* be your Boston premiere?**

This performance in Boston will mark the first time I've ever sung in Boston except for auditions and a competition well over 30 years ago. The only other time I've spent in Boston was at Logan Airport during a layover. I have been to Salem to the Witch Museum and around Boston . . . just never really in the city. I can't wait!!!! It is such a historic and wonderful town. I have also sung at Tanglewood—not quite the same thing as singing in the home of the Red Sox (by the way, I'm a lifelong St. Louis Cardinal fan; 1967 was one of the greatest years of my life).

**When you come to Boston, you will have sung with both our *Siegfried* (Daniel Brenna) and our *Mime* (David Cangelosi) in Washington National Opera's *Ring***

***Cycle.* Will this *Ring* experience in DC, just a few days before our May 28 concert, make it easier for you to perform it in Boston? Or do you know the role so well that by now you could sing it in your sleep?**

Yes, I think it will be interesting. Actually, I won't ever sing with Daniel in our concert in Boston, as our roles don't meet in Act 1. But I've worked with David [Cangelosi] a lot over the years, and our interplay will be based on those performances. I'm sure a great deal of what we do in Washington [DC] will creep in as well. I've been hearing Daniel in rehearsal here—he's an OUT-STANDING up-and-coming Wagner singer. And David—what a joy as a friend and as an outstanding colleague and artist. This is going to be a wonderful event. I'm so looking forward to it.

—*Dalia Geffen*