

## **Heldentenor Daniel Brenna's Honest Siegfried**

*Daniel Brenna will perform the famous role of Siegfried in the Boston Wagner Society's concert of Act 1 of Siegfried. This special event will take place on May 28, 2016, at 3 p.m., at Old South Church, Copley Square, Boston. The other musicians are Alan Held as Wotan (the Wanderer), David Cangelosi as Mime, and Jeffrey Brody at the piano.*

### **You are originally from the United States and studied voice at Boston University. What made you move to Europe just a few years ago?**

After leaving Boston University, I stopped singing and got a job on Wall Street in order to start hacking away at my student loan debt.

The sad events on 9-11 happened right outside our office windows and, to make a long story short, I started taking voice lessons again (after work) and eventually would schedule auditions around lunch breaks. After doing the NYIOP [an organization that promotes the performing arts] auditions several times, I got my break to make my German/European and professional debut in Gelsenkirchen.

### **What do you think of the productions in Europe? And how much do you feel you have to compromise yourself to fit into those productions?**

I have yet to be involved in a controversial staging and have been fortunate that even if the concept may not always have been traditional, they have all always been insightful and successful.

### **Wagner is rarely taught in Boston, with the exception of Jane Eaglen, who teaches at New England Conservatory. How did you encounter the music of Wagner? And what drew you to it?**

How wonderful that she is at NEC!

In my time at BU, we had the wonderful Joy McIntyre and the charming Richard Cassilly. Shortly before his untimely passing, Richard Cassilly had begun mentoring me; he heard that although I wasn't ripe yet, I was developing in the Heldentenor direction. His last suggestion to me was "start learning the *Ring* now (not trying to sing, but to memorize it) so that once you're old enough to sing it, it will already be a part of you."

We didn't get a chance to work on Siegmund, the first *Ring* role I learned, but I greatly appreciated his support. He was one of several people to tell me that I would be a late bloomer, so that helped me fight feeling discouraged.

How did I first encounter Wagner? Well I "discovered" opera midway through college, but via the Italian repertoire of Pavarotti and Sutherland, and later Tucker. I was warned off of Wagner because (a) it would ruin my voice, since (b) once I heard it, I might become addicted. So, I actually didn't listen to Wagner until after I'd begun my graduate degree; at this point I thought I was going to be a Rossini tenor. Funny.

Hearing *Salome* for the first time, though, turned my eyes greedily towards the German repertoire. *Die Walküre* was the first Wagner opera that crossed my path. They were right: I was sucked into Wagner's music and I continue to marvel at his musical genius!

**Is German your primary singing language? Besides Siegfried, have you sung other Wagnerian roles?**

Yes, most of my roles are in German or have been sung in a German translation. When I moved to Germany, I carried a stack of books in order to learn the language “on the fly.” In college I had studied French, so I had a lot to learn, but it was for the best that I learned German in an immersion environment!

Other than Siegfried, I have sung a couple of early Wagner operas, but my greatest success was as Tannhäuser. I’ve also loved performing Siegmund.

**How do you prepare for this very arduous role [Siegfried], which very few tenors can sing? Are there special things you do? Or do you have a talisman that you bring with you? If I remember correctly, it was Pavarotti who always picked up a nail backstage at the Met and took it with him to the stage for good luck.**

No, I’m not a superstitious singer.

How do I prepare? I sing and have fun. I’m not the kind of tenor who saves his voice too often in rehearsals, so I tend to explore from day one in full voice, and through the play I hope to find moments of honesty that I will keep.

When I first learned Siegfried, I felt an immediate kinship with him, not least of all with his tendency to be a bull in a china shop.

I cannot be afraid to sing Siegfried, since he knows no fear; as an actor I do my best to inhabit him and then just go out there and PLAY. Believe me, the role is a lot of fun!

**How do you view the character of Siegfried? Is he a naïve fool? Or a truly heroic demi-god? Or both?**

On the one hand he is a descendant of Wotan, and on the other he was raised in ignorance of his heritage. He is both.

It is true that he is more instinctual than intellectual, but Siegfried isn’t dimwitted—he is an impulsive child of nature, but by Act 1 he begins to question . . . he is desperate to learn but isn’t book smart. He was raised in a less than ideal situation, and as soon as he finds answers to his questions by learning about where he comes from, he overcomes all obstacles with breathtaking aplomb.

Onstage, I do my best to flesh out this dichotomy with an earthy physicalization while striving to sing with as much beauty as his heritage deserves.

**Siegfried grows somewhat during the *Ring Cycle*, but by the time he realizes what he has learned and lost, he is dying. How difficult is it for you show his wide range of emotions, from the childlike hero in Act 1 of *Siegfried* to the transition to the more aware man near the end of the *Ring Cycle*?**

This great character arc is still a work in progress. I only try to be as honest as I can with Siegfried’s emotional journey, and it will be a career-long search to show his development from

his sheltered/isolated childhood to a man led astray in the wide world to his inevitable end.

I try to keep my ears open to the clues in the Leitmotifs—by the conclusion of the *Ring Cycle*, these tunes are an “embarrassment of riches” (is that the right metaphor?), and I know I’ll never tire of untangling the musical puzzle that shows the truth in the music.

**You have sung with a variety of conductors. Do you have any preference in conducting style, especially Wagnerian conductors?**

I have been so fortunate with the musicians I’ve worked with and with the conductors leading us. We’re all somehow works in progress, and nobody wants to bring shame to the Meister, so everybody I’ve had the good fortune to encounter has had an open nature about the myriad ways things can be portrayed and conveyed.

I always appreciate being taken to task when I’ve strayed from Wagner’s blueprint: the notes and their values are important, and I am grateful when coaches and conductors keep me honest.

—*Dalia Geffen*