

# Wagneriana

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Ich höre dich, schlimmer Albe: was hast du meinem Schlaf zu sagen?

— *Götterdämmerung*

## From the President

Many music lovers shun Wagner's operas because of his fearsome reputation as an anti-Semite. They also are influenced by reports that Wagner's music is full of shrieks and therefore unpleasant. In addition, many people have heard rumors that he was a rotten person, a selfish megalomaniac.

Still, some listeners who grew up with prejudices against Wagner's music bravely enter this territory and end up enchanted by its richness, complexity, and sheer beauty. Who else can express human dilemmas and emotions with so much musical skill and imagination and tie the music so closely and expertly to the text? Is there another opera composer who dramatizes human concerns in such depth, as well as musically explore the philosophical problems that have preoccupied humankind for centuries? And last, is it worth either glossing over or somehow accepting Wagner's anti-Semitism in order to experience his extraordinary artworks?

For many people with horrible memories of the Holocaust or for those who have heard of the Nazis' unspeakable cruelties from their parents and others, the answer to the last question is a resounding no, which is completely understandable. Sometimes, though, even Holocaust survivors and/or their children valiantly delve into Wagner's sublime music and make no bones about enjoying it. One such person is the Israeli conductor and pianist Asher Fisch, whose parents survived the death camps.

Maestro Fisch, who recently—though unsuccessfully—tried to break the ban on performing Wagner in Israel, became one of the best Wagnerian conductors of our generation. On the ban, Maestro Fisch states: "There were many German Jews, like my mother, who thought that if you play Wagner in Israel, you've proven that you've prevailed. . . . You protest the Nazification, the nationalization of Wagner by the Nazis.' This, he noted, was the approach of

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## REVIEW

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### Bayreuth Diary on the Run: The Third *Ring* Cycle and *The Flying Dutchman*

*Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Bayreuth Festival,  
August 22, 23, 25, 27, 2013

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko; director: Frank Castorf;  
staging: Aleksandar Denić; costumes: Adriana Braga  
Peretzki

Alberich: Martin Winkler; Wotan: Wolfgang Koch;  
Fricka: Claudia Mahnke; Loge: Norbert Ernst;  
Fafner: Sorin Coliban; Fasolt: Günther Groissböck;  
Freia: Elisabet Strid; Mime: Burkhard Ulrich;  
Erda: Nadine Weissmann; Siegmund: Johan Botha;  
Sieglinde: Anja Kampe; Hunding: Franz-Josef Selig;  
Brünnhilde: Catherine Foster; Siegfried: Lance  
Ryan; Forest Bird: Mirella Hagen; Hagen: Attila Jun;  
Gunther: Alejandro Marco-Buhrmester; Gutrune:  
Allison Oakes

*The Flying Dutchman*, Bayreuth  
Festival, August 24, 2013

Conductor: Christian Thielemann;  
director: Jan Philipp Gloger;  
staging: Christof Hetzer; costumes:  
Karin Judd

Steersman: Benjamin Bruns;  
Daland: Franz-Josef Selig;  
Dutchman: Samuel Youn; Senta:  
Ricarda Merbeth; Erik: Tomislav  
Mužek; Mary: Christa Mayer

#### *Das Rheingold*

Despite the English and German presses' reports on the dismal failure of this year's *Ring* in Bayreuth, *Rheingold* was one of the most effective productions I've seen in my many years of attending the *Ring* Cycle. This production captured the essence of the *Ring*—a power-hungry money grab or, this time, oil grab—but in very innovative ways.

All the characters—gods, Nibelungen, Rhinemaidens, and even Loge—were mean, grubby, sleazy, and sex-obsessed. Rhinemaidens were portrayed as sluts,

if not sex workers; Alberich was clearly motivated by dirty sex, and Wotan was number one among them! He was powerfully portrayed by Wolfgang Koch as a huge womanizer, and every woman on the stage got his sexual attention, even Erda. There was no nobility of character whatsoever.

The entire production was conceived as a play within a play where the live action took place in a run-down motel in Texas on a revolving turntable. The action was filmed and shown on a huge video screen above the stage as a close-up of the same scene in video format. Sometimes the video forecasted scenes to come. The effect was marvelously theatrical and could have come only from a director with deep theater and technology experience and who could get the singers to act!

The cast was uniformly superb, as was the somewhat straightforward but no less dramatic conducting of Kirill Petrenko.

#### *Die Walküre*

*Die Walküre* brought a number of surprises. The setting changed to an oil-producing camplike development in Azerbaijan, which was very effective. It contained a very tall tower surrounded by smaller attached structures, all made of wood. Ladders ran up and down the tower, and singers often climbed up and sang from a high platform. Act 1 was set in a small side structure where a much-abused Sieglinde (Anja Kampe) awaited a stern, black-clothed, and mean Hunding (the excellent Franz-Josef Selig). Johan Botha's

Siegmund was well sung, although his voice had a monotonal quality, and his lack of dramatic stage presence, together with his size, made for an unlikely pair of lovers.

Act 2 took place in the oil compound and showed an older Wotan sporting a long white beard and Turkish-style black trousers. He fought with a Fricka dressed as a Middle Eastern princess, in glittery robes. Claudia Mahnke's Fricka was well sung, and Wolfgang Koch again excelled as an Eastern or Asian oil magnate.

Act 3 was perhaps the best, as it featured, for the very first time in my long *Ring*-going life, Valkyries

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. . . were mean,  
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sex-obsessed.*

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Norbert Ernst as Loge and Burkhard Ulrich as Mime in *Das Rheingold*; photo © by Enrico Nawrath/Bayreuth Festival

dressed in different costumes, perhaps symbolizing the multicultural approach of this production. As the action progressed, their Eastern costumes morphed into strapless gowns, again a different one for each. There were many wonderful touches. In most productions, Wotan and Brünnhilde approach each other and embrace, but here he grabbed her and passionately kissed her on the mouth.

Wotan's farewell was nothing short of spectacular, both dramatically and musically. The use of video was particularly effective. The terrified, anxious face of Brünnhilde stared with wide-open eyes as the huge fire burned brightly in an oil barrel just below the screen. Both singers, Catherine Foster and Wolfgang Koch, were wonderful, and both proved they can act.

The supreme star of this evening, however, was Kirill Petrenko, with his fierce, flowing, and exuberant mastery of the score and the gorgeous sound of the magnificent Bayreuth orchestra.

### **Interlude: *The Flying Dutchman***

We used to get a free day between *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* and *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Nowadays, the in-between days are filled with other

productions. Although I was loath to break into the *Ring* with yet another *Flying Dutchman*, I am very glad I went. This, too, was a modern production with no ship (just a little rowboat, with Daland and the steersman in it) but a large metallic construction filled with flashing lights and a mirrored ground. Instead of spinning, the women packed small electric fans into boxes, and at the happy ending, little bride and groom figures.

Vocally, this was another exceptional cast headed by two diametrically opposed male leads: the powerful bass-baritone of Franz-Josef Selig as a fussy, silly, greedy Daland and a pale, suffering, angst-ridden, victimized Dutchman, wrenchingly sung by Samuel Youn. Their vocal and dramatic differences made for superb theater. Ricarda Merbeth's strong sound, good pitch, and electric high notes, plus her physical loveliness, created a great Senta. But here again the star was conductor Christian Thielemann, who led the most dramatic, energetic, and vibrant performance of *The Dutchman* I've ever heard. From the opening notes of the overture—which can sound hackneyed—his conducting was at high throttle! Yet the slower, softer



*Act 3 of Der fliegende Holländer in Bayreuth, 2013; photo © by Enrico Nawrath/dpa*

parts, as in the Dutchman-Senta duet, were lyrically played. This was orchestral music making at its best!

### *Siegfried*

Siegfried was difficult for many audience members to accept and was viciously booed at the end. The first set was the famous Mount Rushmore showing the heads of Mao, Stalin, Lenin, and Marx. Then the revolving stage turned to the famous Alexanderplatz in Berlin—a noted hot spot.

Mime's hut was an aluminum trailer at the base of the mountain and filled with trash and, surprisingly, books. In addition to Siegfried—a black-costumed, punkish Lance Ryan—and Mime in a jacket and raggedy skirt, a chained man played the bear and was onstage throughout the first act. I believe he was supposed to represent a slave (under socialism??). The Alexanderplatz was also used to show the seamier side of socialist life. A very angry, boozing Wotan confronted and virtually raped Erda, shown as a sex worker. She threw wine in his face, but later, in a remarkable

scene, went down on him while the video above showed her sucking his finger!

The Wood Bird was a beautiful woman in a slinky white gown and sporting enormous colored wings. Siegfried seduced her, and they made passionate love, another modernism that I've never seen before. The romantic end between Siegfried and Brünnhilde was like nothing I had seen. The set moved back to the Alexanderplatz, where a table was set with drinks and glasses. Siegfried, who had left Brünnhilde when she began to sing about her new life, entered and sat down, drank wine, read the menu as though he was about to order food, and when she followed him still singing away, he angrily got up, leaned against a pillar, and with his body language said "Put up or shut up." Just then the Forest Bird, now wingless, entered, and Siegfried rushed over to kiss her before he had even touched Brünnhilde!

The overall concept of this unique interpretation was that modern society, capitalist and socialist, turns

people into nasty subhumans. There was no simple, innocent hero, and no smart, all-knowing women. Thus far, Brünnhilde had remained untouched, but there was still *Götterdämmerung* to come!

### *Götterdämmerung*

*Götterdämmerung* was the weakest of the four operas. One side of the huge set showed a rundown East German apartment building, and a silver trailer was parked in front of it. The other side showed the New York Stock Exchange building, which created quite a stir in the press but did not appear to contribute much to the production—except for its symbolic statement.

The Norns were dressed in colorful long gowns and seemed to use African-derived vodun (or voodoo) implements and candles as their runes, creating a shrine in the small gated courtyard of the apartment building. Siegfried and Brünnhilde conversed rather mournfully in front of the trailer. There was no Rhine journey; Siegfried slept on a bench as the music soared. There was no funeral procession either. The dead Siegfried, who was killed with a baseball bat by Hagen, was dragged in, covered by a large black garbage bag. Brünnhilde walked down a huge flight of stairs, beginning the Immolation Scene while Gutrune fluttered around her.

This opera carried the themes identified in the earlier works. The people were uncaring, just going through the motions of life, and death interspersed with a lot of drinking and sex. Most of the singers sang very well, with good characterization. Catherine Foster was very good as Brünnhilde. I hope she will continue to grow in this role, as her voice is large,



*The Rhinemaidens as “sluts” with Lance Ryan as Siegfried in Götterdämmerung; photo: Enrico Nawrath/Bayreuth Festival via Bloomberg*



*Mount Rushmore, with the U.S. presidents replaced by Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao in Siegfried; photo © Enrico Nawrath/Bayreuth Festival*

is well controlled, and has a *hochdramatisch* quality. Lance Ryan, dressed in leather and playing a punk Siegfried, was very much into his tough-guy characterization but sang very well. His death scene was one of the most moving I’ve ever heard. It was sung quietly, with complete control and lovely high tones. Attila Jun was less successful as Hagen, and despite his huge Mohawk hairdo, he did not seem menacing, and his voice was rather choked.

Even Kirill Petrenko and the orchestra sounded less brilliant. The conductor drew out the slow intervals so slowly that the musical lines were almost lost. Neither of the great orchestral interludes was played with the fullness and depth one usually hears in great performances.

It seemed that Frank Castorf and his team ran out of ideas in this last opera. Castorf did complain that he was not given enough rehearsal time. Perhaps Petrenko also lost a bit of momentum.

— Frances Henry

*Dr. Frances Henry is the chair of the Toronto Wagner Society.*



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## REVIEW

# Jeering and Applause at the Bayreuth *Ring* Cycle

## *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Bayreuth Festival, August 14–19, 2013

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko; director: Frank Castorf;  
staging: Aleksandar Denić; costumes: Adriana Braga Peretzki

Alberich: Martin Winkler; Wotan: Wolfgang Koch;  
Fricka: Claudia Mahnke; Loge: Norbert Ernst;  
Fafner: Sorin Coliban; Fasolt: Günther Groissböck;  
Freia: Elisabet Strid; Mime: Burkhard Ulrich;  
Erda: Nadine Weissmann; Siegmund: Johan Botha;  
Sieglinde: Anja Kampe; Hunding: Franz-Josef Selig;  
Brünnhilde: Catherine Foster; Siegfried: Lance  
Ryan; Forest Bird: Mirella Hagen; Hagen: Attila Jun;  
Gunther: Alejandro Marco-Buhrmester; Gutrune:  
Allison Oakes

I was lucky to have a seat in the first row of the orchestra section, and here the music was clearer than in other orchestra seats I had sat in before.

Kirill Petrenko's conducting was sensitively nuanced, emotionally alive, and fast, earning thunderous applause. Sometimes, though, I wished it were slower and allowed the audience to savor the more intricate passages.

I may be in the minority, but I believe Bayreuth's semi-covered pit has a negative impact on the sound quality. Even in the first row, the notes sometimes seemed tangled. Everything else being equal, I prefer a good seat at the Metropolitan Opera (in, say, the first twelve rows), but many authorities praise Bayreuth's acoustics. It's also possible that the sound quality depends on how the staging reflects the sound back to the audience. Castorf's staging, which was frequently dense and in the front of the stage, may have helped in this regard.

The singing was uniformly good, with no weak points. Catherine Foster as Brünnhilde and Lance Ryan as Siegfried were a little unsure of themselves in the beginning, but they reached their required stature by the end of *Siegfried*. Wolfgang Koch as Wotan was a great success, and Anja Kampe was a truly commanding Sieglinde who gave 100 percent. Attila Jun's portrayal of Hagen was stunningly true to this



*Johan Botha as Siegmund and Anja Kampe as Sieglinde in a sleazy Texas motel; photo © Enrico Nawrath/Bayreuth Festival*

character, but he received less applause than I thought he deserved, perhaps for understandable reasons.

As is often the case, we saw some remarkable performances in the smaller roles, including Claudia Mahnke's Fricka, Norbert Ernst's Loge, Nadine Weissmann's Erda, and Franz-Josef Selig's Hunding. Martin Winkler's Alberich was every bit true to his character, with some great singing. It was one of the best performances of this cycle.

The stage production was controversial, and the jeering at the end, clearly directed at the production rather than at the singers or orchestral players, ranged from mild to intense. The staging was interesting in an artistic sense. It's not always easy to see the director's intent, but I sensed a coherence in style and statement, a rare achievement among modern Wagner productions.

The sets, however, were visually unappealing. From a motel and gas station to a camper surrounded by a tangle of objects, they were rarely helpful, or at least compatible, companions to the tender and hopeful musical passages. Also, a video screen, showing separate actions, either behind the scene or offstage, was distracting and at odds with the emotional states of the characters.

There was also much disjointedness between the drama and the staging at important junctures. Wotan was making out with both Fricka and Freia when the gods first appeared in *Rheingold*. The end of *Rheingold* was an emblematic (and humorous) example of this staging. When the orchestra played the stately motif of the rainbow bridge that carries the gods into Valhalla, extras who had been portraying servants and other staff turned on a diner-style jukebox downstairs and began swinging to the silent music in the same rhythm as the orchestra's. Maybe a valid point was being made, but it was nevertheless strange.

In Wotan's farewell, the chief god kissed his daughter inappropriately, and she seemed to feel strange about it. The love scene in *Siegfried* culminated in Siegfried feeding a crocodile. These scenes were incompatible with the work's intent. Perhaps Castorf had a point to make, but it wasn't clear what he could achieve without altering the music or the libretto. *Götterdämmerung* and Act 1 of *Die Walküre* suffered much less from these issues.

Wagner's music and drama, by themselves, generally fill the audience's available attention and leave little room for taking in extraneous actions. Whenever a director wants to put a big personal stamp on an opera, the production tends to overflow with visual stimulation, and some of the composer's art is lost. Staging a Wagner work may require a director's willingness to humble him- or herself to a secondary or complementary role, to serve as a handmaiden who delivers a glorious work of art more or less intact.

— Karl Wee

*Karl Wee is a former member of the Boston Wagner Society.*

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## Donations for 2013

*We are very grateful to the following individuals who have so generously contributed to the Boston Wagner Society in 2013.*

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## Gottfried Wagner in Boston

Not the least of Hitler's crimes was to cause half of Boston University's wonderful Wagner in Context series to focus on his insane anti-Semitism and one third of the sessions to be dominated by his furious great-grandson denouncing "poisonous" operas.

Of course, we've seen this before: the Paul Lawrence Rose book (*Wagner: Race and Revolution*), so well refuted by Bryan Magee's *The Tristan Chord*; Marc Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, so well demolished by Hans Rudolf Vietz; and even Barry Millington in *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth*.

Now Gottfried Wagner joins this pack. He claims that 600 footnotes back him up in his new book, *Du sollst keine anderen Götter haben neben mir: Richard Wagner—Ein Minenfeld (You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me—A Minefield*, to be translated into English), but probably most of these footnotes, like his two Boston University presentations, are about the evils and folly that marked Wagner's life and thought, matters concerning which there is widespread agreement. If the operas are poisonous and racist, Gottfried Wagner failed to be very specific about it.

Magee has a whole list of errors by some of these writers (page 368) and even foretold Gottfried Wagner's misuse of the Ride of the Valkyries (365). Here are a few of the errors: there is "no evidence [Hitler] got any of his antisemitism from Wagner" (362); "under the Nazis Wagner productions sharply declined" (365). Millington writes that the better Arthur de Gobineau (a white supremacist repeatedly cited by Gottfried Wagner) and Wagner became acquainted, the more they realized their views diverged (379).

Great artists are the best guides to their creative intentions, but not necessarily the best guides to the interpretations of these works. If Wagner intended to convey a racist message in his operas, we are free to ignore it and rely on more benign interpretations. Gottfried Wagner's insistence on the "unity" of Wagner's

life, ideas, and creations would prevent the human race from doing what it has always done with great men: distinguish a genius's sense from his nonsense.

If the operas are an attempt to convert the world to evil ideas, as his great-grandson claims, Wagner kept unbelievably quiet about it. He never told us how to interpret the operas—strange behavior in a man so obsessively outspoken about everything else. And if this was his intention, he failed miserably. As Magee notes, many of Wagner's patrons were and are Jews—including those who personally experienced anti-Semitic oppression.

As Gottfried Wagner says, almost all of Wagner's

operas are about politics. For example, in *Parsifal* we can see a clear political message: compassion is humanity's highest value, governments must focus on it, incompetent leaders need to be replaced by good ones, evil leaders like Klingsor need to be defeated, and a long, hard struggle is required for good leaders to build a world of compassion, which is precisely what Parsifal does.

Let us try a thought experiment: If we learn that Gottfried Wagner underestimated the poison in the operas, for instance, if Kundry's death is a metaphor for the Holocaust and all Nazi atrocities were planned long ago by Wagner, do we really think the world would be different? The music would be no less glorious. The world would continue to make the distinction between Wagner's sense and nonsense. Above all, millions would continue to enjoy the operas under various benign interpretations. What makes the operas great is their musically stunning dramatization of essential human truths. We should focus on how the operas achieve this, not on a hysterical reaction to a horrific genocide that Wagner never advocated. Finally, Wagnerites should visit Daniel Barenboim's Web site to learn how such hysteria violates the best of Jewish tradition.

— Reginald McKeen

*Reginald McKeen, a retired history teacher, has been a member of the Boston Wagner Society since 2004.*

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*What makes the operas great is their musically stunning dramatization of essential human truths.*

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## Hilan Warshaw's Documentary

Filmmaker Hilan Warshaw's *Wagner's Jews* echoes Wagner's life—there is much we can say about it, both good and bad. Alas, Warshaw has fallen into the trap of post-Holocaust Wagner studies: focusing on the bizarre and vile life at the expense of the artistic creation. The result is misleading.

It's misleading to quote Wagner's despicable jocular remarks expressing joy about Jewish deaths in a theater fire, along with his vile hopes for Jewish expulsion, without also stressing that he was no advocate of their extermination. Wagner was not a Nazi, and as Daniel Barenboim writes, we cannot blame him for Hitler: "one can hardly hold him responsible for Hitler's use and misuse of his music and his world views" ([www.danielbarenboim.com](http://www.danielbarenboim.com)). We can understand why Warshaw's relatives (who turned off the radio when Wagner's music came on) blamed Wagner for the Holocaust, but it is a grave historical error for us to do so.

It's also misleading to describe *Parsifal* as Wagner's most Christian opera without giving any context. The opera uses Christian symbolism, but Wagner was no Christian (unlike, say, Poulenc), and the work is not a call to convert anyone.

Finally, Warshaw's emphasis on conductor Hermann Levi's successful resistance to Wagner's attempt to convert him is misleading. Convert Levi to what? We know what church Mahler was forced to join in a more famous case of operatic blackmail. But we don't know what church Wagner might have told Levi to join.

Warshaw is wise to stress this incident, for it symbolizes how Jews who knew Wagner personally did a fine job of distinguishing between the vile man and his glorious works. This is the film's great strength and should serve as a model for us.

We must never deny the terrible pain this issue has caused many people. But if we let it control our musical and historical judgment, we grant Hitler another victory. As Luther said, why should the devil have all the good tunes?

— Reginald McKeen

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## REVIEW

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### All-Wagner Concert (Almost) in Lucerne

September 6, 2013, Staatskapelle Dresden

Conductor Christian Thielemann; tenor Johan Botha

*Der fliegende Holländer*: Overture; *Faust* Overture; *Rienzi*: Overture and *Rienzi's Prayer*; *Lohengrin*: Prelude to Act 1 and Grail Narrative ("In fernem Land"); Hans Werner Henze (1926–2012), *Fraternité* (1999); *Tannhäuser*: Rome Narrative and Overture

A virtually all-Wagner concert in Lucerne was a fitting end to my three weeks of nearly constant immersion in Wagner's music last summer: the Castorf *Ring* and *Lohengrin* in Bayreuth, *Die Meistersinger* in Salzburg, and the Lucerne *Ring*, along with a Berlin Philharmonic concert led by Simon Rattle and two Royal Concertgebouw concerts led by Daniele Gatti. Once again, Christian Thielemann showed that he is the leading Wagnerian conductor of our generation. Judging from his previous day's reading of Bruckner's Fifth Symphony, which was a masterly, organic, and holistic performance, he is one of the most exciting and inspiring conductors of German music today.

Thielemann's concert featured preludes to Wagner's early canonical operas, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, as well as *Rienzi*. In between was Wagner's *Faust* Overture, which sounded a lot like the *Dutchman* overture that preceded it. While the orchestra was not always perfect, especially the occasional flubs in the brass and woodwind sections, in general it responded to Thielemann's detailed and meticulous instructions with elegant and never too bombastic playing, and the result was often revealing. The prelude to Act 1 of *Lohengrin* was exquisite from the beginning, with the mini chamber music pieces for the strings and then woodwinds evoking the otherworldliness of the drama to come. When the violin section began to play with shimmering and overlaying beauty that brought tiny waves of one gorgeous melody after another, I cried after only a few minutes into the music. Thielemann kept the volume very low, leading

*Continued on page 12*

. . . Toscanini. . . 'It's mostly frustrating because there's so much ignorance and disinformation connected with the ban,' he went on. 'If I knew that everyone knew the facts and was making a clear, logical decision, I could live better with it.' As an example, Fisch recalled being taught in school that Wagner's music was played as Jews were sent to their deaths in the concentration camps. 'Which is complete nonsense,' Fisch said, citing repertory lists from a women's orchestra in Auschwitz. 'We know exactly what they played—they played Mozart and Beethoven, and polkas and mazurkas, and Johann Strauss'” (David Weininger, “Asher Fisch Discusses Performing Wagner with the BSO,” July 19, 2012, *Boston Globe*).

Another widespread misconception is that Wagner injected his anti-Semitism into his characters and plots. Thus, many critics are convinced that Alberich, Mime, Beckmesser, and Klingsor are caricatures of Jews. Some claim that Kundry dies because she is Jewish, never mind that she acts like a pagan throughout *Parsifal* (the opera was banned by the Nazis). And yet Cosima, whose anti-Semitism was a great deal more strident than her husband's, writes in her diary, “Richard tells me he once felt every sympathy for Alberich, who represents the ugly person's longing for beauty. In Alberich, the naiveté of the non Christian world.” As Milton E. Brener, in his much-praised book *Richard Wagner and the Jews*, writes, “Naiveté, it must be understood, to Wagner was not a negative trait. His hero Siegfried was naïve (books.google.com, p. 290).

The renowned conductor Daniel Barenboim, who lived in Israel for many years, writes: “In the operas themselves, there is not one Jewish character. There is not one anti-Semitic remark. There is nothing in any one of the ten great operas of Wagner even remotely approaching a character like Shylock. That you can interpret Mime or Beckmesser in a certain anti-Semitic way (in the same way, you can also interpret the Flying Dutchman as the errant Jew), this is a question that speaks not about Wagner, but about our imagination and how our imagination is developed” (“Wagner and Ideology,” danielbarenboim.com).

Although we should never whitewash Wagner's hideous anti-Jewish remarks, let us note that his antipathy

did not extend to his art or go very deep. He twice refused to sign a petition demanding the restriction of Jewish rights. On rare occasions, he expressed his admiration for Jews in general and for Mendelssohn's and Halévy's music in particular. He also admired and liked the conductor Hermann Levi and many other Jewish musicians. R. J. Stove, a reviewer of Brener's *Richard Wagner and the Jews*, writes, “Wagner's relations with five Jews in particular—pianists Carl Tausig and Joseph Rubinstein; conductor Hermann Levi; impresario Angelo Neumann; and journalist Heinrich Porges—prove to have been of the most remarkable complexity and ambiguity” (“Wagner's Ambiguities,” *First Principles*, February 13, 2014). The bonds of friendship between Wagner and these musicians are undeniable, despite his anti-Semitic rants (and anti-French ones).

The Israeli musician, musicologist, pianist, and composer Irad Atir states that Wagner's “opposition to Jewishness was part of his opposition to the sociopolitical and cultural reality of the period in general, including the non-Jewish German reality. He criticized certain aspects of Germanism; for example, the conservatism, religiosity, pride in aristocratic origins, and militarism. He also criticized Jewish separatism and lust for money. For him, there were good Germans and bad Germans, good Jews and bad Jews” (“Wagner Didn't Hate All Jews, Just 'Bad' Ones, Argues Israeli Scholar,” *Haaretz*, January 28, 2013).

For such a prolific and outspoken author, it is remarkable that Wagner never described any of his characters as Jews in his writings. Wagner's intent in his operas was not to demonize the Jews but to elevate humankind, all of it.

As to his so-called unpleasant personality, it was all for the sake of his art. He was the misunderstood genius, a man ahead of his time, which must have grated on him. And if he seemed arrogant by stating that he was a genius, he was taking himself at his own valuation, which was quite accurate. He *was* a genius. Why pretend otherwise? If he also used people and borrowed money, it was because of his urgent desire to promote his operas.

Many scholars and reviewers agree that the quality of Wagner's operatic creations went far beyond that of

his writings. In fact, many of his copious articles and books cannot be (and were not) taken seriously. By contrast, his music was incredibly innovative and influential, to the point where one wonders how a human being could have even imagined these sublime notes, rhythms, chromaticisms. As Verdi said (with some exaggeration), *Tristan und Isolde* was not written by a human being. Wagner's operas take us into the realm of the soul and dramatize what is universal in all of us. They show us the full, complex range of the human psyche, from an evil psychopath with the basest of motives (Hagen) to characters who commit the noblest acts (Siegfried, Brünnhilde, and Parsifal). Thus Wagner's art soars far above the worldly, the mundane, the historical, into a magical realm where we witness the naked truth about human nature.

— Dalia Geffen

## Upcoming Events

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**Saturday, March 8, 2014, 2 p.m.**  
**“What the Composer Intended:  
Producing Wagner on Stage”**

Audiovisual presentation by William Fregosi,  
stage director, designer, and librettist  
Buckingham Brown and Nichols Upper  
School  
80 Gerry's Landing Rd., Cambridge, MA  
02138  
Free to all

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**Saturday, April 5, 2014, 1:30 p.m.**  
**“Wagner and Brahms: Rivalries and  
Common Ground”**

Audiovisual presentation by Dr. Saul  
Lilienstein  
Hunneman Hall, Public Library of Brookline  
361 Washington St., Brookline, MA 02446  
Free to all

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**Friday, May 2, 2014, 7 p.m.**  
**Recital: Baritone Marcelo Guzzo and  
Pianist Rainer Armbrust**  
***Wagner, Verdi, and more***

Vocal excerpts and piano solos  
A reception will follow  
Pickman Hall, Longy School of Music  
27 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138  
Details to come

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**Sunday, June 1, 2014, 3 p.m.**  
**Wagner and Strauss**

In celebration of Strauss's 150th birthday  
Audiovisual presentation by James Holman,  
chair of the Wagner Society of Washington  
DC  
A reception will follow  
The College Club  
44 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02116  
Details to come

find us on 

up to the descent of the grail. And even at a point where most conductors would let the musicians go, with the percussion loudly marking the shift, he kept the orchestra relatively quiet, instead emphasizing the drawn-out and organic cohesion of the prelude as one continuous wave of melodies. I so wished to hear the rest of the opera under this conductor.

The *Rienzi* overture also began slowly, but speeded up in the middle as the full orchestra joined in, and the result was thrilling. The *Dutchman* overture was not as exciting as in Bayreuth, where I clearly heard the ocean roaring in the strings. Lacking the covered pit of the Bayreuth Festival House, the brass section overpowered the strings. Nevertheless, this overture, as well as the lengthy *Tannhäuser* overture, was almost flawless, and the music flowed as one contiguous whole.

Johan Botha is one of the best Wagnerian tenors, and I will take his clarion and sometimes sweet voice, which has enough heft when required, over darker-voiced heldentenors any day. He sang without the score, and as his voice warmed up (the first vocal piece, *Rienzi's* Prayer, was perhaps the weakest of his overall excellent performance), he grew in confidence and his delivery became increasingly effortless. A friend pointed out that one can scarcely tell when he takes a breath, as his technique and breath control are solid. He produced a continuous and delightful string of pearls without any audible breathing, just as Thielemann was able to do with the orchestra. An organic wholeness all around.

Botha's Grail Narrative included the seldom-performed second stanza. I admire his stamina and enjoyed the rarely heard music, which essentially reprises the Act 1 prelude and brings us back to the beginning, so to speak, with the shimmering violins. As good as Botha was, I have heard a much better Grail Narrative sung by Klaus Florian Vogt almost 20 times now (and counting), and to my mind no tenor can surpass Vogt as Lohengrin.

Botha truly shone in *Tannhäuser's* Rome Narrative. He was thoroughly comfortable with both the text and the music, and his delivery was often subtle and impassioned. He even gestured for emphasis at times, and his display of *Tannhäuser's* disappointment at having been rejected by the pope was wrenching. Bravo! He was

rewarded by an appreciative crowd and was called back repeatedly.

Not surprisingly, Thielemann chose the Act 3 prelude to *Lohengrin* as an encore, which he and his orchestra had also played as an encore at Carnegie Hall in April 2013. The brass did flub a bit, but again, the energetic and animated performance made me long to hear his complete *Lohengrin*.

Wagner was everywhere in Lucerne, although I could sense that the audience was not necessarily familiar with Wagner's music. The hall was not always full, perhaps due to the high prices.

— Atsuko Imamura

*Atsuko (Ako) Imamura is an avid Wagnerian who travels around the world to hear Wagner's music. She has been a member of the Boston Wagner Society since 2010.*

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