

The Raven

Newsletter of

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest

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Dennis Petersen



Sonja Thompson

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How I started with Wagner ...

It is a tradition in our society for members to tell us how they became interested in Wagner. In this issue we continue with Woody Andrews, Secretary and member of the Board of Directors of the Society.

Starting with Wagner

By Woody Andrews



I began with Wagner when I was in grade school. I will never forget those strange names on my mother's 78's: Die Götterdämmerung, Tannhäuser, etc. They seemed to come from another planet, as did Kirsten Flagstad singing "Die Walküre--Ho-Yo-To-Ho" (that's the way the record label reads) and John Charles Thomas singing "O du, mein holder Abendstern."

My next contact was when Jon Bergerud and I each bought as teenagers a recording of Lohengrin on LP's. It was on sale for the grand sum of \$4.98 at the Chester Groth music store and had a magnificent photo of a swan on the cover. It sat on my shelf for some time before I tackled it, but when I did, I was hooked. Those exciting choruses and stage trumpets!

In college I was close enough to New York to get to the old Met on weekends. I remember sitting in cheap seats behind posts and reveling in Parsifal and Tannhäuser. Again I was transported to a different world. The audience at intermission seemed like a play on a stage set. The world Wagner had created was the real world.

I took a Wagner course in college taught by the distinguished musicologist, Oliver Strunk. In our last class he suggested that some of us might have come to the course with the same sort of curiosity we would have brought to the reptile house at the zoo. That wasn't the case for me. I loved studying those operas.

In 1961 I heard Wagner in Munich and Bayreuth, and then when

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The Tristan Project is Two-Thirds There: Help Us Go Over the Top!

By David W. Cline, MD



As president of your society, I am happy to report that we have pledges totaling \$108,500 towards our goal of \$150,000 in support of the opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, to be produced in the spring of 2010 by the Minnesota Opera.

We have two large gifts that are matching grants that I hope will stimulate pledges from members of our society and other interested persons.

As you may be aware, *Tristan und Isolde* was Wagner's most dramatic opera. His meditation on love and death is profound and helps us find more meaning and more depth in life.

I encourage you all to send in your pledge forms (a copy is included) if you have not already done so, no matter the amount. Upon receiving pledges from the members of our Wagner Society, we will be in a position to solicit contributions from other organizations, individuals, and institutions.

We will have a strong talking point if we can show that 100% of our members have pledged financial support to this project, which will bring such a rich cultural experience to our community. Any amount, no matter how small, will help in this effort.

Please mark your calendar and plan to attend other programs listed in this newsletter, which include presentations of Wagner's work.

Parsifal: A Series of Personal Experiences

by David W. Cline, MD

Richard Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, is based on Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic poem, *Parzival* and other early sources related to the legend of the Holy Grail. However, Wagner used this material to develop a totally new Parsifal story, in which he mixed Christian and Buddhist elements with aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy. But in another ways, the Libretto resembles a compendium of Wagner's spiritual world.

This opera was written after Wagner had written and presented *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* at the newly built Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Germany. Wagner wrote this opera to contemplate his spiritual journey. He died several months after the first performance in 1882.

Parsifal was much more than a document of Christian faith. Wagner designated it as a '*Bühnenweihfestspiel*' or 'stage-consecrating festival play.' Wagner decreed that no other theater than Bayreuth could perform the work for 30 years; however, the Metropolitan Opera broke the Bayreuth copyright at the beginning of the new century. The work gradually began to be staged by theatres all over the world only after 1914.

I have seen six productions of *Parsifal*, the first of which occurred at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin on April 28, 2002. It was part of a Wagner Festival Extraordinaire in Berlin that occurred between April 11 through April 29, 2002. In this festival, all 10 of Wagner's major operas were presented in two series. They were conducted by Daniel Barenboim, directed by Harry Kupfer, and set design by Hans Schavernoch.

The curtain opens with the back of the stage a wall of corrugated stainless steel with horizontal colored fluorescent lights about one yard apart, periodically flashing. Act I was presented in a straightforward way until the communion scene at the end of the

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Parsifal

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act. Then, Amfortas sprawled on top of a pointed piercing phallus type object, the width of an ironing board and four times as long. He fell off this pedestal and uncovered the Grail, which was a large plastic bowl with a stem on it that fit into the very point of



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the phallus. At the end of the communion scene, everybody fell down and the phallus rose high in the air. In Act II, Parsifal saw the Flowermaidens on TV monitors, but after Parsifal rejected Kundry, the monitors and Klingsor all vanished or melted into a pile of smoke and molten metal. Act III was passionately done. It ends with Parsifal putting the sword on top of the Grail, which is inserted into the end of the phallus. The phallus then rises high in the air. Amfortas dies and Kundry appears piously devoted to Parsifal.

I was uncomfortable with this production, because it associated the evils of sexuality with redemption through the communion of the Grail balanced on the end of a penis. It left an unpleasant feeling.

I spoke to some new friends from Aurora, Oregon who had a more salutary interpretation. They thought that Amfortas had been
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Parsifal

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wounded, because he had been diverted from his main duties of ferreting out the evil Klingsor. He had been redeemed by Parsifal's compassion through empathy. Now there was true love and meaningful relationship within which a healthy, sexual relationship could evolve. Compassion was triumphant.

My second experience with Parsifal occurred at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City on Saturday afternoon, April 12, 2003. Placido Domingo sang Parsifal, Renee Pape was Gurnemanz, Violeta Urmana was Kundry, and Falk Struckmann was Amfortas. The opera was conducted by Valery Gergiev, production by Otto Schank, set and projection design by Gunther Schneider-Siemssen. This was a classic production following the edicts of Wagner, unlike the first presentation I saw in Berlin.



Act I, Scene 2, of Wagner's *Parsifal*
© 2003 Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

It began in a forested area with large Douglas fir around a grassy plain with a lake in the back of the stage. The dress was of ancient times, the music was glorious and wonderfully moving, especially the overture and

the transition scene from the meadow to the castle of the Grail where Gurnemanz takes Parsifal to view the communion service. That transition scene was awesome. The giant Douglas fir morphed into the pillars of the cathedral of the Grail and the chorus sang beautifully and the children's chorus sang almost as beautifully. All of it was just wonderful and brought tears of joy and beauty, as has occurred with me in other Wagner productions.

Act II was serenely done with the Flowermaidens dressed very

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Events

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest
in association with the
Germanic – American Institute
present

An Evening of Schubert and Wagner



A Recital Performance by
Dennis Petersen, tenor
Sonja Thompson, accompanist



Wednesday 18 April, 2007
7:30 PM

Germanic – American Institute
301 Summit Avenue
Saint Paul MN 55102

*Please join us for an informal Reception following the performance.
Cake and coffee will be served*

Cost: \$22 at the door, \$20 for advance reservations by phone or mail.
Call 651.222.7027 for reservations.

Through his innate sense of style, command of languages and superior acting abilities, tenor Dennis Petersen has distinguished himself in a variety of operatic roles, in addition to his appearances in concerts, recitals and oratorio performances.

Recent seasons included the New York premiere of *Dead Man Walking* at New York City Opera, *Turandot* and *Madama Butterfly* for San Francisco Opera, *Salome* for Opera Pacific, the U.S. premiere of *The Handmaid's Tale* with Minnesota Opera and *Dead Man Walking* for Michigan Opera Theatre. He appeared with San Francisco in *Die Zauberflöte*, *Doktor Faust* and *The Cunning Little Vixen* which he also sang with Chicago Lyric during the 2004-05 season in addition to Mime in *Das Rheingold*. He returned to Chicago for additional

Recital

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performances of *Rheingold* after singing his first *Otello* for Sacramento Opera.

His 2005-06 season saw him returning to Lyric Opera of Chicago for *Zauberflöte* and San Francisco Opera for the new production of *La Forza del Destino* and to the Metropolitan Opera for Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa*. The current '06-07 season includes performances with San Francisco for *Fledermaus* and Chicago for *Fledermaus* and *Dialogues des Carmelites* and Spoleto Festival USA for a new production of *Mahagonny*. Further into the future, Mr. Petersen returns to the Met for *War and Peace* and *The Gambler* tours Japan and to Italy to sing the School Master in *Vixen* under Seiji Ozawa and is Mime in the 2009 Seattle Opera *Ring* Cycle.

Pianist Sonja Thompson performs regularly with a variety of singers and instrumentalists in recital, and maintains conducting and educational activities in a broad range of venues. In addition to performing, Ms. Thompson is Assistant Professor of Music at Augsburg College where she works with students in Performance Studies, is an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota School of Music, and serves as Associate Music Director, working with Philip Brunelle, at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis. A graduate of The Juilliard School's Accompanying program, Sonja has worked locally with Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Nautilus Music-Theater, Opera 101 Theater Company, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Minnesota Opera and the University of Minnesota Opera Theater. Nationally she has worked with New Dramatists in New York City, Georgia State University in Atlanta, Florida Grand Opera in Miami, the Aaron Copland Music and Arts Program in Westchester, New York and others.

Recent performances include North American and Latin American song recitals with soprano Maria Jette in Oregon and Texas, performances of Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* with tenor Dennis Petersen in Chicago, San Francisco and Iowa, two all-Grieg recitals for the Grieg Society and *Mindekirken* with Norwegian soprano Marianne Hirsti, several concerts featuring the songs and vocal chamber music of Robert Schumann and Brahms for the 2006 Saint

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Parsifal

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scantly, the way Wagner wanted. The seduction theme by Kundry of Parsifal was sensuous. I do not know how Parsifal could say "no." When Klingsor hurled the holy spear, lightning flashes, and a strobe light flickers and, suddenly, Parsifal grabs the spear out of the air. Voila! Then Parsifal makes a sign and the whole garden and Klingsor disintegrate into a desert.

In Act III, I was most impressed by the beauty of the Good Friday spell. The music from the orchestra is intermingled by Gurnemanz and Parsifal singing about "the meadows wet with the tears of penitent sinners and the dew of spring and nature."

The last portion of the act when Parsifal takes over the leadership of the Knights of the Grail, heals Amfortas, and delivers the sustenance of the Grail is a very moving experience, complete with spine-tingling thrills and tears, because it was so lovely, and beautiful. I was tranquil afterwards, with a great sense of peace and the Grail music singing in my head. The words of another Wagner devotee came to mind. I heard this quote on Peter Allen's talking about Wagner's *Ring*. The devotee said, "Going to see *The Ring* is worth a year of psychotherapy." I felt like I had a profound psychotherapeutic experience viewing this Parsifal. There is nothing more to say.

(This article will be continued in the next issue.)

Recital

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Paul Summer Song Festival, and a recital of Nordic composers for the National Convention of the National Association of Teachers of Singing.

An active chamber musician, Sonja has recently performed with cellists Janet Horvath, Adriana LaRosa-Ransom and David Holmes, violinist Helen Chang and clarinetists Nina Olsen and Jennifer Gerth. Last season's appearances included Messiaen's Quartet for the *End of Time* at several twin cities venues, cello sonatas by Rebecca Clarke, Edvard Grieg and Debussy, several recitals featuring chamber works by Clara and Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, and an all Brahms recital at SUNY Plattsburgh.

DvD Nights

First Thursdays 7-9 PM

We meet approximately the first Thursday of every month to watch and discuss various productions of Wagner's dramas currently available on DvD. The schedule is:

5 April 2007 *Der Fliegende Holländer*, conclusion

1 May 2007 *Parsifal*, Act I

17 June 2007 *Parsifal*, Act II

5 July 2007 *Parsifal*, Act III

Der Fliegende Holländer

Starring: Hildegard Behrens, Matti Salminen

Conductor: Leif Segerstam



Ilkka Backman's acclaimed production of Wagner's classic opera takes place outdoors in the huge courtyard of Finland's 500-year-old Olavinlinna Castle - a majestic and impressive setting, which gives the production an atmosphere and realism almost impossible to create in a conventional theatre. Hildegard Behrens, at the height of her career, is the tragic Senta, whose destiny is to redeem the Dutchman from his fate. The German bass-baritone, Franz Grundheber, sings the title role, and Finland's own Matti Salminen is the Norwegian sea captain, Daland.

From the Savonlinna Opera Festival.

This event is hosted by Kevin Edgar. Coffee and tea are provided. If you like, bring some snacks to share. (A kitchen is available.) The address is 700 Douglas Ave, Minneapolis. (Which is located two blocks south of the Walker Art Center on the Corner of Douglas and Hennepin.) The apartment building is called Kenwood Gables. If you are planning to attend please let Kevin know by email (wagner@bke.org) or phone 612-381-9429.

Watch your mail or visit our website for further details on the following forthcoming events.

Penelope Turing



Monday evening, 30 April 2007
at the home of John Heefner
1819 Colfax Ave
Minneapolis MN 55403
6:00 Social Gathering
6:30 Dinner
7:00 Talk: *The Best of Bayreuth*

RVSP with Dr. Cline's office at 612-863-4319 by 27 April.

Penelope Turing is a well-known chronicler of the Bayreuth Festival and author of *The New Bayreuth* as well as a biography of Hans Hotter, *Man and Artist*. She last spoke to us in 2000.

Dr. Sven Friedrich

Thursday, 25 October 2007 (Tentative)
A Lecture by
Dr Sven Friedrich
Director of the Richard Wagner Museum
& Haus Wahnfried



Membership Renewals

Weiche, Wotan! Weiche! Our membership year is on a calendar year basis. In order to retain your Bayreuth ticket priority, you must renew your membership now. If you have any questions about your membership status contact membership@wagnertc.org or call Carol Thomas at 612-559-6468.

Andrews

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I lived in New York I was a member of the Metropolitan Opera Club. It had a block of reserved seats available almost twice a week to members. Those were the days of the great Birgit Nilsson, and her glorious voice filled the Met to the brim. I liked to sit on the floor just behind the curtains to the Dress Circle where there was enough light to follow the vocal score. For years I preferred Wagner on record rather than in performance because I liked to know what the characters were saying. Supertitles have been a godsend, and I now enjoy good performances as much as recordings.

If you would like to share your story, please let us know! Email Newsletter@wagnertc.org or contact the editor, Carol Thomas, at 612-559-6468

New Members

Foster Beyers

Bruce Bisenz

On the cover:

Tenor Dennis Petersen, Pianist Sonja Thompson

Photos courtesy Dennis Petersen

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