

# *The Raven*

Newsletter of

*The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest*

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*Highlights from the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Founders Day Dinner*

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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. This issue we feature Daniel Freeman. Daniel has taught music history at the University of Illinois, the University of Southern California, and the University of Minnesota, where he now holds a position as lecturer. He also offers annual lecture series in music history at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. A specialist in eighteenth-century European music, he is the author of two books and numerous scholarly essays. His third book, *Mozart in Prague*, is in preparation.

### How I Started

By Daniel E. Freeman



When I am asked to explain how I became a Wagner enthusiast, the honest answer is simply that I was forced to. Of course, the process was not as unpleasant as it sounds when expressed that way. There was never a time in my life that I felt antipathy toward Wagner's music. Like almost everyone, I was introduced to it in childhood in a positive way through popular arrangements of operatic excerpts such as the wedding march from *Lohengrin*. I still recall hearing the "Cry of the Valkyries" for the first time on an episode of *Gilligan's Island* (never identified as such, of course). It was so distinctive that I never forgot the music from that single exposure to it as a child. It was only many years later that I learned what it really was. As a teenager, my passion for classical music was centered mainly around instrumental music. Wagner can be daunting for any teenager—if for no other reason due to issues with attention span. At that age I had respect for opera, but no natural affinity for it. Orchestral excerpts I had no trouble appreciating. Then as now, I regarded the overture to *Tannhäuser* as one of the most extraordinary orchestral compositions ever written.

I had very bad luck in college with music history instructors when it came to Wagner. One of my teachers was quite a devotee, but his personality was so obnoxious that all of the class members automatically wanted to despise whatever he admired. I remember a music theorist who wanted me to write a term paper once about the contrapuntal techniques used in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

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# Founders Day Dinner Tenth Anniversary

On Saturday 13 September, 2008 members gathered at the Germanic-American Institute to celebrate our tenth anniversary. Society President David W. Cline began with a few remarks about



Der Meister gazes down  
upon his flock

the history of the Society. Next, attendees were dazzled by soprano, Karin Wolverton performing “Dich teure Halle” from *Tannhäuser* and “O Sachs, mein Freun” from *Die Meistersinger*. Ms Wolverton filled the room with her brilliant voice. In addition to the vocal excerpts, the audience was treated to two rare Wagner solo piano pieces, *Ankunft bei den schwarzen schwanen* (*Arrival of the Black Swans*) (1861) and *Albumblatt für Frau Betty Schott* (1875), played by accompanist, Kathy Kraulik. Following the recital we enjoyed a fabulous dinner prepared and served by the GAI staff. Each table was accented by centerpieces provided by members John Heefner and John Lassila. The evening concluded with remarks from John Heefner about his recent Wagner experiences.

*Remarks given at the Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest Founders Day Dinner and 10th Anniversary by David W. Cline, MD, President and Founder.*

Welcome to the 10th anniversary and Founders Day meeting of the Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest. I want to review the history of our society and also the history of Wagnerianism in the upper midwest. Interest in Wagner goes back to the 1870s.



Dr David W. Cline, President

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## Cline

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During that period, several St. Paul businessmen corresponded with Wagner inviting him to come to the Midwest and promised him \$1,000,000 to build a festspiel house to his specifications on the banks of the Mississippi River and furthermore, to support him financially thereafter. Wagner was



Members enjoying the program

delighted with the idea of founding a new society in a new world with a theatre school and home in Minnesota where, in Wagner's opinion, the best Germans had immigrated preserving purity and racial stock while the old Germany and the rest of Europe sank into decay.

We have tried to locate and identify the names of those

St. Paul businessmen, but have been unable to do so to date. We shall persist.

A Wagner legacy of a different sort did appear in Minnesota. It took the form of an architectural design of a bank in southern Minnesota built in 1906. The National Farmers Bank of Owatonna was designed by Louis Sullivan, an architect from Chicago. Sullivan was swept away by hearing Wagner's concert in



Soprano Karin Wolverton

Chicago, "revealing a new, refreshing as dawn, the enormous power of man to build, as a mirage, the fabric of his dreams." Louis Sullivan in his architectural masterpiece in Owatonna used abstract color and architectural ornaments to create a "color-toned poem" or a "color symphony" as he called it, designed to evoke emotion and the appearance of the natural world in this prairie school large cubicle with daylight and stained glass windows.

Owatonna is not the only Minnesota community that pays homage to Wagner. In Red Wing is the Sheldon Theatre, also built in 1906. On the

outside of the building at the upper levels, there are several coves wherein stone bust of famous people of the theatre can be placed. One cover sits the bust of William Shakespeare and at another the bust of Richard Wagner. Many coves remain empty. It is remarkable that the people of Red Wing knew and admired Wagner to the point of memorializing him in this way. In Faribault, Minnesota at the Shattuck-St. Mary school dormitory, there is a portrait of Richard Wagner purchased by Evangeline Whipple while she traveled in southern German and Bavaria at the end of the 19th century.

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest first met on August 22, 1998, and it started from spontaneous combustion. Earlier that year, I had seen *Lohengrin* in Dessau, Germany directed by Gottfried Wagner, the great-grandson of Richard Wagner. It was a moving, passionate experience. In June of that year, my wife and I went



Awaiting Dinner

to Flagstaff to the Arizona opera production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. That added to the ardor, but it overflowed at the final presentation of Somerfest with a concert version of the last act of *Tristan und Isolde*. As we applauded loudly, I looked around and saw Woody Andrews and Dick Fischel, who were also applauding. "We have got to start a Wagner Society" we said, "to share this wealth of inspiration." We three met at the Minneapolis Club ""to learn, to teach, to share appreciation of the musical works of Richard Wagner." What is it that is so appealing about Richard Wagner's music? I quote from Bryan Magee's book, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy*, "By successful giving expression to the universal, highly erotic longing for the unattainable, he provides the expression with a certain degree of satisfaction. Not just in the world of our imagination, but in the world of oceanic, unbounded feeling that music makes it possible for us to inhabit, we are enabled to confound the reality principle, experience the disallowed, live the impossible. It is as if our most heartfelt but also most hopeless yearnings were contrary to all possibility met. A

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## **Cline**

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wholeness that is unachievable in life is achieved nevertheless, and in actual experience, because music of this greatness is a directly felt experience as profound as any that is possible for us to have. So the feeling is one of incredible and incredulous fulfillment, a satisfaction that finds itself unable to believe itself. People have always been seized by an inclination to use religious or mystical language about it, language as extravagant as the music itself. This is because they are in awe of their own experience.”

“To learn, to teach, to share appreciation of the musical works of Richard Wagner.” That sharing has expanded from 3 to 53 members in activities sponsored by our Society and also with tickets for the Richard Wagner Bayreuth Festival each August. Our largest project has been to raise \$150,000 in support of a Minnesota Opera production of a Wagner opera, which will occur early in the spring of 2011 or possibly in the fall of 2010.

Let us celebrate our 10th anniversary with the giving of our personal resources to this worthy project.

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## **Election Results**

The annual meeting of the members was held pursuant to notice at the Germanic-American Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota at approximately 6 PM on Saturday, 13 September 2008. David Cline announced that the principal order of business was the election of six directors of the Society. The following were duly nominated: Jamie Andrews, Woody Andrews, David Cline, Kevin Edgar, John Heefner and Carol Thomas. There being no other nominations, the six persons named were unanimously elected as the directors of the Society on motion duly made and seconded.

Woody Andrews, Secretary

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## **New Members**

Christina Chen Dayton Kluksdal Daniel Freeman Amy Neeser

*Our best recruiters are our members. If you know of anyone with an interest in Wagner or his music, please tell them about us.*

## Video Nights 7-9 PM

### Second Tuesdays



Currently, we are viewing

### *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*

(Complete Cycle recorded in 1990)

The Metropolitan Opera

James Levin, conducting



The current schedule is:

- 11 November 2008 Rheingold, Scenes 3 & 4
- 9 December 2008 Walküre Act 1
- 13 January 2009 Walküre Act 2

*This event is hosted by Kevin Edgar at 700 Douglas Ave, Minneapolis. If you are planning to attend please let Kevin know by email ([wagner@bke.org](mailto:wagner@bke.org)) or phone 612-381-9429.*

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### **Freeman**

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I am afraid that this individual was missing the whole point of studying Wagner.

Everything changed when it became incumbent upon me to teach music history to undergraduate college students. In this context, one must become an advocate for the great composers of western civilization, since there is a responsibility to provide an explanation for the fanatic following of certain composers among music lovers and music critics. Obviously, few composers have touched the lives of as many listeners as Richard Wagner. Charged with this obligation,

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## **Freeman**

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everything started to fall in place. I was using a textbook that featured *Tristan und Isolde*. This work quickly became a marvel to me—the music, the story, the literary models, its impact on the musical style of subsequent generations of composers, etc. I studied the score in wonderment at the constantly shifting musical textures, all connected with perfect logic, their complexities unnoticed to audience members who experience nothing but poignant emotional expression. It became clear to me that Wagner’s reputation as a genius was amply justified.

The word genius, of course, is over-used. Properly it should refer only to individuals capable of some skill that ordinarily would not be considered humanly possible. For somebody such as Richard Wagner, who had minimal musical training and not enough proficiency as a pianist even to contemplate trying out his compositions in the form of keyboard reductions, the ability to compose operatic music of such complexity, innovation, and emotional impact simply by imagining the sound of it in his head must qualify him as a true genius. Once this realization took hold, I found myself doomed to spend the rest of my life trying to learn more about Wagner’s music.

**On the cover:  
Soprano Karin Wolverton (l) and pianist Kathy Kraulik (r)  
provided the musical program for our Founders Day Dinner.**

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