

The Raven

Newsletter of

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest

Volume IV Number 1

Spring 2008



Event Reviews:

Tristan and Isolde in High Def

***Robert Brittain discusses Wagner and
National Socialism***

Book Club

Member Survey

And more ...

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 Matthew Bribitzer-Stull. Matt is an assistant professor of Theory / Composition in the School of Music at the University of Minnesota.

How I Became Interested in Wagner .

By Matt Bribitzer-Stull



I first encountered Wagner's music by playing a band arrangement of Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral from *Lohengrin*. This was my junior year in high school at Bloomington Jefferson here in Minnesota. (I am a french horn player.) I remember finding the harmonies truly lovely and the music having a certain je ne sais quoi that I found enchanting.

I next encountered Wagner's music during my first semester at Oberlin (Ohio). I was majoring in horn performance in the Conservatory and Medieval History in the college. During our music history overview course, we listened to the end of *Die Walküre*; it was the first time a new piece of music brought me to tears upon a first hearing.

By the end of my undergraduate years I had decided to pursue Music Theory at the Ph.D. level. In my last semester at Oberlin I took an intense seminar offered by Warren Darcy, one of North America's leading Wagner scholars, on the *Ring* cycle. After that I was hooked, taking another Wagner seminar at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY and eventually doing my Ph.D. thesis on thematic development and dramatic association in the *Ring*. As part of my work I poured through all of Wagner's operas, both with the score in front of me and by watching staged performance recordings on DVD. Out of this work, I eventually wrote an article on *Die Feen* and some of Wagner's compositional techniques that we can hear developing as early as this, his first completed opera. I also attended the Met/Levine *Ring* in New York with my sister in April of 2000 - my first live Wagner.

(Continued on page 12)

A Perfect Day: The Metropolitan Opera's HD Simulcast of *Tristan und Isolde*

By Dr. David W. Cline, MD

It is said of Wagnerians, "They want the music to never end!" On Saturday, March 22, some members of the Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest not only rhapsodized during the five hour performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, but had a warm-up session of 2½ hours earlier in the day. Seven and one-half hours of one of Wagner's great masterpieces! A Perfect Day!

It started at 8:30 AM at Kenwood Gables Apartments with a brunch served by Carol Thomas and Kevin Edgar. At 9:00 AM, I introduced our guest speaker, Daniel Freeman, a Wagner scholar from the University of Minnesota, Illinois, Southern California, and the Smithsonian who lectured about the composition giving the origins of the tale from the Dark and Middle Ages, Wagner's re-creation beginning in 1854 when he was in love with Mathilde Wesendonck and the first performance in Munich June 10, 1865. (Our Civil War was just ending.) The 13 of us present had a lovely discussion prompted by two first-time visitors: Robert Howe, MD, Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota Medical School, and Sabine Engel, Director of German European Studies at the University of Minnesota. Daniel got our tears flowing as he beautifully told the story of these tragic lovers and played some excerpts from the impassioned passages.

How could there be resolution between the mores of society (rules, law, restraint, and custom) as represented by King Marke, with the passionate ecstasy between Tristan and Isolde? How can this ecstasy which broke the rules, made the night rapturous, and brought enlightenment, by reconciling with the day represented

(Continued on page 4)

Tristan und Isolde

(Continued from page 3)

as constraining, inhibiting, concealing the truth and shattering the bonds of honor, loyalty, devotion, and trust? Wagner gives us these questions so that we are challenged to reflect upon the nature of our humanity. Nike Wagner says that “opposing views cannot be reconciled through dialogue and meditation. On the contrary, the plot is full of misunderstandings between characters, both deliberate and inadvertent. The deceptive nature of verbal communication is constantly revealed and ‘lies,’ ‘betrayal,’ ‘illusion,’ and ‘treason’ are among the most frequent and most important words in the drama.

Contradiction and paradox pervade the plot, too. Tristan as Tantris the escort of the bride, is the real bridegroom; the physician, Isolde, is the cause of the disease; the loyal Melot is the enemy; King Marke wants to bring peace, but only increases the harvest of death. The dialogue between employers and servants is riddled with mutual incomprehension. Brangane hears Isolde's wrath, but fails to recognize it as love; her wrong potion is the right one, and her warning sounds like a lullaby. Kurwenal fails to understand the truth about Tristan. He believes that some sort of witchcraft or ‘love-making’ has been at work and fails to recognize that his master's delirious ravings actually tells the truth, that his sufferings are the result of his own character. Treason - or acting in opposition to one's real wish - is a constant cry; Isolde accuses him of treason

against his love for her when he is acting for Marke and Marke accuses him of the same crime when he does the opposite.”



Robert Dean Smith and Deborah Voigt
in the title roles.
(Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera)

The Metropolitan Opera high definition simulcast direct from New York City added further drama.

Before the gold curtain went up, we saw the audio engineer summon James

Levine to the podium and we joined in applause with the audience at the Metropolitan Opera House and over a hundred simulcast audiences from around the world from Berlin to Australia, from
(Continued on page 10)

Robert Brittain Discusses Wagner and Nazi Germany

On February 21st, WSUM member Robert Brittain gave an engaging talk entitled, “A Nazi at the Opera: Wagner’s Myth and Music as Propaganda in Nazi Germany.” Held at the Minneapolis Club, about 15 members discussed this interesting topic over dinner that was based on Mr Brittain’s graduate work in communications.

Quoting from Mr Brittain's handout, the main topics discussed were “The Development of the Volkisch Movement, The connection with Wagner, the rise of National Socialism, and Bayreuth, the Wagner family and Hitler”. A fascinating fact was that Hitler apparently used ‘Siegfried’ as the example of “the perfect German archetype - brave, strong, handsome, headstrong will, naive, doomed. The man becomes God.” The group concluded that Wagner would have probably liked the attentions of Hitler and the money coming in, but would have not agreed to Nazism and Hilter's acts on Jews.

A hard copy of Mr Brittain’s fascinating and informative presentation can be found in the WSUM library. Contact Jamie Andrews at 612-342-9573 for further informaton.



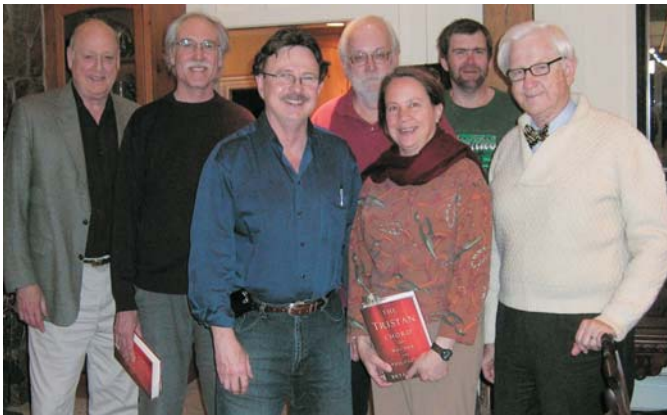
Left to right: Woody Andrews, Robert Brittain, David Cline, Jamie Andrews

Book Club News

by Carol Thomas

The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy by Bryan Magee

On March 6th, we gathered in the home of member David Bergerson in Wayzata. Mr Bergerson, being a most gracious host, showed us around his home, which was at one point part of a hunting lodge in the 40's or 50's. Beautiful wood and vaulted ceiling in what appeared to be a family/dining room. Just a gorgeous setting!



Left to right: David Bergerson, Jack Sielaff, Robert Baumer, Tom Logeland, Debbie Done, Kevin Edgar, David Cline

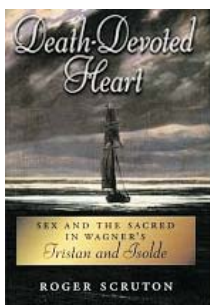
With some coffee or port in hand and variety of cheeses, crackers, nuts and sweets, we settled down in an area off the great room. We started in our discussion of "*The Tristan Chord*:"

Wagner and Philosophy" by Bryan Magee. A fascinating philosophical study of Wagner and how his works "goes deeper than non-musical forms of drama." Magee's central point was Wagner's intense study of philosophy had a profound influence on his works, each rich historically and intellectually. Magee outlined aspects of Wagner's life, from the young Wagner as a left-wing revolutionary, to the mature Wagner's complex relationship with Nietzsche. Magee also provided an interesting overview of Schopenhauer's philosophy and showing us Wagner's overhaul of his own values in order to embrace that of the thinker's world view. Lastly, we touched base on the lengthy appendix, in which Magee tackled head-on the thorny issue of Wagner's anti-Semitism. Wagner was anti-Semitic, though our thoughts on this sided more towards the "day in age" as this was widespread in the European intellectual world of the 19th century. The question arose if Wagner really made Hermann Levi (conductor

of *Parsifal* get baptized? Turns out initially Wagner wanted this, but subsequently dropped the requirement. A practicing Jew, Levi maintained a close friendship throughout the end of Wagner's life.

After 2 hours, we concluded our discussion. It was a most enjoyable evening especially to be with and discussing Wagner with fellow Wagnerians! Again, many thanks to David Bergerson for hosting.

Next Book:



During our last gathering, we decided to read something corresponding to our fundraising project - *Tristan und Isolde*. Choosing recommendations from our previous guest speaker, Daniel Freeman, our next book will be:

Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde"
by Roger Scruton.

Description: A tale of forbidden love and inevitable death, the medieval legend of Tristan and Isolde recounts the story of two lovers unknowingly drinking a magic potion and ultimately dying in one another's arms. While critics have lauded Wagner's Tristan and Isolde for the originality and subtlety of the music, they have denounced the drama as a "mere trifle"--a rendering of Wagner's forbidden love for Matilde Wesendonck, the wife of a banker who supported him during his exile in Switzerland.

This book explodes this established interpretation, proving the drama to be more than just a sublimation of the composer's love for Wesendonck or a wistful romantic dream. Scruton boldly attests that Tristan and Isolde has profound religious meaning and remains as relevant today as it was to Wagner's contemporaries. He also offers keen insight into the nature of erotic love, the sacred qualities of human passion, and the peculiar place of the erotic in our culture. His argument touches on the nature of tragedy, the significance of ritual sacrifice, and the meaning of redemption, providing a fresh interpretation of Wagner's masterpiece. Roger Scruton has written an original and provocative account of Wagner's music drama, which blends philosophy, criticism, and musicology in order to show the work's importance in the twenty-first century.

“Scruton's new book connects the opera in an informative way with sex and religion and shows how many primitive religions associate sex with God. Scruton also examines the drama in this opera in interesting ways and notes how Wagner wanted the medieval setting of this opera to be taken very seriously.” *The Opera Quarterly*

Member Survey

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest Asks
Its Members to Participate in our Survey

by Carol Thomas and Jamie Andrews

During the last Board Meeting in January, the Board of Directors brought up the issue of future events to hold, host or partner with for our members of our Society. As a group, the board re-evaluated the time and cost it took to host past events, and using this as a measurement along with calculating the number of member attendees.

In our discussion we questioned why some events and gatherings seem to bring more members together than others. We found that the Annual Founders Day Dinner brings the most members together. And recently, our brunch/discussion before the Met's Tristan had many members in attendance.

The Board is now looking at hosting an average of 3 events a year, including the Founders Day Dinner. On that note, we are looking at different facilities to host our annual dinner for more room to socialize, etc.

But as for other events, we are now asking our members to help us determine, to decide, what YOU, as a member, want or would like to have (or have more of) in the future. We want to provide opportunities that excite our members, the ability to have wonderful discussions with other Wagnerians and the ability to increase our membership. The yellow insert in this newsletter is a Survey we would like you to fill out and return to us in the enclosed pre-addressed envelope. We would appreciate your full compliance and appreciate your thoughts and opinions!

The Board of Directors thank you in advance for filling out the Survey, and thank you always for your continued support!

Should you have any questions, please contact Carol Thomas at 612-559-6468 or email info@wagnertc.org.

Video Nights 7-9 PM

Second Tuesdays

Yes, it will finally happen. The event which has been eagerly anticipated by some, dreaded by others:

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg



Attendees will have the opportunity to select from four possibilities. The first possibility weighing in at a svelte 150 minutes is a contender from the Australian Opera starring Donald McIntyre, Helena Does and Paul Frey, conducted by Charles Mackerras in 1990. Next are a pair of middle weights at 268 minutes. From

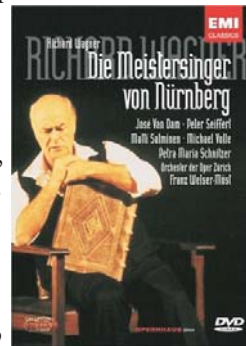


Zürich we have a contender starring Jose Van Dam, Peter Seiffert, and Maria Schnitzer; Franz Weiser-Möst conducting. From the Deutsche Oper Berlin comes a production starring Wolfgang Brendel, Gösta Winbergh, and Eva Johansson, with Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos. The final contender is a bloated offering from the Metropolitan Opera at a scale crushing 292 minutes. (That is 4 hours, 52 minutes – nearly 5 bun-crushing – death-free hours!!) This Levine behemoth stars James Morris, Karita Mattila and Ben Heppner.



The current schedule is:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| Tuesday, 13 May 2008 | Act 1 |
| Tuesday, 10 June 2008 | Act 2 |
| Tuesday, 8 July 2008 | Act 3 |



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) or phone 612-381-9429

Tristan und Isolde

(Continued from page 4)

Cape Horn to Egypt.

And then this touching, emotionally shattering music that lead us to the Tristan chord - and we know we are there in the grip of this own wizard who is turning our lives inside out. Wagner was to have said, "Let there never be a perfect performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, because if there is, no one will survive!" I knew what he was talking about as the prelude continued. This production was typically Metropolitan opera: magnificent! The scenery, lighting, and costumes were superb, all sophisticated and simple. The television camera videography was — dare I say it? — better than being in the opera house itself. We could see their faces at close range. Had Isolde really fallen in love when she first recognized that "Tantris" had slayed her betrothed? Seeing Isolde's face close up as she tells Brangane this story in Act I, there was no doubt in my mind that she was a woman in love, even though she also wanted to kill him in revenge. And the split screen technique gave me all the options I needed. In fact, my wife, Wanda, and I saw the "Tristan Project" last May in Avery Fisher Hall - a concert production with a huge video screen showing scenes of nature that accompanied the music presented by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and it was second place to what we saw on March 22.

We did not see any glitches which had occurred at earlier performances of this production of *Tristan und Isolde*. At the third performance, considerable mayhem ensued. Gary Lehman, substituting for Ben Hepner, as Tristan, began Act III laying on a mat, which suddenly coasted down the raked stage sending him sliding like a toboggan head first and upside down right into the prompter's box. Wouldn't that have been a laugh - like when Leo Slezak missed the swan boat in *Lohengrin* and asked, "When does the next swan leave?"

In this production, there were few laughs and many tears. It was discombobulating: even though we spent an hour afterwards talking it over, I did not get my feet back on the ground until the next day.

The English translation in Act II does not adequately convey the depth of this dialogue. That saved it from being a perfect performance and thus ensured my survival.

Our Society hopes to have more discussions in preparation for the Minnesota Opera production of *Tristan und Isolde* in April 2010.

Seattle Ring News

Seattle Opera Announces 2009 *Ring* Cast

Debuts Include: Janice Baird as Brunnhilde, Stig Fogh Andersen as Siegfried, and Stuart Skelton as Siegmund

Returning Cast Members Include: Greer Grimsley as Wotan, Margaret Jane Wray as Sieglinde, Richard Paul Fink as Alberich, Stephanie Blythe as Fricka/First Norn/Waltraute (*Götterdämmerung*). **Robert Spano Conducts**

Opera Cycle I Cycle II Cycle III

Das Rheingold (7:00 p.m.) (Sun) August 9 (Mon) August 17 (Tues)
August 25

Die Walküre (6:00 p.m.) (Mon) August 10 (Tues) August 18 (Wed)
August 26

Siegfried (6:00 p.m.) (Wed) August 12 (Thurs) August 20 (Fri) August
28

Götterdämmerung (6:00 p.m.) (Fri) August 14 (Sat) August 22 (Sun)
August 30

Membership Renewals

Many thanks to our members who have renewed their membership for 2008. Its great to have you as part of our Society and continued support! For those who have not yet renewed, the deadline for 2008 has expired. But there is STILL time for you to renew your membership! Renewing your yearly membership ensures keeping your Bayreuth ticket priority status intact and invitation to events, including our Annual Founders Day Dinner. And don't miss out receiving our quarterly newsletter, *The Raven*, which includes Society event news and reviews, member updates and anecdotes, on-going Society gatherings and upcoming productions!

To renew your membership, contact Membership Director, Carol Thomas, at 612-559-6468 or email info@wagnertc.org for a Membership Form. Forms can also be found on our website, www.wagnertc.org, by clicking on the JOIN US Tab, then "Get Form".

Bribitzer-Stull

(Continued from page 2)

Since then, I have published a number of other articles on the technical aspects of Wagner's music, taught a course on the *Ring* here at the University, played his music with various orchestras, and co-edited *Richard Wagner for the New Millennium*, an anthology of Wagner articles authored by scholars from a range of disciplines.

In the future I hope to attend Bayreuth, see the remaining Wagner works that I haven't yet experienced in live performance, and write a book about the origins and musical structure of *Die Feen*, based on study of the composer's sketches.

New Member

Robert Baumer

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

On the cover:

Daniel Freeman address members before the Metropolitan Operas High Definition broadcast of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Published by
The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest
P.O. Box 300014
Minneapolis, MN 55403
612-863-4319
Fax: 612-863-4384
General Email: Info@wagnertc.org
Newsletter Email: newsletter@wagnertc.org
Copyright © 2008 by
The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest

STAFF

Carol Thomas – Editor
B. Kevin Edgar – Production/Design

WSUM Member Survey

#1) How many WSUM events did you attend in the last year?

- 0
- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6 or more

#2) Overall, did you enjoy the events you attended?

#3) Which events do you wish the WSUM would present more of in the future?

- Recitals/concerts
- Guest speakers
- Book Clubs
- DVD nights
- Opera Study Group
- Social gatherings without a specific topic
- Other (Please specify) _____

#4) In general, what day of the week is the best to hold meetings and events?

#5) Describe an event(s) that you would like to see in the future.

For example, I would like to see the WSUM host a pre-show gathering before each Wagner opera that the MET broadcasts in movie theaters.

#6) What was your primary reason for joining a Wagner Society?

#7) What are new membership benefit suggestions?