

The Raven

Newsletter of

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest

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It is a tradition in our society for members to tell us how they became interested in Wagner. This issue we feature member Jon Erik Kingstad.

HOW I STARTED WITH WAGNER

By Jon Erik Kingstad

Until I actually experienced a performance of one of Wagner's pieces, "Godsgloaming" (as George Bernard Shaw translates *Die Götterdämmerung*), I was one of those Philistine music lovers that dismissed opera as snobbish, pompous and tedious. It was only after I actually attended a performance of *Götterdämmerung* that my eyes were opened to the multi-dimensionality of Wagner's concept of music theater. I had been tantalized to see another opera after first attending a luscious production of Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* in Stockholm, Sweden in 1986 that left me dazzled. I decided then to risk a performance of *Götterdämmerung* by that same Stockholm company in the august Royal Opera House.

The performance was five hours in length, which I recall because it did not seem so to my wife and me. From this experience, I can say that it was not just about the music or even the words, which, being sung in German with Swedish subtitles, I was having a hard time comprehending. It was more in the costuming, staging, and movement which all combined with the music and words for an overall grandiose effect on the senses and, more importantly on the imagination. I was familiar with the music. The *Magic Fire Music*, *Siegfried's Rhine Journey* and others were known to me in their orchestral form. But what was this strange musical play all about with its heroes, goddesses, dwarves, evil half brothers, spears, Gibbichung Hall, Rhine gold and water nymphs? My imagination ran wild with questions and curiosity.

Since that memorable afternoon in Stockholm, I have explored the rest of the Ring Cycle and some of the other Wagner operas, on PBS when it broadcast the complete Ring in four nights. The operas have become for me a passage to a different world of music, theater, art, thought, imagination, myth and legend, and possibly a key to some of the deepest secrets of life. Who cannot read George Bernard Shaw's

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Tenth Anniversary Founders Day Dinner Part 2

*We conclude coverage of our tenth anniversary dinner
with remarks given by founding member and member*

THE BAYREUTH WAGNER EXPERIENCE

By John Heefner

A journey to Bayreuth might be thought of as a pilgrimage to the temple which was the culmination of Richard Wagner's dream and opened in 1876. One hundred thirty-two years later it remains the ever-beating heart of his music dramas.

It is hard, if not impossible, to describe the experience in words. Let me quote from a letter to the London Times by Virginia Woolf in 1909 in which she tries to express her experience at Bayreuth. "In the meantime, we are miserably aware how little words can do to render music. When the moment of suspense is over, and the bows actually move across the strings, our definitions are relinquished, and words disappear in our minds. Enormous is the relief, and yet, when the spell is over, how great is the joy with which we turn to our old tools again. These definitions indeed, which would limit the bounds of an art and regulate our emotions, are arbitrary enough; and here at Bayreuth, where the music fades into the open air, and we wonder with *Parsifal* in our heads through the empty streets at night, where the gardens glow with flowers like those other magic blossoms, and sounds melt into colour, and colours call out for words, where, in short, we are lifted out of the ordinary world and allowed merely to breathe and see--it is here that we realize how thin are the walls between one emotion and another; and how fused our impressions are with elements which we may not attempt to separate."

Well, I don't want to talk much about the actual performances. We saw the *Ring*, *Tristan*, *Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*. They were all interesting, generally well sung, with great choral and orchestral music. They were also controversial and some even booed. The truth is Wagner's operas can probably be seen and heard as well, if not better,

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Special Event: What Is a Wagner Tuba?

A Lecture and Recital

Tuesday, 3 February 2009
7:30 PM

Ferguson Hall
The University of Minnesota
Twin Cities Campus
Minneapolis

Is it a tuba, or a Horn orwhat exactly is a Wagner Tuba? This engaging talk by RWSUM member and conductor Foster Beyers will discuss Wagner's use of the orchestra with a close look at the Wagner Tuba. Mr Beyers will discuss the reasons for the invention of the Wagner Tuba, its use in Wagner's works and the way it has either been embraced or ignored by many post-Wagnerian composers. A demonstration of the tubas will be performed by members of the Minnesota Orchestra horn section. The evening will conclude with a performance of *Siegfried Idyll* led by Mr Beyers.

Foster Beyers, Conductor

Currently a Sample Fellow in Conducting at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Mr Beyers is Co-Conductor of the Campus Orchestra. Previously he served as Music Director of the Ravenswood Community Orchestra in Chicago and Assistant Director of Choirs at Kenilworth Union Church. While teaching in the Green Bay, WI public schools he also served as Music Director of the Green Bay



Symphony Youth Orchestras.

Mr Beyers holds a bachelor of Music Education from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire where he studied trumpet with Robert Baca and conducting with Nobuyoshi Yasuda. He received a Master of Music in Orchestral Conducting at Northwestern University where he was mentored by Victor Yampolsky, Dr. Robert Hasty, and Dr. Mallory Thompson. Currently he is a Doctoral candidate in conducting at the University of Minnesota where he studies with Mark Russell Smith.

Foster Beyers is active as a conductor and educator. He has led orchestras including the Green Bay Symphony, St.Louis Youth Symphony, Northshore Chamber Orchestra, Skokie Valley Symphony, Eau Claire Chamber Orchestra, and the Jugendorchester Stuttgart. As an educator he has led the Merit School of Music Symphony Orchestra and the Music Institute of Chicago Junior Academy Orchestra.

Membership Renewals

Yes, it is that time of year again, time to renew your membership! Our membership year is on a calendar year basis. In order to retain your Bayreuth ticket priority, we must receive your renewal by **15 March 2009**. A form is included for your convenience. Please make any necessary corrections to it and mail to

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If you have any questions about your membership status contact membership@wagnertc.org or call Carol Thomas at 612-559-6468.

Heefner

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in houses other than the Festspielhaus. However, there is only one Bayreuth Wagner opera experience.

Part of this experience is the time spent in the land of Wagnermania. It is a chance to roam the streets with Wagner associated names lined with buildings there during Wagner's time and which he frequented. Bayreuth rolls out its red carpet to visitors who are warmly welcomed in shops, restaurants, coffee houses, palaces, parks, and museums.

We visited the site, including Wanfried, where Wagner lived and raised his family, composed, entertained, and coached his first *Ring* and *Parsifal* casts. We stood at his and Cosima's burial sites. At the city cemetery we visited the graves of Liszt, Wieland Wagner and his wife, Siegfried and Winifried Wagner, and most recently Wolfgang's wife, Gudrun, a much beloved and sorely missed festival figure.

We toured the Festspielhaus, likened to a violin in its marvelous acoustical construction. We stood and sat in perhaps the same spots the likes of Wagner himself, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Adolph Hitler, King Ludwig II, Kirstin Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, Birgit Nilsson (the list goes on and on) sat or stood. I even got to occupy the conductor's chair in the hidden orchestral abyss. Seeing the magnificent structure from behind the scenes, so to speak, gave us an appreciation for how the theater was built and equipped, and constantly updated, to put on unparalleled productions. The dedication of the huge staff was remarkable.

We were truly fully immersed in a Wagner experience far away from home, work, and the everyday distractions of frantic contemporary life. We had ample time to reflect, to share thoughts and feelings with Wagner lovers from throughout the world. We met people from the Wagner Societies of America, and attended lectures on each opera sponsored by the New York Wagner Society. Professor Hans Adolph Vogel delivered brilliant essays on the social, political, spiritual, and mythological and philosophical dimensions of Wagner and his works. One evening we attended a dinner in honor of the Wagner family and the Bayreuth cast. We had the privilege of meeting, for example, Linda Watson, this year's Brünnhilde, who is from the United States and whom we had seen as Ortrud at Bayreuth previously.

We were present at a momentous landmark event in the history of the Festival overseen by the Wagner family uninterrupted since its inception. The last night of the Festival season was punctuated by a performance of Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*. Wolfgang Wagner, director since 1951, sitting on a chair with cane in

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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:

13 January 2009	Walküre Act 2
10 February 2009	Walküre Act 3
	Siegfried Act 1

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.

Heefner

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hand, and with the Parsifal cast standing next to him, bowed to the thunderingly applauding audience as the Wagner curtain parted. This was on Thursday night, and the following Monday it was announced that his daughters, Katharina and Eva, would be assuming the directorship from that day on.

The future undoubtedly will unfold successfully and controversially as it has from the beginning. The loud booing that greeted Katharina Wagner's curtain call at the closing of her *Meistersinger* most certainly represents the dissatisfaction many have for poorly conceived and executed new productions, but also most certainly alludes to the attraction to controversy and the allure of Wagner lovers to experience the "neu" theater he spent his life creating.

The Bayreuth Wagner experience is something I hope each of you will have the good fortune to have at least once if you haven't already. Your love of Wagner and his monumental works could only be further enriched.

Kingstad

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interpretation of the Ring in *The Perfect Wagnerite* and not wonder at the many questions which Shaw raises in trying to answer the mysteries and many levels of meaning in just these four Wagner dramas.

For me, Wagner's operas now hold one of the undiscovered frontiers of life which I am glad to have only started exploring. I am pleased to look forward to enjoying Wagner's operas for the rest of my life knowing I will probably never plumb the depths of that well.

New Members

Katrin Erdmann Matthew Anderson

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:
The Mysterious Wagner Tuba**

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