

The Raven

Newsletter of

The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest

Volume VI Number 4

Winter 2010



Dennis Petersen Recital Review

Minnesota Wagner History, Part 2

First Impressions of Bayreuth

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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 one of our newest members, Jim Salutz.



I didn't grow up with opera. As an adult, I decided that there was something to it, and started to listen, not always closely. I had enjoyed selections of Wagner's music, but never paid a lot of attention to the operas themselves. I was listening to the pre-opera talk before *Das Rheingold*. It must have been Owen Lee. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I realized there was more to Wagner than magic swords and flying horses, and I decided to pay attention.

Over the years, I've taken advantage of many books and talks on CD, as well as the Met Saturday broadcasts. Fortunately, my wife, Margaret Brandl, has also learned to appreciate Wagner's works. Our first live production was the Minnesota Opera's production of *The Flying Dutchman* in 1992. We've been able to do some traveling and have been to six Ring Cycles, and with the Lyric's *Lohengrin* in February, we will have seen all of Wagner's major works. With the new Met *Ring* coming in HD, I hope to expose our daughter to the wonder that we've grown to appreciate.

New Members

Heather Gehring and Chris Hazlett

Our members are our best recruiters. So get out there and recruit.

Dennis Petersen Recital Review

by Jamie Andrews



A **sold out** audience enjoyed a 90 minute recital presented by tenor Dennis Petersen on 18 November 2010 at the Germanic-American Institute. This is Mr Petersen's third program for our Wagner Society. The recital focused on the various tenor excerpts of the Ring Cycle that included all four music dramas. It even included Dennis singing a Mime/Siegfried duet with himself! In between pieces, Dennis gave some very insightful explanation about how a singer goes about performing Wagner and how other singers have done it in the past as well as answering questions from the audience. Accompanying him was Lara Bolton, a marvelous pianist who performed this repertoire with great insight. Following the performance was a well attended reception. All-in-all it was a fantastic evening -actually the most successful to date!

Board News

Jamie Andrews has resigned from the board of directors, but will remain as Librarian. Board Members Renate Sharp will take over Jamie's duties as Program Director and Carol Thomas has usurped his role as treasurer. Joining the board is Bernt von Ohlen.

Member Jack Sielaff has been doing some extensive research on Wagner operas in Minnesota. There was a time when Wagner was all the rage in St. Paul! This is the conclusion of Jack's history of Wagnerper formances in Minnesota from the last issue.

Early Wagner Stage Performances in Minnesota (Part 2)

by Jack Sielaff



Newspapers of the day were fascinated by the popularity of Wagner's music and covered it from several angles. The Minneapolis and St. Paul papers and the German language daily, *Volkszeitung*, enthusiastically printed articles including synopses of the operas and discussion of Wagner's "Music of the Future." Social page reporters noted the presence of the elites of the city. The Hamm families, both Theodore and William, were seen as well as Frederick Weyerhauser and dry goods wholesaler G. Sommers and his family. The wives of non-Germans like J.J. Hill and Capitol architect Cass Gilbert attended without their husbands. German musicians attending included Emil Oberhoffer who would become the first conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony in 1903 and local band and orchestra leader Frank Danz Sr. Danz Jr. would become Oberhoffer's first concertmaster.

The quality of these performances was heralded in the *Pioneer Press* as the finest the city had ever seen. Touring opera companies, performing primarily in English, had been coming to Minnesota since the 1860's. James Henry Mapleson, a famous British opera impresario brought his entourage in 1884 and 1886 and several other lesser quality companies made regular annual visits. The Hess Grand Opera Company did the first fully staged Wagner in Minneapolis with *The Flying Dutchman* in 1890. Marie Tavary and her Grand English Opera Company followed with *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* in English in November of 1894. Annual music festivals featuring imported talent with local choruses were another fixture of musical life in American cities in the 19th Century. Theodore Thomas, a famous conductor and Wagnerite, came with his orchestra and soloists for these festivals many times starting in 1883 and gave audiences heavy doses of Wagner. The 1884 festival featured an all-Wagner concert: *Tannhäuser* Overture and Act II, *Meistersinger* excerpts and *Walküre* Act III. Damrosch, however, was the first to offer fully staged German opera to Minnesota and music lovers greeted it enthusiastically.

Unfortunately, critical success did not usher in an age of touring
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companies bringing Wagner to middle America. The *Kansas City Journal* reported the earlier, July 1895, tour to be a financial success in that city. Damrosch had presented *Tannhäuser*, *Siegfried*, and *Lohengrin* with ticket prices ranging from \$2.00 to \$4.00 and sold out the house. (Skilled tradesmen such as carpenters made \$2.00 to \$2.50 a day at that time.) The same paper reported on the second tour in January of 1896 after *Meistersinger*, *Die Walküre* and *Lohengrin*: “Despite excellent performances not a pecuniary success.” In order to make Wagnerian Opera feasible in Kansas City they speculated that a hall seating at least 4000 was needed. The two theatres used in the Twin Cities had seating for only 1800 each. The alternative was the Exposition Building in Minneapolis, a huge wooden barn used for conventions that would accommodate about 6000. The acoustics were poor but Schoen-Rene had added a stage, heating plant and dressing rooms in 1895 to put on a music festival featuring the Boston Symphony and Nellie Melba.

So it was that in December of 1900 Damrosch made another visit to Minnesota performing in Minneapolis at the Exposition with a large company of New York Metropolitan Opera stars organized as the Grau Opera Company. With 225 in the troupe and traveling on a special train of 17 cars, 8 carrying scenery, they did just four operas: *Les Huguenots*, *La Boheme*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. One program featured Nellie Melba in *La Boheme* plus the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* tacked on for good measure. December 15 was devoted to Wagner as Damrosch conducted *Tannhäuser* at 2:00 and *Lohengrin* in the evening. Once again the casts included several Bayreuth veterans. Joanna Gadski (Elizabeth), a regular at Covent Garden and the Met, had appeared at Bayreuth the year before. Lillian Nordica (Elsa), a native of Maine, got her start in America and had sung in Minneapolis with Mapleson’s company in 1884. She made her career in Europe and had sung Elsa at Bayreuth in 1894. Schoen-Rene knew both Gadski and Nordica had brought both to Minnesota for recitals. Andreas Dipple (*Lohengrin*) had a wide repertoire of over 150 roles and had sung at Bayreuth in 1889. He eventually retired from singing, managed opera companies, started an opera singing school, and finally ended up working in the movie industry. My favorite of Damrosch’s singers on this tour is the contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink (Ortrud). She debuted in Graz when she was just 16 and although she sang many other roles was famous for her Wagner interpretations. Cosima Wagner coached her and she became a regular at Bayreuth after 1896. The critic for the *Minneapolis Tribune* said that, although Nordica made an outstanding Elsa, Schumann-Heink’s portrayal of Ortrud dominated the production. Eventually Schumann-Heink moved to the U.S. and became enormously popular at the Met. She made many recordings and radio appearances and retired to a large ranch

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Impressions of My First Experience at Bayreuth

by Lyda Lanier

My brother, David Cline, had pointed out the Festspielhaus or Festival Theater where the three operas would be performed, beginning at exactly 4:00 p.m. We were going to see *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin*, and *Die Meistersinger*.

This performance center is at the end of a long avenue of trees, which lead the eye uphill to the top where the Festival House sits in 19th Century ornamental splendor. We could see this landmark building from the hotel, perhaps a mile or so away. I was not prepared for my own reaction to it.



On Wednesday for the first opera, *Parsifal*, David was dressed and ready to leave at 3:00 to meet with friends from the New York Wagner Society. I was ready a little later, walked downstairs to the front of the hotel where a young woman was hailing taxis for opera goers. Yes, I said, I would like a taxi. Two Germans were standing in front of me, both tall and slender. The gray haired gentleman, wearing a dark suit, his wife, dressed elegantly in a fitted lime silk jacket, long black pants covered with long panels of a light fabric in sheer black. Their dress, of course, was setting the tone for elegant evening wear that I observed while we mingled outside at the festival house.

They turned, asked in English if I were going to the opera and invited me to ride along which I did, getting in the front seat of the taxi while they sat in back. On the drive I commented to the driver how beautiful Bayreuth was and how beautiful the drive was through this avenue of green leafy trees that bordered the street on both sides. The driver did not speak English so the couple in back translated for him and then translated his comment, made in German which was typical, “I have lived here so long I don’t notice this anymore.”

When it came time to pay the 6 Euros I was getting my money out but the lady said we will pay. I accepted this second gift, the first being their invitation to ride with them. As we stood on the sidewalk and I thanked them, I realized this was my first time at a place that is so loved by my brother David. Tears came to my eyes and I started to cry. The couple

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stood there calmly, quietly as I spoke through my tears, explaining to them the deep feelings my brother had for Wagner and his music and then I spoke of my mother who was a major influence in our lives, introducing us to classical music at an early age, listening to the radio and playing records on our phonograph in our Wisconsin farm home, attending concerts in Tomah and La Crosse and music lessons at a sacrifice not so much of money but of her time. Eventually I stopped talking, the gentleman suggested we move out of the wind and as we did, I thanked them again and walked on by myself, meeting David in front of the festival house as we had arranged to do earlier. What a pleasure to be with him at this place. So that was my introduction. Because I read westerns, I call it El Dorado. Because David is becoming a Wagner scholar, he would call it Valhalla.

My lasting impression of all of this is the contrast between the building itself, completed in 1876, with its long lasting air of grandeur and the productions on stage. There is no air conditioning and no handicapped access. We followed an older woman as she struggled down stairs between acts, her one hand on a cane, the other clutching the banister, her husband behind her, a woman in front of her. She had the same struggle going up stairs. For the last opera we sat on hard wooden seats with hard wooden backrests, no arm rests which may account for the good posture of most of the people we saw. Cushions, David said, are available but we were too late in getting them; they were all loaned out. Nothing can be changed I was told. Everything is grandfathered in.

Following tradition, five or six brass players appeared outside on the second story balcony, minutes before the performance and played a short musical phrase that would be heard in the act to follow. This was tradition and the music from the orchestra was Wagner's music. On stage, performers were costumed in aluminum foil, a nude man rose up out of a bed of clay, a nude woman ran across the stage, shoes rained down from the ceiling until the stage was littered with what looked like white tennis shoes; a chorus of 181, I counted them, were singing in a stadium setting and while remaining seated changed their costumes. We were seeing, I think, what has never been done before and in this theater that is allowed to happen.

I want to thank the Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest for making all the arrangements for tickets so that I could attend with David. We had very good seats all three operas, the first two in padded box seats. The last on the wooden seats but in row 5. I talked with two Germans, Monica from Minden, Germany who waited seven years to get tickets, and another lady who waited 11 years. Thank you for this wonderful experience.

Membership Renewals

Dear Society Members,

I hope you all are enjoying a Happy New Year and the long cold winter is invigorating you and not inducing cabin fever.



As I am writing this message, February 5th, I am listening to the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera Broadcast of *Simon Boccanegra*. During the intermission, James Levine's 40 years at the Met is again celebrated with words from Daniel Barenboim. He said their path crossed every July and August for 15 years when they both conducted at Bayreuth, Wagner's Festspiel. As he spoke the background music of the "Pilgrim's Chorus" from *Tannhäuser* came forth and, hearing this, I was again inspired and recommitted to the work of our Society.

Therefore, I bravely ask you to accept a dues increase to carry out our import work: To promote and share the music dramas of Richard Wagner with our community. We are planning additional programs as noted in this newsletter all building towards a grand anniversary year 2013, the year of Richard Wagner's 200th birthday!

Regular dues have changed from \$45 to \$60 per year, and same residence/dual membership from \$80 to \$100. This is the first dues increase since 2006. I hope you will consider additional contribution as contributor at \$100, Sponsor at \$150, or Benefactor at \$500.

I thank you all for your loyalty to the Society and hope you will help the Society continue to thrive.

Sincerely,

David Cline, President

Our member ship year is on a calendar year basis. In order to retain your Bayreuth ticket priority, you must maintain your membership. Please check the mailing label for your membership expiration date. For your convenience, a form is included with this newsletter.

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

Events

Wotan: The Original Helicopter Parent ***Thursday 7 April 2011*** ***7 PM***

Germanic-American Institute (GAI)
301 Summit Avenue in St Paul, MN
\$10 RWSUM and GAI Members
\$15 Non-members
Students with valid ID are free

Don't miss this provocative presentation with music. A reception will follow at 8PM. Free parking at GAI for all is located behind the GAI building. Presented by Nancy Thompson, a long time musician, teacher and Wagner aficionado, will dissect Gods and demi Gods and peek into Wagner's life to give us a colorful picture of Wagner and his creations. Nancy also will explore the relationship of Wotan to his daughter, Bruennhilde, and the dilemmas of well-meaning, perhaps over-protective parents, be they Gods and Valkyries or modern moms and dads. See enclosed flyer for details.

Daniel Freeman Discusses Die Walküre ***Saturday, May 14*** ***9AM***

Kerasotes Showplace Icon 16 Theatre
1625 Park Place Blvd (W 16th St and Park Pl Blvd)
St Louis Park, MN 55416
\$10 Members / \$15 Non-members
Students with valid ID are free

YOU MUST BE 21 OR OVER TO ATTEND
Theater admission must be purchased separately

Join Daniel for a stimulating discussion before the Metropolitan Opera's new production of *Die Walküre* in High Definition. We are meeting in the Lobby Lounge on the second floor where guests 21+ may enjoy beverages and savory food made from fresh ingredients. Doors open at 8:45 AM. Further details are included with the enclosed flyer.

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in Southern California. Then, after being wiped out financially in the 1929 crash, she returned to singing at the age of 69 and sang her last Erda at the Met when she was 71!

In the first decade of the Twentieth Century Minnesota Wagnerites benefited from new developments in the opera world. Impresario Henry W. Savage founded the Castle Square Opera in Boston in 1895 to present operettas in English at affordable prices. He gradually expanded to other cities and formed a touring company which brought both operetta and more serious opera in English to cities across America without superstar singers but at affordable prices. Ticket prices ranged from \$1 to \$3 while the Met charged \$1.50 to \$5 for their touring shows. Castle Square Opera made month long stops in the Twin Cities in 1903 and 1904 performing *Lohengrin* and *Tanhäuser* multiple times along with their other repertoire but without the big stars.

New enthusiasm for Wagner's music was also sparked in 1903 when Heinrich Conried defied Cosima and presented *Parsifal* in New York. A kind of Parsifal-mania overtook the opera world and the music drama was repeated over 350 times across the country in the next two years. Savage's troupe first did *Parsifal* (cut and in English and at popular prices!) in St. Paul on Easter Sunday 1904 and then in 1905, to meet demand, used alternating casts to travel with an only English *Parsifal* tour. They spent two weeks performing the *Buhnenweilfestspiel* in Chicago and one week in St. Louis before coming to St. Paul in March for four shows. Some critics actually preferred the English to the star-studded Met version, though they did point out the deficiencies of some of Savage's singers.

Meanwhile, Walter Damrosch came to St. Paul in November of 1903 and presented a lecture-recital on *Parsifal* with the Metropolitan Opera baritone David Bispham. In April of the next year Damrosch brought a company with a concert performance of *Parsifal* (in German, of course).

To top all this Conried's Metropolitan Opera followed Savage in 1905 by one week with a German *Parsifal* featuring Alois Burgstaller(Parsifal), Olive Fremstad(Kundry) and Anton van Rooy(Amfortas). Fremstad, as noted in the local press, was born in Sweden but grew up in Minneapolis before moving to New York, then Germany for her vocal training. All three singers had been favorite singers in these roles at Bayreuth until Cosima banned them for participating in the American premier of *Parsifal*.

The Met returned to Minnesota only two more times prior to their annual
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visits to Northrup starting in 1945. Although some of the later music dramas were presented in Chicago only early Wagner was then considered a sure draw in Minnesota. In 1907 they did *Tannhauser* and in 1910 there was one performance of *Lohengrin*. Olive Fremstad and Andreas Dipple were back for both these productions which the Tribune critic judged to be the finest the city had ever seen. He thought the audience in 1910, though large, showed a lack of enthusiasm for the Wagner. And were reserving their applause for the big attractions on these tours: Enrico Caruso starring in *La Boheme*, *Pagliacci* and *Aida* and Geraldine Farrar in *Madama Butterfly*. Apparently the high water mark for Wagner performance in Minnesota had past. Wagnerites could only look back at their 10 year old news clippings and sigh.

From the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* Sunday, 12 January 1896:

Absolutely the largest audience ever at an entertainment at the Metropolitan was within its walls yesterday afternoon (to see *Tannhäuser*). In spite of a disagreeable flurry of snow hundreds were turned away, the aisles even containing people who were willing to stand sooner than miss the opera. An equally large audience was present last evening to listen to *Die Walküre*. . . . Every performance has been given before an audience that filled the theatre. There was no crescendo of attendance or enthusiasm. Both were phenomenal from the overture of *Fidelio* to the curtain upon *Die Walküre*.

Most of my information was gleaned from local newspapers of the day. Other sources include: *Opera Caravan*, Quaintance Eaton, *Music and Theatre in Minnesota*, John K. Sherman, *First Rival of The Metropolitan Opera*, John Frederick Cone, and an article in *Minnesota History Magazine*: "Anna Schoen-Rene, Minnesota Musical Pioneer" by Janis White Dees.

Events

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13th Annual Founders Day Dinner

Mark your calendars for this popular event!

Saturday 10 September 2011

Directions, map, and program details will follow at a later date.

Video Nights 7-9 PM

Second Wednesdays

After a Winter holiday break, video Nights have resumed!

The current schedule is:

9 March, 2011

13 April, 2011

*Program to be
determined*

11 May, 2011

*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 612-467-9786.*

**On the cover:
Tenor Dennis Petersen, pianist Lara Bolton with retiring
program director Jamie Andrews.**

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