

WAGNER NOTES



Biterolf, a minnesinger (Le Bu, Met Lindeman young artist) in Act II's Hall of Song, with Elisabeth (Elza van den Heever) pleading for mercy for Tannhäuser. Photo: Evan Zimmerman/Met Opera. See the Met *Tannhäuser* review: page 3.



WSNY Calendar

Jan. 14 (Sun.), 3:00 pm. Barry Millington: "A Collision of Like-Minded Souls" (Wagner, Edward Burne-Jones, and George Eliot). Members only: on-line event. Registration: wagnersocietyny.org/events or call (800) 573-6148 (for all upcoming events).

Feb. 28 (Wed.), 6:30 pm. Prof. Hans Vaegt: "Long Live America!: Wagner and the New World." National Opera Center, 330 7th Ave., New York. In person and streamed online. (Note change of date from Feb. 21 to Feb. 28.)

March 7 (Thurs.), 6:30 pm. Prof. Larry Wolff: "Art & Social Transformation." National Opera Center, 330 7th Ave., New York. In person and streamed online.



Our Dec.10th *Tannhäuser* Seminar, which was well attended both live and livestream, included two speakers, two roundtables, and great visuals and displays. Above: the Met Cast Roundtable: Elza van den Heever, Ekaterina Gubanova, Georg Zeppenfeld, Christian Gerhaher, and David Shengold (moderator). Photo: Neil Friedman. Both roundtables will soon be on the WSNY Free YouTube Channel. Comments from attendees: "excellent Annual Seminar...a great event...speakers and panels were so informative..."

It was great to see so many members – new and old – at the *Tannhäuser* Seminar on December 10. Thanks to those who gave such interesting presentations, those who helped to organize the event, and those whose contributions of time and money made it possible. We look forward to next season's Seminar, on a topic to be determined.

The ticketing policies at the Bayreuth Festival have been in flux for several years, and we are grateful to our Bayreuth liaison, Claudia Deutschmann, for her patience, grace, and tenacity in dealing with our members' requests on the one hand, and the Bayreuth box office on the other. We anticipate a healthy contingent from our Society during the period August 17-25, as well as groups from other English-speaking Societies. We are already planning our morning programming, and will announce the events as the dates draw closer.

Please note three upcoming Society programs: Wagner author and critic Barry Millington will be

joining us from England on the afternoon of Sunday, January 14, for a recorded presentation on the symbiotic relationship among Wagner, Edward Burne-Jones, and George Eliot. On Wednesday, February 28, our longtime colleague Hans Vaaget will join us for a discussion of Wagner's odd fixation with America. And on March 7, NYU Professor Larry Wolff will offer a presentation on the fascinating topic of Wagner's conviction that art is an engine of social transformation.

Interesting and rewarding as are our speakers, the great kick I get from Society functions is the chance to see old friends and make new ones. I encourage all members to attend these "in-person" events in February and March, bring a friend, and remain for refreshments. After all, not for nothing we're called the Wagner **Society!**

F. PETER PHILLIPS
PRESIDENT

About the Contributors

Ira Barrows, a long time WSNY member and an attorney, has attended 14 Ring cycles with his wife Carol.

Susan Brodie writes about musical events and performers for numerous publications and handles the social media presence for WSNY and the Music Critics Association of North America.

David Hughes, WSNY's representative to the RWVI, travels far and wide for Wagner performances.

Jeffrey Swann, an honorary WSNY member, is an international pianist, lecturer, and member of the piano faculty at NYU Steinhardt.

Andrew Rombakis, a retired ophthalmologist and long-time member of WSNY, serves on the board of the Wagner Society of Northern California. He will soon attend his 45th Ring cycle.

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Tannhäuser Returns to the Met

E. van den Heever, E. Gubanova, M. McKay, L. Bu, C. Gerhaher, A. Schager, G. Zeppenfeld. Metropolitan Opera; cond.: D. Runnicles; production: G. Schenk; set designer: G. Schneider-Siemssen. Performance of Nov. 3, 2023.



Act II, Hall of Song. Georg Zeppenfeld (Landgraf Hermann) standing, facing Tannhäuser (Andreas Schager) and Elisabeth (Elza van den Heever), seated. All *Tannhäuser* photos: Evan Zimmerman/Met Opera.

Like a long-absent old friend, Otto Schenk's classic production of *Tannhäuser* returned to the Metropolitan Opera in its tenth revival since its 1977 premiere. I attended the third performance given on November 3.

In the 1970s, when the burgeoning Early Music movement was striving to rediscover original performance practice, Schenk's picture-perfect "authentic" production was praised as a return to stagecraft that would have been recognizable when *Tannhäuser* was written, as well as a reaction to the stark post-war abstractions of Wieland Wagner and his school. In the intervening 46 years, staging fashions have shifted, such that none of the cast members interviewed during WSNY's Dec. 10th *Tannhäuser* Seminar had ever experienced such a traditional production. All four participants—Ekaterina Gubanova (Venus), Elza van den Heever (Elisabeth), Christian Gerhaher (Wolfram), and Georg Zeppenfeld (Landgrave Hermann)—agreed that it was liberating to delve into their characters unencumbered by a director's reinterpretation.

In 2023, Günther Schneider-Siemssen's meticulously detailed medieval Hall of Song, with museum-quality dark woodwork and rich frescoes, still drew

applause, as it undoubtedly did in 1977. If Venus' forest grotto and the mountain road with its wayside Maria shrine have lost some of their original sheen, they did the job, though Gil Wechsler's lighting design, in the way of most revivals, has lost some of its glow and precision. Patricia Zipprodt's sumptuous costumes for the court remain some of the prettiest at the Met, and choreographer Norbert Vesak directed the many guests, nobles, and pilgrims around with grace and precision. If the Bacchanal ballet seemed a little perfunctory, it was interesting to note a few alternative couplings among the lovers in the mix.

Sir Donald Runnicles, conducting only his second Wagner opera at the Met since a pair of *Holländers* in 1990, proved the lynchpin of the revival. He launched the prelude softly and deliberately, allowing the sound to build to a full and grandiose statement of the Pilgrims' theme. Turning on a dime, he led an effervescent Bacchanal, and paced the opera throughout without letting it flag. There were occasional tempo disagreements with singers: the men's chorus raced ahead of the orchestra at the end of Act I, while the breathless accompaniment to the Act II duet proved too fast for the bel canto flourishes. But over-



Act I: Tannhäuser (Andreas Schager) with Venus (Ekaterina Gubanova).

all, he calibrated the energy of the music to create a steady arc.

In her role debut as Elisabeth, van den Heever embodied the girlish princess with youthful sincerity, persuasively capturing Elisabeth's conflicting emotions tempered with dignity. The soprano's lustrous top has an appealing flutter, while her middle and lower registers were steady, focused, and expressive. Her "Dich teure Halle" was buoyant, while her third act prayer conveyed despair tempered by faith. Vocally she rode the big ensembles except for the finale of Act II. Her extensive bel canto experience served her well through the ornamented passages which all but disappear from Wagner's later vocal writing.

Andreas Schager, in only his second Met appearance after three Siegfrieds in 2019, was a largely indefatigable Tannhäuser. The Austrian tenor, a fixture in Wagner casts across Europe, including Bayreuth, sang with energy and conviction. His singing is not subtle, but it is firm, focused, and steady, after some warmup smoothed his wide vibrato. The Rome narrative was avidly impassioned, if not quite as bitterly possessed as in some interpretations.

Gerhaher has sung Wolfram all over Europe since 2007, but this run was his belated Met debut, "eagerly awaited," as they say. Best known as a lieder singer, he

was able to project both tone and text effectively into the large auditorium. His opening sally in the song contest, "Blick ich umher," sounded like a spontaneous improvisation, and he always honored the meaning of the text. Although his voice carried well, he too often resorted to half-shouting for interpretive effect, an unnecessary tic for this listener. Still, it was a satisfying and deeply considered portrayal of the faithful friend and frustrated suitor.

Zeppenfeld has sung most of Wagner's paternal and authority figures, including Pogner and Gurnemanz at the Met and at Bayreuth. His sympathetic Landgrave Hermann was by turns gravely authoritative and sweetly avuncular, his bass sonorous if less cavernous-sounding than some. The honey-voiced mezzo Gubanova made a sultry Venus, both vocally and physically, though her sound was slightly underpowered for this house and this cast. In the small role of Biterolf, Met Lindemann young artist Le Bu, made me sit right up. His handsome, well-produced voice and compelling stage presence augur a promising career. Maureen McKay sang an appealingly bright-voiced Young Shepherd. Eight sturdy-voiced teens announced the drawing for the song contest. The Act II trumpet fanfare from the balcony of the stage was thrilling.

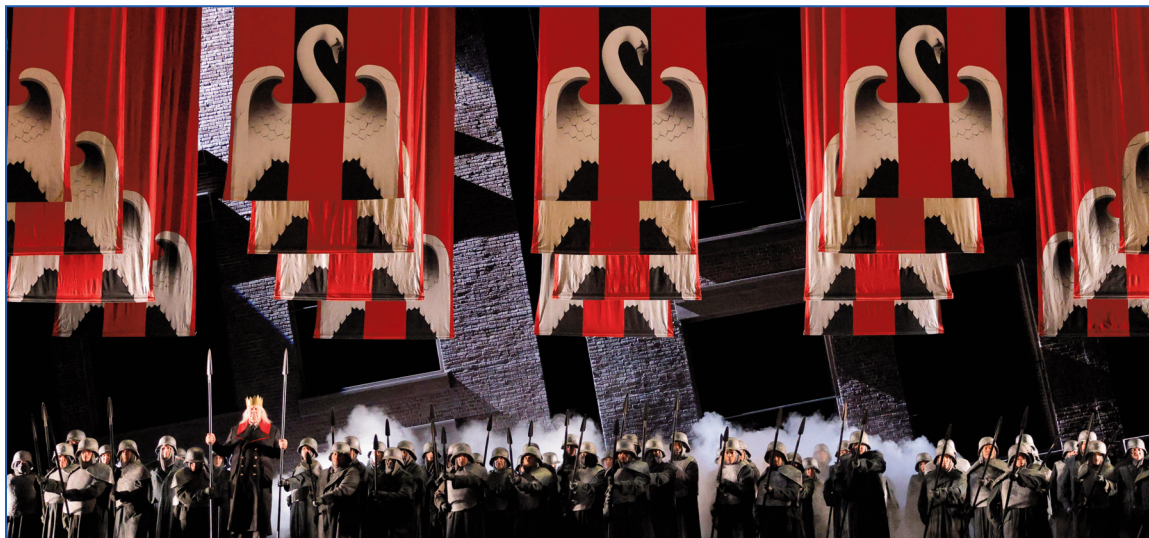
SUSAN BRODIE



Act II: Wolfram (Christian Gerhaher), Landgrave Hermann (Georg Zeppenfeld), and Tannhäuser (Andreas Schager).

Lohengrin at San Francisco Opera

J. Adams, J. Kutasi, T. Lehman, B. Mulligan, S. O'Neill, K. Sigmundsson. Cond: E. S. Kim; dir.: D. Alden. Performance of Oct. 15, 2023.



Final scene: swan flags matching those used in swastika flags. Photos: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.

San Francisco Opera recently presented six performances of *Lohengrin* (Oct. 15 – Nov. 1) that left an indelible mark on its audience. Eun Sun Kim, Music Director, ventured into Wagner's repertoire for the first time since coming to San Francisco, in line with her commitment to perform one Wagner work and one Verdi work each season. She led the orchestra and the audience on a remarkable Wagnerian journey into one of Wagner's most exquisite and powerful creations.

Simon O'Neill tackled the title role with ease, showcasing a voice that effortlessly handled the high tessitura and resonated throughout the house. Julie Adams, a California native, debuting the role of Elsa, secured her place among the best interpreters of the character.

In her San Francisco Opera debut, Romanian soprano Judit Kutasi offered a flamboyant portrayal of Ortrud, malevolently seizing the souls of the audience through her embodiment of evil. Brian Mulligan (the Heerufur in the recent Met production) as Friedrich von Telramund and Thomas Lehman as the Herald

were equally impressive in their roles. Icelandic bass Kristinn Sigmundsson portrayed Heinrich with a mature and stentorian voice that befitted this venerable character.

The production, co-presented with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and Oper Vlaanderen, Belgium, was directed by David Alden in a bold departure from the traditional tenth-century Brabant setting. Instead, it portrayed a despotic, war-torn country in the 1930s, marked by a palpable undercurrent of insecurity. The set featured tilted buildings with sinking foundations, symbolizing political instability, with Elsa making her entrance from an underground prison. Amidst a stunning light show simulating the flapping wings of a swan, Lohengrin arrived on stage in a visibly soiled all-white suit, signifying his arduous journey. His magical powers enabled him to defeat Friedrich von Telramund without a weapon, prompting the King to declare that he must have been sent from God.

During the second act, a swan statue, uncannily resembling the Nazi eagle, served as a backdrop for



Interaction between Ortrud (Judit Kutasi) and Elsa (Julie Adams).

the wedding procession. Elsa's bridal gown descended from the clouds: a symbolic representation of a celestial union. In Act III, nodding to tradition, an 1882 portrait of Lohengrin was prominently displayed in the bedroom, showing him on a boat pulled by a swan. Continuing the subtle linkage to Naziism, the final scene incorporated a legion of swan flags with red, white, and black colors that matched those used in swastika flags.

This linkage, in itself worthy of book-length discussion, might be criticized as the perpetuation of the tired canard that retroactively labels Wagner as a proto-Nazi. However, I felt it reflected the unfortunate link of Naziism to Heinrich der Vogler (Henry the Fowler and Heinrich in the opera), based on the 20th-century hijacking of his legacy. As Henry has been considered to have been the first king of Germany, Wagner had used this story as a means to promote German nationalism and unity. A millennium after King Henry's death, the Nazis reframed his history to suit their own national-socialist purposes. Heinrich Himmler allegedly saw himself as the reincarnated spirit of Heinrich der Vogler and restored his gravesite in Quedlinburg, a medieval town well worth visiting. In this historical context, the production's Nazi imagery takes on added relevance.

San Franciscans can look forward to a Wagnerian treat in each of the coming seasons!

ANDREW ROMBAKIS

International Scene as of Jan. 2024 (see listings in Sept. 2023 issue, with recent updates)

- Feb. 29, March 4, 9, 11, 13, 16, 2024. *Holländer*. Royal Opera House. Cond.: H. Nánási; dir.: T. Albery.
- March 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, April 7, 10, 2024. *Lohengrin*. Opera national du Rhin (Strasbourg). Cond.: A. Shokhakov; dir.: F. Siaud.
- June 15, 16, 18, 20, 2024. *Ring Cycle*. Sofia, Bulgaria, Opera will revive its *Ring Cycle*, and will premiere a new Wagner opera production (TBA). It will also take its *Die Walküre* to Germany. It states that their Wagner Festival "is a sanctuary from Konzept opera."
- **Bayreuth Festival, 2024:** see Bayreuth website for full details: www.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/
Tristan (new production): July 25, Aug. 3, 9, 15, 18, 26. Cond.: S. Bychkov; dir.: T. O. Arnarsson.
Ring Cycles: July 28, 29, 31, Aug. 2; Aug. 20, 21, 23, 25. *Tannhäuser*: July 16, Aug 4, 12, 16, 22, 27.
Parsifal: July 27, Aug. 7, 10, 14, 17, 24. *Holländer*: Aug. 1, 8.

Austerity measures in Bayreuth? It was reported in Nov. that the size of the Bayreuth Festival chorus would be reduced, and that cost savings in all areas would need to be made. The Gesellschaft der Freunde von Bayreuth (Friends of Bayreuth) has announced cuts in its payments in 2024. Only one-third of the audience received augmented reality glasses in *Parsifal*, and some would consider entirely eliminating them a useful saving.

Tannhäuser in 2024: Here are a few, as noted in the *Tannhäuser Seminar*.

National Moravian-Silesian Theater, Ostrava, Czech Republic: Jan 21, Feb 1, Mar 27. Cond.: M. Šedivý; dir.: J. Nekvasil.

Tokyo: Nikikai Opéra Foundation: Feb 28, 29, Mar 2, 3. Cond.: A. Kober; dir.: K. Warner's production from Oper national du Rhin.

Staatstheater Karlsruhe: Mar 31, Apr 13, 21, May 12, 30, June 9, 23. Cond.: G. Fritzsche; dir.: V. Nemirova.

Oper Frankfurt: April 28, May 1, 5, 11, 20, 30, Jun 2. Cond.: T. Guggeis; dir.: M. Wild.

Bayerische Staatsoper: May 5, 12, 15, 19, July 21, 25, 28. Cond.: S. Weigle. Production: R. Castellucci.

Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden: June 15, 19, 26. Cond.: M. Güttler; dir.: U. E. Laufenberg (2017 production).

Der fliegende Holländer Lands in Pittsburgh

M. Owens, L. Heater, K. Albertson, D. O’Hearn, B. Register, P. Volpe. Pittsburgh Opera. Cond.: A. Walker; dir.: S. Helfrich. Performance of Nov. 14, 2023.



Dutchman (Kyle Albertson) and Senta (Marjorie Owens). Photo: David Bachman Photography for Pittsburgh Opera.

Pittsburgh Opera’s first production was in 1940; it has maintained a history of artistic excellence and community purpose. It currently has a season of six shows. I attended the second of four performances of *Holländer*, which was last produced there in 2003.

The opening chords of the overture were sharp and clear, echoing through the Benedum Center. It was Music Director Antony Walker’s first Wagner opera, but the orchestra was clearly well prepared and held the attention of the audience with a well-paced reading. The audience applauded after several of the arias and duets.

The pacing was brisk but not rushed and the brass section was up to the difficult task, perhaps aided by the insertion of an intermission between Acts I and II. At the post-opera talk, Maestro Walker explained that he felt it necessary both for the performers and the audience, some of whom might not have been ready for a nearly three-hour sit.

Kyle Albertson as the Dutchman had an imposing bass voice and clear diction; he commanded the stage during the entire performance without overshadowing his castmates. His duet with Peter Volpe, who played Daland as a father wishing the best for his daughter rather than as a greedy schemer, was well sung and acted; both seemed deferential to Senta’s wishes.

Marjorie Owens, who missed the opening night performance due to an allergic reaction, was in fine form as Senta when I attended. She had a powerful, unforced sound and her acting portrayed a woman who knew her own mind, rather than being in thrall to her father’s wishes; this take was somehow more satisfying. Senta’s duets with Daland, Erik, and the Dutchman were all well sung and dramatically taut, their scenes serving to bring out the relationships between Senta and the men in her life.

Bryan Register, a WSNY awardee in 2008 and recitalist in 2009 whose career is mostly in Europe, has performed most of the major Wagner heldentenor roles to high praise, so it was a luxury to hear him as Erik. He has a powerful instrument but blended perfectly with Owens during their impassioned duets; they were convincing as former lovers who still had a connection but were clearly never to be together.

In Act II, the Spinning Chorus unfolded with a mix of longing and whimsey as the girls teased Senta, who was transfixed by the Dutchman’s portrait. Leah Heater was excellent vocally as Mary, playing her as a kindly mentor to Senta, rather than as a strict matron.

The Sailors’ Chorus was a rollicking dance number which focused on Daniel O’Hearn, a talented young tenor who is more used to leading roles than character parts. His Steersman was exceptional, both for his singing and his drunken dance which provided a touch of humor without veering into slapstick.

Pittsburgh Opera does not have the financial resources of the Met or some other large companies, nor the ability to attract an audience at those price levels (top ticket was \$160). Sets and staging were minimalist with the action and costumes updated to contemporary times: Director Sal Helfrich provided an atmospheric concept; Steven Kemps’ unit set was an unadorned box and tricky to navigate, with doors for entrances and exits; and Ian Wallace’s video projections included ships, tanker, and classic galleon.

IRA BARROWS

Piano-vocal Scores of Ring Operas

Das Rheingold: piano-vocal score, and *Die Walküre*: piano-vocal score. 124 pages each, contained in one volume. Copyright and arranged by Jonathan McPhee. Boosey & Hawkes, 2023. \$35.00. N.B.: Re-orchestrations of the first two sections of “The Essential Ring” by McPhee are to be published soon by Boosey & Hawkes, for rental only.

Jonathan McPhee, a conductor and arranger, is in the process of publishing an orchestral adaptation of the *Ring*, entitled “The Essential Ring.” Note that this review covers only his published piano-vocal scores of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. There is a long history of works of this kind, and I feel that it is important to review why this kind of work has been undertaken, the various ways in which this has been done, and what are both the goals and potential pitfalls. Then we can evaluate McPhee’s work in this light.

There are basically two ways in which the *Ring* and other Wagner music dramas have been altered, condensed, or simplified. Both date back to Wagner’s own lifetime and reflect responses to the unique challenges of presenting his major works. The first way consists of making a new orchestration: reducing the number of winds and brass, and in the case of the *Ring*, the extra harps, and also eliminating new instruments such as the Wagner Tubas, the bass trumpet, and the contrabass trombone. Humperdinck was probably the first to undertake a reduced orchestration of the *Ring*, initially in extracted orchestral passages such as “Siegfried’s Rhine Journey.” But complete versions of reduced orchestrations of the *Ring* were common by the 1880’s and are used to this day, especially in provincial German houses. The rationale for this is both economic and practical, and very easy to understand. Many theaters do not have pits large enough to hold the huge forces that Wagner demands; and even those that do have to face considerable expenses in acquiring the needed instruments and paying the additional players. I cannot judge McPhee’s orchestral version, because I have not seen his orchestral scores, but have only seen the piano/vocal reductions of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. Judging from his description of the forces required, it would appear that he calls for orchestral forces that are usual to standard

Romantic repertoire, such as Verdi or Puccini. It is, therefore, not a version for chamber ensemble, some of which have been presented recently with various levels of success, but rather one which any “normal” opera company’s orchestra could undertake.

The second way, one that McPhee has taken very seriously, is that of making the works briefer. Cuts have always been a common feature of Wagner’s major works, and even though they are much less common today than they were in previous generations, it is nevertheless useful to consider what has been deemed to be gained by making them. The first reason is perhaps the most obvious: to shorten the length of time the audience has to dedicate to a performance. It is strongly felt that many people lack either the time or the Sitzfleisch to tolerate a work that uncut might well last 5-1/2 or 6 hours, if one includes intermissions. There is a financial side as well: orchestra players often have to be paid overtime. Another financial aspect comes into play when entire scenes or characters are cut. Many famous productions of *Götterdämmerung* in the not so distant past eliminated the roles of the three Norns, Waltraute, and Alberich, thereby considerably reducing the budget for solo singers, as well as cutting well over 45 minutes of music and dramatic action. McPhee follows this approach in his *Rheingold* piano-vocal score, where both Mime and Erda have been eliminated.

Another rationale behind cuts is to lighten the demands on the singers, especially in taxing roles such as Siegfried and Tristan. It is worth noting that practically the only cuts that one encounters in major opera houses in the past 50 years or so are those made in either Act II, or less commonly, in Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*: these are made with the explicit goal of making the role of *Tristan* less strenuous. There is certainly some validity to the argument that the performance of less strained or fatigued singers may be more valuable than a compromised uncut one.

A final rationale for shortening Wagner must be mentioned: some people feel that Wagner is simply too long for his own good, and that his works are actually improved by judicious cuts. There is really no answer to this.

The success of cuts can be defined by two primary criteria, one essentially dramatic, the other basically musical: does the drama lose in cohesion by the cuts? Does the action retain its logic? Are the characters' motivations clear? Does the audience empathize with the characters and their situations on the same level of intensity? Does the music retain its own inner cohesion, does the crucial role of memory, of comparing what we hear now with what we had heard before, still function? Do we hear the music that we most love? These are all questions that we must answer in evaluating the success of any condensed *Ring*.

I am sorry to say that in my judgment, McPhee fails to satisfy most of these criteria, especially in his version of *Die Walküre*. Some aspects of his *Rheingold* version are relatively successful, but even in this version there are glaring problems. How can we understand the nature of Alberich's vision of a loveless world, if all of his descriptions of it in Scene III are

cut? And whereas the lack of Mime does not radically alter our understanding of the story, Erda's intervention and warning seem to me to be essential elements in Wotan's "Great Idea" and the entire course of the dramatic action in the rest of the *Cycle*.

By my calculation, *Rheingold* is cut by about 40%. *Walküre*, on the other hand, is reduced by well over 60% if not more. We have no Love Duet, no shred of Wotan's monologue, none of the scene between the fleeing Siegmund and Sieglinde, and perhaps worst of all, not one single note from the minute that Wotan in terrible rage banishes Brünnhilde, to his explosion of love and regret in the great Farewell. With these cuts, none of the characters acts with any understandable motivation, and none of the underlying themes of the *Ring* are revealed or even comprehensible. And we do not hear much of the greatest, and, even more to the point, most dramatically significant music in the *Ring*. I would much rather hear a few excerpts, rather than a version of *Die Walküre*, one of the most moving works ever composed, in which both the drama and the music are so violated and have lost so much of their meaning.

JEFFREY SWANN

Performances and Concerts in the U.S. as of Jan. 2024 (please check websites)

- Jan. 19, 21m, 27, 31, 2024. *Parsifal*. Houston Grand Opera. Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: J. Caird.
- Met Orchestra Concerts: Feb. 1, 2024 (L. Davidsen: *Wesendonck Lieder*). Carnegie Hall. Also, June 11 and June 14.
- April 24, 2024. Carnegie Hall: Bamberg Symphony: Prelude to *Lohengrin*; Overture to *Tannhäuser*. Cond.: J. Hrusa.
- May 3, 2024. Carnegie Hall: Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra: Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan*. Cond.: S. Rattle.
- Apr. 27, 30, May 3, 5m, 2024. *Die Walküre*. Atlanta Opera. Cond.: A. Fagan; dir.: T. Zvulun.
Members of The Wagner Society of New York have been invited to pre-performance receptions at Atlanta Opera's production of *Die Walküre* (Apr. 27, 30, May 3, May 5) and we may organize other events around the performance. Let us know if you'll be attending and we'll keep you in the loop. Reminder: WSNY Members receive 20% off tickets to performances of *Die Walküre* by going to the Atlanta Opera web site (www.AtlantaOpera.org) and entering the discount code WAGNER20.
- Oct. 13, 15, 17, 20, 2024. *Ring Cycle* in concert. Dallas Opera. Cond.: F. Luisi. With many special events for supporters of the project. Also note that the the four operas will be performed individually from May to early Oct. Specific info to come, and see website: dallassymphony.org/ring-cycle

43rd Annual Seminar, and the 4th on Tannhäuser



Met Orchestra Musicians Roundtable: Wen Qian (violin), Hannah Cope (harp), Anton Rist (clarinet), and Anne Scharer (French horn). Photos: Neil Friedman.



Speakers: John J. H. Muller IV - on the different versions; Susan Brodie - on recent productions. David Shengold, Seminar moderator and interviewer for the roundtables. The two roundtables will soon be entered on the WSNY Free YouTube Channel.

2023 RWVI Congress in Brussels

The Richard Wagner Verband International held its 2023 Congress in Brussels, Belgium, November 2-6. The Congress, normally an annual meeting of the 123 worldwide member Wagner Societies, took place after two Covid-related cancellations in 2020 and 2022 and a limited gathering in Munich in 2021. (WSNY, a longtime member, has regularly sent a delegate and has reported on these Congresses, participating as a voting member since the organization's revised Constitution permitted voting for non-German members in 2009.) The Wagner Societies of Brussels and Ostend welcomed Verband members with many special programs, including a recital on the first evening by soprano Anne-Sophie

Sevens that included three of the *Wesendonck Lieder* and "Dich teure Halle" (*Tannhäuser*, Act II).

The following morning, Delegates of the member societies convened at 9:00 a.m. for a business meeting, chaired by President Rainer Fineske, concluding six hours later. There was much discussion of a proposal to downsize the Verband's governing body (Präsidium) by reducing the number of Vice-Presidents from four to two, and the number of Committee (Board of Directors) Members from eight to six. Prior to the Congress, an objection had been raised that the late addition of the proposal to the Agenda violated the Verband's corporate charter and jeopardized its tax

exempt status, but no attendees addressed this, and the meeting proceeded. After discussion, the proposal passed by a wide margin, with the Präsidium now to be composed of a President, Secretary, Treasurer, two Vice-Presidents (one German and one non-German), and six Committee Members (three German and three non-German). This was followed by a discussion as to whether the Verband is an “international” or “German” organization, although no one present seemed dissatisfied with its current purpose or operation. After adjournment, a Special Meeting was called for December 18 to revote—and pass—all Agenda items.

Other business at the Delegates Meeting included Treasurer’s Reports from 2021 and 2022 and a report from Stephanie Kollmer, Director of the Bayreuth Stipendium Program. The next Congress was con-

firmed for May 11-15, 2024, in Madrid, which had been prepared to host the 2022 Congress. Katharina Wagner, Director of the Bayreuth Festival, was represented by Ulrich Jagels, Managing Director.

Special activities included a performance of *Das Rheingold* Friday evening at Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie (review follows) and a Symposium Saturday morning, in the Monnaie workshops, on Wagner’s influence on Belgian Symbolists and the role of Brussels in spreading Wagner’s works. Brussels tours, receptions, dinners, and special excursions to Bruges and Antwerp were also offered. All of these enjoyable events and activities were organized by the host Societies, headed by the highly competent and gracious Elizabeth Mollard.

DAVID HUGHES

Das Rheingold Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels

G. Bretz, N. Spence, S. Hendricks, M. Lemieux, A. Fritsch, N. Gubisch, A. Foster-Williams, J. Hubbard, P. Hoare, A. Jerkunica, W. Schwinghammer. Cond.: A. Altinoglu; production: R. Castellucci. Performances of November 3 and 5, 2023.



Alberich is dangled above the stage until he surrenders the Ring and the Tarnhelm (Scene IV). Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

The Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie recently launched a new *Ring Cycle* with eight performances of *Das Rheingold* in a visually audacious production, simultaneously compelling and unsettling, by Romeo Castellucci. It incorporated numerous supernumeraries, occasional religious references, and scenes invoking human fears as it explored the transitory nature and power of the river gold.

In Scene I, the Rhinemaidens collect what may be gold dust and they taunt Alberich after he appears, tied to an I beam. After freeing himself, he “seizes” the river gold and disappears into darkness. Scene II opens in a courtyard containing Grecian statues and friezes, with the stage floor covered by writhing unclothed supernumeraries over whom Wotan, Fricka, and the other Gods tread. When the Giants arrive, the statues and friezes fall, “burying alive” some of those on the floor.



Wotan and Fricka, wearing crowns, tread carefully over near-naked bodies (Scene II). Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

In Scene III, Loge and Wotan descend to Nibelheim where Alberich uses the Tarnhelm—a gold circlet around his neck—to turn into a giant “monster,” framed by the upright Ring, a very large black gold hoop, previously seen and heard before the overture, where it had spun noisily and then clattered to the ground. Instead of turning into a toad, Alberich emerges naked inside the Ring (the hoop) after discarding his character’s wig, mask, and body suit, which form the “toad” seized by Loge. Scene IV opens with Alberich still standing naked inside the Ring. He summons the Nibelungen who appear but bring no gold. Loge then ties Alberich’s hands to the Ring and coats him with black paint, while Wotan lifts the Ring with Alberich dangling. He is lowered after surrendering the Ring and the Tarnhelm, then curses Wotan, but these valuables are ignored until they are collected by Fafner after he has killed Fasolt.

As the opera comes to a close, Donner summons a storm and then walks upstage to stand on the edge of a large circular hole, in the stage floor. After spreading his arms, he falls backwards into the abyss, followed by Froh, Freia, several supernumeraries, Fricka, and

Wotan, as the orchestra plays the “Ascent to Valhalla” music (no rainbow bridge or sense of triumph).

Musically, *Das Rheingold* was greatly rewarding. The singers, many of whom may not be known to American audiences, all sang well, with excellent diction. Three in particular were noteworthy. Bass Gábor Bretz was a resonant and stoic Wotan: he did not react to the black handprint on his face, which symbolized the curse. American baritone Scott Hendricks sang Alberich in a role debut to great effect, vocally varied to reflect triumph and then devastation. Scottish tenor Nicky Spence’s Loge, clearly sung, reflected the character’s duplicity, and, in this production, brutality. The Monnaie Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Music Director Alain Altinoglu, was superb from start to finish. The pace was relatively swift, and the singers and motifs could always be heard.

Das Rheingold completed its sold out run at the Monnaie on November 9. *Die Walküre* follows with eight performances beginning January 21, 2024. *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* will follow later in 2024 and 2025.

DAVID HUGHES