

WAGNER NOTES



Tristan, Act III: Isolde (Elisabeth Teige), talking to the just deceased Tristan (Clay Hilley), prior to the Liebestod. The main feature of the production is a gigantic tableau with 260 lights. Deutsche Oper Berlin.
Photo: ©Bernd Uhlig.
See review, **page 8**. Also see Met and San Francisco reviews.



WSNY Calendar (see also [WSNY website](http://wagnersocietyyny.org)) with best wishes for 2026

Jan. 14 (Wed.), 6:30-7:45 pm. Annual Meeting; Jeffrey Swann on *The Music of the Ring*. National Opera Center, 330 Seventh Ave. at 28th St., New York. (See review in this issue.) Books will be available for signing.

Feb. 11 (Wed.), 6:30-7:45 pm. Walter Frisch on Wagner and Brahms. National Opera Center.

Feb. 3, 10, 17, 24, March 10, 6:30-7:30 pm (Tuesdays). *Tristan* Course. John Muller, lecturer. Collaboration with The Juilliard School/Extension, 60 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York. (Sold out, waiting list is being maintained.)

March 14 (Sat.), noon-4:30 pm. *Tristan* Seminar. Victor Borge Hall, 58 Park Ave. at 38th St., New York. Speakers include Prof. Karol Berger, Will Crutchfield, Ryan Speedo Green, Ekaterina Gubanova, Tomasz Konieczny, and Prof. Wayne Oquin.

April 30 (Thurs.), 6:30-7:30 pm. Joshua Borths on Foundations of Wagner's Music. National Opera Center.

May 22 (Fri.), 2:00-4:30 pm. Singers' Auditions. Merkin Hall, 129 West 67th St., New York. (Members only.)

Recital by WSNY's 2025 audition winners, on Dec. 13, 2025, included works by Mahler, Wagner, and Bizet. Left to right: Alec Carlson, tenor (Ursula Springer Award); Mitchell Cirker, pianist; Sadie Cheslak, mezzo-soprano (Robert Lauch Memorial Fund Award).
Photo: Neil Friedman.



We enter the new year with energy and optimism. Our Annual Meeting on January 14 will introduce new leadership on our Board and another valued presentation by Jeffrey Swann, on the occasion of the publication of his much-anticipated book on the *Ring*. In February we have invited Columbia Professor Walter Frisch to talk to us about the intricate relationship between Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner (and their respective adherents and critics). Then in March, we have the 45th Annual Seminar on *Tristan und Isolde*, hand-in-hand with the new Met production. Tickets for this event are available on our web site and we encourage you to grab them early.

After being blessed with allocations of over 200 tickets for purchase by our members to the 2025 Bayreuth Festival, the Society – along with all other similar organizations around the world – is having

difficulty securing allotted tickets for the 2026 Festival. The International Verband (RWVI) is working hard on behalf of all of us to investigate, and our Bayreuth Coordinator Claudia Deutschmann is busy working her magic. We will do what we can on behalf of our members, but it appears as of this writing that we will have substantially fewer Bayreuth tickets available to our members than we are accustomed to receiving.

On the bright side, the Society was able to secure blocks of tickets to two other *Ring Cycles* – La Scala in March and Paris in November. We look forward to fellowship and thrilling music theatre on those occasions.

Our membership renewal season was successful – thanks to all of our loyal and generous members, new and returning. We wish everyone a productive start to the New Year and look forward to good times to come!

F. PETER PHILLIPS
PRESIDENT

About the Contributors

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Parsifal at San Francisco Opera: 1988, 2000, and 2025

B. Jovanovich, T. A. Baumgartner, K. Youn, B. Mulligan, F. Struckmann, D. Soar. Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: M. Ozawa. Performance of Oct. 25, 2025.

In 1988, San Francisco Opera mounted a fine *Parsifal*, directed by Nicolas Joël, featuring spectacular performances from René Kollo, Kurt Moll, Jorma Hynninen, Waltraud Meier, and Walter Berry, with John Pritchard conducting. It returned in 2000 with Donald Runnicles leading a Nikolaus Lehnhoff production. In October 2025, Matthew Ozawa here tackled his first Wagnerian directing assignment with mixed though generally positive results, giving a fundamentally clear and peaceful account of the story. Conductor (and San Francisco Opera Music Director) Eun Sun Kim, who first ventured *Parsifal* last season at Houston Grand Opera, achieved strong musical rewards once past an inert start to Wagner's crucially mood-setting Vorspiel, with a very well-prepared orchestra. Initial brass work was excellent, though occasionally sounding less precisely rehearsed as the opera progressed. It's hard to accept any *Parsifal* choral placement after hearing it in Bayreuth; here the choral entries sounded diffuse but sound and ensemble improved considerably for Act III's heavy lifting.

Brandon Jovanovich as Parsifal looked youthful and energetic in this low-lying, surprising short role, which his non-baritonal tenor negotiated with skill, handsome tone, and tapered soft dynamics. As in Houston, Kwangchul Youn's mellow, steady, and beautifully articulated Gurnemanz anchored the entire performance. Brian Mulligan gave us Amfortas' anguish but was directed far too robust and able throughout, entering on his own power and storming around the stage, his wound visible only at the end. His timbre now suits Telramund or Gunther better; phrasing was judicious but lacking the legato fervor of a Hynninen or Peter Mattei. Making her American stage debut, Tanja Ariane Baumgartner confirmed her vocal strength and alert presence, making her one of Europe's leading Ortruds and Frickas. She met Act II's near-impossible demands, but her voice lacked any element of sensuality, a deficit for Kundry in that act. Visually she proved suitably seductive, after a ghastly first act haggish costume and a blonde Rosannadanna



Act II: Klingsor (Falk Struckmann), demonstrating his authority over Kundry (Tanja Ariane Baumgartner). Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.

wig. Veteran bass-baritone Falk Struckmann, despite being constrained by very static blocking, dispensed dramatic authority as Klingsor. His powerful voice has shaded towards classic "Bayreuth bark"—not inappropriate for this depraved, self-torturing character. David Soar, his voice borne in electronically, sounded almost too steady and healthy as Titurel. The Flower Maidens, saddled with outfits seemingly derived from 1970s robin's egg-blue mylar shower curtains, sang effectively. Promise came in smaller roles from the appealing timbre of Nikola Printz (A Voice) and strong-voiced tenors Christopher Oglesby and Thomas Kinch (Third and Fourth Esquires).

Ozawa did well to utilize a rotating unit set (by Robert Innes Hopkins), minimizing this opera's inherent problems of rendering space/time transformations. Its pillars and platforms served several functions effectively enough though the construction materials looked rather cheap than majestic. Mystifying bound corpses punctuated the stage pictures, which lacked any sense of the natural world. Yuki Nakase Link's lighting provided some variety of mood, but no hint of green appeared in Act III, when Wagner's text and music turned to meadows and flowers. Ozawa's aesthetic imagery universalized the

work's spiritual content at the end. Kundry didn't die but (pleasingly to me) unveiled the Grail and, jointly with Parsifal, held it up towards the audience, including us in the promised redemption.

Choreographer Rena Butler had booked a half dozen talented dancers, one as Herzeleid (Parsifal's spoken-of but usually wisely unseen dead mother), who gyrated in Klingsor's magic garden and three in blood-red outfits accompanying the Grail's unveiling. The often awkwardly accomplished detailing of Klingsor's hurled spear by Parsifal, was here well handled by the far-from-home red trio. Butler's imaginative but overly insistent moves served to obscure and distract from the ongoing drama. The choreography, per se, was fine, the dancers very good; the problem was that 95% of it was completely unnecessary, with the onstage presence of Herzeleid at the brink of bathetic kitsch. The Met's HD stagings' increasing focus on showily arty choreography—to fill the moments in which spectators might otherwise simply experience and grasp the significance of an opera's music—may be reaping untoward consequences elsewhere. Mystifyingly, neither dancers nor Amfortas nor Parsifal aged a day during



Act III: Wildly colorful dancers accompanying the unveiling of the Grail. Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.

the years-long period between the second and third acts although Grunemanz and company looked and acted decades older. Christopher Bergen's generally helpful titles had an odd gaffe, focusing on the returned Parsifal's removing (at Monsalvat) his armor rather than even mentioning downing his spear--the object central to his long quest and the opera's redemptive plot.

DAVID SHENGOLD

[*Parsifal* as the fifth opera of the *Ring*? Paul Schofield, a Wagner scholar and former Zen Buddhist monk, called attention to the links between the two works in his 2008 book *The Redeemer Reborn, Parsifal as the Fifth Opera of the Ring*. Schofield's premise is that it is a single, unbroken story beginning with *Rheingold*: stealing the gold, and ending with the reunion of the spear and grail at the end of *Parsifal* and is the last manifestation of the hero in Wagner's work. – Ed.]

San Francisco Opera *Ring* Cycles: June/July 2028

A brief announcement was given in the Nov. issue; details are now available: General Director Matthew Shilvock and Music Director Eun Sun Kim have announced plans for San Francisco Opera's upcoming presentation of the *Ring* in three full cycles, preceded by standalone performances in 2027 and early 2028. Francesca Zambello, director of a co-production of San Francisco Opera (2011) and Washington National Opera (2016), will remount this production for SF Opera. (It was revived in San Francisco in 2018 and in a virtual Festival in April 2021. Maestro Kim will conduct. 2028 Cycle dates (Tu., Wed., Fri., and Sun.): Cycle 1: June 13-18; Cycle 2: June 20-26; Cycle 3: June 27-July 2. A variety of community programs and ancillary events will be announced. The cast will be headed by Tamara Wilson as Brünnhilde, Brian Mulligan as Wotan, and Simon O'Neill as Siegfried, with additional casting to be announced later.

Tickets will go on sale initially on Oct. 13, 2026, to *Ring* Circle members, who will receive special benefits. *Ring* Cycle packages will be offered to the general public beginning in July 2027. Full information: sfopera.com/ringcycle

Rings (and partials) in the U.S. and Europe

The Nov. issue gave an extensive listing of *Rings*—complete and partial—being presented through 2030. We will provide an update in the March issue. We note here a few updates and domestic Wagner performances. Also, consult Operabase for many international performances. WSNY has obtained a block of tickets for both La Scala *Ring* (first cycle—sold out) and Opera Bastille Paris (first cycle). See details: Wagnersocietyny.org

NEW Baltic Opera Festival: *Walküre*: July 2 and 5, 2026. Tomasz Konieczny is the Artistic Director of the Festival and will perform Wotan. (Also see p.7.) balticoperafestival.pl

NEW Opera Sofia Bulgaria *Ring*: May 26, 27, 29, 31, 2026 (revival). Cond.: C. Trinks; dir.: P. Kartaloff. Plus *Lohengrin*: June 12, *Tannhauser*: June 14. operasofia.bg

Upcoming Performances (including Strauss) in the U.S and Canada

- **Jan. 25, 29, Feb. 3, 6, 11, 14.** *Salome*. Lyric Opera of Chicago. Cond.: T. Netopil; dir.: D. McVicar. lyricopera.org
- **Feb. 28, Mar. 1.** *Tristan*, 2nd act (concert). Houston Symphony. Cond.: J. Valcuha. houstonsymphony.org
- **March 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, April 2.** *Tristan*. Metropolitan Opera. Cond.: Y. Nezet-Seguin; dir.: Y. Sharon. met-opera.org
- **May 7, 8, 9.** *Götterdämmerung* excerpts (concert). Cleveland Orchestra. Cond. E. Welser-Möst. cleveland-orchestra.com
- **May 19-24.** *Walküre*. LA Philharmonic. Act I: May 19 & 22; Act II: May 20 & 23; Act III: May 21 & 24. Cond.: G. Dudamel; dir.: A. Arvelo. laphil.com
- **May 25, 27, 29, 31.** *Siegfried*. Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta. Cond.: S. Rivald; dir.: J. Ivany. (Jonathan Dove arr.) edmontonopera.com
- **May 30, June 2, 5, 7.** *Götterdämmerung*. Atlanta Opera. Cond.: R. Kalb; dir.: T. Zvulun. atlantaopera.org
- **June 7, 11, 14, 19, 23, 27.** *Elektra*. San Francisco Opera. Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: A. Kühnhold. sfopera.com
- **August 14-19.** Wagner in Vermont 2026: *Tristan*: Aug. 14 and 19; *Hollander*: Aug. 16; *Parsifal*: Aug. 17. TUNDI Productions. info@tundi productions.org

Bayreuth Festival: July 25 - Aug. 26, 2026 - SOLD OUT

Highlights were given in the Nov. issue. For full schedule, casts, and creative teams, see bayreuther-festspiele.de.

WSNY members were offered the opportunity to purchase 2026 Festival tickets (subject to availability) through the Society, but the huge demand for tickets (partly as a result of the package deal offered in July) has created great difficulties for the usual allotments to RW Verband International member societies. See the President's column on page 2. If you applied, you will be contacted by our Bayreuth Coordinator, Claudia Deutschmann. The following apply, taking these issues into account. Priority is first given to members who have not requested tickets recently and then by order of receipt of application. A member may request up to two tickets per performance. A payment of a \$100 application fee is required per person, per request, payable online via credit card, to be applied to the ticket price. This payment will only be refundable if the WSNY is not able to offer the requested tickets. If we offer tickets and the member decides not to purchase the tickets, the payment is not refunded. A contribution equal to 15% of the ticket price will be added when tickets are confirmed. See details: wagnersocietyny.org/bayreuth-festival/

Other ways to obtain Bayreuth Festival tickets:

1. **Gesellschaft:** Members of the Gesellschaft der Freunde von Bayreuth have received 2026 order information, giving scheduled performances, ticket categories, and prices, and a unique password for the ticketing section.
2. **Box office:** requests may be made directly to the box office (Kartenbüro) online. Members should note in their account their affiliation as a member of the WSNY. **SOLD OUT.**
3. **Online sale:** In recent years, a portion of the total number of Bayreuth Festival tickets also has been available through immediate online sale. That process was open from November 30. **SOLD OUT.**

Arabella Returns to the Met

R. Willis-Sørensen, T. Konieczny, L. Alder, P. Breslik, K. Cargill, B. Sherratt, E. Gigliotti, E. L. Johnson, R. J. Rivera, B. Brady J. Roset. Cond.: N. Carter; dir.: O. Schenk; set designer: G. Schneider-Siemssen. Performance of Nov. 22, 2025.

Richard Strauss' *Arabella*, his tenth opera, was not performed at the Metropolitan Opera until 1955, more than two decades after its 1933 debut in Dresden. Rudolf Bing (then General Manager) assembled a stellar cast: conductor Rudolf Kempe, one of Strauss' finest interpreters; Eleanor Steber, the first American to perform the title role; Canadian baritone George London as Mandryka; and the renowned Hilde Gueden as Zdenka, a singer whom Strauss had personally admired. Two years later, Lisa della Casa assumed the title role for sixteen performances until 1965; Strauss' daughter-in-law once told me there was never a better *Arabella*, and it's hard to argue with that sentiment.

The opera lay dormant until 1983, when it was revived to mark its 50th anniversary, with a new production directed by the Austrian Otto Schenk. This production, still in use today, stands as a refreshing return to historical opera. Schenk and set designer Günther Schneider-Siemsen created a faithful portrayal of the work, drawing directly from the score: the slightly worn Biedermeier hotel room in Act I, the grand ballroom of Act II, and the slightly cramped hotel lobby in Act III, reminiscent of some of the small, charming hotels in Vienna's first district.

The 1983 production starred Kiri Te Kanawa and Kathleen Battle as the two sisters, with Bernd Weikl as Mandryka and Erich Leinsdorf conducting. It has been revived several times, with a highlight being a performance featuring Renée Fleming, conducted by her close friend Christoph Eschenbach.

Though Strauss called *Arabella* a "lyrical comedy," it is hardly straightforward amusement. As in so many of his works with Hofmannsthal, the humor is threaded with pointed social and ethical commentary. Set in Vienna of the early 1860s, the opera reveals both the dazzling public life of the era—its cafés, balls, and opera houses—and the more murky world of the rising bourgeois class: bankers, industrialists, and professionals whose identities were tied to wealth and



Ending of Act III: Mandryka (Tomasz Konieczny) and Arabella (Rachel Willis-Sørensen) as they renew their promise of love. Photo: Marty Sohl/Met Opera.

cultural capital. The Waldner family embodies this deterioration: Count Waldner, drowning in debt, gambles compulsively and treats his daughters as financial assets: his younger daughter is raised as a boy due to the expense of marrying off two daughters, while his wife numbs herself with alcohol and fortune-tellers.

Hofmannsthal—himself the son of a banker and born just a year after the financial crash of 1873—was acutely aware of the peril behind such pleasure-driven living. In *Arabella*, he perceived an impending collapse and famously lamented the culture of "hedonism and everyone living on tick." The opera also echoes the broader historical trauma of the Habsburg Empire's demise after World War I. Hofmannsthal wrote extensively on the postwar world and imagined a kind of European union with Vienna as its nexus, a symbolic meeting point between East and West. In that vision, Mandryka (the East) and Arabella (the West) embody a potential harmony. Strauss, for his part, was less concerned with politics and more inspired by the East's musical color, weaving Slavic folk elements into the score.

Australian conductor Nicholas Carter led a superb Met orchestra. Despite the score's density and occasional excess, he elicited unusual clarity, letting the

interlocking motifs speak with psychological nuance. He occasionally risked overpowering the singers, yet his conducting remained nimble and fluid. His interpretation highlighted Strauss' conversational ebb and flow while bringing out the waltz-infused atmosphere that defines the work.

The production was meant to feature Lise Davidsen as Arabella, but she withdrew from the role and from the rest of the year due to pregnancy (she gave birth to twins in June). American soprano Rachel Willis-Sørensen delivered a performance that gathered momentum over the course of the evening. She appeared somewhat restrained at first, but her Act I monologue, "*Mein Elemer*," revealed her vocal radiance. By Act III, she embodied a fully realized Arabella, warm and gracious, and her final monologue, "*Das war sehr gut*," carried real emotional weight.

British soprano Louise Alder, making her Met debut as the cross-dressing Zdenka, proved the evening's revelation. Her luminous, plush tone blended exquisitely with Willis-Sørensen's in the celebrated Act I duet "*Aber der Richtige*." Alder conveyed Zdenka's hopeless love for Matteo with touching sincerity, which became the emotional heart of the performance. (In real life, she is three months pregnant.)

Polish bass-baritone Tomasz Konieczny added a real Eastern European color to Mandryka and gave one of the most compelling portrayals of the role in recent memory. He captured the character's volatile mix of adoration and suspicion, underscoring his rus-

tic outsider status among the Viennese elite—a contrast reminiscent of Baron Ochs' tirades against "this city of Vienna." His voice was forceful and authoritative, with the jealousy-driven eruptions of Act II standing out, yet he maintained a refined lyricism in the gentler passages.

The supporting cast was uniformly strong. Pavol Breslik as Matteo brought depth to a role that can easily seem petulant; his nuanced lyrical singing added weight to the attraction between Matteo and Zdenka. Brindley Sherratt and Karen Cargill made an excellent comic pair as Count Waldner and his wife, their chemistry lending authenticity to the opera's domestic humor. Juliet Roset, in her Met debut as the Fiakermilli, displayed considerable coloratura skill but remained somewhat superficial dramatically, leaving Mandryka's jealous flirtation with her feeling underdeveloped.

In the end, this *Arabella* reaffirmed why Strauss and Hofmannsthal's final collaboration remains such an irresistible blend of charm, complexity, and quiet devastation. The Met's long performance history—from its belated 1955 debut to the enduring Schenk production—reminds us that *Arabella* is at its best when tradition and humanity are held in delicate balance. The performance honored the work's nostalgic beauty while revealing its sharper social truths—an *Arabella* that felt not only faithful to the past, but vividly, movingly alive in the present.

BRYAN GILLIAM



Tomasz Konieczny, right, receiving a WSNY logo pin from President F. Peter Phillips at the Nov. 16 reception. Photo: Wojtek Kubik.

Tomasz Konieczny was honored by the Wagner Society of New York at a reception for its special contributors on Sunday, November 16. Konieczny, who performed Mandryka in *Arabella* at the Met from Nov. 10-29, discussed his beginning as an actor and moving into singing roles. During the Met Cast Roundtable of the 2019 WSNY Seminar on *Rheingold*, Konieczny had noted that he would not do Alberich again, as he is only interested in Wotan. He has since done many productions of the *Ring* as Wotan/the Wanderer, including Zurich Opera in May 2024 and Bayreuth in 2025. He discussed the Baltic Opera Festival in Poland (its third year) which will present *Walküre* in 2026; he is Artistic Director of the Festival and will perform Wotan. *Walküre* dates: July 2 and 5 (open air). More information will be available soon. Tickets can already be reserved on the festival website: The Baltic Opera (Opera Baltycka w Gdansk). www.balticoperafestival.pl

260 Eyes Are Watching You – An (Almost) New *Tristan* in Berlin

C. Hilley, G. Zeppenfeld, E. Teige, T. Lehman, D. Murphy, I. Roberts, B. Ulrich. Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: D. Runnicles; dir.: M. Thalheimer. Performance of Nov. 23, 2025.

T*ristan und Isolde* at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, which premiered on November 1, 2025, is not entirely new since it is a coproduction with the Grand Théâtre of Geneva and was premiered there in September 2024. Reviews of that premiere were mixed. This reviewer holds that the Berlin production by director Michael Thalheimer is very finely crafted, with the help of an extraordinary cast of singers and musicians.

As the piece virtually demands, Thalheimer reduces the “action” to an absolute minimum of activity on stage: the passions, the waves of pain, of love, of jealousy; all this happens internally, inside the characters. The outer action thus can be reduced to an absolute minimum which, however, only works if the singer-actors on stage are able to express those torrents of passion with their voices, mimics, gestures, and sheer scenic presence. With the cast of the Deutsche Oper, this endeavor succeeded convincingly.

The American tenor Clay Hilley (WSNY’s 2015 Robert Lauch Memorial Fund awardee and 2017 recitalist) is developing into one of the important heldentenors of our age: he does not try to cope with the difficult role of Tristan by force, but by using an almost lyrical tone. The sound is radiant, the expression is strong, the interaction with Elisabeth Teige as Isolde gripping; the way he overcomes the enormous waves of sound ignited by the conductor Sir Donald Runnicles in the third act is stunning. He does so with a strong, albeit lyrical tone based on a firm technical basis that carries him through this devastating act.

Elisabeth Teige, as Isolde, is the perfect companion, not only in terms of falling victim to the same absolute passion, but also in the way she interacts with Hilley in the framework of this production. Her voice is brilliant and touching and possesses a huge variety of expressions: both a mesmerizing piano betraying a broken and beguiled soul and a fervent, intense forte during the moments of distraught passion. Her intimate dialogue with the just deceased Tristan prior



Act II: King Marke (Georg Zeppenfeld), Melot (Dean Murphy), and Kurwenal (Thomas Lehman) against a wall of 260 lights. Photo: ©Bernd Uhlig.

to the *Liebested* is deeply moving; the *Liebested* itself is sung with fragile beauty, accompanied by a large, slow movement of her arms forming a complete circle until the moment she expires.

At the beginning of the opera, Isolde is pulling a gigantic block tied to a long rope across the stage, from right to left. She generally has to bear a heavy burden in life, preventing her from blossoming, even in her passion to Tristan through which she is doomed to fail and doomed to die. The corresponding image is provided at the beginning of Act III, when Tristan, emerging from the dark depths of the back of the stage, is pulling an invisible burden with a long rope. It seems to be a metaphor of affliction, torn between his deadly wound: the social interdiction of his true love and subconscious suffering he has carried with him for his entire life.

The main stage feature throughout is a gigantic tableau with 260 lights, symbolizing the *öder Tag*, Tristan and Isolde’s fiercest enemy. At the same time those round lamps may be seen as eyes, with Tristan and Isolde under constant observation by big brother (in that case, presumably Melot): 260 eyes are watching you. As a consequence, Isolde extinguishes those lights to begin the *Liebesnacht* in Act II: a stunning

effect since the contrast between the blinding glare to soothing darkness is enormous. In Act III, the wall of lights serves as a ceiling and is lowered slowly to a 90 degree angle during Isolde's Liebestod, gleaming brightly into the audience, yet another mesmerizing effect. In this vein the whole set is characterized by minimalistic reduction. And the rest – is acting.

The rest of the cast performs equally well. The American mezzo-soprano Irene Roberts sings and acts divinely as Brangäne; her “*Habet acht*” calls in Act II, sung from the balcony, especially leave a lasting impression. The American baritone Thomas Lehman, an ensemble member of the Deutsche Oper, excels as Kurwenal, endowing Tristan's servant with the required intensity and warmth of tone. The difficult passage in Act III, feverishly greeting the arrival of Isolde's ship, is for once beautifully sung, not shouted. Melot, clad in the yellow color of the traitor, is portrayed by Dean Murphy (another excellent American singer), torn by jealousy but beautiful in tone.

Then there is Georg Zeppenfeld. He is the Marke, the Gurnemanz of our age, and yet is becoming more and more brilliant and mature. In addition to his superb diction and cultivated tone, he is adding torn, intense, unconditional expression. Fathoming the human depths of melancholy and suffering, he applies this knowledge to Marke's lament in Act II, reaching a peak in his extraordinary career. Here, he dares to declaim rather than sing certain passages, according to

Wagner's ideal of Sprechgesang, and the heightened dramatic effect is astounding. (Michael Volle is the inventor—and other hero—of this new Wagnerian Sprechgesang of the 21st century.)

The “minor roles” are also very well cast: Burkhard Ulrich, long-time member of the ensemble and acclaimed Mime and Loge, sings the Shepherd poignantly and beautifully. Paul Minhyung Roh, a young scholar of the Korean National Opera, endows the Young Sailor with an ethereal yet strong voice. Even the Steersman, sung by Kangyoon Shine Lee, stands out with vigor and determination.

All were well led and guided by maestro Sir Donald Runnicles, who, after 16 successful seasons, will end his term as General Music Director of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. 2024/25 is his farewell season of sorts, in which Runnicles says goodbye with pieces that are very dear to his heart: among others, the *Ring*, which he will conduct in May 2026, and *Tristan*. The mastery and experience he possesses with this work is palpable, and the orchestra is in splendid form. He does not entirely make use of the enormous dynamic and agogic range that this exceptional score offers and demands, but he knows the score intimately. In conjunction with the static but captivating production and an excellent cast of singers, this (almost) new *Tristan* is an important landmark of Wagnerian interpretation today.

HERMANN GRAMPP

Tannhäuser – Final Revival at Deutsche Oper Berlin

K. F. Vogt, C. Nylund, T. Kehrer, T. Lehman, K. Carrel, M. Bachtadze. Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: A. Kober; dir.: K. Harms. Performance of Nov. 2, 2025. With a documentary film on K. F. Vogt.

Deutsche Oper Berlin presented the 60th and final performance of Director Kirsten Harms' 2008 production of *Tannhäuser* on November 2nd. When Harms joined the cast and conductor on stage for a final bow, many in the audience greeted her with enthusiastic applause. I recall many singers who graced this production, including, sadly, two notable *Tannhäuser*s who are no longer with us: American Stephen Gould and German Peter Seiffert.

The production is relatively straightforward with medieval knights in shining armor, Christian motifs including images of damnation by fire, and the chorus dressed in period costume, albeit more graphic and stylized. Staging is simple: gray slabs serving as a bed for *Tannhäuser* and Venus in Act I, becoming tiered steps to showcase the chorus in Act II, and finally flat in Act III, with hospital beds of wounded souls. The lighting creates a vision of hellfire for the sinners in

Act I, followed by a bright evocation of the secular reality of medieval society. Other than the occasional unwelcome noise of armored horses in Act I, it well serves Wagner's tale of sacred and secular, art and lust, faith and salvation.

One of the production's concepts is the identification of Venus and Elisabeth as two sides of the same woman, differentiated by hair style. Clad in a long white dress, Venus wears her long blond hair loose, while Elisabeth braids her hair tight around her head. The singer who takes on the roles of Venus and Elisabeth in the same performance faces the challenge of negotiating the two distinct vocal styles and being on stage much of the time, including her transformation from dying Elisabeth to seductive Venus towards the end of the opera. Camilla Nylund, a lyric soprano whose voice has a powerful sheen and thrilling high notes, had little difficulty with this concept. Her tireless yet elegant singing is a marvel; one can fully appreciate her recent transition from an acclaimed Strauss singer to a more recent Wagner soprano. She portrayed Venus as a sympathetic woman who seeks love, while her Elisabeth was a willful and strong woman of faith.

Klaus Florian Vogt first essayed the role of Tannhauser, arguably the most difficult of Wagner's tenor roles, with its wide vocal range and high tessitura, in 2017 in Munich, and has since refined his interpretation at venues such as Hamburg and Bayreuth. As with his more recent role debuts as Siegfried and Tristan, Vogt maintains his unique approach, singing Tannhäuser with lyrical legato and impeccable diction, while acquiring warmth, strength, and color. The homage to Venus in Act I is always a challenge, and here he delivered an increasingly dramatic narrative. He was rewarded with a standing ovation.

The supporting cast, consisting mostly of ensemble members of the Deutsche Oper Berlin, greatly contributed to this performance. Tobias Kehrer as Landgraf Hermann sang with authority combined with benevolence, his youthful and resonant voice dominating the ensemble. As Wolfram, Tannhäuser's friend and an admirer of Elisabeth, the young



Curtain call: Landgraf Hermann (Tobias Kehrer), conductor Axel Kober, Venus and Elisabeth (Camilla Nylund), *Tannhäuser* (Klaus Florian Vogt). Photo: Ako Imamura.

American baritone Thomas Lehman made a strong impression with his powerful yet flexible delivery of some of Wagner's most beautiful and lyrical melodies. His singing was full of passion, yet seemingly effortless, and he cut a sympathetic character on stage.

The veteran conductor Axel Kober led the Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin with splendid control and precision, providing the singers ample support and breathing room. This house is known for its great acoustics, benefiting both orchestra and singers. As the "Pilgrims' Chorus" swelled in the dramatic final moments, there was hardly a dry eye among the audience: a moving and fitting finale of this beloved production.

The next evening, November 3rd, Vogt was back at the opera house to attend the screening of a new documentary film about him, titled "*Hier kennt einer das Fürchten nicht*" (Here one knows no fear). The film maker Astrid Bscher had made a film about Vogt in 2008, entitled "*Der Meistersinger*," chronicling his early career through his last minute debut in Bayreuth in 2007. The new film documents his career since then. At the post-film discussion, Vogt was joined by Bscher and Harald Schmitt (a sing and talk entertainer) for a lively conversation. Vogt and Schmitt have partnered with a pianist in a show—"Wagner for Three – A Journey through the Wagner Cosmos"—across Germany. The film will be screened in Hamburg on March 9, 2026, and may follow in other cities; it is expected to be released commercially with English subtitles.

AKO IMAMURA

Jeffrey Swann, Professor of Piano at New York University, has a PhD in both philosophy and in piano from The Juilliard School of Music. He has performed extensively in the U.S. and every continent and has given many recitals and lectures, including for the Wagner Society of New York and the Wagner Society of Washington, DC. WSWDC has provided generous financial support for the preparation and publication of this book.

Jeffrey Swann. *The Music of the Ring: A comprehensive study of the Leitmotives and how they are used in Der Ring des Nibelungen.*

Washington, DC, Wagner Society of Washington, DC, 2025. 736 pages, paperback.

List price: \$60.00, paperback. Available from Amazon and from Barnes & Noble.

It would be difficult to find any volume on Wagner published in the last fifty years that is more useful than Jeffrey Swann's *The Music of The Ring*. Deryck Cooke's influential discussion of the Leitmotives of *The Ring* that supplements the Solti recording and informs his unfinished critical analysis of the tetralogy has guided many, possibly most, Wagnerians in their understanding of the work. [WSNY published Cooke's study of the musical texture of the *Ring Cycle* in 1989, in a two-audiocassette package.] Swann, however, takes them further, not by challenging Cooke, but by standing on his shoulders. Swann shows how the Leitmotives work, change, and generate our comprehension of the action.

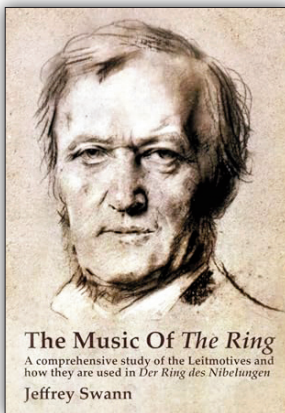
On first sight this book might intimidate a potential reader; its 736 pages come in a doorstopper-sized format. It is essentially a reference work – a specialized encyclopedia, with detailed entries on each of the 136 Leitmotives that Swann discovers. 90 of these are primary motives, which occur in various guises throughout the cycle, and 46 are secondary in that they occur very rarely, such as the melody from *Siegfried Idyll* that accompanies Brünnhilde's "*Ewig war ich*" in the final act of *Siegfried*. The generous supply of music quotations from the piano score requires only moderate skill at music-reading to understand the points that Swann is making. The Leitmotives are listed numerically – in the order they first appear in the score.

What makes this book such a remarkable contribution is its system of cross-referencing. Swann, with admirable clarity, explains how it works and the structure of each entry, which includes a detailed description of each Leitmotive, a list of locations where it occurs in the score, and examples not only of the Leitmotive in its basic form, but the myriad transfor-

mations it undergoes in the course of the action and, crucially, its relationship to other Leitmotives. Readers may encounter some difficulty with Swann's labelling each Leitmotive with a Latin number instead of the usual nomenclature – e.g. "sword", "flight", "Tarnhelm" etc. – on the grounds that the use of such labels limits the wide range of associations. Swann mercifully provides a listing of all Leitmotives in their typical form and, when appropriate, the label by which the Leitmotive is commonly known. But, initially to gather the full meaning of passages where there is a particularly dense concatenation of Leitmotives requires a lot of page flipping.

Two features of this encyclopedic coverage draw attention to salient characteristics of Wagner's music. First, Wagner was as acute a dramatist as he was a composer, so this volume will be of as equal interest to those engaged in theater or literature as it will be for musicians. Swann is acutely aware of the dramatic resonance of how even the slightest nuance of a dropped semitone or a sudden change in key or instrumentation indicates a shift in a character's personality or a turn of events, how almost every note of the *Ring* grows from previous music and has a clear function in narrating the story, establishing the peculiar and wonderfully changing environments of the action. The second feature is Swann's refusal to accept that anything about Wagner's music is definitive. Meanings of Leitmotives change; change is also the essence of Wagner's characters, and while the numen toward which the action moves is often foretold in vivid and spectacular beauty, that numen is never defined. As Swann points out, each of us might be able to find our own sequence of musical phrases that can lead us toward our own understanding of the action.

It is the continuing possibility of discovering new angles on *The Ring* that this volume enables. In a substantial Afterword, Swann outlines fresh lines of research that could arise from his analysis, both musically and dramatically, suggesting some especially fruitful lines of inquiry. They highlight how Wagner's Leitmotives allow us to view most characters with irony, ranging from mild to intense, and often arouse a vigorous, raw comedy, which has traditionally been undervalued or ignored entirely. The workings of the unconscious can be felt throughout the cycle, but especially in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, where Wagner intensifies the Leitmotif by an increasing dependence on fragments that echo the action of the past, so that the orchestra increasingly takes on the function of a collective memory that embodies the meaning of the entire work.

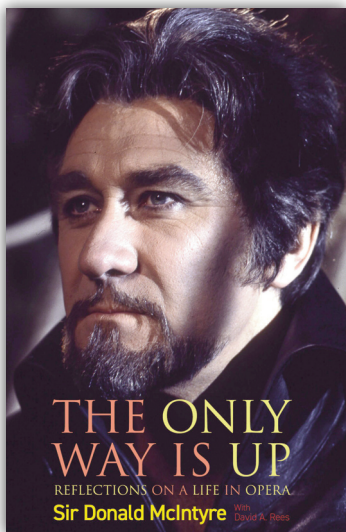


One could wish that the volume came with a recording of all the musical extracts; perhaps there may eventually be a digitized version. This might allow readers to appreciate the way in which Leitmotives allow us to trace the radical changes that occur in so many characters, to hear how concepts such as Wotan's "great idea" at the end of *Rheingold* gradually morphs, even, at times, is forced to take on a resonance that is the opposite of what we had initially thought it meant. But the costs of such a project would probably be overwhelming.

Nevertheless, *The Music of The Ring* is a volume that should belong in every Wagnerian's library. Swann has announced that it is not definitive; it is something much more: it will serve as the basis for a whole new generation of Wagnerian scholarship.

SIMON WILLIAMS

In Memoriam



Sir Donald McIntyre (Oct. 24, 1934, Auckland, New Zealand-Nov. 13, 2025, Munich), an internationally renowned bass-baritone, performed a wide repertoire that most often featured Wagner roles. Debuting at the Bayreuth Festival as Telramund in *Lohengrin* in 1967, he performed there more than 40 times over 17 seasons. He stated that his Wotan in Patrice Chéreau's revolutionary and highly praised 1976-80 Bayreuth Centenary *Ring* was the highlight of his career. A tribute from Bayreuth praised his voice, stage presence, and humanity.

Moving from Auckland to the U.K. in 1958, having abandoned a career in rugby in favor of a music career, he made his operatic debut in 1959 with Welsh National Opera as Zaccaria (*Nabucco*). Although he performed roles with many companies, he long considered Royal Opera (1967-1991) his musical home base. The recipient of many honors, he was knighted in 1992.

"Sir Don"'s illustrious Met career (1975-1996) of 16 roles, beginning with *Götterdämmerung* in 1975, included all of the major Wagner bass-baritone roles. He sang *Meistersinger* 8 times, *Siegfried*: 11, *Parsifal*: 4, *Walküre*: 1, *Rheingold*: 2, *Lohengrin*: 11, *Götterdämmerung*: 2, *Tristan*: 9, and *Holländer*: 5. His other Met operas were *Die Zauberflöte*: 7, *Fidelio*: 7, *Khovanschina*: 4, *Wozzeck*: 5, *The Makropoulos Case*: 6, *Elektra*: 4, and *Arabella*: 8.

His autobiography *The Only Way Is Up: Reflections on a Life in Opera* was published in 2019, thanks to the encouragement and research of Wagner scholar Prof. Heath Lees and the Wagner Society of New Zealand. Co-written with David A. Rees, it provides a full description and many photos of his life and career development. (A 240-page hardcover, it is available through Amazon.) He noted that the book title is his mantra and his one single motto as a singer. The image is the *Holländer*, in Bavaria Studios, Munich, 1974.