

WAGNER NOTES



Bayreuth Festival
Rienzi (Andreas Schager)
 mounting the stairs
 before dying, Act V.
 Photo: Enrico Nawrath.
 See *Rienzi* and *AI Ring*
 reviews and other
 performance reviews.



Anniversaries in 2026

- 1876 – 150th Anniversary of the Bayreuth Festival
- 1976 – 100th Anniversary of the Bayreuth Festival
 (with Chéreau's revolutionary *Ring Cycle*)
- 1976 – 50th Anniversary of the Richard Wagner Museum
- Upcoming, in 2027 – 50th Anniversary of the Wagner Society of New York

WSNY Calendar (see also [WSNY website](#))

- **Sept. 14 (Mon.), 6:00 pm - 11:00 pm.** *Rienzi*: Bayreuth, 2026. RPX Auditorium, Regal Times Square, 247 West 42nd St., New York. 360 seats, no assigned seating. Admission: members: \$45; non-members: \$55; student members: free. Doors open: 5:45 pm; start: 6:00 pm; end: approx. 11:00 pm. Registration and details: [WSNY website](#).
- **Sept. 24 (Thurs.), 7:00 pm.** Bayreuth Festival and Stipendiate Reports. National Opera Center, 330 Seventh Ave. at 28th St., New York.
- **Oct. 15 (Thurs.), 6:30 pm.** Joseph Horowitz on his novel *The Disciple*, addressing Anton Seidl and his world. Book signing. National Opera Center.
- **Nov. 12 (Thurs.), 6:30 pm.** Will Crutchfield on *Parsifal*: “The End as Beginning.” National Opera Center.
- **Dec. 3 (Thurs.) 6:30 pm.** “Wagner’s Innovations in Theater” with Peter Phillips. National Opera Center.
- **2027: Jan. 13 (Wed.), 6:30 pm.** Annual Meeting and Maestro Anthony Barres on “From Boito to Berio: the influence of Richard Wagner on Italian opera.” National Opera Center.
- **Feb. 17 (Wed.) 6:30 pm.** Prof. Christopher Park on “Wagner and Liszt.” National Opera Center.
- **March 10 (Wed.) 6:30 pm.** “What Does a Dramaturg Do?” with Cori Ellison. National Opera Center.
- **March 16 (Tues.)** Recital by Melissa Zgouridi, 2026 Robert Lauch Memorial Fund Awardee. Victor Borge Hall at Scandinavia House, 58 Park Ave., New York.
- **March 30 - April 27.** 5-part course on *Parsifal* offered by John Muller, in coordination with The Juilliard School. Discount available for Society members only.
- **April 1 (Thurs.), 6:30 pm.** “Heard and (Often) Unseen: The Met Orchestra’s Perspective.” National Opera Center.
- **May 7 (Fri.), 2:00 pm.** WSNY’s 2027 Singer Auditions. Merkin Hall, New York.
- **May 22 (Sat.)** Annual Seminar: *Parsifal*. National Bohemian Hall, 321 East 73d Street, 4th floor, New York.

Welcome to the 49th season of the Wagner Society of New York. As noted elsewhere, our volunteers have worked assiduously to prepare a rich and rewarding series of events, including performances, lectures, film screenings, social events, and of course our annual Seminar – scheduled this season on Wagner’s 215th birthday, May 22, 2027.

I write this note from Bayreuth, where I am immersed in things Wagnerian. I am struck by the experience of the theater itself – unique in its structure and its mission, drawing a specific audience that no other producing organization can summon. Even if I were not a devotee of Wagner’s work, I would recognize the remarkable and sustained achievement of this master theater artist and musician in creating this

event, the precursor of the “summer festival,” and its persistent claim to world-wide attention and respect. It’s a remarkable place.

This is, of course, our membership renewal time, a period of real importance to our Society. We derive practically all our revenue from current members who renew, many of whom offer an increase in their contributions. We continue as an all-volunteer operation and as such we are particularly grateful for our membership’s loyalty and generosity. Please hop online and make your membership contribution early.

And please pencil in an important date: November 3, 2027, our Fiftieth Anniversary Gala Dinner!

F. PETER PHILLIPS
PRESIDENT

Contributors

Hermann Grampp, a Bayreuth native, studied history, economy, and political science in Berlin, Cambridge (UK), and Paris. A freelance historian and music critic, he is an expert in French wagnerism and other Wagner-related topics.

Richard Moukarzel is a musicologist and pianist and a tutor at the University of Oxford. He previously studied at the National Lebanese Conservatory. He is a regular contributor to The Wagner Journal, and has also published in the International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology in Music.

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Bayreuth 2026: *Rienzi*

A. Schager, M. Nagy, A. Bauer Kannabas, G. Scherer, J. Holloway. Cond.: N. Stutzmann; dir.: A. Szemerédy and M. Parditka. Performance of July 26, 2026.

The centerpiece of Bayreuth's 150th anniversary season was the first performance ever of Wagner's "youth work" *Rienzi* in the Festspielhaus. *Rienzi* has never belonged to the traditional ten-work Bayreuth canon, so staging his only grand opera on the Green Hill was a genuine experiment.

Since 2026 marks 150 years since the first Bayreuth Festival of August 1876, the opening days carried extra weight. A ceremonial Festakt opened the festival on July 25, the traditional inauguration date, with remarks from Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder; the keynote was given by Nike Wagner, who spoke about the festival's history and her own experience with it. Christian Thielemann conducted the Festival Orchestra in excerpts from *Meistersinger* and *Tannhäuser* and in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. His conducting was, uncharacteristically, sloppy and uninspired; only in the finale did he find his grip, producing real dramatic tension and an enthralling range of dynamics and tempo. The next morning brought a memorial event, "Verstummte Stimmen" (Silenced Voices), with author Michel Friedman as guest of honor, who received sustained applause.

The third inaugural event was the premiere itself, on July 26 (with nine performances). The opera is better than its reputation suggests. What stands out, especially against the truncated versions heard in recent decades, is its completeness: a work "Wagnerian from beginning to end," as Egon Voss put it, already carrying many of the composer's signature traits. Choral scenes recall *Tannhäuser*, ensembles anticipate *Lohengrin*, and Wagner's personal voice is unmistakable. Yet the leap from *Rienzi*, finished in Paris in November 1840, to *Der Fliegende Holländer*, begun there in June 1841, was enormous: continuous dramatic evolution replaced a sequence of numbers, and the first hints of a leitmotif system appeared.

Rienzi's roots in the German Vormärz period



Irene (Gabriela Scherer), Adriano (Jennifer Holloway), and Rienzi (Andreas Schager). Photo: Enrico Nawrath.

(1815-1848) are unmistakable. The opera conveys the hopes of Wagner's generation to overcome political fragmentation and forge a unified, liberal nation, a root that Hitler and Nazi Germany misread almost beyond belief. Interestingly enough, in fascist Italy, the opera's brutal ending made it something of a taboo, while Hitler romanticized it as a metaphor of his own rise to power. At the end of the fascist period, Mussolini was publicly hanged in April 1945, much as Cola di Rienzo was lynched in Rome in 1354, and Hitler killed himself two days later amid the burning of his capital, just as Rienzi dies in flames atop the Capitol at the opera's end.

Staging the opera meant first solving the problem of the version: Wagner never fixed a final score. As was customary in the 1830s, he composed more music than any single performance would use, and while he settled on a final text in 1871, he never finalized the score itself. The original manuscript, given to Hitler for his fiftieth birthday in 1939 along with several other autographs, vanished in the final weeks of World War II and has never resurfaced. Dramaturg Markus Kiesel spent three years building a thorough,

well-balanced version across the opera's five acts. Productions of *Rienzi* are usually cut beyond recognition, as at Deutsche Oper Berlin in 2010, which trimmed the work to two hours and left its tenor shouting almost without pause. The 2026 Bayreuth version is far better proportioned and has a total duration, music only, of 3 hours and 33 minutes, although the role remains punishing, demanding careful husbandry from any tenor hoping to last the night intact.

Andreas Schager met the title role's demands admirably, sustaining true heldentenor stamina throughout; only in exposed piano passages, such as the prayer "Allmächtiger Vater" (oddly relocated from Act V to the start of Act IV, where it makes little dramatic sense), did small cracks appear in his otherwise radiant voice. The men generally outsang the women. Secondary male roles were excellently cast, and Michael Nagy and Andreas Bauer Kannabas, as heads of the rival Orsini and Colonna families, stood out; Bauer Kannabas impressed both vocally and physically, not least in a striking staged fall after his execution in Act III. Gabriela Scherer, as Rienzi's sister Irene, is a lyric soprano who often had to push past her natural range, while Jennifer Holloway, as her lover Adriano, has the more dramatic instrument but showed heavy vibrato and a sharp tone in her upper register.

Directors Alexandra Szemerédy and Magdolna Párditka relocated the story to a present-day setting of social-media populism, a persuasive translation of Wagner's metaphor about the rise and fall of "the last of the tribunes." The concept worked especially well in the first two acts, with Rienzi's rise in the polls tracked through cellphone messages from "the people," displayed on large screens, building to his election victory and a failed assassination attempt closing Act II. The most striking touch came in the ballet music and pantomime Wagner wrote to depict the rape of Lucretia and Rome's salvation through Brutus, but was cut before the 1842 Dresden premiere. The directors used it to build a stage within the stage resembling the Festspielhaus itself, with a golden miniature Wagner presiding over scenes from his later operas, told through simple Baroque-style props, balancing

seriousness with real theatrical wit. However, from Act III onward, the staging grows shallow and repetitive; there is, furthermore, an additional story interwoven which is introduced during the prelude of Act I, in which a pantomime shows the death of a young boy which could either be Rienzi's and Irene's little brother (mentioned in the libretto) or even their common son born out of incest. Whatever the meaning, it is a recurring theme throughout the entire production and adds to confusion rather than to a better understanding of the plot. The directors avoid a cheap Hitler-Mussolini parallel that undid the Deutsche Oper Berlin production, but end with Rienzi climbing a staircase to heaven and dying at the top on the opera's final bars.

The music itself was superbly led by Nathalie Stutzmann, who had problems with balance and coordination conducting *Tannhäuser* at Bayreuth in 2023 and 2024. Here she commanded the sprawling score with real authority, shaping its architecture while letting it shine, drawing a rich orchestral palette and masterful control in its most explosive moments. The one shortfall was the chorus, which appeared in many crowd scenes, lacking its usual precision and blend. While *Rienzi* is a work that even experienced Wagner singers have to learn, deserving some allowances, the loss of excellence in classic choral works such as *Parsifal* and *Holländer*, in comparison to the years prior to the big chorus reshuffle in 2024/25, was blatant. The old ultra precision and awe-inspiring homogeneity is no more. The reasons for this self-mutilation regarding the exceptional status of the Bayreuth chorus on a global scale remain a big mystery.

As for *Rienzi*, the biggest surprise was how naturally the score fit the Festspielhaus, as if it had been performed there for decades. It reaches the same acoustic limits, in clarity and instrumental radiance, as *Tannhäuser*, *Meistersinger*, or even *Tristan*, none of which were written for this house either. On musical grounds alone, it is regrettable that this experiment is confined to a single season rather than letting the directors refine the production under near-ideal conditions, in the tradition of the "Bayreuth workshop."

HERMANN GRAMPP

Bayreuth 2026: The AI Ring

M. Volle (Wotan, Wanderer), K. F. Vogt (Loge, Siegmund, Siegfried), G. Siegel (Mime), C. Nylund (Brunnhilde), M. Kares (Fasolt, Hunding, Hagen), J. Schmeckenbecker (Alberich), A. Kissjudit (Fricka, First Norn), C. Mayer (Erda, Waltraute). Cond.: C. Thielemann; “curator”: M. Lobbjes. Performances of July 27-Aug.1, 2026.



Ride of the Valkyries, *Die Walküre*, Act III. The eight Valkyries gather, as digital AI imagery swirls around them. Photo: Enrico Nawrath.

The most genuine Bayreuth work may be *Parsifal*, composed by Wagner with the Festspielhaus’ specific acoustics in mind, but the core of the festival remains *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. It was for the *Ring* that Wagner conceived the almost insane idea of building a theater worthy of staging it, and it was with the *Ring* that the first Bayreuth Festival opened exactly 150 years ago. In retrospect, we know that the four performances of August 13, 14, 16, and 17, 1876, were among the great milestones of global cultural history. Few contemporaries saw it that way at the time, and understandably so. What impressed them first was the achievement itself: Wagner had built his own theater, raised the funds, assembled singers and musicians, organized the premiere, and drew Europe’s and North America’s cultural elite to a small town at the edge of Northern Bavaria to pay homage to the most famous and notorious composer of the age: Richard Wagner. A reviewer for *The New York Times*, writing in August 20, 1876 (no review in 2026), captured the uncertainty many felt about the work’s lasting value, noting that “some years

must pass” before a final judgment on what was genuinely new in Wagner’s “concepts and methods” could be reached. Many years have passed since and time has settled the question: the *Ring* proved exactly that: a work “new in its concepts and methods,” carrying a wealth of musical and dramatic structure with few parallels in music history. The work descended like a meteor on the Upper Franconian countryside. Nietzsche, however, was among the few who grasped the scale of the untimely event before it happened, judging only from the scores, which he knew in detail. His essay “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth,” published a month before the premiere, called the *Ring* “the first circumnavigation in the realm of the arts,” a claim that 150 years of history have largely vindicated.

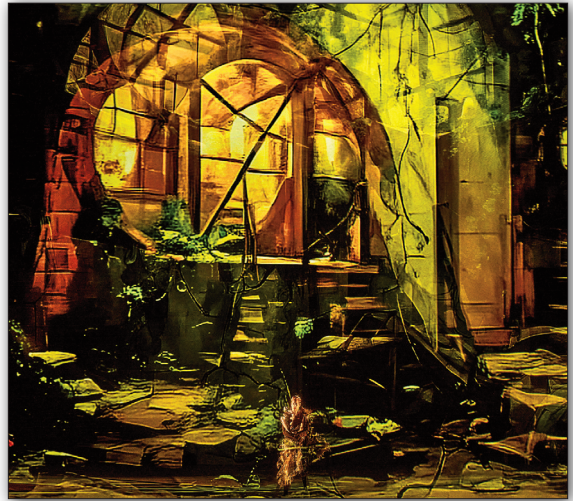
Bayreuth as a festival became a symbol of German national history, its most glorious and most doomed chapters strangely mirrored in its own fate. The festival has always been political, regardless of Wagner’s stated wish in 1876 to keep it purely artistic. In 1976, Federal President Walter Scheel, a Wagner skeptic, gave a pointedly critical speech on the

festival's history; this year, at the opening Festakt, it was Chancellor Friedrich Merz who insisted on speaking, underscoring once again the festival's national and political dimension.

The Bayreuth Festival and the *Ring* have thus been intertwined from the start. A revolutionary new (Chéreau) *Ring* marked the centenary in 1976, so it was no surprise, indeed almost a necessity, that this year's 150th-anniversary edition would bring a new *Ring* production as well. Wagner was always eager to fold the latest technology into his stagings, and technical experimentation has been part of the Bayreuth tradition ever since World War II. After augmented-reality glasses accompanied *Parsifal* in 2023, it seemed a logical next step that this *Ring* would become opera history's first production built around artificial intelligence: "the *AI Ring*."

However enticing the idea, the visual result was an artistic disaster. Over 14 hours and 7 minutes of music, a comparatively brisk rendering of the Tetralogy under Christian Thielemann, the stage delivered an exhausting flood of imagery that added almost nothing to the interpretation or understanding of the cycle. The production's "curator" (no one spoke of a "director"), Marcus Lobbes, and his creative team fed AI a vast trove of photographs and texts, including images from every Bayreuth *Ring* production between 1876 and 2025; AI had no internet access and worked only from data that the team supplied. Onstage, the singers essentially gave a concert performance of the *Ring* in odd fantasy costumes while AI projected imagery onto three translucent gauze curtains spanning the stage.

Some visual elements were pre-programmed. Each act opened with an image from the corresponding act of the 1876 premiere, a nod to the festival's origins, and every six minutes a new image marked one year of the intervening century and a half, counting from 1876 to 2026. In principle this could have given the production a basic structure; in practice it did not. The 1876 images offered a reliable, often visually striking anchor, but the "march through history" was usually impossible to place and had no relation to the drama the singers and orchestra were narrating.



Hagen (Mika Kares) in Gibichung Hall, *Götterdämmerung*, Act I.
Photo: Enrico Nawrath.

Worse, the effort of placing each image in time drew attention away from the music itself. In *Rheingold* the historical images were barely recognizable. From *Walküre* onward, fragments of history drifted past: the First World War, a billion-mark banknote from the 1923 inflation, images of Hitler in the early 1930s, and, concluding the opera, the Hindenburg disaster at Lakehurst, placing the chronology at 1937 with no relevance whatsoever to the drama. *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* continued the pattern: glimpses of Wolfgang and Wieland Wagner reopening the festival in 1951, Kennedy in Dallas, Martin Luther King, Willy Brandt, Helmut Kohl, and so on. Between these points, the AI-generated imagery freely, morphing pictures at times reminiscent of Dalí, at times of cubism, but never illuminating the work itself. Historic Bayreuth *Ring* stagings also flickered past, from 1876 and 1896 through Heinz Tietjen and Emil Preetorius in the 1930s, both Wieland Wagner productions, Patrice Chéreau, Peter Hall, Harry Kupfer, Frank Castorf, and Valentin Schwarz, but as indistinct visuals rather than illuminating references. The cumulative effect was an unrelenting, incoherent mass of imagery that critic Mark Berry, borrowing a phrase from Stefan Mauss, described as "visual waterboarding" of sorts.

Anyone unable to tune out that arbitrary flood of pictures was doomed to frustrating evenings. Anyone who managed to, as this reviewer did, was rewarded with a musical interpretation with few equals in *Ring* performance today. Christian Thielemann has conducted the *Ring* many times, including at Bayreuth between 2006 and 2010, and the difference twenty years on is striking. Where he once favored a chamber-music intimacy in Karajan's tradition, with an almost impressionistic tone, in 2026 he combined dramatic fluidity with a symphonic majesty that has few rivals on record. In *Götterdämmerung*, the curtain closed for each transformation scene, whether Siegfried's Rhine Journey or the shift from Hagen's watch to Waltraute's scene at the end of Act I, moments in which the music alone carried the drama. The Act III funeral march also played behind a closed curtain, inviting the audience to imagine what this music must have felt like when first heard on this spot on August 17, 1876. The concentrated tension, the luxuriously controlled dynamic and rhythmic build, and the disciplined growth toward a fortissimo climax were overwhelming. From the outset, Thielemann seemed determined to compensate for the missing stage action with a gripping, theatrical intensity in the pit, unusual for him but exceptional in its results, even set against his own considerable history with this score.

He was superbly seconded by a fine cast which, however, was hampered by ridiculous costumes and forbidden to truly act. Several of the naturally agile performers found ways around the constraints of a concert staging drowned in unrelated imagery: Michael Volle (Wotan, the Wanderer), Klaus Florian Vogt (Loge, Siegmund, Siegfried), and Gerhard Siegel (Mime) gestured, reacted, shifted position, and built real communication with their colleagues within the limits allowed. Volle once again proved himself the Wotan of our time, his majestic voice combined with an intensity of expression that sent shivers through the hall as he twice pronounced "das Ende" in his Act

Thielemann seemed determined to compensate for the missing stage action with a gripping, theatrical intensity in the pit, unusual for him but exceptional in its results.

II *Walküre* monologue, each utterance separated by a perfectly judged general pause from Thielemann. Vogt gave a remarkable Loge and a passionate Siegmund; even as Siegfried, a role fundamentally too lyric for his voice, he found heroic color throughout, though a more baritone weight would have helped in *Götterdämmerung*'s more dramatic outbursts. Camilla Nylund's Brünnhilde displayed both lyric and heroic range, with clear limits at the most dramatic peaks. Mika Kares, as Fasolt, Hunding, and Hagen, filled the Festspielhaus with dark, powerful tone; Jochen Schmeckenbecker brought unrestrained vigor to Alberich; and Gerhard Siegel's Mime, as in 2006, radiated an almost heldentenor energy. Anna Kissjudit, as Fricka and the First Norn, and Christa Mayer, as Erda and Waltraute, rounded out a cast fully worthy of the festival's anniversary, although the attempt to reinvent the *Ring* through artificial intelligence plainly failed.

The main problem with this production was false programming and the wrong feed of content. With more pertinent *Ring*-related data and clearer commands, artificial intelligence might yet create something worthwhile. For the time being it was almost soothing to see how, in sharp contrast, "classic" productions by "real" directors such as Jay Scheib's *Parsifal* and Dimitri Tcherniakov's *Fliegende Holländer* fulfilled what Wagner wanted to achieve: the unity of music and drama, the marriage of the orchestral pit, and the theatrical stage. Not that Scheib's production of *Parsifal* had improved artistically or aesthetically (the AR glasses were abolished, by the way, because the providing company went bankrupt), but the simple fact of stage design, costumes, and singers acting had an almost liberating effect. Tcherniakov's *Holländer*, however, already captivating in 2021, turned out to be a masterpiece of precision, clear vision, and excellent actors' directing when seen in direct opposition to the big *AI Ring* mess. In this context, real humans still do it better

HERMANN GRAMPP

Strauss: San Francisco Opera (June) and Bard Summerscape (July)

***Elektra* at San Francisco Opera.** E. Pankratova, E. van den Heever, K. Ketelsen M. Schuster, W. Burden. Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: K. Warner and A. Kuhnhold. Performance of June 23, 2026.

***Die Agyptische Helena* at Bard Summerscape.** H. Clark, J. M. Myers, J. McIntyre, B. Denson, S. Roth, D. Nansteel. Cond.: L. Botstein; dir.: C. Räth. Performance of July 29, 2026.

A s revived by Anja Kuhnhold, Keith Warner's production of *Elektra*—apparently popular when done in 2017—was yet another “Night in a Museum,” starting with guards and patrons pantomiming closing hour amidst displays of improbable props (Agamemnon's axe and iconic/apocryphal gold mask). Inevitably, projections (including flashbacks) took a large role. Blending contemporary and ancient elements, the staging shed some insight into the House of Atreus's interpersonal relationships but proved scattershot, courting at times a camp sensibility and Grand Guignol aesthetics: Orest decapitated his mother in the sink of designer Boris Kudlicka's pastel suburban kitchen that, with other similarly styled rooms (including Chrysothemis' toy-filled bedroom and a funeral parlor), rolled on and off with discouraging regularity. Eun Sun Kim's reading—overpraised locally—stressed drama derived from volume, with some impure brass playing. Elena Pankratova made very little dramatic impact. Dressed in a contemporary “business casual” black pantsuit, she seemed like a slightly disoriented middle management person directing a museum gala rather than the deranged, living-for-revenge Mycenaean Princess Sophocles that Hofmannsthal created. Despite this being her 17th *Elektra* production, she skated over the German words in generalized fashion. Movement, similarly unspecific and non-driven, featured much arm-waving. In her world-class assumptions—the Dyer's Wife (Baden-Baden) and Kundry (Bayreuth, Houston)—I've seen Pankratova make more textual contact and vocalize more powerfully in the crucial middle register, which here seemed colorless and undifferentiated under the onslaught of the SFO's virtuosic 95-piece orchestra. Some of the phrases in the Monologue and the crucial duets with Klytemnestra and Orest flattened: a disappointing hole at the evening's center—especially for one with memories of the deeply moving Janis Martin and titanic Gwyneth Jones as *Elektra* on this stage. *Elektra*'s siblings—Elza van der Heever's refulgent-voiced Chrysothemis, styled as a “Baby Doll” princess, and role debutant Kyle Ketelsen, as a stoic, impactful Orest, the most beautifully sung I've experienced—dominated the



Chrysothemis (Elza van der Heever). Photo: Cory Weaver.

proceedings vocally and dramatically. Despite diminished volume, Michaela Schuster etched a verbally vivid, unhinged Klytemnestra. William Burden gave Aegisth clarity and clean-cut creepiness, suggesting a possible Siegfried Mime for this inventive tenor. SFO Young Artists in small roles sounded healthy, with Wagnerian promise audible from Gabrielle Beteag, Sadie Cheslak, and Laura Krumm among the Maids and Alexandra Loutsion as an Expressionist Overseer.

A few weeks later at Bard Summerscape, founder Leon Botstein returned to one of his fetish pieces: Strauss and Hofmannsthal's penultimate collaboration, *Die ägyptische Helena* (Dresden, 1928). It's an odd work conceptually, trading in a post-Homeric fantasy involving the post-Trojan War reconciliation of Helen with her abandoned husband Menelaus. The uneven score blends what sound like outtakes from *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*: stretches of Straussian note-spinning and occasional true inspiration, often focused around the renewal theme foregrounded by Helena's defining aria “Zweite Brautnacht.” Botstein fares best with such late Romantic soaring bombast although he is no match in pacing or nuance with the much-missed Fabio Luisi at the Met's (unimpressive) 2007 staging. Here he benefitted from a well-prepared American Symphony

Orchestra. Hamburg native director Christian Räth scored another Bard success after effective work here in Meyerbeer, Korngold and another rare Strauss: 2022's *Die schweigsame Frau*, which starred high-flying, highly musical Jana McIntyre. Her delightfully enacted and sung Aithra—the sorceress whose intervention repairs Helena and Menelaus' relationship—all but stole the show, of which Räth insightfully made her the central motor. The centrality of the marriage bond, a theme to which both composer and librettist returned in differing ways, was cleverly evoked in Räth's Act II's "Hollywood Sign" lettering of HELENA (with paparazzi surrounding this most image-conscious of Homeric characters) into the exultant final curtain's EHE (wedded state). As the mythical parted-and-reunited couple, Hailey Clark and John Matthew Myers handled the demanding vocal heavy lifting admirably, with penetrating, pleasing-toned voices that bloomed, especially in their upper third registers. (Clark could shine as Eva, Freia, and Gutrune.) Myers, with a high-placed voice predestined for success in Strauss and 20th century repertory, takes a big Wagnerian leap next year with his first Tristans, at Leeds' Opera North and Austria's Tiroler Festival. Blake Denson's stage authority registered strongly as the macho bully Altair; with better German diction, his loud, rough instrument might serve Klingsor well.



Helena (Hailey Clark) and Menelaus (John Matthew Myers).
Photo: Maria Baranova.

Resident Artist Shawn Roth (Da-Ud) showed high-quality tenor timbre and dynamic nuance. Deborah Nansteel, always engaging onstage, fared better as a mettlesome mezzo Servant than in the Erda-like alto utterances of the (wonderfully named) Omniscient Seashell. A very worthwhile afternoon.

DAVID SHENGOLD

In Memoriam



Photo: Neil Friedman.

Mignon Dunn (June 17, 1928, Memphis, TN-June 28, 2026, Colorado Springs, CO) was a renowned mezzo-soprano who sang at international opera houses, including La Scala, the Vienna Staatsoper, Covent Garden, the Bolshoi, and the Paris Opera, and was especially renowned for the role of Carmen, which she sang more than 400 times. She performed 652 times at the Metropolitan Opera, from 1958 to 1994, in a wide-ranging repertory of dramatic Italian, Wagner, and Strauss roles, and also Russian, Czech, and Spanish parts. She received the Wagner Society of New York's Anton Seidl Award on May 20, 2018 (photo at left). Quoting from the scroll that she received on that occasion: "A beloved member of the Metropolitan Opera for over three and half decades, she essayed every Wagner mezzo role, as the superb voice of Fricka, Ortrud, Venus, Waltraute, Mary, Kundry, and Brangäne. Her non-Wagner roles included Carmen, Klytemnestra, Herodias, Amneris, Azucena, Santuzza, and Marina in the Met premiere of Mussorgsky's original orchestration of *Boris Godunov*."

She was also a vocal coach, teacher, and competition adjudicator, including at Manhattan School of Music, for three decades.

Classic yet effective: *Das Rheingold* at Grange Park Opera

J. Rutherford, C. Rice, R. Nicholls, T. Isherwood, J. Schouten, D. Stout, A. Thompson, M. Rose, D. Shipley, M. Le Brocq, S. Fulgoni, A. Tynan, O. R. Tringham, C. Bateman. Cond.: H. Sever; dir.: C. Edwards. English National Opera Orchestra. Performance of June 20, 2026.

The summer opera season is underway, with its usual flourish of rural festivals sprouting across the UK. Against this bucolic backdrop, Grange Park Opera kicked off its five-year *Ring* project, in a venue that is almost as picturesque (and hot) as Bayreuth. The cycle opened with an excellent *Rheingold*, directed by Charles Edwards, fresh from his recent New York Met debut (directing *I Puritani*).

Edwards opted for a familiar yet potent nineteenth-century setting, in line with many such productions inspired by Chéreau's Centennial Bayreuth *Ring*. With Alberich as a proletarian-turned-nouveau-riche industrialist challenging the gods in their Wilhelmine interior (featuring a Doric Valhalla lurking in the background), this staging highlighted the class struggles implied by the *Ring* narrative. Much of the scenography involved a clever play of gauzes and projections, especially during the opera's challenging aquatic scenes and transitions, which successfully conveyed a sense of spatial depth and made the most of the modestly sized stage. Confrontation scenes involved moments of quickfire acting, such as the gripping Nibelheim encounter, set in an industrial hellhole where Alberich subjected a caged Mime to electrical torture after the latter yielded the Tarnhelm in the form of a binding cap lamp. At other moments, Erda's gesticulations or the Rhine daughters' highly choreographed pantomime of cajoleries somewhat burdened the dramatic pathos and momentum of their respective scenes. Nevertheless, within this largely classic setting, the production teemed with visceral dramatic moments and imaginative details.

Grange Park (Surrey) is now the only British summer festival to boast a complete opera orchestra. And indeed, the English National Opera Orchestra shone under the brisk direction of Harry Sever, whose dynamic (but never hasty) tempo choices and transitions convincingly animated the opera's extended conversation pieces. The cast featured excellent



Freia (Rachel Nicholls) and Fasolt (Matthew Rose), embracing.
Photo: Marc Brenner.

Wagnerians for the most part, starting with David Stout's full-bodied, articulate, and captivating Alberich, set against a dynamic trio of Rhine daughters (dark-timbered Olivia Rose Tringham and Charlotte Bateman supporting Ailish Tynan's golden-bright soprano). James Rutherford and Mark Le Brocq delivered exemplary diction as Wotan and Loge, respectively. Rutherford's portentous baritone projected admirably into the relatively small house, showcasing remarkable timbral warmth and nuance. The performance also featured strong singers in supporting roles, with Christine Rice's authoritative Fricka, Rachel Nicholls' surprisingly dramatic Freia, and Sarah Fulgoni as a compelling Erda emerging from the stalls. Matthew Rose and David Shipley were dynamic and convincing as the two giants, while Thomas Isherwood and James Schouten proved a less happy pair: Donner's fortissimo passages did not always have full vocal support, and Froh was somewhat insecure in the higher register, though they both had pleasant, warm timbres. Overall, the Grange Park *Ring* is off to a successful start, and we look forward to the cycle's continuation, with *Die Walküre* coming up in 2027.

RICHARD MOUKARZEL

Upcoming Performances (including Strauss) in the Americas through 2027

Oct. 9 & 11. *Walküre*. Tacoma Opera. Cond.: B. Kwiram; dir.: T. Harper. tacomaopera.com

Nov. 17, 20, 23, 26, 29. *Elektra*. Municipal Theatre of Santiago (Chile). Cond.: P. Bortolameolli; dir.: E. Munoz. opera-nacional-de-chile-o943

Nov. 20 & 22. “Wagner: Myth and Music” (concert). Lyric Opera of Chicago. Cond.: A. Soddy; chorus: M. Black. lyricopera.org

(Correction: The above Nov. 20 & 22 programs are in 2026, not in 2027, as reported in the July issue.)

Nov. 29, Dec. 1, 3, 5, 6. *Walküre*. Teatro Colon. Cond.: A. Pérez; dir.: D. Livermore. teatrocolon.org.ar

2027: Feb. 4, 6, 10, 12, 14, 16, 20. *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Canadian Opera Company. Cond.: J. Debus; dir.: P. Curran. coc.ca

March 5, 7, 10, 13. *Lohengrin*. Dallas Opera. Cond.: E. Villaume; dir.: L. Désiré. dallasopera.org

March 11, 14, 17, 20, 23. *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Lyric Opera of Chicago. Cond.: O. Lyniv; dir.: J. Cox/B. Revella. lyricopera.org

March 13, 16, 19, 21. *Holländer*. Atlanta Opera. Cond.: I. Lopez; dir.: T. Zvulun. atlantaopera.org

NEW April 11 & 18. *Lohengrin* (concert). Philadelphia Orchestra. Cond.: Y. Nezet-Seguin. philaorch.ensembleartsphilly.org

May 7 & 8. *Salome* (semi-staged). Kentucky Opera/Louisville Orchestra. Cond.: T. Abrams; dir.: B. Robinson. louisvilleorchestra.org

May 16, 19, 22. *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (concert). Cleveland Orchestra. Cond.: F. Welser-Möst. clevelandorchestra.com

NEW May 29, June 3, 6, 11, 16, 19, 22. *Rheingold*. San Francisco Opera (revival). Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: F. Zambello. sfopera.com (Looking ahead: SF Opera’s 3 cycles: June-July, 2028.)

AND from Down Under:

“Wagner Gala”: Melbourne, Oct. 16, 2026.

Tannhäuser: Melbourne, Nov. 5, 8, 11, 14, 2027. New production by D. McVicar.

2026 Bayreuth Festival Events

Wagner Stimmen. The International Singing Competition for Wagnerian Voices, established in 2026 by the Richard Wagner Association Bayreuth e.v. and other individuals and institutions, is a new organization noting the 150th anniversary. It offers young singers (born after Jan. 1, 1991) an important platform to showcase their skills, with the winners receiving substantial prizes. Preliminaries were August 5-6; semi-finals with public concert: August 8; final with public concert: August 11, with members of the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra, conducted by Axel Kober, held in the Friedrichsforum. WSNY’s recipient of the 2025 Ursula Springer Award, Alec Carlson, was a semi-finalist in this competition. American tenor **Devin Eatmon** won the £15,000 First Prize, while South Korean bass **Seokjun Kim** won the £10,000 Wolfgang Wagner Prize. Website: www.rwv-bayreuth.de

Wagner Salon presented events of the International Wagner Society, based in Salzburg. See their website for further events and info: <https://www.richard-wagner.at>

Artist Talks, Aug. 11-17, were hosted by the Wagner Society of New York. Interviews at the Arvena Kongress Hotel with Georg Zeppenfeld, Michael Volle, Christa Mayer, Camilla Nylund, Marcus Lobbes, Mika Kares, and Dr. Thomas Launius.

Pictured: Christa Mayer (Erda, Waltraute), interviewed by Sanford Schwartz.



Photo: Griffin Kaiser.

Richard Wagner Museum celebrated its 50th anniversary. Dr. Sven Friedrich, Museum Director, presented an introduction to *Rienzi* the day before its premier performance. He has published a book entitled *Wahnfried*.

Touring Spain, Aug. 29 - Sept. 6. The Bayreuth Festival Orchestra, conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado, will perform highlights of the *Ring*, with soloists Catherine Foster, Klaus Florian Vogt, and Nicholas Brownlee. Barcelona: Aug. 29; Santander International Festival: Aug. 31; Seville: Sept. 2; Madrid: Sept. 3; Valencia: Sept. 6.

Radio Broadcasts of some 2026 Bayreuth Performances: Please check WFMT Broadcast Series (late fall).

Warriors Gallop Through Streets: Bayerische Staatsoper's *Die Walküre*

N. Brownlee, I. Roberts, J. Backstrom, M.-L. Varela, A. Anger, E. Gubanova. Bayerische Staatsoper. Cond.: V. Jurowski; dir.: T. Kratzer. Performance of July 1, 2026.

In June-July, 2026, the highly acclaimed beginning of the Munich Ring (review of *Das Rheingold*: Jan. 2025 issue) continued with *Die Walküre*. Tobias Kratzer did not maintain the exceptionally high quality of *Das Rheingold*, but it remained an outstanding and well-thought-out interpretation. The Ride of the Valkyries certainly stood out and may yet become one of the most extraordinary versions of the beginning of Act III ever to be seen “on stage”: a video showed the female warriors galloping wildly through the streets of Munich, starting at the majestic “Siegestor” gate on Ludwigstrasse, riding rapidly through the English Garden past flabbergasted Munich promenaders and ending up in the opera house itself, storming up the wide stairs into the foyer, with the Act III set design already shown on the theater stage: there was rare spontaneous applause by an enthusiastic audience.



Act III: Valkyries heading toward the stage.
Photo: Barbara Valmarana.

However, while the first two acts showed the same degree of clarity as *Rheingold* did (mostly set in the woods between Hunding's hut and a forest shrine dedicated to Fricka), Act III, with the exception of the warriors, was characterized by a lack of compelling ideas. (The entire cycle will be evaluated in July 2027.) The singing was of high quality, especially Nicholas Brownlee's Wotan and Irene Roberts' outstanding Sieglinde. Joachim Bäckström (from Sweden) as Siegmund and Minna-Liisa Väreä (from Finland) as Brünnhilde showed great promise; Ain Anger (Hunding) and Ekaterina Gubanova (Fricka) assured traditional Munich high quality. Jurowski's conducting featured incomprehensible dynamic changes, being strongest when orchestral outburst was required. The orchestra itself proved to be, as ever, of the finest quality, with its extraordinary worldwide standing.

HERMANN GRAMPP

2027 Bayreuth Festival: Opening July 29; no *Ring Cycle* in 2027

- Two new productions: *Lohengrin* (cond.: Tarmo Peltokoski; dir.: Ilaria Lanzino; cast: Michael Spyres, Elsa Dreisig, Judit Lutasi, Jordan Shanahan) and *Parsifal* (cond.: Christian Thielemann; dir.: Ersan Mondtag; cast: Piotr Beczala, Michele Losier, Mika Kares).
- Two Revivals: *Die Meistersinger* (cond.: Simone Young) and *Tannhäuser* (cond.: Thomas Guggeis). Four ticket packages will include a combination of new productions and revivals. (See Bayreuth Festival website for details.) See upcoming Nov. issue for ticketing information.)

Bayreuth tickets through WSNY: a member-only privilege

Ticketing Policies:

Questions regarding obtaining tickets through WSNY may be sent to bayreuth@wagnersocietyny.org. Further info will be provided here and on the WSNY website.

Other ways to obtain Bayreuth Festival tickets:

1. Gesellschaft: Members of the Gesellschaft der Freunde von Bayreuth have received 2027 order information, giving scheduled performances, ticket categories, and prices, and a unique password for the ticket section. Their Yearbook “Almanac 2026” is available from their website. In its 16th year of publication, it contains news and many illustrations.
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.
3. Instant online sale: In recent years, a portion of the total number of Bayreuth Festival tickets is also available through immediate online sale. The date for this process: December 6, 2026.