



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Welcome to the third Quarterly for 2015.

This letter will be shorter than usual. I am currently in London, on my way to Bayreuth, the Wagner shrine, for the annual festival. There I hope to meet up with a number of our members, a few of whom obtained their tickets through the Society.

We are very much hoping that, before too long, considerably more of our members will be able to obtain Bayreuth tickets this way. A couple of meetings I will be having during this trip might well throw further light on this matter.

Many of you attended one (or both) of the Sydney Symphony concert performances of *Tristan and Isolde* on 20th and 22nd June. It was generally agreed that these were highly successful, although many people thought that the film projections were an unnecessary distraction. One thing was certain, namely that the orchestra, under the baton of the dynamic David Robertson, played beautifully. And in my opinion, the orchestra is by far the most important component in any Wagner opera. No matter how great the production and/or the singers might be, if the orchestra is not up to par then it almost inevitably becomes a failed performance.

Many of our members attended the afternoon tea function which we hosted at the Goethe Institute on the Sunday between the two *Tristan* performances. The occasion provided an unusual opportunity for Wagner lovers from around the country, as well as New Zealand, to mingle socially. It was a resounding success. Indeed, we have since received very enthusiastic expressions of thanks from both the Victorian and the Queensland Wagner Societies (see Colleen Chesterman's report below).

It was particularly fascinating to hear David Robertson speak about the experience of conducting *Tristan*. He was extremely generous with his time, and answered a number of questions from the floor. One interesting aspect of his talk related to the positioning of the singers behind the orchestra during the performances. A number of audience members commented, after each performance, that the singers should have been at the front of the stage. I thought exactly the same after the first performance, until I heard the maestro's explanation, which is simply this. If the singers are at the front of the stage, then the orchestral players cannot properly hear them, and are entirely dependent upon the conductor as to the volume at which they play. Accordingly, there is a significant danger of the orchestra drowning out the singers. However if the singers are behind the orchestra, then the players can hear when they are singing softly, and can reduce their volume accordingly. This makes a great deal of sense, and many people - including me -changed our attitudes after hearing it.

At our next event, only three weeks later, Sir David McVicar came and answered questions which had been devised by our vice-president, Colleen Chesterman. He also answered numerous questions from the floor. It was another fascinating afternoon, which Colleen has

described more fully later in this quarterly. Sir David, of course, was the director of the current Glyndebourne *Mastersingers*, which has had rave reviews. He travels the world to direct opera, but - most interestingly - he refuses to go to Germany. This is because of the overwhelming fad in current German opera to have productions which are way out simply for the sake of being way out. As a result, what is happening on stage often has little to do with the words or the music. This is certainly the case with the current Ring production in Bayreuth. Nevertheless, the orchestra and singers in Bayreuth are still superlative, which is why I am making my pilgrimage there yet again. I shall report back in the next Quarterly.

I cannot, though finish this Letter without mentioning two other important events.

Firstly, our Patron Simone Young has finished her decade as General Manager of the Hamburg State Opera and Music Director of the Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra. As President of the Wagner Society in NSW and on behalf of our Members, I want to wish our Patron all the best for the next stage in her career and look forward to having her address the Society during a future visit to her home town. *

Secondly, I would like to extend the Society's congratulations to Member Warwick Fyfe, who has been awarded the Stuart and Norma Leslie Churchill Fellowship in 2015 to obtain tuition in Wagnerian vocal technique from Wagner specialists of international status in Germany, the USA, and the UK. It's certainly a very significant recognition of his talent. We wish him well with his studies and hope to hear the results in the 2016 Melbourne Ring Cycle.

*According to Andrew Taylor's report in the Sydney Morning Herald of 15-16 August 2105, Simone Young considers that "There have been some very tough times. We had to ride out the financial crisis of 2008 which threw everybody's planning into disarray.... But I am leaving the house both financially and artistically stronger than when I arrived." Taylor also reports Ms Young reeling off "an impressive-sounding set of statistics....500 performances...in the opera house, about 50 new productions, more than 30 different operas performed each year. She has ruled a very large institution, with an orchestra of 128 musicians, a 70 voice chorus, an ensemble of 20 full-time singers plus a revolving door of guest performers. We are...a production house, which means we build all our own sets, we make all our own costumes. We don't outsource any of these things....We're dealing with a workforce of about 700 people." It is also important to remember that our Patron's practical, everyday achievements have been recognised with an impressive range of awards: "Simone Young was awarded an Honorary Doctorate at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne, the "Chevalier des Arts et Lettres" in France as well as the Goethe Medaille in Weimar and the Brahms Prize in Schleswig Holstein. The magazine "Opernwelt" named her "Conductor of the Year" in October 2006 when she also became Professor at the University for Music and Theatre in Hamburg." (Source: www.hamburgische-staatsoper.de/biografien/bio_neu.php?id=1265&english=1). Taylor also reports Ms Young as saying of her future: "I'm drastically reducing the amount of opera I do and doing more concerts....I'm also travelling more....So the change of balance between concerts and opera really makes a difference." EDITOR