

The *RING* in Australia

Wagner arrived in Australia (metaphorically speaking) on 18 August 1877, one year after the first Bayreuth Festival, when *Lohengrin* was performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Melbourne by William Lyster's Royal Italian and English Opera Company. Melbourne in those days was the largest, most prosperous and most cosmopolitan of colonial cities, courtesy of the gold rush. The 1877 opera season also included *Aida* which was, at the time, Verdi's latest opera. *Lohengrin* on the other hand was thirty years old and had long been surpassed by *Tristan*, *Meistersinger*, and the entire *Ring*, and yet how avant-garde it must have seemed to those Melbourne audiences. It was sung in Italian, with the principal singers coming from Europe and the United States. The music was under the direction of Alberto Zelman who, lacking a copy of Wagner's orchestral score, simply took a piano version and orchestrated it himself. Zelman had arrived in Australia six years earlier from Trieste via India and, although he had conducted operas in northern Italy, it seems that he had never actually seen or heard a Wagner production. On his arrival in Sydney, he had joined the Cagli-Pompei Royal Italian Opera Company and toured the Australasian colonies, eventually coming under Lyster's management. His son, by the way – also called Alberto Zelman – founded the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Soon after the *Lohengrin* performances, a local resident Emil Sander wrote to Wagner to inform him of this noteworthy event – a fact recorded by Cosima in her diary. The entry for 21 October 1877 reads: 'He receives a letter from a theatre director in Melbourne, according to which *Lohengrin* last month made its ceremonious entry there, too.'

The following day, Wagner replied to Sander as follows:

My very dear Sir, I was delighted to receive your news, and cannot refrain from thanking you for it.

I hope you will see to it that my works are performed in 'English': only in this way can they be intimately understood by an English-speaking audience. We are hoping that they will be so performed in London.

We (that is, I and my family) were extremely interested to see the views of Melbourne which you sent me: since you were kind enough to offer to send us more, I can assure you that I should be only too delighted to receive them.

Please give my kind regards to Herr Lyster, and, however remote your part of the world may be, continue to be so well-disposed towards

Your most grateful servant, Richard Wagner

Sander omitted to mention that the music heard by Melbourne audiences had been orchestrated by Zelman.

William Lyster, the producer, was a colourful Irishman and soldier of fortune. Dublin-born, he had lived in Calcutta for a while, served as a volunteer in the Kaffir war in South Africa and joined an ill-fated expedition to Nicaragua where he took part in several battles before forming an opera troupe in the United States with his brother Frederick as conductor and himself as musical director. In 1861, he set sail with a full chorus and orchestra to gold-rich Melbourne. The company's repertoire was said to include over thirty operas. Performances were given in Melbourne, other Victorian centres, Adelaide, Sydney and throughout New Zealand. During a hunting expedition in 1867, Lyster accidentally shot one of his tenors and, soon afterwards, the company returned to the United States where it was eventually disbanded. In 1870 he came back to Melbourne to pursue new operatic ventures including *Lohengrin*, which was repeated in New Zealand at Dunedin in November 1877.

The next impresario of note to Wagnerians was George Musgrove, who had arrived in Melbourne from England at the age of twelve in 1866. He worked for a time for Lyster (to whom he was related by marriage) and for the American, J C Williamson. In 1900, under his auspices, *Tannhäuser* and *The Flying Dutchman* were given their first Australian premieres (*Tannhäuser* had 28 performances and the *Dutchman* 10). In the same season, there were 32 performances of a new production of *Lohengrin*.

So, in 1900, 70 performances of Wagner's works were given in Australia, divided between Melbourne and Sydney.

On Saturday 4 May, 1907 – a famous day in Australia's operatic history – Musgrave staged *Die Walküre* for the first time in this country. 12 performances were given in German, including a few in Melbourne that had standing room only. The conductor was Gustave Slapoffski, half English and half Russian by birth, and completely English by upbringing. He claimed he had had a lot of trouble getting permission from Cosima Wagner to perform the opera, which sounds odd to me since the rights to *Walküre*, like all the *Ring* dramas, had been sold by Wagner himself to both Otto Wesendonck and Ludwig II at different times. In later years Slapoffski maintained that the opening night of *Walküre* had been the proudest of his life.

Australia's first Wotan in those 1907 performances was Julius Rüniger who performed the role in Melbourne. In Sydney, the Wotan was Hans Mohwinkel.

Bayreuth practice was followed scrupulously in terms of audience experience, with three fanfares being sounded outside the theatre before the doors were closed and no further admissions allowed. The auditorium was darkened and attention focused on the stage. Newspaper reports commented on the difference in singing and acting styles between Wagnerian opera and its Italian counterpart, including the naturalistic style of the former and its appeal to the intellect.

Our first Brünnhilde was Johanna Heinze. Assessments of her at the time were mixed, with one critic suggesting she was perhaps a trifle too feminine for a war-goddess. In Sydney, on one occasion, she presented Musgrove with a doctor's certificate just minutes before the curtain was to go up. Act One passed without incident but since there was no cover Brünnhilde for Act Two, the audience was treated to *The Flying Dutchman* instead.

People were amazed that the *Walküre* orchestra had been increased to 50, with the result that it overflowed from the pit into the stalls area. The *Argus* reported that the musicians had risen admirably to the challenge of Wagner's music, especially since, in the past, the Rhinegold itself wouldn't have bought a Melbourne orchestra capable of mastering the work's 'myriad sinuosities'.

The scenic wonders were commented on (very realistic rocks and clouds) as was the presence of a real if somewhat decrepit horse which was startled when Brünnhilde brandished her spear in its face and tossed its head, knocking off her helmet. Fricka was described as entering in her ram-drawn 'go-cart' – presumably that meant something different in 1907.

Our first Sieglinde was the American soprano Sara Anderson who was regarded as an outstanding exponent of the role. Unfortunately, the Siegmund, Karl Studemund, was lampooned in *The Bulletin* as resembling 'a large house on very insecure piles'.

The Dublin origins of the first man to bring Wagner to the Australian stage, William Lyster, have caused some confusion, I think, about the nationality of another early impresario, Thomas Quinlan whose opera company brought the first complete *Ring* to Australia in 1913. Quinlan is often referred to as being Irish but in fact was born at Bury in Lancashire, now part of Greater Manchester, where his father was a railway clerk. He was no more Irish than Florence Austral was Swedish. He studied to be both a baritone and an accountant (a useful combination), and began music management in 1906, touring Enrico Caruso, Fritz Kreisler, John Philip Sousa and Nellie Melba, amongst others.

In 1910, Sir Thomas Beecham created The Beecham Opera Comique Company and, for his manager, he chose Thomas Quinlan. In 1911, Quinlan decided to set up his own company, noting that the provinces and 'the dominions beyond the seas' had never had the chance of hearing grand opera on the same scale as Covent Garden. The Quinlan Opera Company was formed in Liverpool, and Quinlan supervised everything, casting the operas himself, and seeing every act of every opera before it was presented to the public.

The company rehearsed in London for five months before touring the provinces, making a visit to Ireland and then setting off for Australia for the 1912 season. In February 1912 they performed in South Africa on their way to Australia, and on arrival in Melbourne they established a record that remains unbroken: four Australian premieres in eight days.

The Quinlan Australian tour was limited to just ten weeks (five in Melbourne and five in Sydney) but fifteen operas were presented, including *Tristan*, *Die Walküre*, *Aida*, *La bohème*, *Carmen*, *Lohengrin*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Faust* and *La traviata*. The artists were mostly British, with two returning Australian singers. The company travelled with 163 personnel, including a permanent orchestra of 55, a chorus of 60, and three conductors.

Important though the 1912 Quinlan tour was, the following year's tour remains without parallel in Australian operatic history. In 1913 the *Ring* as a whole was staged in Australia for the first time. Quinlan had set out with the goal of performing nine *Ring* cycles around the English-speaking world in six months, an ambition that was frustrated only by strikes in New Zealand and poor attendances in Canada. However, the 1913 Australian tour was an extraordinary success and deserves to be better appreciated. The company performed 25 different operas in just under eight weeks in Melbourne, including two *Ring* cycles and the national premiere of *Die Meistersinger*. In Sydney the original season of seven weeks was extended to nine because of the New Zealand strike, and included another *Ring* cycle plus extra performances of *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*. In all, nine of the major Wagner operas were staged – all except *Parsifal*, then the exclusive preserve of Bayreuth. All of the major Puccini operas written at the time were performed: *Manon Lescaut*, *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West*; four of Verdi's most popular operas: *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, *La traviata* and *Aida*; other staple operatic fare: *Cav & Pag*, *Barber of Seville* and *Marriage of Figaro*, and an assortment of French works, including *Louise*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Carmen*, *Faust* and most notably *The Tales of Hoffmann* which alone was given fifteen performances. So, 25 operas in just 17 weeks. The efforts of our modern opera companies pale by comparison.

All operas in 1913 were given in English. For the *Ring*, the orchestra was enlarged to 65 and the chorus to 70. Some cuts were made, notably in *Götterdämmerung* (but not the Norns' scene). Top price tickets were four guineas for the cycle, but individual *Ring* operas were interspersed with other works.

So, for instance, between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* there were performances of *Aida*, *Tales of Hoffmann*, *Tannhäuser* and *Louise*. The decision to do a second *Ring* cycle in Melbourne followed the publication in *The Age* of a petition by prominent musical identities. Quinlan obliged, but the strain on the singers affected other performances in the days following. Nevertheless, it seems to have been a remarkably happy opera company. *The Bulletin* reported that it was 'said to be more free from internecine strife than most travelling aviaries. It is a kind of co-operative Commonwealth arrangement, with no stars at enormous salaries and proportionate opinions of their worth to play up when the management gets into a tight corner. The longer Thomas Quinlan can keep going the better it is for principals and understudies. A steady wage being better than a tussle for engagements, even one tenor has learnt to be at peace with another, and no soprano in the company has been caught smacking the face of any other lady who got too much applause.'

The conductor of the first *Ring* in Australia was Richard Eckhold who also conducted the first *Meistersinger* here. He had been born and trained in Germany but spent much of his career with British companies, working particularly on performances of Wagner's works in English in the UK, the dominions and the United States. When the First World War broke out he was interned in England as an enemy alien.

The stars of the 1913 *Ring* were English soprano Maud Percival Allen as Brünnhilde and American Robert Parker as Wotan, who also sang Hagen. German Heldentenor Franz Costa was our first Siegfried. Costa had difficulties with the English text but was otherwise vocally impressive and physically convincing. When war came just a year later, he ended up in the German army.

Quinlan planned to return to Australia in 1915 with an even more ambitious season that would have included the first performance of *Parsifal*, but the great catastrophe of the First World War put paid to that, and opera in Australia drifted into more predictable channels with an emphasis on the Italian repertoire. *Die Meistersinger* wasn't seen again for 75 years, and the complete *Ring* for 85 years. *Parsifal* didn't have its first staged performance in this country for 88 years after entering the public domain. When the body operatic began to twitch into life again in the second half of the

twentieth century, people had forgotten all about Thomas Quinlan and his contemporaries. But the truth is that Australian opera lovers have good reason to remember him, and I think that Wagnerians in particular should do more to celebrate his example.

Quinlan was primarily an opera impresario, but Sir Benjamin Fuller was what used to be called a showman. Ben Fuller was the Cameron Macintosh of his day – and more. He controlled more theatres at one time than any man in Australia, with shows ranging from Punch and Judy and vaudeville to grand opera. There were times when he juggled hundreds of acts between Perth and New Zealand. In 1934 he invested heavily in an imported English grand opera company, though he personally knew little about opera. The repertoire ranged from *Die Fledermaus* to *Die Walküre*, and included the Australian premiere of Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. Lady Fuller chose the costumes which came largely from the Met. The orchestra was set at 46, but augmented when necessary. Most of the principals were imported from Britain, including the Australian dramatic soprano Florence Austral, singing in opera for the first time in her homeland. This extraordinarily ambitious exercise formed part of Melbourne's centenary celebrations and was intended as a springboard for a permanent touring opera company. The intention was that, following the Melbourne opening, the company would perform for more than eighteen months, twelve in Australia and six in New Zealand, consisting of not only extended seasons in the big cities but also visits to provincial cities. A repertoire of 26 operas was listed, from which 20 were to be selected. In the end, only 15 were performed. *Siegfried* was on the list but never performed, and there was talk of including *Götterdämmerung* and lots of wishful thinking about mounting a complete *Ring* but this didn't eventuate. Fuller's hoped-for support from the Federal government never came (sound familiar?) and, sadly, neither did audiences. Sir Ben's operatic adventure cost him £30,000 and Australians wouldn't see another major opera season until 1948. However, the tour was significant from a Wagnerian perspective in that 13 performances of *Die Walküre* were staged along with 12 performances of *Tristan*, 13 of *Tannhäuser*, 4 of *Lohengrin* and 11 of *The Flying Dutchman*.

The star was undoubtedly Florence Austral, a daughter of Victoria, who was born Florence Wilson although her family's original Swedish name had been Lindholm. She adopted the stage name of Austral in 1921. Her association with Wagnerian roles began in London and she quickly made a name for herself in Britain where she shared roles with Frida Leider, in Germany as a principal artist of the Berlin State Opera opposite Friedrich Schorr, and in the United States with the conductor Fritz Reiner. Melba called her 'one of the wonder voices of the world'.

The Wotan in the 1934 season was Australian expatriate Horace Stevens. He gave a performance described by *The Age* as one of 'masterly dramatic power, deep insight and appropriate realism'. The eight locally recruited Valkyries included the 'well-known Sydney golf champion, Joan Hammond'. In Melbourne the orchestra (presumably expanded from the basic 46 players) was said to be too occupied with technical problems to be able to give full expression to the music – not exactly a ringing endorsement. Quinlan's decision to bring his experienced orchestra with him had obviously been a wise one.

The staging drew special praise for the way in which the director, Charles Moor, set the principal figures as sharply lit silhouettes against the gloom, using broadly decorative poses for the principals and quick, darting movements for the Valkyries. The performance, with cuts, lasted from 7.45 pm until shortly before midnight. One Melbourne critic was highly enthusiastic about the whole experience, but his Sydney counterpart concluded that 'for the Australian taste and climate these *Ring* operas are too long'. It was a sweltering January and the singers, done up in furs and drapery, perspired profusely.

A couple of weeks before the end of the Sydney season, the company faced insolvency. Ticket prices were slashed and Fuller was on the point of appealing to the Government to subsidize the venture. In the end, it was fellow impresario J C Williamson who came to the rescue by providing His Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne for a return four-week season. Thus ended the last major opera season before World War II and once again, hopes of seeing a complete *Ring* in Australia had come to nought.

If the staging of a complete *Ring* seemed beyond the realm of possibility, concert performances and radio broadcasts of the constituent parts of the *Ring* were not. In 1936, *Das Rheingold* was broadcast

by the ABC in two parts, with Austral as Fricka, setting a precedent for John Culshaw's use of Kirsten Flagstad as Fricka in the great Decca recording of 1958.

In 1939 the Australian dramatic soprano Marjorie Lawrence, who had become a famous Brünnhilde in Europe and America but was rarely heard in her native land, made a concert tour of Australia, performing at her birthplace of Winchelsea in Victoria and in Melbourne and Sydney. At a performance broadcast by the ABC she sang the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung* and, according to the press the next day, 'the Town Hall rocked on its foundations with the thunders of appreciation.'

In 1977, Peter Hemmings was appointed General Manager of the Australian Opera and, near the top of his list of desirable projects was a new production of the *Ring*. Richard Bonyngue, who was the AO's Music Director at the time, had reservations about whether Australia had singers who could do justice to this work. He had become familiar with the Wagner repertoire at Covent Garden during the 1950s, with singers of the calibre of Kirsten Flagstad, and when Joan Sutherland had sung several Wagnerian roles: Helmwig, Woglinde, the Woodbird and Eva. Planning began anyway, and consideration was given to Mark Elder conducting and David Pountney directing. The new *Ring* was intended to commence in 1979. The General Manager, conductor and director were adamant that the performances should be sung in English even though this would immediately rule out most of the world's great Wagnerian singers. For a variety of reasons, the management of the Australian Opera descended into chaos during those years and Peter Hemmings' appointment was terminated in late 1979. In March *Das Rheingold* had indeed been performed, not on stage but in concert in the Sydney Opera House, using Andrew Porter's translation and featuring Donald Shanks as Wotan, Raymond Myers as Alberich, Margreta Elkins as Fricka and Robert Gard as Loge. The cast was entirely Australian. Englishman Mark Elder conducted. In his review in the Sydney Morning Herald, Roger Covell wrote: 'It was an interesting and musically encouraging event, sung in English as if in preparation for the stage performances which ought to follow....It was fitting that there should be a celebration, 125 years after Wagner finished the score of *Rheingold* and 110 years after its first performance, but it was not fitting that the celebration should look like an oratorio'.

Successful concert performances continued: *Die Walküre* with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in August 1981 and *Götterdämmerung* with the SSO in October 1981. The Melbourne *Walküre* was conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras and featured Rita Hunter as Brünnhilde, Raymond Myers as Wotan, Nance Grant as Sieglinde, Robert Gard as Siegmund and Lauris Elms as Fricka. *Götterdämmerung* in Sydney, also led by Sir Charles, saw Rita Hunter once again on the concert platform, John Weaving as Siegfried and Bruce Martin as Hagen. Both concerts fanned enthusiasm for more Wagner performances in Australia and, especially, fully staged ones.

Richard Bonyngue decided that a new production of *Die Walküre* in German should be staged in 1983, which over time might be expanded into a complete staging of the *Ring*. Initial discussions were held with Welsh National Opera about the possibility of collaboration on their new *Ring* being directed by Göran Järvefelt. However, there were differing ideas about casting Rita Hunter (who by then had made Australia her home) as Brünnhilde, and the collaboration never happened.

Work on the 1983 *Walküre* got seriously under way with a consortium of German business firms providing significant funding towards a staging the four operas over several years culminating in a complete cycle for the Australian Bicentennial Year. Sponsorship of \$1m was also provided by the Federal Republic of Germany. But there were huge risks, centred largely on the limitations of the stage and pit of the Opera Theatre of the Sydney Opera House. Stuart Challender made a reduction of the score for an orchestra of around 70. Carlo Felice Cillario was invited to conduct, Andrew Sinclair to direct and Allan Lees to design the sets and costumes. Moffatt Oxenbould, who was then Artistic Administrator, describes the resulting performances as follows: 'The eventual outcome was respectable and even encouraging – but not what we had hoped for. Bruce Martin gave a majestic, mature performance as Wotan, and Rita Hunter as Brünnhilde sang with expected authority, but was neither convinced nor convincing dramatically. Margreta Elkins as Sieglinde, Jon Weaving as Siegmund, Clifford Grant as Hunding and Lauris Elms as Fricka all tried hard to give complete performances, but in the event their strengths were principally vocal. The group of eight *Walküren* was vocally uneven and there was a degree of self-consciousness working on an

impressive but awkward set for the final act. The orchestra responded to the attention Carlo lavished on the rehearsals and Stuart Challender's reduction of the score was masterly, but the total impression was small-scale and lacked the epic breadth the work needed. The reasons were misjudgements by the creative team as much as the limitations of the pit and stage, so we all took to using phrases like 'it promises well' and 'maturing and improving' to cover our disappointment and an early unwillingness to acknowledge that the whole venture was a well-intentioned miscalculation. The public and press acknowledged the quality of most of the singing but were not so complimentary about the production and design. A number of devoted Wagnerites, having experienced Ring performances overseas, were sceptical about our ability to imaginatively complete the tetralogy with the resources we had available and particularly because of the limitations of the Sydney Opera House orchestra pit and stage.'

The production was eventually taken to Melbourne where it worked better. But while the stage of the State Theatre is large, the pit is small, designed for just 67 musicians, so Victorians also heard Challender's orchestral reduction. Marilyn Zschau took over the role of Brünnhilde with a dreadful costume and Goldilocks wig. The Valkyries gathering at the start of Act Three looked more like a coven of witches. Other casting changes were made between 1983 and 1989: Leonie Rysanek and Marilyn Richardson as Sieglinde (Marilyn Richardson made a beautiful Sieglinde), Alberto Remedios as Siegmund, Heather Begg and Rosemary Gunn as Fricka, Donald Shanks was Hunding and Donald McIntyre was Wotan. Horst Hoffmann sang Siegmund.

In 1984, the Australian Opera turned its attention to *Das Rheingold*, which proved a fateful decision. Again, to quote Moffatt Oxenbould: '*Rheingold*'s first night was one of those performances one would like to forget, but never can, because the memories of a horribly bad performance remain so vivid. ... Much of the singing was excellent and aspects of the sets and costumes admirable, but the fairly literal view of the story-telling that had more or less worked in *Die Walküre* assumed ludicrous proportions with the magical effects, transformations, giants and dwarves of *Rheingold*. We had hoped the various elements would come together with the addition of the orchestra, but despite Maestro Cillario's dedication and the skilful orchestral reduction by Stuart Challender, it had to be acknowledged that the pit of the Opera Theatre was not of sufficient size to allow the Ring to be adequately performed... Members of the West German diplomatic corps and of the consortium Charles Berg had put together to sponsor the Ring were guests of honour at the premiere.... Technical mishaps begat more technical mishaps and in the auditorium one could sense the disappointment and incredulity of the audience. A reception at the West German consulate was far from a celebration. We knew we had a big problem on our hands!'

After that, plans to stage *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* were abandoned. But *Siegfried* was performed successfully in concert in Melbourne with the MSO.

When Leo Schofield was Artistic Director of the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts from 1994 to 1996 he began to develop plans to stage a new production of the *Ring*. He soon came under considerable pressure from local patrons and even the Victorian Government, to invite Richard Divall, then Music Director of the Victorian State Opera, to conduct it. Leo felt that Richard Divall was not the man for the job and refused. As a consequence, there was no *Ring*.

Between 1996 and 2000, each of the *Ring* operas was performed in concert at the Sydney Opera House by the SSO and Edo de Waart. Amongst the singers were South African Elizabeth Connell as Brünnhilde, Dutchman Albert Bonnema as Siegfried, American Robert Hale as Wotan, Austrian Kurt Rydl as Hagen, and German Ekkehard Wlaschiha as Alberich. There were also many fine Australian singers. It was a reminder of how thrilling it is to hear great Wagnerian voices, regardless of where they come from.

The major Wagnerian event of the 1990s was undoubtedly the Adelaide staging of three complete cycles late in 1998 – the first fully staged *Ring* since Quinlan's in 1913. I was in Adelaide at the time and became caught up with the preparations and excitement surrounding these performances. The production, you'll recall, had originally been created for the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

Not everyone was enthusiastic about Pierre Strosser's rather austere interpretation but I liked it a lot. The orchestra under Jeffrey Tate played superbly. The whole thing was a triumph and introduced

thousands of Australians (including politicians and bureaucrats) to Wagner in general and the *Ring* in particular.

A detailed study of the economic impact of the 1998 *Ring* undertaken by the Centre for Economic Studies of Adelaide and Flinders Universities, reported that 44% of attendees were South Australians, 44% were from interstate, and 12% were from overseas – so, 56% came from outside the State. The *Ring* attracted around 3,600 new visitors and provided a boost to Gross State Product of around \$10 million. The \$2,780 spent per visitor exceeded the usual expenditure of around \$1,500 for other major events.

The 1998 *Ring* was strongly supported by the South Australian Government of the day, anxious to find a substitute for the Formula One Grand Prix, lost to Victoria. The brain-child of Bill Gillespie, General-Director of the State Opera, it had the enthusiastic backing and lively advocacy of the Minister for the Arts, Diana Laidlaw and relevant State Government departments, and notably the Governor of South Australia, Sir Eric Neal who, together with the chairman of the State Opera Ring Corporation Board, Donald McDonald, did much to secure financial backing from wealthy and influential patrons in several States. The principal source of funding was the State Government. The great success of this venture fostered renewed interest in the creation of a wholly Australian *Ring*. The even more ambitious venture that followed in 2004 benefited greatly from a groundswell of support in the wider community and, especially, from the invaluable experience of working with Jeffrey Tate and Pierre Strosser in 1998.

The role of the South Australian State government was again crucial in getting the 2004 *Ring* off the ground, and the first steps towards this were taken in 2000. A year earlier, the Commonwealth government had set up the Nugent Inquiry into the major performing arts. The chairman, Dr Helen Nugent, was impressed by the success of the 1998 *Ring* and by our plans for the 2001 *Parsifal* and, in her report, designated the State Opera of South Australia a ‘niche’ opera company, specialising in Wagner’s works and other out-of-the ordinary repertoire. The value of such a designation was that it made our case for commonwealth funding more persuasive. The State Government launched a lobbying campaign aimed at persuading the Commonwealth to be the major financial backer, rather than the junior partner it had been in 1998. Coalition governments were in power in both Adelaide and Canberra, and the State arguments – pursued mainly by the Minister for the Arts and the Chief Executive of Arts SA – carried the day. Whereas the Commonwealth government had contributed only \$250,000 towards the 1998 *Ring*, it agreed to contribute \$4.3 million towards the 2004 *Ring*. Thus the new project was assured. Then came the exciting and challenging task of bringing it to fruition, a task that took every moment of four and a half years.

There is always a degree of rivalry amongst opera companies for funding. Opera Australia gets the lion’s share, as one would expect for the national company, nationally funded, but the State companies compete more or less equally – unless, that is, one or other can make a case for special treatment. By winning the ‘niche company’ appellation, the State Opera of South Australia secured just such an advantage. The new production had some wonderful visual images and it is not hard to see why it was more sophisticated than the Australian Opera approach of the 1980s. No one is ever happy with every detail in such a massive project – that is half the fun of doing the *Ring*: the search for the elusive perfect staging – but there is no denying that the production values for 2004 were high and that it will remain a landmark in Australia’s operatic history. Hugh Canning in Britain’s *Sunday Times* described it as ‘one of the most visually resplendent *Rings* of recent times, with spectacular use of real water (20,000 litres for the Rhine) and fire, as well as fresh, witty insights into Nibelung drama... What made Neidhardt’s *Ring* so memorable, however, was not the expensive scenic feats but the intelligence and distinction of her *Personenregie* (direction of the actors)’. Shirley Apthorpe in the *Financial Times* wrote that ‘it is executed with unflinching excellence. Afraid of falling below European standards, Australia sometimes surpasses them, often without noticing... Magnificent playing from the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra under Fisch, whose interpretation grew as the cycle progressed, from a somewhat hasty *Rheingold* and a *Walküre* occasionally low on inner tension, to a taut *Siegfried* and a *Götterdämmerung* of gripping inevitability’. Roger Covell in *The Sydney Morning Herald* concluded ‘The whole cycle has amounted to one of the finest occasions in the history of Australian music, opera and theatre’.

The Adelaide Festival Theatre has the largest stage in Australia and the largest proscenium arch, and this made possible some tremendous scenes. The Festival Theatre orchestra pit, which is already quite large, was made even larger by breaking through the rear wall and extending the orchestra back under the stage into what is normally an instrument storage room. 133 musicians were engaged for the 2004 *Ring* (including relief musicians) augmenting the 80 permanent players of the ASO by another 53. Members of interstate symphony orchestras took leave of absence just to have an opportunity to play this wonderful music in a full production.

Needless to say, the practical requirements of putting something like this together are formidable. The rehearsals were divided over two years and occupied 14 weeks in 2003 and 15 weeks in 2004 – that is to say, about seven-and-a-half months (1,400 hours) of rehearsals in all. Then came four weeks of performances and a final week for dismantling. The *Ring* occupied the theatre itself for over five months, for which the hiring costs were \$2.6m.

About 65% of the audience came from outside the State (including many from New Zealand, Europe, North America and Asia), and the boost to GSP was estimated to be around \$15 million.

Regrettably, in contrast with the Seattle model, no commitment was sought or given in advance for performances in subsequent years – which proved a fatal mistake. After 2004, various expensive and protracted feasibility studies were undertaken in true ‘*Yes Minister*’ style, but by then the momentum had been lost and champions of the *Ring* were no longer in office at State or Commonwealth levels. Rival opera companies, dependent on Australia Council funding, argued that Adelaide had had its day in the sun and now it was their turn. New ministers had new priorities and decided not to fund a revival of the Adelaide production.

Since 2004 there have been several proposals to create new *Ring* productions in Victoria. In recent years Oleg Caetani, chief conductor of the MSO put proposals to the Victorian Government, as did the management of Victorian Opera, the company established following the absorption of the old Victorian State Opera into Opera Australia. In these cases the initiatives foundered because the Victorian Government was not interested in contributing the necessary funds. In 2008 a Melbourne resident, Mrs Maureen Wheeler, expressed interest in supporting a new *Ring* production in Melbourne, and initiated a feasibility study. There was much inaccurate speculation in the media about the size of her potential financial contribution, and it can be said categorically that she didn’t have in mind anything like \$12m that was bandied about. The cost of the last Adelaide *Ring* – about \$15m – was made up of \$6.8m in government grants (Commonwealth and State), \$5.7m in ticket sales, and about \$2.3m in donations and sponsorships.

The truth is that a new, full-size production of the *Ring* in Melbourne faces a significant challenge in that no venue there is suitable without major modification. What about the State Theatre? A plan to refurbish the State Theatre and enlarge the orchestra pit beyond its current 67 musician capacity formed part of a Stage Two development of the Arts Centre, but this seems to have been postponed indefinitely. The last time a *Ring* opera was performed in the State Theatre was in 1989 when Opera Australia’s *Walküre* was staged there, and that was with a seriously reduced orchestra.

Venues are a major problem in Australia in terms of staging the *Ring*. Only the Adelaide Festival Theatre is physically capable of mounting the *Ring* without compromise and in a physical context suitable for the *Ring*’s ‘festival’ atmosphere. The work is scored for Wagner’s largest orchestra (119 players at its premiere in 1876) and a complete cycle requires a huge amount of rehearsal time both in studios and in the theatre.

Finally, one cannot overestimate the importance of engaging an experienced conductor as Music Director for the *Ring*. The music is so important in this work and the role of the orchestra so vital, that most people who follow *Rings* around the world will ask first and foremost ‘who will be conducting’. It is essential for any production to have an experienced Wagner conductor and, in particular, an experienced *Ring* conductor who has learned the work at ‘the knee’ of a master and has honed his or her skills over a period of time.

The superb SSO *Ring* concert performances between 1995 and 2000 were conducted by Edo de Waart, who had a distinguished career in Europe and the United States and had conducted a

complete *Ring* at San Francisco and other works at Bayreuth and Covent Garden. The 1998 *Ring* in Adelaide had Jeffrey Tate, who had conducted many *Rings* and other works by Wagner, and had learned his craft with Solti, Davis, Kempe, Kleiber and Karajan. His work in preparing the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra proved invaluable. The 2004 *Ring* had Asher Fisch, who had studied with Daniel Barenboim at Bayreuth and Berlin where he conducted *Die Walküre*, had conducted *The Flying Dutchman* in Los Angeles, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* in Vienna, *Tristan und Isolde* for the Royal Danish Opera, and *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin* in Seattle, and had conducted at the Bavarian State Opera, Covent Garden, the Metropolitan, La Monnaie in Brussels, the Bastille in Paris, the Deutsche Oper Berlin, the Savonlinna Festival in Finland, the Dresden Semperoper and in Leipzig, Montreal, Budapest and Amsterdam. The selection of an experienced conductor is vital if any *Ring* production is to have a chance of achieving distinction.

Peter Bassett

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