

# *The Raven*

Newsletter of

*The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest*

Volume VI Number 1

Spring 2010



*In this Issue ...*

*Wolfgang Wagner 1919-2010*

*Paul Straka's Bayreuth Experience*

*Founders Day Dinner Info*

*And More...*

## How I Started with Wagner ...

It is a tradition in our society for members to tell us how they became interested in Wagner. This issue we feature member Rick Davis.

### The Naked City:

#### How I Got Started with Wagner

by Rick Davis

As the famous closing narration in the TV Series “The Naked City” said, “There are eight million stories in the naked city. This is one of them.” And this is mine. Wagner was assigned to me as my composer when I was in junior high school, my appreciation for his music literally developed while I slept, and nothing has been the same ever since.

When I began 8<sup>th</sup> grade, we had a new band director, one did what band directors were not supposed to do--he assigned *homework*! One of the assignments was to do a report on a composer. Each student received a sealed envelope with the name of a composer. When I opened mine, I thought that a mistake had been made, as I was expecting to have received a recognizable name, such as Mozart or Beethoven. After class, I asked the director who the heck “Wagner” was, further demonstrating my ignorance by mispronouncing his name. One of the things that goes along with my various psychological disorders is the propensity either to do nothing at all, or to severely overdo the task at hand. So it was off to the library, where I checked out and read two biographies, including Ernest Newman’s. My required 3 to 5 page report was closer to 20.

During high school my mother gave me a set of about 15 or 20 classical LP’s. There were only two that I really disliked: the *Rite of Spring*, and *Prelude und Liebestod*. One night I apparently fell asleep while the latter was playing, and as was customary with 1960’s vintage record changers, a record would keep repeating if the stacking arm was left swung to the right. The astringently unpleasant *Prelude und Liebestod* played that night for hours while I slept.

The next morning I awoke to what was simply the most ravishingly beautiful music I had ever heard, and I was quite certain that it was something that I had never listened to before.

I was in a state of complete disbelief when I read the record label and saw that I had been listening to *Tristan*! I guess my simple little 17 year old mind couldn’t comprehend chromaticism until that night! The subliminal experience of that night made me understand why Liszt’s last spoken word was “Tristan.” My high school years also featured getting to play the part of Alberich on the trombone in band, and buying the newly released Karajan recording of *Das Rheingold*, which I played obsessively every

# **Memorial Service for Wolfgang Wagner Bayreuth, Germany**

*by Dr David W. Cline*

The Presidents of all the Richard Wagner Societies through out the world were invited to Wolfgang Wagner's Memorial Service, held on Sunday, April 11, 2010, at 4pm. I felt honored to be invited as representative of our Society and accepted the invitation. I think I was the only President from the American Societies to attend.

I walked from my hotel, the Bayerischer Hof, up the Green Hill to the Festspielhaus. The grass was green, and the flowers were blooming, although the temperature was in the low 60s with a chilly breeze and a partly cloudy sky. Nevertheless, I felt that old feeling of awe, excitement, and inspiration come over me.

A crowd had already gathered at 2:45pm: some spectators, many press agents, and well dressed attendees, all in dark colors. Two planes flew overhead, and was told they were bringing officials, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, some of her deputies, and other high-ranking officials. The doors opened at 3:15pm with open seating. I took a seat center, ten rows from the stage, which was all set for the orchestra and chorus. Next to me sat Erwin Phalm, who had been personal friends with Hr Wagner since 1971. He accompanied Gundrun and Wolfgang on tour to Japan and was on the board that made the decision as to who would run the Festival after Wolfgang retired. "It was a difficult job," he said. I also met Michael Tiertjens, who worked with Hr Wagner as a set designer for many years, including the "Chereau Ring." I saw the director of the Berlin Opera and also spoke with Tankard Dorsch, the director of the current *Ring* at Bayreuth.

Chancellor Merkel and her entourage entered at five minutes to four. Then lights gradually began to dim and a minute before four, the famous Bayreuth "hush" occurred: not a sound. Then, after the minute hand passed 4 o'clock, Katharina, followed by Eva Wagner, walked to the front row. Everybody stood up. The orchestra and chorus members took their seats. Christian Thielemann conducted the orchestra in prelude from Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*. Dr Michael Hohl, the Mayor of Bayreuth, spoke about Wolfgang's honors and achievements, including his contribution as an artist, how important the Festival was for the city and region, and how he looked after the artist and production staff in a fatherly way. He pointed out that beginning in 1951, Wolfgang assisted his brother Wieland. Together they opened the Festival not only Europe, but eventually for the whole international community.

Then Christian Thielemann conducted the orchestra in "Siegfried's Rhine

*(Continued on page 9)*

# My Bayreuth Experience

By Paul Straka

It has been almost nine months now since my first trip to Bayreuth to see Wagner's *Ring*. To say that I loved it, or enjoyed it, would be stating the obvious- it was great! The town of Bayreuth, the home and grave of Wagner at Wahnfried, the magnificence and remarkable acoustics of the Festspielhaus, the quality of the orchestra and its direction in the hands of Christian Thielemann, the hospitality of David Cline and other patrons including perfect strangers all come to mind.

Rather, I have been trying to form my thoughts around a very old, but still relevant topic familiar to all opera goers; that being of staging. It is especially timely because of last summer's well-publicized and controversial *Die Meistersinger* at Bayreuth, complete with giant clown heads which remind me of Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are." Certainly not befitting the historical backdrop of *Meistersinger*. It must be very difficult to be the descendant(s) of such an incomparable genius such as Richard Wagner.

The staging distractions in the *Ring* were quite minor by comparison, and easily could be overcome by closing one's eyes. The silliest was near the end of *Götterdämmerung* when a young boy dressed in today's street clothes came on to the stage and held out his arms, both pleading with the audience to take heed, and to observe the destruction caused by the frailties of mankind...(!) Still, not enough to destroy my first experience at Bayreuth.

On one hand I think of all of the entertaining productions of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, for example, which lends itself to so many settings, not only because it deals with basic human traits and characteristics, but because the topic is so easily transposable to any time period. It's about marriage; not the dealings of heros and their gods.

On the other end of the scale is the *Ring*. Wagner did not set the operas in contemporaneous Europe; he set them in Nordic Mythology, where he said so much wisdom could be found. Myth contains (among other things) the distillations of thought, philosophy, emotion, history, and the state of the human condition. He intentionally went there, so as to be able to focus on these things, and not to be distracted by the present. I think he had the confidence in the intelligence of his audience to allow their thoughts to muse where they wanted to go, as opposed to insulting them with spoon-fed caricatures. That is not what we need stage directors for. Certainly the thoughtful mind of the opera goer will often drift in and out of different scenarios, and characters will remind the viewer of persons known not only to history, but also to ourselves as individuals.

(Continued on page 5)

**Paul Straka**

*(Continued from page 4)*

Had Wagner not put so much time and energy into the stage and set design, as well as to costumes, I think a better argument could be made for re-staging these and other operas, such as the historical *Meistersinger*. To reset these elements is considered by some, as next to changing the musical notes or libretto- it only flatters the director into believing they are on the same level as the composer. A fellow Wagner lover recently quoted someone as saying, "Well, the director wouldn't have anything to do then!"

I do not profess to be an opera expert, nor a philosopher, so I do not flatter myself into thinking that I am covering any new ground here. I am merely a french horn player that still gets excited about playing great music, and when I do come out of the pit or off of the stage, I want to see a production that treats the audience with the respect that it deserves.

I will never forget the thrill I had when I was about 15 years old at hearing the turbulent storm music which opens *Die Walküre*, and then to see the weary warrior Siegmund dressed in animal skins fall exhausted and cold before a huge hearth. This just couldn't have been set in North Oaks or Minnetonka! I can also recall the shivers and goose-bumps at hearing Hunding's theme, the Magic Fire Music, the battle music between Sigfried and Faffner, and the Fall of Valhala. The fantasy of the staging contributed to this early live experience of mine, and was a surely a factor in my becoming a Wagner fan.

---

## **2010 Founders Day Dinner**

*Mark Your Calendar*

**Saturday 11 September 2010**

**Germanic-American Institute**

Our most popular event is our annual Founders Day Dinner. Held in the fall, it commemorates the founding of the Society when a few friends met for dinner in 1998. From that handfull, we have grown to over 50 members.

*Good friends, good conversation, good food, and good entertainment.*

**Scheduled Performer is John de Hahn**

## Book Club

Several members met at the Common Roots Cafe in Minneapolis last February to discuss “The Wagner Clan” by Jonathan Carr. Kevin Edgar presented four questions to aide our discussion, and to keep us on track.

*Should the Ring have ended with “Wotan’s Farewell?” (chapter 2, pg 40-41)* We all agreed that it should not. There was too much going on in the story to end just with Wotan.

*Carr suggests that the driving force behind completing the Ring was Ludwig, not Wagner. Wagner had not worked on the Ring for seven years, during which he devoted his time to completing Tristan and Meistersinger. Other than the Ring, the only opera composed later was Parsifal. Suppose Wagner’s energies had not been consumed with completing the Ring, building Bayreuth, paying off debts from the first Festspiel. What over works could we have been hearing today? Was Bayreuth worth it?* We were indifferent on this one. Some said yes because possibility we might have gotten more operas out of Wagner if his situation was different. Others said no -- if Wagner had an urge to write more, he would have written them. He was strong-willed. Maybe he got off track at times, but the energy was always there. He seemed to place what was important to him first.

*Wagner's antisemitism-did it penetrate his music dramas? Chapter 5, pg 79, Carr suggests that the wildly different interpretations of Wagner's works suggest that it did not.* We all agreed on this with Carr's point. We felt that Wagner would have made it clear if he wanted to label characters.

*Do you agree with the author's explanations for the relative decline in the popularity of Wagner's works during the Third Reich? (chapter 10, pgs 178-180)* - Yes, we most definitely agreed on this point as well. With the crisis at the time, it was apparent that Hitler loved Wagner's work, and sadly history was determined that the two now go hand in hand.

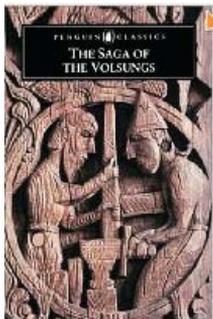
All in all, we felt the book was an interesting account of Wagner’s life and his legacy.

*(Continued on page 7)*

## Book club

*(Continued from page 6)*

*Have a different opinion? Want to continue the discussion? Check our page on Facebook.*



## Next Meeting

Wednesday 30 June 2010  
(Tentative)

7-9 PM  
Common Roots Cafe  
2558 Lyndale Avenue South  
Minneapolis MN



At our next meeting we will review and discuss some of the background material for the Ring:

Das Nibelungenlied: Song of the Nibelunds  
(Burton Raffel, translator, but any edition will be fine)  
Yale University Press (January 8, 2008)

and

The Saga of the Volsungs  
(Jesse L Byock, translator, but any edition will be fine)  
Penguin Books (January 31, 2000)

Free, online translations of the texts are available. See the links on our website Book Club page:

[www.wagnertc.org/Events/Book Club/Book Club.htm](http://www.wagnertc.org/Events/Book Club/Book Club.htm)

The Common Roots Cafe offers beverages, including wine and beer, and food appears to be good. The Cafe also offers a nice back room that is private and able to seat 20 people ready for a great discussion.

If you plan to attend you MUST RSVP to Carol Thomas, by email or call 612-559-6468 NO LATER THAN Thursday 24th June, so you can be informed of any changes. Do not even think of showing up otherwise.

# wagner on Stage and Screen

## Madison

Several members recently attended Madison Opera's production of *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Reports on the production will appear in the next issue.

## Los Angeles Ring

Cycle 1: May 29 - June 6; Cycle 2: June 8 - June 16; Cycle 3: June 18 - 26. One member is attending the third cycle.

[www.losangelesopera.com](http://www.losangelesopera.com)

## Cincinnati

Cincinnati Opera is presenting *Die Meistersinger* on Wednesday, June 23 and Saturday, June 26. Four members are attending.

[www.cincinnatiopera.com](http://www.cincinnatiopera.com)

## Seattle

Seattle Opera is mounting a new production of *Tristan und Isolde* in August 2010. Online tickets go on sale on 22 May 2010. Two members are planning on attending the 15 August performance.

[www.seattleopera.org](http://www.seattleopera.org)

## Chicago

The Chicago Lyric has a new production of *Lohengrin*. Performances are in February and March 2011. Two members are attending the 11 February 2011 performance. [www.lyricopera.org](http://www.lyricopera.org)

## Twin Cities

The remodeled Columbia Heights Theater is presenting a series of high definition opera screenings on Tuesdays and Sundays. Included in the line up is *Das Rheingold*, recorded at La Scala. Screenings

*(Continued on page 9)*

## **Wolfgang Wagner**

*(Continued from page 3)*

Journey” from *Götterdämmerung*.

Next came Dr Horst Seehofer, who is the Minister President of the Free State of Bayern, who spoke briefly.

This was followed by the Festspiele Chorus singing from Psalm 91 by Felix Mendelssohn Batholdy. Christian Thielemann then spoke about Wolfgang. He said he was a great artist and that no one knew more about Richard Wagner’s music dramas than Wolfgang Wagner. He knew all the musical lines from vocal to the instrumental as they appeared on one page.

Then Dr Joachim Thiery spoke. Dr Thiery was Wolfgang’s personal physician, and he spoke at length in an intimate way about him. He said that Wolfgang was very ill at the end and that Katharina, with whom he lived, had done everything possible to make his life pleasant and comfortable in the last months and weeks of his life. “She took care of him very well and saw to his every need”, he said. She always called him “Papa”, never “Father”. The morning that he passed on, Katharina kissed him, he smiled, and then he died. Dr Thiery, in the name of Eva and Katharina, thanked all those who were his caretakers. The finale was the orchestra playing the prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and the chorus sang the opening hymn sung in St. Katharine’s Church.

All stood up as Eva and Katharina left and then followed them out of the Festspielhaus in silence. The service lasted for 1 hour 45 minutes. Most of us had been sitting 2½ hours and hardly anyone moved. I asked several how they could do that; they said, “We are used to it.”

The Wagner Society Presidents repaired to the Avena Hotel for some Gemutlichkeit and a chance to meet old acquaintances and make new friends. Plans for the International Verband were also outlined. I tried to represent us throughout these activities in the most dignified way that I knew.

---

## **Wagner on Stage and Screen**

*(Continued from page 8)*

are August 24 and 29, 2010. [www.heightstheater.com](http://www.heightstheater.com)

The NY Metropolitan Opera will be telecasting two Wagner operas in HD next season.

***Das Rheingold*** - Saturday 9 October 2010

***Die Walküre*** - Saturday 14 May 2011

Theaters to be announced.

*If you are planning to attend any of these events and would like to coordinate with other members or would like more information, contact Kevin Edgar at [wagner@bke.org](mailto:wagner@bke.org) or by phone at 612-381-9429.*

**Rick Davis**

*(Continued from page 2)*

day until I knew every note of it.

In college, I majored in Radio-TV-Film and for my required senior year independent study project, made a 60 minute movie that contained a dream sequence with a demonically laughing Richard W, a stunningly beautiful 21 year old Brünnhilde, medieval pilgrims (complete with habits borrowed from a nearby monastery), and a papal staff with fresh growth.

For Christmas of my sophomore year, I asked my parents for the Solti recording of *Götterdämmerung*. They had a difficult time finding a store that stocked it, and my father, when asking for it, would say to the salesperson, "I know this isn't the correct name, but it is something like 'God-damerung.'" Life has contained few experiences as blissfully intense as that same Christmas night in 1969, as I listened to the Prologue and Act III for the first time in my darkened bedroom.

Also during my college years, I also co-hosted a classical radio show, *Singspiel*, on which my roommate and I broadcast the complete Ring cycle. We also had a 16 week-long "Battle of the Composers" which culminated in a 24 hour marathon of music composed by the winner. (While Wagner made it to the semi-finals, he was edged out by Bach, who in turn was blown out of the water in the finals by Beethoven.) Apollo 10 was launched during the ensuing Beethoven marathon, and at the moment of liftoff I did manage to slip in *Ride of the Valkyries*. I spent my final quarter of my senior year in Germany, where I made my first pilgrimage to Bayreuth and where I saw my first live performances of *Flying Dutchman*, *Siegfried*, *Die Walküre*, and *Tristan*. The latter two were at the Vienna State Opera with Birgit Nilsson. In an outpouring of affection unmatched by anything I ever witnessed before or after, her performance of Isolde received a 35 minute standing ovation, with a number of attendees winging flowers from their boxes down to her on the stage. While I had purchased a ticket for a performance of *Die Meistersinger* at the Bavarian State Opera on what would have been Wagner's 159<sup>th</sup> birthday (had he lived), I skipped it in favor of a trek to the French Riviera with my Eurail pass, a decision I have since questioned many times.

The next year I received an M.A. in Cinema from U.S.C., where I wrote a screenplay about Wagner and King Ludwig, entitled "Sweet and Sauerkraut." (The professor who taught that screenwriting class found the characters to be "delightfully awful" and felt that it would be a good project for Orson Welles! Well, I'm still waiting!) That year I heard Birgit Nilsson for the third and final time when she sang the Liebestod and Immolation scenes with the L.A. Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta.

*(Continued on page 11)*

**Rick Davis**

*(Continued from page 10)*

Little did I realize it, but when I started law school the next year, I also entered a 25 year Wagner drought. While I purchased a few Wagner recordings during those years, I only attended one fully staged performance (a dreadful *Lohengrin* during one of the Met's last annual tours) and concert performances of *Walküre* and *Siegfried* from the aborted Cleveland-Dohnanyi Ring cycle. Oh, I also read Cosima's diaries, or at least as much of them as I could stand.

It was not until 2004, when fellow RWSUM member Rachel Schneider started organizing world class weekend-long Wagner symposia in Canton (which developed into the Wagner Society of Ohio) that I got back into the swing of things. Thanks to her efforts and the many fellow Wagnerians I have met through Wagner societies, I have been fortunate to have been able to attend all 7 Bayreuth productions in 2008 (which included seeing Wolfgang following the final performance of that festival -- the fabulous Hersheim production of *Parsifal*, which is the best theater of any kind that I have ever seen and which I hope to see again with some of you in 2012), a *Tristan* at the Met, the Seattle Ring last summer, and the L.A. *Ring* and Cincinnati *Meistersinger* this coming summer. Because of my reawakened interest in Wagner combined with certain compulsive personality characteristics, I now own far too many DVD's and Blu-Ray discs of Wagner performances, have collected too many historic Bayreuth broadcasts, have read too many books on Wagner, have spent too many hours studying the origins of the grail legends, and have downloaded Wagner's entire, and entirely boring, prose outpourings (it's all there, and all free, at [www.archive.org/details/texts](http://www.archive.org/details/texts)).

Other than the closing minutes of *Walküre*, *Tristan*, *Götterdämmerung*, and *Parsifal*, I know of nothing else in all of music that has the ability to quell the gnawing existential *angst* that appears to be part of the human condition. Being able to use music to accomplish such a feat is one of the things that makes the otherwise thoroughly despicable Wagner such a towering genius. It is my personal experience and belief that a thorough familiarity with his works is a uniquely life-enriching experience. Perhaps I would have stumbled upon Wagner in some other way, but how glad I am that my 8<sup>th</sup> grade envelope did not contain the name of, say, Boccherini! We need organizations like the WSUM to keep the light shining, and I am most pleased to be a member!

# Video Nights 7-9 PM

## Second Tuesdays

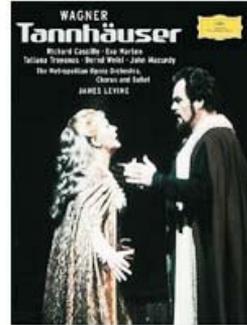
Currently, we are viewing

### *Tannhäuser*

The Metropolitan Opera, 1982

The current schedule is:

- 11 May 2010     *Tannhäuser Act 2*  
08 June 2010     *Tannhäuser Act 3*  
July and August     **Summer Hiatus - NO MEETINGS**



We resume in September, 2010

*This event is hosted by Kevin Edgar at 700 Douglas Ave, Minneapolis. If you are planning to attend please let Kevin know by email ([wagner@bke.org](mailto:wagner@bke.org)) or phone 612-381-9429.*

**On the cover:  
Wolfgang Wagner (30 August 1919 - 21 March 2010) devoted his whole life to the Bayreuth Festival and the works of his grandfather Richard Wagner.**

Published by  
The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest  
P.O. Box 3804  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
612-863-4319  
Fax: 612-863-4384  
General Email: [Info@wagnertc.org](mailto:Info@wagnertc.org)  
Newsletter Email: [newsletter@wagnertc.org](mailto:newsletter@wagnertc.org)  
Copyright © 2010 by  
The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest

#### STAFF

Carol Thomas – Editor  
B. Kevin Edgar – Production/Design