August, 2020  Volume 22

2020 was challenging for all of us. Cancellation of our monthly live lectures and of our concerts, recasting the American Wagner Project (AWP) for distant training, postponing the Das Rheingold performance by AWP singers, and the rescheduling of the 22nd annual Wagner in der Wildnis have all come as disappointments. Through it all, you, our members, have stuck with us. Membership is at an all-time high, and thanks to your generosity, we have been able to continue to assist musicians, especially in these difficult times.

Our response to the pandemic has been to lead the way by initiating the Wagner World’s most successful Webinar lecture series. Each of our programs, which have been recognized by Bayreuth’s International Association of Wagner Societies (the Verband), has been attended by upwards of 250 viewers from around the world. With this in mind, we have committed to continue free Webinar lectures, even after we resume in-person “physical” meetings.

We have presented programs by pianist Jeffrey Swann, tenor Issachah Savage, Maestro Saul Lilienstein, and your Chairman. Beginning in September we have scheduled monthly Webinar programs featuring the great singers and leaders of the AWP Dolora Zajick and Luana DeVol, plus Maestro John Edward Niles, and musicologist Iain Scott. We are pleased that many of our lectures are now posted on Youtube. Our new website includes a direct link to Youtube.

We are pleased to announce the formation of the Valhalla Society, established for those who wish to include the Society in their estate plans.

We note with great sadness the death of our friend John Pohanka, one of our founding members and an invaluable Board member for 23 years. The Memoriam on page 4 celebrates his many accomplishments.

Thank you for helping us continue our primary mission of discovering, nurturing and supporting the development of talent with the capability of performing Wagner. Moreover, your renewal, especially at the Premium Level, enables us to support Wagner artists in this, their time of need. Welcome to our 23rd year. We look forward to enjoying and appreciating Wagner’s genius with you. And please consider a Premium Membership when you renew.

Thursday September 24, 7:30, on Webinar. “Wagner’s Unbelievable Life and Indispensable Music in One Evening.” To inaugurate WSWDC’s 23rd season, Chairman Jim Holman will take on the full expanse of Wagner’s life and work! This talk will provide an introduction to those new to Wagner, while offering a refresher for members and friends that provides a point of departure for further study. Jim will survey Wagner’s biography and provide excerpts from each of the ten operas that form Wagner’s indispensable permanent repertory. To receive a link to this broadcast, please register on the Wagner Society website, WWW.Wagner-dc.org.

Thursday November 12, 7:30, on Webinar. “What Beckmesser Said; What Eva Said.” Maestro John Edward Niles will delve into two of the most compelling yet under-appreciated elements of the Meistersinger libretto, the words of Beckmesser’s “Prize Song” in Act Three, and Eva’s “asides” in Act Two, as she and Walter von Stolzing are trapped in the bushes hiding from Sachs, Beckmesser, Pogner, and the Night Watchman. Contemporary translations of the Beckmesser “Prize Song” generally corrupt the brilliant nuance of Wagner’s humor, while Eva’s comments from the bushes reveal her “trouble with men.” Maestro Niles will unravel these hidden delights. To receive a link to the broadcast, please register on the Wagner Society website.

Thursday December 10, 7:30, on Webinar. “Ben Heppner Talks about Three of his Wagner Roles.” Ben Heppner was perhaps the world’s leading Wagnerian heldentenor from 1988 to 2014 when he retired. Interviewed by the Canadian musicologist Iain Scott, Mr. Heppner will focus on his approach to the roles of Lohengrin, Walter von Stolzing and Tristan. We will see clips of Mr. Heppner singing each of these roles, with ample opportunity for questions at the end of the program. To receive a link to the broadcast, please register on the Wagner Society website.

We are pleased that many of our lectures have been attended by upwards of 250 viewers from around the world. With this in mind, we have committed to continue free Webinar lectures, even after we resume in-person “physical” meetings.

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Upcoming Events
**The American Wagner Project of 2020**

By John Edward Niles

In 2006 the soprano Dolora Zajick founded the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices (IYDV) to address the shortage of voices suited to opera’s dramatic repertoire, specifically the works of Richard Wagner, but also of Richard Strauss, Alban Berg, and Verdi. In 2013 the Institute formed a partnership with the Wagner Society of Washington DC, creating the American Wagner Project (AWP), led by renowned soprano Luana DeVol and the Society’s John Edward Niles.

The AWP identifies and develops singers to prepare specific roles in the Wagner repertoire, essential for auditions and performances with major opera companies. The program provides German language instruction, diction, movement, and acting. AWP is the successor to the Thomas Stewart and Evelyn Lear Emerging Singers Program, which our Society established in 2000 to identify and support emerging Wagnerian talent. In 2019, under the leadership of Board Members John Pohanka and John Edward Niles, the Society and AWP partnered with the Miami Wagner Institute, led by Michael Rossi, to offer added coaching and performance opportunities for AWP singers. We anticipate a performance of Das Rheingold in Miami, August 2021, which will feature many of our AWP singers.

This August, for two intensive weeks, Ms. DeVol and her pianist conducted vocal training via Zoom webinars. All the participants prepared specific roles from the Wagner repertory.

Mr. Niles reports that for summer 2020, there were over 150 applicants for the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices. Auditions were held November, 2019 in New York City. A total of 45 singers were accepted for the IYDV. Twenty applied for the AWP; two were accepted and joined five carry-overs. The Wagner Society of Washington is the largest financial and artistic supporter of the AWP.

New to the AWP are Soprano Kelly Noltner and Soprano Jenna Odem-Schroer. Ms. DeVol reports that Kelly, while young for the Wagner repertoire at age 28, has “wonderful metal in her voice, ideal for Brünnhilde and Elektra.” This summer she worked on the roles of Siglinde and Elsa. Jenna “possesses a warm, big lyric voice with ‘ping.’ She should be an ideal Siglinde and Elsa, roles she worked on this summer.”

Mezzo Courtney Ankerfelt, in her second year, “is developing rapidly and possesses a beautiful, multifaceted voice that seems to have no bounds.” She is preparing the role of Waltraute in Götterdämmerung. Tenor Jon Janacek, also in his second year, is preparing the role of Loge in Das Rheingold, which he will sing in the Miami Festival’s upcoming production. Jon sang at the Wagner Society’s 2019 Gala at the Swedish Cultural Center.

Eugene (Trey) Richards, who has sung for three Society concerts, returns to AWP for the fourth year. He is coming off a successful engagement singing the role of The Wanderer with the Kassel, Germany opera’s Siegfried. He will sing Wotan in Miami Opera’s Das Rheingold. He has been offered a position with the Kassel opera for the 2021 season.

Three singers divide their commitment between the AWP and the IYDV. Blake Talbot and Bill McCullough are young heldentenors who work with both Ms. Zajick and Ms. DeVol, studying Verdi and Wagner. Baritone Hunter Enoch sang for the Society’s 2019 AWP concert at the Swedish Cultural Center. He had a major role in the NSO’s production of Silent Night and is preparing for Verdi under the tutelage of Ms. Zajick, and Wagner under Ms. DeVol. Hunter is preparing Donner for Miami; Bill and Blake are preparing the role of Froh.

The ESP/AWP has a fabulous roster of successes. Alumni include Jay Hunter Morris who sang the role of Siegfried in the 2011 San Francisco Opera’s Ring and the 2011 Metropolitan Opera’s Ring and is featured on the Met’s recording of the Ring. Daniel Brenna sang Siegfried in the WNO’s 2016 Ring and the Met’s 2018 Ring. Jennifer Wilson sang Brünnhilde in the Ring for the Valencia Opera and Florence Italy Opera under the baton of Daniel Barenboim. Rebecca Teem sang Brünnhilde in Lubeck Germany’s Ring, and Carolyn Whisnant sang Brünnhilde for Frankfurt Opera.

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**AWP Participants 2019-2020**

Renew Your Membership Now!! The 2021 Membership Year runs January 1 - December 31. Renew Now and when you do please consider adding a gift to support the singers in the Society’s American Wagner Project.
Wagner in der Wildnis Update

Board members Lynne Lambert and Sabrina Cassagnol, who coordinate the Wildnis program, report that the study of “Lohengrin” has been postponed to 2021. This intensive three-day program has sold out every one of its 21 years. Wildnis honors Wagner’s preference for the bucolic setting of Bayreuth to appreciate his music absent the distractions of big cities like Munich. Wildnis 2021 will be held June 4-6 at Cacapon Resort State Park in Berkeley Springs WV. Presenters will again be concert pianist extraordinaire Jeffrey Swann and Professor Simon Williams.

Bayreuth Update
By Guillermo Schultz

The Wagner Society of Washington DC is pleased that the Bayreuth Festival has again changed ticketing policies, and we have been assured that our allotment of Festival tickets has been restored. This brings an end to the Festival’s years of indecision, while the Festival tried to decide whether to honor the requests of non-German societies, and/or whether to award tickets through the Richard-Wagner Verband International, to which our Society belongs.

We have valued our ticket allotment for over 20 years. In February of 1999 the grandson of Richard Wagner, Wolfgang Wagner and his wife Gutrune, visited Washington for the opera’s production of “Tristan und Isolde.” Jim Holman, Aury Fernandez, Barb Karn and R.G. Head invited them to lunch. Even though we were less than a year old, with fewer than 50 members, Barb, Aury and R.G., seated at Gutrune’s table, asked for tickets, to which Gutrune replied “of course.” A set of 16 tickets arrived by mail in 6 weeks and we have treasured our allotment yearly for over 20 years.

A new “Ring” has been scheduled for August 2022. In the meantime, the Bayreuth Festival announced a series of live events featuring conductor Christian Thielemann, with members of the Festival Orchestra alongside Camilla Nylund and Klaus Florian Vogt -- Mr. Vogt sang Siegfried in the 2019 Metropolitan Opera “Ring.”

For the first time in its 150 year history, the Festival is not headed by a member of Richard Wagner’s family. Katharina Wagner, the 42-year old great great granddaughter of Richard Wagner, and director of the Festival. For the first time in its 150 year history, the Festival is not headed by a member of Richard Wagner’s family. Katharina Wagner, the 42-year old great great granddaughter of Richard Wagner, and director of the Bayreuth Festival through 2025, has been sidelined by an illness – not the Covid-19, but it is serious enough that she has been hospitalized for an extended stay. The Richard-Wagner Verband International describes her illness as “unexpected and serious.”

What was Wagner’s Allure?

Gabriel Monod was a French historian who had seen a good deal of Wagner during the first Ring festival of 1878. In an article published contemporaneously in the periodical Moniteur universel, he wrote:

“On everyone who comes near him he exercises an irresistible fascination, not only by reason of his musical genius, or the originality of his intellect, or the variety of his learning, but above all by the energy of temperament and will that emanates from every fibre of him. You feel that you are in the presence of a force of nature, unleashing itself with almost reckless violence. After seeing him at close quarters, at one moment irresponsibly gay, pouring forth a torrent of jokes and laughter; at another vehement, respecting neither titles nor powers nor friendships, always letting himself be carried away by the first thing that comes into his head, you find yourself unable to be too hard upon him for his lapses of taste, of tact, or delicacy: if you are a Jew, you are inclined to forgive him for his pamphlet on ‘Judaism in Music,’ if a Frenchman, his farce on the capitulation of Paris, if you are a German, all the insults he has heaped on Germany... You take him as he is, full of faults – no doubt because he is full of genius – but incontestably a superior being, one of the greatest and most extraordinary men our century has produced.”


The Valhalla Society
By Mark Golden

The Society has established the Valhalla Society. This is a legacy opportunity for members who, as part of their estate planning, would like to extend their commitment to the Wagner Society’s core mission of advancing the knowledge and appreciation of Richard Wagner’s genius, and ensuring the development of the next generation of Wagnerian singers.

There is no minimum financial commitment, and we take you at your word that you have included the Society in your bequest. You can remember the Society in your Will or in a Revocable Trust. You can also name the Society as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy or an IRA. Bequests may specify a dollar amount, or as a percentage of the residual value of your estate after specific bequests and expenses. The bequest is not payable until death, so it does not affect your assets or cash flow during your lifetime, and it is revocable. It may help minimize estate taxes or avoid tax burden on heirs. If you already have a Will or a Trust, a simple codicil is an easy and inexpensive vehicle.

Your greatest benefit is knowing that your support of our programs and mission will continue into the future. We will include your name in all printed materials and on our website, as per your preferences. Your gift will allow future generations to experience the music of Wagner in our nation’s capital.

If you would like more information, or would like to be listed among our Valhalla Society Champions, please contact us at Legacy@wagner-dc.org.

Charter members include Jean W. Arnold, Betty Byrne, Sabrina Cassagnol, Marc DePaul, Aurelius and Janet Fernandez, Mark and Annette Golden, Frederic Harwood and Nedda di Montezemolo, Jim and Diana Holman, Margaret C. Jones, Lynne Lambert, Helen McConnell, Marc Nicholson, and John Pohanka.
John Pohanka, 92, a founder and longtime trustee of the Wagner Society of Washington DC, died May 17, 2020, in West Palm, FL.

In 2009 he received the Wagner Society’s Wagner Award for his role in founding and supporting the Society and for his impact encouraging and funding Wagner productions in Washington and Miami. He founded the Wagner Society of Palm Beach, and forged our relationship with the Miami Wagner Festival, creating performance opportunities for our American Wagner Project singers.

John served as board chairman of the Washington National Opera, and was instrumental in bringing Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung to WNO in 2016. In 2019 the Washington National Opera dedicated its annual Gala in John’s honor, recognizing his outsized contributions to the Opera, both artistically and financially. At the Gala, the National Symphony Orchestra played, primarily the music of Wagner selected by John, and his friends Soprano Christine Goerke and Baritone Alan Held, both of whom performed in WNO’s Ring, sang favorite Wagner selections. The Pohanka Automotive Group sponsors CDs of WNO productions narrated by Saul Lilienstein.

He authored Wagner the Mystic, published by the Society in 2016. He was a learned lecturer on Wagner, and also demonstrated an encyclopedic knowledge of the work and career of Maria Callas. He did see her perform, but not in a Wagnerian performance. His daughter in law, Anne Kline Pohanka, notes that John was fascinated by Callas’ vocal and dramatic talent.

John became president of the Pohanka Automotive Group after his father’s death in 1958 and expanded the business from a single Oldsmobile dealership in Washington to include showrooms in Maryland, Virginia and Texas, 9 makes of vehicles, and 1,400 employees with more than $1 billion in sales. Among his survivors are his wife Lynn, and Premium Wagner Society members Anne Kline & Geoffrey Pohanka.

The Wagner Society’s Working Board 2020

Chairman Jim Holman, in his 23rd year, leads the board and books lectures and events, including the Webinar broadcasts. Bonnie Becker works membership, including renewals. Veteran Board Member Betty Byrne works publicity and mailings with new board member Deborah Diamond, who is also writing a history of the Emerging Singers Program now known as the American Wagner Project.

Jim Giragosian manages e-blasts. Mark Golden has assumed leadership of the Valhalla Legacy Society. Frederic Harwood writes and edits the newsletter. Lynne Lambert and Sabrina Cassagnol plan and manage Wildnis. Lynne serves as the Society’s treasurer and Sabrina manages the membership software. John Edward Niles coordinates the relationship with the American Wagner Project and IYDV. Guillermo Schultz oversees the Bayreuth relationship. Will Stewart, ex-officio, is the office manager and the technical wiz behind the webinars. We welcome Deborah and Sabrina to the Board. We would also like to recognize the work of retiring Board member Helen McConnell, who initiated and structured the Valhalla Society.

The Wagner Award

Since 1999 the Society periodically recognized notables in the opera world who have made extraordinary contributions to the study and enjoyment of Richard Wagner’s art.

Martin Feinstein, 1999, WNO General Director
Thomas Stewart, 2000, Bass Baritone
Father M. Owen Lee, 2001, Critic and Scholar
Maestro Heinz Fricke, 2002, WNO Conductor
Evelyn Lear, 2003, Soprano
Saul Lilienstein, 2004. Musicologist
James Morris, 2005, Bass Baritone
Jeffrey Swann, 2007, Pianist
John Pohanka, 2009, WNO Board Chair
Donald Crosby PhD, 2012, Author, Scholar
Francesca Zambello, 2014, WNO Artistic Director
Jay Hunter Morris, 2015, Tenor
Jennifer Wilson, 2016, Soprano
Philippe Auguin, 2018, Conductor, WNO Ring

WSWDC’s Webinars are now on Youtube.

Go to the our webpage, then to resources, and click on any of the following:

Lohengrin, Jim Holman, April 23, 2020
“The Immolation Scene in the Ring,” Jeffrey Swann, May 7, 2020
“Imagination and Reality in Wagner,” Saul Lilienstein, May 21, 2020
“Tristan and the Delights of Ambiguity,” Jim Holman, May 28, 2020
“Wagner’s Music Dramas and the Jews,” Saul Lilienstein, July 15, 2020
“Wagner: A Voyage of Self-Discovery through Beethoven,” Jeffrey Swann, August 6, 2020

Additional Resources from our Webpage

Maestro Saul Lilienstein has permitted us to share his commentaries on several of Wagner’s operas: Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, Götterdämmerung, Tristan und Isolde, and Parsifal.

The complete Wildnis lectures featuring Jeffrey Swann and Prof. Simon Williams are available on our webpage. They include Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, Tristan und Isolde, Der fliegende Holländer, Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, Götterdämmerung, Meistersinger, and Parsifal.
The season opened with a special concert featuring award-winning pianist Jeffrey Swann performing with the Wagner Society Chamber Players organized by Washington National Symphony violist Jennifer Mondie, and including NSO associate concertmaster Ying Fu, violinist Abigail Kreutzer, cellist Britton Riley, cellist Sophie Shao, and violinist Lisa-Beth Lambert. Katzen Arts Center, September 15.

In “The Wagner Symphony,” WSWDC Chairman Jim Holman pointed out the overlooked influence of Beethoven’s symphonic style – orchestral primacy, thematic cohesion, and leitmotiv – on the music of Wagner’s operas. Levine School of Music, October 14.

Canadian musicologist Iain Scott was “Remembering Father Owen Lee” as he recalled the career of the long-time popular commentator for the Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, author of several books on Wagner, and an early recipient of the Wagner Award from the WSWDC. George Washington University Marvin Center, December 11.

With a clever analysis of the German text and examples from the music, John Edward Niles helped us understand poor Beckmesser’s ridiculed attempt to steal Walther’s contest song in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Levine School of Music, January 29.

Because of the corona virus pandemic, the Society canceled its spring in-person events. However, we were able to produce seven webinars offered free of charge and broadcast throughout the world. Most of these can be viewed on Youtube through a link on our webpage. www.wagner-dc.org.

WSWDC Chairman Jim Holman explained how “Lohengrin, the Last and Greatest of the German Romantic Operas,” sets the themes of obsessive love, political intrigue, and social fragmentation evident in all seven of Wagner’s subsequent operas. Webinar, April 23.

Wagner expert Jeffrey Swann discussed “The Immolation Scene” from Götterdämmerung, performing piano transcriptions of the themes to highlight how Brünnhilde’s self-sacrifice resolves the complex plots from the preceding Ring operas and presages a new world in the future. Webinar, May 7.

Exciting young Wagner tenor Issachah Savage, one of the discoveries of WSWDC’s American Wagner Project, gave a live performance of “Rienzi’s Prayer” and described his background, musical training, and feelings about the composers whose music he brings to life. Webinar, May 14.

In “Imagination and Reality,” the challenge of transferring Wagner’s dramatic creativity to the stage, was described by Saul Lilienstein with film examples from Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, and Götterdämmerung. Webinar, May 21.

Incorporating the idea from Leonard Bernstein that Tristan und Isolde is the “central work in all music history,” Jim Holman presented “Tristan and the Delights of Ambiguity,” with background on political, artistic and scientific developments during Wagner’s lifetime that influenced his work. Webinar, May 28.

In “Wagner’s Music Dramas and the Jews” frequent Smithsonian lecturer Saul Lilienstein provided thoughtful insight and historical facts to help audiences appreciate Wagner’s magnificent music despite his personal shortcomings. Webinar, July 15.

Taking us along on “Wagner’s Voyage of Self-Discovery through Beethoven,” concert pianist Jeffrey Swann played piano transcriptions of themes from Der fliegende Holländer and Parsifal to show how Wagner’s genius was influenced by an evolving understanding of Beethoven. Webinar, August 6.

Parsifal and Some Authors in the Master’s Shadow

Chairman Jim Holman will take on Wagner’s final opera in four lectures, one on each act. With audio and visual excerpts, he will discuss the controversies and the increasing appreciation surrounding its 135 year history. The final four segments of this 8 part series will be led by Bruce Eisen, who will discuss twentieth-century works by Eliot, Hesse and Mann influenced by Wagner. Tuesday September 22 for 8 weeks, online, 11:45 – 1:15. Register at OLLI-DC.org. Course #515

September 15 Alex Ross’ Book Release “Wagnerism.”

In a preview, the publisher writes, “Around 1900, the phenomenon known as Wagnerism saturated European and American Culture. His operas became models of formal daring, mythmaking, erotic freedom and mystical speculation. Artists such as Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Cezanne, Isadora Duncan and Bunuel felt its impact. Then, largely because of his antisemitism, for many, his name became almost synonymous with artistic evil.

“In Wagnerism, Alex Ross, music critic of the New Yorker magazine, restores the magnificent confusion of what it means to be a Wagnerian. A pandemonium of geniuses, madmen, charlatans and prophets do battle over Wagner’s legacy.”
The Wagner Society of Washington DC is committed to developing emerging Wagnerian talent. We could not fulfill that mission without the help of our Premium Members, our most generous donors. We thank the members who champion our mission.

**Premium Members**

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- Helen McConnell
- Bill & Cathy Pastor
- Jack Roth

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- Donald Clagett
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- Jacqueline Rosen

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- Joanne Whitney
- David Wood
- Tiemen & Els Woutersen
- Bernadette Wright
2021 Membership: Join or Renew Today
The Wagner Society of Washington DC

The WSWDC membership year runs from January 1 through December 31. Join/renew now. Online at www.wagner-dc.org, or by mail to: Box 11842, WDC 20008.

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ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES (Check one category only)

WSWDC is a 501C3 charitable organization. Membership dues and donations are tax-deductible in accordance with federal law.

□ Individual Regular $40
□ Dual (Two @ Same Address) $70
□ Patron $250 – $499
□ Sponsor $500 – $999
□ Golden Ring $1,000 – $2,499
□ Meistersingers’ Guild $5,000 – $9,999
□ Wotan’s Circle $10,000 and Above
□ Pilgrims’ Chorus $2,500 – $4,999

For an employer matching grant, please contact Will.Stuart@wagner-dc.org

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

• An invitation to all lectures, a subscription to the WSWDC newsletter, and priority notice of all activities.
• Invitation to the Bayreuth Festival in Germany and to Wagner in der Wildnis
• Invitation to American Wagner Project Events

Wotan’s Circle, Meistersingers’ Guild, Pilgrims’ Chorus, Golden Ring, Sponsor, and Patron members also receive:

• Invitations to Premium membership special events
• Priority for WSWDC Bayreuth tickets
• Priority for lodge accommodations at the Wildnis weekend
• Recognition in programs and the newsletter for support of AWP and emerging singers

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