

Preparing for performances of the works of
Richard Wagner in Germany

A report for The Finzi Trust

by Martin Lamb

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to the Finzi Trust for giving me the opportunity to travel to Germany and immerse myself in the world of Richard Wagner, and the German opera community more widely, and to Sarah Gabriel for drawing my attention to the existence of the Finzi Scholarships in the first place.

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And lastly thank you to Hannah, who has put up with my constant Wagnerian ramblings, for her unfailing support throughout this project.

Introduction

In the summer of 2013, Longborough Festival Opera realized a long-held dream: to stage a complete performance of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*). The four operas (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*) run for around 13 and a half hours (or longer depending on the musical personality of the conductor), and require considerable resources on the stage and in the pit, making staging the *Ring* amongst the greatest challenges which any opera company can undertake. The complexities of the libretti drawn from early Germanic myth have seen them reinterpreted countless times as dramatisations of a wide array of issues both individual and social. They are essential pieces to study in any survey of the development of opera as an art form, and for German art more widely, and have provoked extreme reactions from audiences and commentators throughout their history. They have been both lauded as works of genius, close to the absolute summit of individual artistic achievement, and damned as overlong, grandiose nonsense with a thick streak of proto-Nazism running through them. Richard Wagner, composer and librettist, towers above these and his other works, either a colossal figure who represents the triumph of the individual artist and seer, or a monstrously vain and arrogant racist foisting an unpalatably nationalistic vision of the German identity on his audience from beyond the grave, depending on one's point of view. And then there are plenty of people whose views are somewhere in between.

The Longborough Ring Cycle, coinciding with the bicentenary of the composer's birth, was a triumph; an artistic *tour de force* brought to life in an intimate but challenging small-scale setting, and a friendly, supportive environment in which a great number of talented people worked with huge commitment. I know all this because I was there, and at the risk of this sounding like false modesty, I was very surprised to find myself part of this, the only fully-staged *Ring* cycle you could see in the UK as part of the Wagner bicentenary celebrations. I was covering the role of Alberich in *Das Rheingold*, in some ways the prime mover

behind the first chapter of the story. It is he who steals the gold to forge the all-powerful ring of the title (having renounced love in order to do so). His possession of the ring does not last long, and once it is stolen from him, he curses it and all who wear it. When we encounter him subsequently in the cycle he is obsessively and unsuccessfully scheming to get the ring back. It's a great role, one of the greatest character bass/baritone parts in opera, especially the opening incarnation in *Rheingold*. But then you could say the same about so many roles in the Ring and in Wagner's works more generally: singers love them because there's so much to get your teeth into, both vocally and dramatically. They need huge stamina but also huge subtlety, and if the stereotype of the Wagner singer is of someone bellowing at the top of his or her voice for hours on end, true Wagnerians (musicians and audience alike) know that along with an untiring vocal technique, a singer also needs a vast range of colours to do Wagner's writing justice, and to cut the mustard with what is often an exceptionally well-informed public.

I asked myself why it was that I felt surprised to be on the inside of this, my first *Ring* (and to have a couple of other Wagner engagements in my diary for the year). I was brought up listening to Wagner (or more accurately watching it on TV – productions from Bayreuth, from the Met and from Vienna on the BBC and Channel 4) by a keen Wagnerian father, whose own father had introduced him to it via the Third Programme. I remember as a student being in the audience for the first night of the Richard Jones/Nigel Lowery *Ring* at Covent Garden which had people leaving their seats near me in the Amphitheatre in order to get closer to the front to boo the creative team when they took their curtain call. The furore and the Rhinemaidens costumes (nude fat suits) made the front pages of not just the broadsheets but *The Sun*, so divisive was it (I stayed in my seat, applauded and enjoyed it more and more as the cycle went on). I remember playing *Tristan und Isolde* obsessively on CD with a couple of friends at University, and I remember before my voice broke hoping I might turn into a tenor so I could have a go at singing Siegfried forging the sword.

But my surprise wasn't just the thrill of being professionally involved with something I had always loved when I was younger. Although I played *Tristan* a lot when a student, I was more obsessed with *Don Giovanni*, yet being involved with my first production of that didn't give me the same feeling of elation mixed with fear. I gradually realized that what had surprised me wasn't just to do with the thrill of it dawning on me I was earning a living from Wagner, however briefly, but that even in the context of being a professional singer involved in opera, I thought of Wagner as being something "other". I realized that I had always thought of Wagner as being somehow distinct or removed from the rest of the operatic world. I also recognized that this wasn't unique to me. As a young singer I'd been told on at least two occasions I had a big voice and should be thinking about heavier repertoire in time, but probably not Wagner (one actually used the words "it's a big voice but not Wagner-big") as if there were a definite distinction.

I'd written about Wagner as part of my English degree, assessing how different literary figures were influenced by his works and in particular his recycling of myths as part of the Europe-wide Modernist movement. Figures who are directly influenced by or cite him include James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, George Bernard Shaw, D.H. Lawrence and George Moore amongst others. (And if the summary of the plot of *Das Rheingold* reads rather like parts of *The Lord of the Rings*, that's no accident: like Wagner, J.R.R. Tolkien reinterpreted Germanic and Norse myth for his own epic work.) It would be fair to say that I already had a fascination with the position of Wagner and his works in the wider artistic world. But this sense of the "difference" of Wagner didn't feel like it was unique to me. Those singers who start to gain a reputation for performing Wagner tend to get booked to sing the same roles a lot, and often run into the same colleagues across the world interpreting the same roles, getting described as "Wagnerians" as well as or instead of opera generalists. Obviously this is the case in other areas of opera too – there are early music specialists, Mozartians, contemporary music experts – but the more I thought about the Wagner situation, the more I felt that there was something distinct and definite about Wagner performances and performing style.

The opportunity to explore this further with the aid of a Finzi scholarship was a hugely exciting prospect. I realized that I was in the fortunate position of being able to investigate whether or not there was indeed anything different about preparing for a Wagner role and putting on a Wagner production by means of taking roles from my repertoire to Germany and discussing them with a range of people working in opera at the moment – conductors, coaches, other singers – and asking them about their own experiences. I was fascinated to find out whether or not the difference I perceived between the opera world in general and the Wagner world existed outside of Great Britain where I'd noticed it, and specifically in Germany and the German speaking opera industry. Did this idea of Wagnerian “difference” exist at all, and if so, did it exist in his homeland, or just in places where his works have the allure of the foreign-sounding and exotic.

Monday 24 November, Berlin

It's mixed feelings for me setting off from London after spending much of the weekend celebrating Hannah's birthday. A combination of "have I done enough prep" and general trepidation. Difficult to believe anything is going to be much fun, compounded with last night's packing woes: in my excitement of finishing the run of *The Marriage of Figaro* at ENO¹ with a matinee, I had made a mess of remembering what time my flight left!

The flight is overbooked and I have butterflies all the way. And I definitely need a new suitcase for next week. I'm pleased with myself getting to Kreuzberg for 2.30 and on the U-Bahn though.

The apartment is small but quite cool. There's a club below called The Bang Bang Club. So far, so Berlin.

Lots of singers I know are in Berlin at the moment. John Gyeantey is on his way over this week, plus Mark Saberton and Stephen Svanholm. I call home and let various people know I've arrived and head off for a walk. Feel much better after finding a supermarket and walking a bit. Cook dinner, watch *21 Jump Street* and arrange a beer with Mark Saberton for tomorrow.

¹ English National Opera

² Video recording of the Fulham Opera production of *Siegfried* which I am editing to send to agents

³ As a producer of usually around 16 operas a season, ENO does not have all its rehearsal and coaching spaces under one roof, so musicians working there can expect to split their time between the Coliseum in central London, the company's own rehearsal facility at Lilian Baylis

Tuesday 25 November, Berlin

Sleep in this morning and then set about editing *Siegfried* movies.² John Gyeantey gets in touch about tomorrow and I pick his brains about agents. Write to two of them and then head off to Deutsche Oper for my first actual coaching of the trip. Manage to explain who I am at Stage Door but see Chris White beckoning me in.

Deutsche Oper is, as expected, a big, brutalist block of a building. Not just big – vast. Chris confirms that everything happens under the one roof, a great relief after ENO.³ I see a sign for Probenbühne⁴ 2 which sort of sums it up.

The coaching room is also big – big windows, grand piano and nice and warm. We spend our hour on Alberich. Chris is really detailed, as I remember. It's good to have new ears and a very precise approach. He wants me to sing more neutral schwa vowels (no surprise there)⁵ but is complimentary about my German in general. He thinks my rolled r's sound rather fussy and wonders if this is basically a Bayreuth⁶ tradition. I'm not sure but it will be something to keep an eye on to see whether it's a general Wagner thing because of the nature of his language, particularly in the *Ring* with its fantastical and Medieval themes and setting. We agree to meet again tomorrow for more Alberich and some Klingsor.⁷

² Video recording of the Fulham Opera production of *Siegfried* which I am editing to send to agents

³ As a producer of usually around 16 operas a season, ENO does not have all its rehearsal and coaching spaces under one roof, so musicians working there can expect to split their time between the Coliseum in central London, the company's own rehearsal facility at Lilian Baylis House in West Hampstead and a number of spaces hired on a show-by-show basis, for example Three Mills Studios in Bromley-by-Bow where we rehearsed *The Marriage of Figaro*.

⁴ Rehearsal stage

⁵ The schwa vowel in English is a neutral, unstressed sound (like the "a" in the words "postman" or "another" as opposed to the same character in the words "apple" or "man"). I've been told repeatedly by coaches that my schwa vowel carries too much emphasis and is too close to other stressed vowels.

⁶ Bayreuth is the Bavarian town containing the opera house ("Festspielhaus") built by Wagner thanks to the patronage of Ludwig II of Bavaria. It still stages an annual summer festival of Wagner's works and is considered to be the centre of the Wagner universe. Its history has been controversial, with close links to the Nazi party and, in the post-war period, an artistic manifesto which has seen avant garde productions derided by many on the outside of the Bayreuth administration. Wagner's descendants still play a key role in its ongoing management and artistic direction.

⁷ Klingsor appears in the second act of Parsifal and is a former knight of the Grail with magical powers.

I walk from Deutsche Oper all the way down Bismarkstraße to the Brandenburg Gate before hopping on the S-Bahn to Mark Saberton's local *kneipe*⁸ in Schöneberg. It's great – old-fashioned carpet, good beer, sausages and obviously some sort of card schools (on Tuesdays at least) – lots of table slapping. It reminds me a bit of singing the skat-playing scene in Strauss's *Intermezzo*. We swap experiences of learning German and Alberich. He's been out here two months doing a language course and is coming to the end of it. We have more beer than perhaps we intended and I head back to Kreuzberg.

Wednesday 26 November, Berlin

Thoughts on second day of coaching in Berlin:

1. We move from Klingsor (and the end of Alberich's curse) to Mozart and "La vendetta".⁹ Chris says how unlike in Wagner we can sometimes just enjoy the sound we are making and see how the words feel in the mouth. Wagner is so dense textually as well as musically, that often we can't take our concentration off the detail.
2. Much discussion about the power of Wagner to write arresting rhythms which surprise the listener and the importance of these precise details. Also the need to take advantage of when the orchestra is quiet, even absent.
3. Chris thinks the first appearance of the "fluch" ("curse") motif¹⁰ – is Alberich's line. How often does Wagner allow a character (rather than the orchestra) to introduce such a major idea? Not that often we feel, but it's something to go away and remind oneself when returning to the operas.

I head out to see John Gyeantey after Deutsche Oper. He's been doing an agent tour and we catch up over a beer. He's on good form and advises me of a few people to contact. He says there are lots of US singers in Germany auditioning but

⁸ German local pub/corner bar

⁹ Dr Bartolo's aria from *Le nozze di Figaro*

¹⁰ Much of the writing on Wagner's composition concentrates on his development of "leitmotifs" (themes) for individual characters and ideas

very few (almost no) Brits. Although I'd earlier seen Jim Cleverton and Andrew Greenan at Deutsche Oper post-Staatsoper auditions, they were here on a flying visit.

In the evening I see Mark Saberton again along with Stephen Svanholm. They're both at the end of their stints in Berlin. Stephen cooks curry and we swap our impressions of the city and Germany more widely.

Off home tomorrow for the Wagner competition in London.¹¹

Monday 1 December, Nackenheim nr. Mainz

After a few travails with travel – my shiny new suitcase didn't even make it as far as Earlsfield station, and my boarding pass failed repeatedly to scan at the gate – I get to Frankfurt. I'm proud of myself for both buying a suitcase and reserving train seats in German and without English lapses. Hurrah!

Nackenheim is great. Big, spacious houses and a metro link to Frankfurt as well as Mainz, obviously. Peter Wedd is here and I have dinner with him and Roxane before John Treleaven arrives. They're all lovely people and while dinner is pleasantly singer-y there's also a lot else to talk about, especially supernatural appearances of dead relatives! Anthony Negus has sent love to all and I'm able to brag a bit of my success last night in London.¹² Work starts tomorrow...

¹¹ By coincidence, I ended up breaking my time in Germany in order to fly home and take part in the final of the Wagner Singing Competition run by the Wagner Society of Great Britain and held at the Royal Academy of Music.

¹² I won the Audience Prize at the competition. Audience prizes always mean a lot to performers, and with Wagner having such a formidably loyal and knowledgeable following, I'm feeling doubly grateful for the approval.

Tuesday 2 December, Nackenheim

Sleep like a log – black-out blinds are an amazing thing. I can feel it in the air that Peter is off to an audition: there's a very clear, if indefinable atmosphere in the house which is instantly recognizable.

John & I start work. I begin by warming-up – very self-conscious as I haven't done that in a VERY long time (in front of someone else that is). He's complimentary about how my voice turns and my upper range. We get to work on Alberich. He & Roxane are great to work with. Reassuringly, they bang on at the "usual faults", the things I know deep down need fixing. It's a feeling I've always been happy to experience, the sense of knowing that although I don't have the answers, I am asking myself the right questions, and need to work things out with a teacher's help – the sense that we're trying to sort out the same thing is a very positive one. Basically:

1. the "ee" vowel.¹³ Always. Get it forward – much further forward than I think it needs to be
2. The schwa. There's (immediate?) success here – I suddenly click knowing what Kelvin [Lim], Robert [Dean] and others have meant. I think maybe I can now sing a schwa not an "eh"¹⁴ by dropping my jaw from where I think it needs to be.
3. Getting the vowels in line. This is going to be a big one, and connected to the "ee" issue.
4. Singing on the body – when everything is in the right line in terms of vowels, this happens and it's all OK, but it needs to be consonants as well as vowels.

It's good to have another set of ears (or 2) on me. Good also to hear the schwa problem is quite universal and needs to be taught to German singers too.

¹³ International Phonetic Alphabet [i] as in English "sheep"

¹⁴ IPA [ɛ] as in English "egg"

It's very rewarding and positive work. John thinks my basic technique is very sound but in need of help getting away from over-characterisation (again, not so far from where I already know I need to be). He too thinks I should go and sing to John Parr and that I should sing to Thomas Herwald (who has confirmed a time with me). He also thinks Alberich bang-on for me but is impressed with the lower register too. He agrees Sachs is a good idea bearing in mind the need for more lyricism to help me develop.¹⁵ He agrees Pizarro¹⁶ is definitely my role.

Tomorrow we will work again on the Alberich sections to consolidate them. Then on to Frankfurt, sadly not to see Louise Alder on stage as I'd hoped as she is ill, but to check out some Bellini there anyway.

Between sessions I took a walk to the Rhein – cold but beautiful. All felt suitably Wagnerian too.

Wednesday 3 December, Frankfurt

Just arrived into Frankfurt to be complimented on my German by the receptionist in the hotel. Feeling smug AGAIN! The hotel itself is very old-fashioned – feels like it could be a room in Rose Haven, the rest home my grandmother spent a few years in the 1980s, but it's very clean and friendly. Arriving here felt very un-German though – not only is Lufthansa having a pilot strike, the S-Bahn was very delayed too. Who'd have thought it possible?

Morning session and chat with John & Roxane was good. We consolidated the *Rheingold* & we also looked at some Bartolo (Mozart). I really do feel as if the sessions have made a difference. I think two things happened which I need to hold onto physically.

¹⁵ I'd been advised on a couple of occasions to start looking at the role of Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, at least as an exercise. The role is outside of my normal casting, being more lyrical and less of a declamatory or comic character.

¹⁶ Don Pizarro, the villainous prison governor in Beethoven's *Fidelio*

1. The dropping of the jaw to form the schwa definitely helped. I must hold onto that feeling
2. The “ee” and “eh” vowels are really close to one another – almost imperceptibly close in terms of how John himself changes them in his voice. It’s a really good demo of the closeness Robert has talked about this year.

By the end of today’s session I feel really well sung in. It’s been hard work on the support muscles but in a good way.

I went out to the Nackenheim Netto in the morning. The houses here are so large and so modern whilst being in the old style. Somehow they don’t feel at all kitsch though – they have a solidity which somehow works. Shopping here is cheap – huge red cabbage and a box of carrots for €1.50.

Over lunch we again discuss the fear which seems to keep so many UK singers from coming over here. The money on fest contracts doesn’t seem much but it would go much further than in the UK. John remarks that the Channel feels very significant to us in the UK despite its lack of width.

We’ve also talked about why there’s a Wagner industry here. As Peter Wedd put it, over here they do *Lohengrin* like we do *La bohème*. There’s a definite set of agents/houses etc. who “do” Wagner, but all houses have something, are expected to have something, in their repertoire. The economic elements are important here too – when John was a master in *Mastersingers* at ENO years ago, they all came from the ensemble.¹⁷ It’s so expensive to put one on now. Is it also English taste? How minimal could a production get away with being in England I wonder?

We also talk about the “stagioni” system in Germany, where a production might come back for an odd performance or so with weeks or even months in between

¹⁷ German houses, unlike their British equivalents, still retain a roster of principal singers on salary in their “ensemble”.

throughout the season. John feels that a *Lohengrin* done only once every few months might be a bit scary to be involved in, but the results of everyone's focus and concentration can be extraordinary. In such circumstances, even for an opera like *Lohengrin*, the cast might only meet the day before the show.

Off to the opera tonight – *La sonnambula* might not be Wagner, but it's Bellini, his favourite composer.

Thursday 4 December, Leipzig¹⁸

So last night's *Sonnambula* was interesting. The Amina, Brenda Rae, an American, was amazing. Really starry, controlled performance. The rest of the cast were good but not in her class. The Lisa, jumping in for Louise, was pretty good though, if a bit harsh in tone.

Production was... interesting. An odd raised/moving platform above a bare floor with no apparent difference I could infer between the two spaces. Costuming involved everyone in seemingly random attire (I'm sure there was a solitary Regency coat in there somewhere) with parkas over the top. Also very heavy winter shoes on everyone. Chorus action was patchy, including quite a lot of random clumping and freezing. And some bad stick-on beards too. Also one or two really badly judged moments of "comedy", especially between stanzas of the final aria – a kind of "get on with it" acting which felt entirely out of place after a sincere telling of the story with no prior exploitation of its considerable silliness. A shame. Perhaps the Germans don't mind that sort of thing, or perhaps it doesn't read as so unsubtle as it did to me as a foreigner.

Oper Frankfurt is another massive house. New and comfortable in the auditorium. No ushers on the door either – people left to fend for themselves finding doors and seats. I had mine stolen for the second act, which was a bit of a surprise.

¹⁸ Wagner was born in Leipzig and studied at it's university, living there until he was 20.

Today I travelled by train from Frankfurt to Leipzig – 3 hours through the most amazing Christmas-card scenery in Thuringia. The weather's not nearly as dramatic in Leipzig itself. It's quite a city – the Hauptbahnhof¹⁹ is vast, a huge, well-heeled shopping centre which dominates that part of the city. The opera house, where I go for a coaching to see Christian Hornef, is vast too, as is the Gewandhaus²⁰ opposite it. I'm tired after the journey but we work Alberich from "Schätze zu schaffen" to the end of the role. He's very detailed and wants a wide variety of colour and text. It's a draining hour but a good one. I get a mini-tour of the stage, which is gigantic. The stage itself is big, and the same space to its side in either wing.

I interview Christian about Wagner preparation. He tells me many of the things he has to work on with German singers are the same as what we have worked and that without doubt in Wagner the text is king. The vowels (and often the consonants) need to be sung properly long in places, especially where there is word play. I ask him what the biggest challenge is and he says that sometimes the music is very beautiful in the vocal line and the singer will tend to sing the line and not the text, but that we must fight this. He says the more we work in this way, the more the audience experiences. It's also crucial to be very clear as the text contains plenty of words which a German audience will find unfamiliar – in the Tarnhelm scene of *Rheingold* for example, when Alberich sings "tauschen" (to permit or allow someone to do something) Wagner chooses a very evocative, but very unusual, out-of-the-ordinary word.

He also tells me that many of the *Ring* cycle roles are now cast as guests in Leipzig, and that house singers some will double-up in "unusual" combinations across a season – their Violetta is a Rhinemaiden, for example, but they have no heldentenors or a Brünnhilde at the moment.

¹⁹ Central railway station

²⁰ Leipzig is home to the world's largest full-time orchestra, the Gewandhaus.

Friday 5 December, Leipzig

Took today off to all intents and purposes. Instead of researching Wagner, Hannah (who has flown out to see me for a couple of days) and I researched Christmas markets, which was of course lovely.

And we had dinner at Auerbach's Keller which the Rough Guide refers to as touristy, but this being Leipzig, it is in fact quite understated, if grand. What is classed by the guide book as "cheesy" is a chap dressed as Mephistopheles doing, it seemed to us, a very good job of some *Faust*.²¹ Food was great – Saxon traditional dishes and lovely dark beer. Lots of potato cakes.

Saturday 6 December, Leipzig

This morning I met with Alessandro Zuppardo, the Oper Leipzig Chorus Master who has been here for three seasons, prior to which he was four years in Frankfurt. He's interested in Wagner without being anything like an anorak, in fact he refers to the Wagner-obsessives as being "sick" (as in fanatical). He shies away from any sort of fanaticism, be it for Wagner, the core Italian repertoire, or even Verdi (being Italian, he makes this last admission with a definite glint in his eye). We talk about his excitement that Leipzig's program has allowed them to explore the early Wagner works: *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*, and that all three will be presented next season. He is about to work on his first *Götterdämmerung* but complains how "shit" the chorus writing is in *Tristan und Isolde*. He raves about the *Liebesverbot* production and how its meta-theatrical setting rescues a difficult/impossible story. We talk about ZAL,²² about extra chorus casting and the core programme in Leipzig, very much a German/Italian house. He wants desperately to bring some Britten into the program but explains Leipzig has no British cultural mission, unlike its French one, and feels the lack of a British-speaking community doesn't help.

²¹ Goethe, one of Germany's many other cultural giants to have a connection to Leipzig, sets scenes of *Faust* in Auerbach's Keller.

²² The state-run agency which represents performing artists

We go our separate ways with a determination to stay in touch – I’m hoping to come back and see the Ring Cycle in 2015/6 and he is an occasional visitor to London with the Gewandhaus. He was surprised to learn that ENO is a totally English language house.

In the evening, and after a look at some old trains (by mistake, we were searching for a flea market), the Wagner memorial, St Thomas- and Nikolai-kirchen, and the Grassi Museum (where we see old cabinets and a Jugendstil exhibition), Hannah and I head out to the Musikalische Komödie. It’s fair to say this feels off the beaten path for visitors. It’s a small house with very little in the way of facilities – only an Abendkasse²³ – but its bar/restaurant is “sehr gemütlich” (very cosy). We are both very impressed. Spacious, well-decorated, friendly and with photographs going back to the 1950s and probably earlier. Lovely place for a drink before *Der Ring für Kinder*.

This *Ring* done in two hours for children was originally seen in Bayreuth and has been in the Leipzig repertoire this season. Interesting to note that the singers are all from the music theatre ensemble apart from Brünnhilde, Sieglinde and Siegmund/Siegfried (he doubles up). There are a few overlaps – Alberich also sings Hagen. At first I wonder about the incursion of occasional dialogue scenes. They’re no doubt necessary bearing in mind the danger of presenting “bleeding chunks” otherwise, but on reflection, they also provide time for concentration to lapse in a good sense, bearing in mind the educational/taster possibilities of the piece. The whole thing is well done – visually very good, whilst being very simple – one raised circular platform, some projection, colourful costumes and a decent dragon and Tarnhelm scene. I’m sad that Fricka is cut entirely – the force of the argument about trust and fidelity is reduced to Wotan jokingly doing as he’s told by his absent wife. A shame. The *Walküre* love triangle is done in a very straightforward way whilst avoiding the incest story.²⁴ Only *Götterdämmerung* is

²³ An “evening box office” which opens only for sales before each performance

²⁴ Sieglinde leaves her domineering and vengeful husband Hunding for Siegmund, who turns out not only to be a handsome stranger, but her brother

massacred with no Gibichung in the story. Hagen's power over Siegfried is thus odd, but hey, not bad for two hours of theatre. Singing is mostly accomplished and characterful – Siegmund/-fried is good, especially in “Winterstürme”.²⁵ Wotan is a bit overparted. The tenor doubling as Loge/Mime has lots of fun. Perhaps inevitably given the comic possibilities of these roles (and Loge's detachment from the other characters), he is the main conduit for the audience's engagement with the story. All in all I think it is enjoyed and obviously the music is superb done in two hours – so much rich, powerful content. The orchestra play well – tight and plenty of texture despite small numbers (although they still manage to fit in two harps).

It's interesting to hear Hannah's thoughts – she follows the story very closely considering she doesn't speak German and has no experience of the *Ring* beyond having heard me sing a few bits here and there at home. Hunding confuses her, as does the presentation of Siegmund and Siegfried in the same costume. She prefers the simplified *Götterdämmerung* to the actual story as told by me over dinner in Wagner's Restaurant back in Leipzig (which is excellent).²⁶

Sunday 7 December, Leipzig / Köln

Today is spent mostly travelling – my first really long journey, five hours to Köln. After a bit of faff, I get to the Airbnb and after some admin for the rest of the trip it's time for bed.

Monday 8 December, Köln

I spent this morning trying, not entirely successfully, to learn more of Klingsor. Lots of admin too – the travel and the diary management is always much more tiring than the actual music. Went for a walk by the Rhein which looked stunning.

²⁵ Siegmund's “aria” insofar as there are arias in the cycle, from Act I of *Die Walküre*

²⁶ It's the restaurant that is excellent, not necessarily my summary of the story of the *Ring*.

Bit chilly but very lovely – it’s great to see so many boats on there – big ones too. It’s also amazing to see suddenly all the trappings of the tourist industry – hearing conversation in English is one thing, but there are so many coach trips here. Somehow very different to the places I’ve been so far.

After managing to reserve my last four rail journeys I’m off to see Eberhard Bäumlner. We have a terrific session on *Siegfried*. We work in great detail – he has some good useful observations about my voice – over-darkening in places and needing to give full weight to every syllable. Specific darkness issue with the “ah” vowel.²⁷ Interestingly not so much on the schwa – perhaps I’m getting a bit better. He also talks about coaching in levels, adding layer on layer of interpretation with a singer, and says he always starts coaching by speaking the texts as an actor would to find the punctuation and from there finds where the changes of vocal and dramatic colour need to come. He also talks about finding Wagnerian syntax, grammar and vocabulary difficult even as a German and a writer on Wagner. It’s a really great session.

Michael Avery arrives and we call it a day. He asks Eberhard how the session has gone, and I’m pleased when Eberhard replies “excellent – he’s much better than I thought he would be.” He’s very complimentary about my German.

We go to dinner with Beate Lenzen, who has spent 15 years as prompt at Bayreuth. I ask all three what, if anything, they think makes Wagner different or unique, and we cover a lot of ground:

1. The language, as I’ve already been hearing. Wagner writing in a form of German which never existed makes the text difficult, even for a German speaker.
2. It also requires an intelligence and an understanding of philosophy and without that, singing or interpreting the roles becomes almost impossible.

²⁷ I try to remember one of the first things I learned from Robert Dean at GSMD which is to try to make all “ah” vowels sound as close as possible to the vowel in the English word “up”, rather than the vowel in the word “farther”

3. We speculate about whether or not any other composer creates the same degree of challenge as Wagner in terms of characterization of the roles. We struggle to find examples in say Puccini, or even Strauss, where each character speaks with a different voice (dramatic, not fach²⁸) as Wagner's do. (There are of course exceptions, for example, Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier*; *Die Zauberflöte* in the core rep has a linguistic challenge in its old-fashioned dialogue (I compare it to Handel in English); and "Als Büblein klein" from *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* by Nicolai is, evidently, a horror show for non-Germans auditioning in Germany, but these aren't exactly equivalent to the Wagner situation. It would be good to pick the brains of someone who knows da Ponte intimately and compare his and Mozart's characterisations with, say, those of Alberich and Wotan and see if there are such verbal (as well as musical) differences in the individual characterisations.
4. We discuss whether the fact that some characters MUST NOT sound beautiful is yet another facet of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk.²⁹ All life is here, and all voices/sounds are here too.

We move on to talking about Bayreuth, which is fascinating. As prompt, Beate has responsibility for cueing the singers and is more involved there than in any other house. The chorus is directed from the sides and looking at the conductor is forbidden. The conductor deals with the orchestra. The prompt box is in a unique position acoustically in the house, above the orchestra and the acoustic shell. It's fascinating to hear all of this.

Eberhard is fulsome in his praise of the orchestra there – the uniqueness of the sound. Beate says everything is different in Bayreuth in these and other more ineffable ways. She talks of the power of the music as it is felt physically and the

²⁸ The German "fach" system is a categorization of operatic voices into classes, such as dramatic soprano, lyric soprano, heroic baritone, bass-baritone etc.

²⁹ "Gesamtkunstwerk" or "total-art-form" is the term used by Wagner in essays (and borrowed from K.F.E. Trahndorff) in which he put forward his ideas for a form of art which would be as all-encompassing as possible by achieving a synthesis of art forms which had become separated (music and drama for example) but which could, united, express ideas better. He applied it to his own artistic ideal but also to Greek tragedy, which he saw as having the same aims, albeit unfulfilled.

three say it is little wonder how it has been appropriated politically. They speak of a former dentist and member of the Wagner Gesellschaft³⁰ in Köln who was obsessed with a “good Wotan” reading of the *Ring* and (another) who had a literal altar to the *Ring* characters in his house. Proper fanaticism.

Inevitably we move on to Regietheater³¹ and the susceptibility of Wagner to its worst excesses. Beate thinks this is another sign of Gesamtkunstwerk and it chimes with my suspicion about Wagner having many “stories” in one piece, not just one.

We also swap ideas about the place of opera and the arts in Germany and England. I am able to vent my frustration at the lack of seriousness with which we take the arts in the UK. We touch on how important it is that theatres produce their own repertoire: those which have become receiving houses and nothing else are letting down their audiences by offering them a more shallow relationship with the programme and the performers they see on stage. Beate takes my (unexpressed) thought of the version of the social contract we espouse in the UK (or certainly in England) being to blame one step further and says that in a democracy, true access to the arts is essential, but as we in Britain live in a monarchy, this is harder to achieve. Looking at the size, position and overall vibrancy of many the theatres all over Germany, its not difficult to argue that we in the UK are plainly missing out on something enriching.

Eberhard regrets the passing of the “resident” conductors in who truly nurtured the ensembles, and says when he first worked (in Bielefeld) he had to teach his principals their notes – to note-bash properly – and this really taught him the pieces. Michael says in the really big houses, conductors are often absent throughout rehearsal periods (much less so in Bayreuth) and that a really good, established coach can be passing on traditions a singer can’t get as easily elsewhere these days with so much travel and mobility.

³⁰ Wagner society

³¹ Director-led theatre, a term frequently used to deride overly experimental productions, or those felt to be anti-musical. The term also reflects the fact that the role of the stage director has increased significantly in importance in the presentation of opera in the past decades.

Tuesday 9 December, Düsseldorf

A relatively quiet day today. I looked over some music in the morning before heading to Düsseldorf. Had a session with Mary Satterthwaite, another contact from Michael Avery. We worked mainly on audition repertoire, which was just as well as I realized I'd sent my only copy of Don Magnifico's aria³² home with Hannah.

Spent the evening with Anja Schmidt-Ott and her family in Wuppertal. Didn't have time to see any of the Wesendonck³³ sites, but I did at least manage a catch-up. We discussed the issues of culture here and in the UK, and Anja reported the shocked reaction to the theatre closing in Wuppertal. Not the ensemble being disbanded, just the closing of the building. We said how good it would be if there were a way of uniting the best elements of the education systems in the two countries. She spoke of her post-doctorate experiences in London – feeling too old and over-qualified for a lot of positions in the UK job-market, and being seen as a drop-out from academia which she felt would not happen in the same circumstances in Germany. The most frequent question she faced was “why have you given up on academia?” as if leaving at doctorate level was an unusual step.

Back home to a slightly comical hotel room. It's on the ground floor behind the breakfast room and clearly used to be an office. It feels like an office, but at least it will be big enough to warm up in tomorrow morning. Sitting at the desk it's like being on the set of some old sitcom though. Still, at least it's not tiny and faces the back. My location raised eyebrows with Anja's husband – we're slap bang in the middle the red light district it transpires.

³² From Rossini's *La cenerentola*

³³ Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner's muse and possibly his lover was a poet from Wuppertal. Wagner set five of her poems as the *Wesendonck Lieder*.

Wednesday 10 December, Düsseldorf

So I did my first German agent audition today. Went to sing to Neil Thornborrow. It's a funny system – good that one can audition in front of these people with relative ease, but odd turning up to someone's house, queueing, and there being no warm-up facilities. I thought I sang reasonably well and there was a nice chat afterwards – we touched on all sorts of things including why there aren't more British singers out here, but there were no terms offered and no formal feedback.

Afterwards I went straight back to the opera house to meet with Christoph Stöcker, their Erster Kappellmeister. He was great – a very friendly, detailed and inspiring coach. We mostly worked on the German. He has a real singer's approach to the music though and gave me useful rules of thumb for a couple of things – the difference between the schwa sounds for masculine “-er” as opposed to feminine “-e” endings, and how correctly to read vowels before a “ß” as well (they're longer than they would be before other double consonant combinations). He's also a real Wagner expert and we talked about his importance in the history of art.

What was fascinating was the sign, yet again, that the language is really something else – a sort of made-up German. There are words which floor even a real expert coach. He also said he imagined Alberich singing in Wagner's own east German hard, dark accent which I'd not imagined before.

He was very complimentary and urged me to stay in touch and to carry on auditioning as he thought I could work there as well as in Germany more generally.

I went out to meet James Martin in the evening, along with his girlfriend and some other singers based here. We talked a lot about the German way of doing things, although it was also, oddly, good to hear life isn't a bed of roses in terms of the work. James has had the sorts of ups and downs from various opera

companies that we all get used to. He's also become something of a local celebrity (there aren't many 6'4" Australians in the Rhineland after all, and of those even fewer sing opera). He has carved out quite a niche for himself running tours of the town for English groups, doing either history, bars or music – or a combination of the three, taking tourists to the local breweries and singing the *Meistersinger* Night-watchman scene. We drink a lot of Alt³⁴ and he shows me his Stammtisch,³⁵ filling me in on their traditions. I tell him about Colonel Blimp in return.³⁶ It's great to see him again even if I'm in bed much later than planned.

Thursday 11 December, Karlsruhe

After an early start I head to the station to find the train delayed, but I make the connection in Köln and catch up on some sleep before getting to Karlsruhe around 11. I leave my bag at the hotel and try to work out how to get to the audition with Thomas Herwald, another agent. As John Gyeantey had warned me its two (very fast) bus rides away. I have a brief disagreement with the driver over whether my ticket is validated – it is – and I spot a chap I'm sure is a singer when we change over. Sure enough we both get off at the same stop, after I try to leave one stop early. We feel like we are in the middle of nowhere – there are a few houses and a community centre where the audition is being held. The other singer is Dmitri, a Russian. We speak in German, and it turns out we are the last two to sign in. We meet two Americans, Megan and Kevin. They both help me pick the feathers which have moulted from my down coat off my jacket. Megan says I've brought out her maternal side and I say at least we have something to do while we wait.

³⁴ Dark beer brewed in Düsseldorf

³⁵ A Stammtisch is a table set aside for the use of a drinking club. Many of them are very old and serve not only as social clubs but also as professional networks. James's club meet to hear a talk by one of the members weekly and then go to drink beer around their reserved table. He's one of the youngest members by some distance.

³⁶ Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1943 film *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* contains a sequence set in a Stammtisch in a Berlin café before the outbreak of the First World War.

There are some odd noises coming from the room, but it's partly the acoustic (I like to think). I sing ok. The pianist plays the Wagner very heavily and it's hard to feel the 4/4 of the vocal line against the piano's 6/8. There are a couple of undersupported notes I think, and it's hard to feel real light and shade in what is a very boomy room. He asks for the Rossini and the pianist goes hell for leather. I keep up and he says I obviously enjoy singing that rep. I agree and that's it – no real chat – I can tell no-one else has had any either as I'm the last person in for the day.

I head to the hotel and crash. Later I go out and explore Karlsruhe, much of which is one vast building site – huge amounts of roadworks. Lots of shops and the splendid Schloß is worth seeing. I can't really face much more than a quick kebab and home for a quiet evening before *Lohengrin* tomorrow.

Friday 12 December, Augsburg

Augsburg is very pretty – not that you'd know it from the Hauptbahnhof, but then that's the same in a lot of British cities – you rarely see anything at its best advantage from the railway station. I find the hotel, eat (Bavarian specialities near the cathedral, sitting under a former star of the Augsburg Puppentheater³⁷) and have a quick look round having bought a ticket for *Lohengrin*. Augsburg Theater doesn't do credit card bookings over the web, so this has to be done in person.

Again I'm struck by the size of the theater, the cheapness of the ticket (€45 for the front row of the dress circle) and the well-dressed punters. If it weren't for the jacket issue (which still makes me look like a goosey cousin of the *Lohengrin* swan) I'd have dressed up too.

³⁷ The puppet theatre is one of Augsburg's most famous institutions, and was a running joke with Martina, my German teacher, when I mentioned I was going to the opera there

There's some good singing in the show. Dong Hwan Lee's Herald is excellent – he's doing Monterone at the ROH at the moment too. Jaco Venter's Telramund is good too – free and clear, if a bit light for the “evil” side of the character – I'd ideally like to hear a Telramund with a bit more darkness in the sound. Kirstin Descher's Ortrud is great – rounded and subtle in its dynamic range. Sally du Randt, like Venter a South African, sings well as Elsa, although the voice isn't the richest Wagnerian sound. Gerhard Siegel's Lohengrin is interesting. He starts a bit tentatively but there's great text as you'd expect from someone who has sung Mime at the Met and a great range of colour too. Act II is better as is the start of Act III. It's a bit pinched in places and “In fernem Land” gets a bit uncomfortable. There's a very artful cough upstage at one point. It leaves me wondering about whether he's overparted or not. I can see why people feel the voice has too much heft and quality for Mime and the like, but as Lohengrin I'm not sure. Heinrich der Vogler meanwhile definitely stretches Vladislav Solodyagin. I enjoy Lancelot Fuhry's conducting very much – he's clear and communicated with the stage a great deal – head never down. The orchestra play well and the brass placed around the wings and then the house give a great three-dimensionality to the majesty of the score.

Thorliefur örn Arnarsson's production is mixed. I think I understand the Märchen³⁸/meta-theatricality the opening act is looking for, but by the end I'm bewildered. There's a moment of pure unintentional comedy in Act III when Elsa stabs Telramund (who bounds into her chamber/cell grinning) with a swan's feather Ortrud had earlier been brandishing as a quill.³⁹ Blood spurts from his neck like Monty Python's Peckinpah/“Salad Days” sketch. The audience gasps and sniggers (the young woman two seats down turns to her companion and loudly whispers “Mein Gott!”) and it's a couple of minutes before we calm down.

Elsewhere, Gottfried (Elsa's younger brother) is some sort of weird man/child/midget and the last tableau of him with Elsa's swan/wedding dress, surrounded by swan feathers discarded by the chorus, is just bizarre. I'm left

³⁸ Fairytale

³⁹ More usually Telramund, accompanied by his henchmen and about to launch a coup, is killed by Lohengrin with the sword handed to him by Elsa

with various ideas from Eberhard about recycled directorial ideas ringing in my ears, feeling I've seen some of the elements before. Why, for example, in the Act III prelude were the chorus required to walk round and round in endless lines and circles, their boots clumping so loudly that we couldn't hear the *piano* sections of the music?

I notice again a definite style of what we would consider in the UK to be overacting in places. It's a definite difference in approach I believe – Venter is more recognizably British/American in his style and its no surprise to read he's trained in the States. I'm not sure one is better than the other, but there is undeniably a different language of theatre at work on opera stages in Germany than further west.

Saturday 13 December, München

It's very busy at Augsburg Hauptbahnhof this morning – lots of police and lots of football fans. When I get to München I realize Bayern are playing away at Augsburg (I didn't realize they were a Bundesliga 1 team – further investigations reveal that they've had a recent meteoric rise, having previously slumped to the lower, part-time reaches of the league).

I check into the hotel, do a bit of admin and spend the rest of the day off relaxing out here in the Messestadt.⁴⁰ I'd spent the morning reacquainting myself with *La traviata* for ENO so figure a night off before some sightseeing tomorrow is the best plan.

⁴⁰ Many German cities have Messe or Messestadt areas which are areas in which trade fairs and major conferences take place.

Sunday 14 December, München

I'm pretty tired when I wake up and breakfast. I can feel the past week catching up with me, but I feel a bit more relaxed than last night.

I head out into the centre of München to do some sightseeing. The walk up from Sendlinger Tor to the Neues Rathaus is quiet and I climb the Rathaus tower for a look around. It's quite a view across the city.

By the time I had back and walk west, the Christmas market has filled up a lot and it's getting really quite crowded. You can feel that it's quite a tourist trap here. There are lots of different languages on the street.

After a stop in the Stachus for a currywurst, I head further north and west to the Brandhorst Museum in a quarter of the city filled with modern art galleries. The Brandhorst is next to the modern Pinakothek⁴¹ and it's stunning from the outside – multicoloured but muted. It's only €1 to go in because it's a Sunday and it's a lovely space with a Pop Art/Warhol dominated small permanent collection and a Cy Twombly/Franz West exhibition upstairs, including Twombly's 12 canvas *Lepanto* which is breathtaking.

I walk into the city and visit the Residenz. The 1753 Cuvilliés Theater is a rococo treat. What's great is how well preserved it is on the one hand, but lurking in the background is a modern lighting rig in the second circle, and in the pit a drumkit and bass. It's used as a venue for the Gardnerplatz Theater. I'm quite shocked by the ticket prices – it's the first place I've seen London prices in Germany. Sadly the stalls is the only part of the theater I can visit. Looking round such a well-preserved theatre reminds me of the Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond, and I'm sorry not to be able to see behind the scenes as you can there. It's still a good

⁴¹ The Pinakothek galleries – the old, new and modern so-called because of the periods of their collections – are the centre of the art/museum quarter of München.

reminder of the state interest in theatrical patronage, as well as the proximity of 18th century audiences to the stage however.

Next is the Schatzkammer.⁴² There's very little interpretation other than an audio guide which I don't take, fearing information overload. I like that after an initial pair of rooms filled with early/late Middle Ages pieces, the royal treasures are curated and arranged by form/medium. It's not just the detailing and luxury of the pieces which is arresting, but also in many cases the solidity – there's a real heft to some of the tableware and drinking vessels. A queen's toilet set is amazing in its variety – at least four pairs of scissors, two or three razors and loads of bottles and flasks. There are some fantastically detailed ivory altar pieces too. All in all it's a dauntingly large collection to view at once.

I head for a beer before returning to the hotel via a glühwein. I manage to find an appetite for another Schweinshaxe⁴³ (albeit not as colossal as the one I'd eaten in Augsburg) and head to bed.

Monday 15 December, München

I went to the Bayerischer Staatsoper ticket office and found all they had for tonight's *Figaro* was a standing ticket for €10. Going back to the Residenz, I was irritated to find I'd lost my ticket from yesterday which would have let me back in. But as the Museum was only €7 I thought it was probably worth paying again. I wasn't wrong. It's an amazing place to visit. Firstly the stability of the Wittelsbach dynasty is something incredible – 700+ years of rule by one family of ever greater influence (at least until Napoleonic times) – and the Residenz there throughout most of that time, gradually expanding and developing with the family's titles and fortunes. Secondly, the evidence left by successive rulers keen to bring their personal artistic visions to life makes one realize that Ludwig II

⁴² Treasure house

⁴³ Bavarian speciality of a pork-knuckle braised in dark beer and usually served with cabbage and potato dumplings.

was far from being the only serious patron of the arts in Bavarian royal history. The incredible remodeling and preservation which has taken place is on a par with Hampton Court or anything else we have in the UK. Monarchy may be gone from Bavaria, but is certainly not forgotten.

What is also truly amazing is the realization that much of what one is seeing is in fact late 20th century reconstruction. The painstaking effort required to recreate the rococo (and earlier) state rooms, together with the assembling of new, similar, collections after the serious bomb damage of WWII, is astonishing. The craftsmanship at work to put the reproductions side by side with genuine antique works, and to curate and light it sympathetically, makes the place a triumph. There are some beautiful and intriguing collections, perhaps nothing more bizarre than the relics in the reliquaries – still guarded by massive iron doors, unlike much else in there.

The Staatsoper is another great achievement – an over-the-top, sumptuous interior, but also a triumph of efficiency – every section has its own cloakroom and we seem to move through the house towards our seats without a single queue or pinch point, despite a sellout crowd. The six-tier house is a step up in terms of luxury (and perhaps a helping of kitsch) on anything else I've seen here. It's truly vast.

The show itself is fun. Gerald Finley is in a class of his own as the Count, although Anita Hartig's Susanna is also terrific. I feel bad for judging too much the musical standards – there's a hint of period instrumentation I think, which makes me sorry I'm not hearing a fully modern orchestra – the sound doesn't feel as generous or as ringing to me. But it may be the balance from my eyrie in the third circle (5th level of the 6) that is to blame.

The production is unfussy. A white box is decorated with some 18th century furniture and, in Act II, carpet, and the costuming is of the right period to make the distinction between master and servant, aristocrat and professional, ring true. The blocking is clever – the singers always able to see the conductor and for

us to hear them. The Act II finale, for example, has them in the right sections of the stage to make Mozart's dynamics work. All in all, the performances and the production allow the characters to feel as if they belong in their own time and in ours – they feel like our contemporaries as well as Mozart's at the same time.

A caveat to all of the above – I leave at the interval, as I have a six-hour journey ahead of me tomorrow. I decide that any more standing after the Residenz and the first two acts may be a bridge too far.

Once again I'm impressed with prices – if I'd wanted to pay top price it would be €132 and fourth (of 8 price bands) would be €74. Not bad for the fully international cast you'd be seeing. It's a Dieter Dorn production who's done a *Der fliegende Holländer* at Bayreuth and a *Tristan und Isolde* at the Met, as well as Gent's Ring Cycle.

Tuesday 16 December, Berlin

Long train journey from München today – six hours give or take, and through some beautiful countryside. I was quite sorry I hadn't decided to stop off in Nurnberg for lunch, but it was too late by the time I'd had the idea. Next time.

I find the flat in Prenzlauer Berg, in the old east Berlin but now well and truly gentrified with a row of shops and restaurants on Schönhauser Allee which feels a bit like Upper Street in Islington. It's nice to have a flat and a kitchen again after seven days in hotels so I go shopping so I can cook dinner and go to bed.

Wednesday 17 December, Berlin

There's mixed news today in terms of meetings for the rest of the week – John Parr is on for Friday and Antony Shelley tomorrow, but Stewart Emerson is tied

up. So too are Ulrike Meyer and Florian, although I will have a chance to meet with Lexi Hutton tomorrow.

I go out to have a look at the surviving sections of the Berlin Wall. It's still a shock to remember seeing the images of the wall coming down when I was at school – seeing it for real gives me a strong flashback to German lessons when I was about 13 as much as anything else. The Wall and the Death Strip are chilling in their banality, and the Wall looks so small. Nothing is quite so horrible as seeing the monument to the people killed crossing, including the last – a 21-year old man killed in 1989. There's an interesting exhibition about the effects of the partition on the underground and other rail networks at Nordbahnhof, a station once bisected by the border with the Soviet sector. The tunnels and infrastructure were of course heavily policed throughout, making them a flashpoint of a lot of border tension.

If the Nordbahnhof area of the wall is chilling and provides food for thought, the same can't really be said for Checkpoint Charlie. To be fair I didn't go into the museum there, as I was a bit put off by the proliferation of tourist tat and cafés catering to school groups and tourists nearby. The Checkpoint cabin itself is a recreation and there are a couple of American guards outside (re-enactors, I assume) dwarfed by a giant Christmas tree. The position of the checkpoint is funny: at the end of the shopping mecca of Friedrichstr., and now surrounded by Deutsche Bank, Aon Consulting, a BMW dealership and the like. It's impossible to picture what the eastern side must have looked like 25 years ago.

Mindful of this, I spend the afternoon in my own mindless celebration of Western capitalism by doing my Christmas shopping in KaDeWe,⁴⁴ which is splendid.

⁴⁴ Landmark German department store, rather like the Harrod's of Berlin

Thursday 18 December, Berlin

I met with Antony Shelley at Staatsoper Berlin today. We worked through scenes 3 and 4 of *Rheingold*. It was good to be singing again after quite a few days of travel, theatregoing and general research/sightseeing.

It clarified lots of things in my mind in terms of what I know I need to do and also the approach to the role of Alberich here. Wagner's writing in terms both of the words and of the music is such that there's a need to put aside any thoughts of singing beautifully, but still to approach the work as if it were bel canto – to recall the influence of Bellini. Antony urged me to go back to the role and look how to take time where possible and to ensure that it doesn't become a race with the text – make sure that wherever you can, you find space to really roll the words around in the mouth, but always to sing with legato. My German and my musicianship have stood up to the role and to being coached but he warned me to make sure that the sentences head towards the most important words in order to sound more fluent and to avoid the pitfall of stressing everything equally.

Technically it's becoming clear to me what I need to do – if I can really nail my “ee” vowel and get the other vowels to fall into line behind it, I'm pretty confident that I can take my singing to the next level.⁴⁵ And if I can produce smaller vowels which sit closer to one another, it can only help keep the voice on the support – the two facets of vowel and line very much go together.

After meeting with Antony I go and buy some more luggage to get my Christmas presents home before going to meet Lexi Hutton for dinner. Lexi is coming to the end of the two-year studio at Deutsche Oper and looking at various possibilities for next year. We talk about the pros and cons of being here in Berlin – mostly

⁴⁵ I don't believe that levels really exist in singing or any other form of creative expression, certainly not in any definable way. It's very difficult though to find the right metaphor for ongoing technical and artistic development, which although is an unending process definitely feels like it has milestones along the way.

pros. She has interesting things to say about the very high standard of the ensembles here and also the mixture of guests and resident singers in Wagner casts. She says because there is more bigger repertoire staged here, there are more careers to be made singing stuff which suits a wider array of voices in general. We swap notes on the way voices develop and it taking time to find one's true sound, and she is full of praise for the high standard of coaching here. I agree that I've been very lucky to meet and work with lots of very inspiring people this month.

Friday 19 December, Berlin

This afternoon I had my last coaching session of the trip, with John Parr, Head of Music at Deutsche Oper. John has a formidable reputation for having a real feel for voices and that's obvious from the start. We work through most of scene 3 of *Rheingold*. What is most helpful about the session, apart from the very detailed information and help John imparts, is the feeling of it being a summary of the time I've spent here. It's reaffirming in my mind what it is I need to do, and also where my strengths lie.

When I talk to John about feeling I need to bring my sound forward and how I think the key for me is to get the vowels in line, he agrees, and he also agrees that it makes a big difference when I truly get the resonance forward. It's interesting when we move on, briefly, to look at Pizarro's aria that he feels my voice tends to ring in the right place much more. We both wonder whether this is on account of the tessitura being that bit lower or whether it is the speed at which the aria flows. Whichever, he is sure that it is a role for me – he also says, when I tell him about my career and development so far, that there's no obvious problem with the top of my voice after the tessitura conversation.

In the evening, I go to the Staatsoper to see *Candide*. I'm keen to see it partly to find out how a German house handles English language repertoire. Leonardo Capalbo, who is Italian-American, is superb as Candide, not just vocally and

dramatically with a lovely, open naïveté, but also in terms of his movement – he never stops. Graham F Valentine, a Scot, is Pangloss and his voice is definitely that of an actor. I'm sorry that quite a lot of the text feels lost from where I'm sitting. It's a very valuable lesson in the importance of the shorter notes and the final consonants – it helps reinforce much of the coaching I've had this month. Elin Rombo's Cunegonde is great and "Glitter and Be Gay" brings the house down, even in Germany where as a rule applause in the middle of an act seems much harder won. Anja Silja is the Old Woman – someone I never thought I'd get to see sing live. The voice might have aged but nothing like her years (74 it appears from Wikipedia) but the class of the singing is there in spades. Her presence, dramatic force and diction are all amazing.

It's a good production (Vincent Boussard), and I wonder if I've worked out one way in which German audiences laugh differently here. I wonder if they laugh at a funny idea before it is actually executed. Like the stirring of the soup with a rolling pin by Mime in the Leipzig *Der Ring für Kinder*, when Candide goes to kill Cunegonde's two lovers (the Cardinal and the Jewish banker), the realization of their being connected by a wire, prior to their joint electrocution, gets the biggest laugh. The Cardinal wears a robe of fairy lights (and matching mitre), but whereas in Britain, a big laugh might be earned by his flashing death throes, here the laugh comes earlier. Similarly, the initial appearance on stage of the banker gets an immediate laugh, not the obvious overacting of the stage-Jewish man. The woman a row in front of me is highly amused throughout by quite a lot of English wordplay, clapping her hands in delight. I think her hearing must be better than mine. Unless of course she's keen to impress her friends with her knowledge of a foreign language: if so that's hardly something reserved for German audiences.

Saturday 20 December, Bremen

My last train journey today and I think my tenth city of the month. I'm grateful to the Deutsche Bahn man in Köln who advised me this route (via Hannover) would

be less crowded the weekend before Christmas than going via Hamburg. It's busy. We travel through a massive storm and, having checked into the hotel and gone out to look around the centre of Bremen, I get caught in another pretty spectacular one which passes directly over us and brings hail. Happily I'd gone to look at the architecturally crazy Böttcherstrasse which is cloistered, so was able to take shelter along with what feels like half the population of Bremen. I decide it's too miserable to explore much more, certainly to get the most out of the Christmas market, so I head back to the hotel.

Sunday 21 December, Bremen

I've been waiting some time to write this final entry. I spent the morning looking round Bremen's Christmas market and was pleased I had, as it was lovely. The whole thing was pirate themed, with staff in costume and lots of nauticalia on sale as well as the usual Christmas suspects. Although this could have come across as cheesy, it was extremely charming and very popular. It made me think that someone doing something similar with a decently executed theme could clean up somewhere in Britain. A very nice last taste of Christmas markets this year.

It was then on to the opera house for *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*. What to make of it... it's a very strong reading, and involves Sachs and Eva being the only two characters who seem to really exist. The setting is some sort of possibly kidnap/hostage situation, or maybe that's too strong an inference – maybe it's Sachs's daughter locked up in her room at home. All the other figures seem to be drawn from Eva's imagination. There's a toy figure of a knight who comes to life in some way as Walther, and the Meisters are drawn from a gallery of comic book or fairytale villains and the like (Kothner is Dr Evil from *Austin Powers* for example). There are other unusual aspects to it as well – the orchestra is on stage at overhead level, and the pit is used by the apprentices and occasionally others. Sachs and Eva (Eva especially) were needed on stage for much longer than one might have expected, even in an "ordinary" Meistersinger, and their stamina and

commitment were truly amazing. There was also a pair of wedding shoes which seemed symbolic of Eva's coming of age more generally.

Die Meistersinger is a huge effort for an opera company, a masterpiece which requires significant orchestral and vocal resources, and the feeling when one emerges after hours of great music which is by turns reflective, comical and grandiose is uplifting. Although it would be possible to criticise individual performances or aspects of the singing of some of the cast, it would be unfair to do so. There are tremendous, committed and well-defined performances throughout and it feels like we have all, audience and musicians alike, shared in something by the end, a feeling augmented by the conversations I have with my neighbour at both intervals and then again after the final curtain.

The impressions which remain of the production writing this a few weeks later are almost all positive, and yet I started out infuriated, angry even, at the treatment of the work. But the sincerity of the performances and the amazing power of the work itself won me over. The production touched on themes of storytelling, why we tell ourselves or others stories, and left me thinking about it for a very long time. I still have no idea of the "true" relationship between Sachs and Eva, but the moral complexity of Sachs made what was a truly creepy ending (the story going full circle and a younger version of Eva being shut in her room) into something not only unsettling but all the more disturbing for the emotional empathy which one had felt for him throughout what is a mammoth evening, even by Wagnerian standards.

Conclusion

Much of what various coaches and colleagues said to me isn't recorded here. All of the coaching sessions I undertook followed the same format as they would have done had I been working on any other repertoire – *La traviata*, *Billy Budd* or *Carmen*, say.

The process of learning an operatic role involves meticulous study of both the text and the music, absorbing the details as accurately as possible and then going back to the studio and repeating passages over and over until they become second nature. A singer's muscle memory then develops so that the body knows instinctively how to sing a role with total accuracy. At that point the hope is that options to present the sound in different ways reveal themselves in order that the singer can offer a range of colour, expression, and dynamic variation. Then once rehearsals begin with a conductor and a director, through a synthesis of ideas, a vision of the role emerges from the rehearsal room that engages, perhaps even thrills the audience. In this way, performers try to do justice to the piece. In that respect, all of these coaching sessions in Germany were attempts to allow the music and the story to come alive through a collaboration not just between singer and pianist, but between singer, pianist, composer and librettist. It would be a huge simplification to pretend that there was something uniquely different about the process expressed in these terms just because the composer and librettist in question was Richard Wagner.

But still there were things I learned about the difference of approaches to Wagner, and insofar as I can express them in one general point, it's that the primacy of the text in Wagner feels more crucial than in other operatic repertoire, even though opera is a verbal art form. In Wagner, we need to be encouraged to sing the text and not the individual sounds or the individual lines of music, to a greater extent than in many other works. At the same time, the range of characters which Wagner created means that some interpretations require sounds and forms of singing which are a long way away from the idea of "bel canto" – there is a school of thought which says that some of the characters

need to sound ugly and that too much beauty of tone, or concentration on the sung sound, will impede the full communication of the character. This is by no means a unanimous opinion, but it still comes from a desire to serve the text at all times.

Why is this the case? It's because we are conscious of the attempt Wagner was making to meld together several existing art forms, evidenced not only in his renewal and reinterpretation of mythical subject matter, but in his development of theatre practices (of which so much has been written elsewhere). Wagner uses opera as the means to tell stories in which he wants to immerse his audience completely, precisely because he felt that opera represented the most total form of artistic expression available to him. It is the seriousness of the subjects which he wished to express, their epic scale, and their desire to mine deep emotional and philosophical truths, which has made them susceptible to radical and at times unsettling production and interpretation, and which challenge the singer to engage with and express the vast emotional range of the characters he strove to create.

Who's Who?

LOUISE ALDER is a British soprano and graduate of Edinburgh University and the Royal College of Music now working as a member of the ensemble at Frankfurt Oper

EBERHARD BÄUMLER is a conductor and writer on Wagner based in Köln. He has conducted throughout the opera houses of Germany and further afield throughout a long career. He is now director of the Landesregierung Düsseldorf, and orchestra which brings professional and amateur musicians together and which has toured internationally as well as working in Düsseldorf itself.

JAMES CLEVERTON is a British baritone and occasional colleague of mine. His ties with Germany and the German-speaking opera houses date back to his training as part of the opera studio in Zurich.

ROBERT DEAN has enjoyed a career as an opera singer, conductor, coach and music teacher, and has been my singing teacher ever since I took up a postgraduate place at Guildhall School of Music & Drama where he is Professor of Singing.

STEWART EMERSON has since 1995 been Music Director for Voice/Musical Theatre of the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler in Berlin

ANDREW GREENAN is a British bass-baritone who has enjoyed a long career in Great Britain, Germany and elsewhere. He sang Alberich in the Longborough Festival Opera production of *Das Rheingold* in 2013, and I was his cover.

JOHN-COLYN GYEANTEY is a British tenor and occasional colleague of mine. We spent some of the summer of 2014 together working in Provence on a production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

THOMAS HERWALD runs an opera agency in Karlsruhe.

CHRISTIAN HORNEF is a member of the music staff of Oper Leipzig and has coached many productions of Wagner's operas there.

ALEXANDRA HUTTON is an Australian-born, British-trained soprano who is currently a member of the opera studio at Deutsche Oper Berlin.

BEATE LENZEN lives in Köln and is a language coach and prompt. As well as her work in Köln and its surroundings, she has spent fifteen seasons as the Bayreuther Festspielhaus where she has worked alongside many of the leading Wagner conductors of the present day, including the festival's current musical director, Christian Thielemann.

KELVIN LIM is an opera coach based in London. As well as being Co-director of Postgraduate Opera for Trinity College of Music he has developed a reputation of

being one of Britain's leading coaches for encouraging younger singers to look at Wagner. He has worked alongside Dame Gwyneth Jones, Sir John Tomlinson and Graham Clark amongst others and is heavily involved with the work of the Wagner Society of Great Britain.

HANNAH LYONS is a senior project manager at the Science Museum Group and my partner.

JAMES MARTIN and I trained together at Guildhall School of Music & Drama. Born in Australia, he left London for Mannheim where he continued his studies before joining the ensemble of Deutsche Oper am Rhein.

ULRIKE MEYER is a German mezzo-soprano who is currently a member of the ensemble in Bremen. She and I were colleagues in Sir Thomas Allen's production of *Le nozze di Figaro* for Scottish Opera in 2010.

ANTHONY NEGUS is a British conductor and former head of music staff at Welsh National Opera. He has a long association with the works of Wagner, having worked with Reginald Goodall and coached many of the world's leading Wagner singers. He conducted the four separate operas in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Longborough before bringing them together as a complete cycle in 2013.

JOHN PARR is head of music at Deutsche Oper, having previously worked all over the world, including a spell as assistant to the music director in Karlsruhe and as head of music at San Francisco Opera. He has specialized in the works of Wagner and Strauss throughout his wide-ranging career.

MARK SABERTON is a British operatic baritone and occasional colleague.

MARY SATTERTHWAITE is an American opera coach based at Deutsche Oper am Rhein, having previously worked in several houses in western Germany.

ANJA SCHMIDT-OTT and I met studying in Oxford in the 1990s, where she read History. After completing a doctorate in London, she returned to Wuppertal where she now works in corporate communications.

ANTONY SHELLEY is a member of the music staff of the Staatsoper Berlin, having previously worked in houses across Britain, including several seasons with Opera 80 alongside Roger Norrington.

CHRISTOPH STÖCKER is Erster Kapellmeister of Deutsche Oper am Rhein and a keen Wagnerian.

STEPHEN SVANHOLM is the grandson of Set Svanholm, the famous heldentenor. He has worked in the music business in many different roles, having been a member of a highly successful metal band, before becoming an operatic baritone and agent.

NEIL THORNBORROW is a well established opera agent based in Düsseldorf. He also has a position on the advisory board of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth.

JOHN TRELEAVEN and his wife **ROXANE** are based in Nackenheim, outside Mainz. Both are singing teachers and former singers, although John is not fully retired. His career has seen him play all the major heldentenor Wagner roles in the world's leading houses, and he now teaches, with many young Wagnerians studying with him.

PETER WEDD is a freelance tenor. A former company principal of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, he now works in heavier repertoire and recently made his debut as Lohengrin for Welsh National Opera.

CHRIS WHITE is a British coach who is new resident in Berlin as part of the Deutsche Oper music staff, having previously worked at English National Opera and at the Bayerischer Staatsoper in München.

ALESSANDRO ZUPPARDO is chorus master of Oper Leipzig, having previously held the same role in Frankfurt. He has spent most of his career in Germany, having relocated there from his native Italy.