

PERFORMER INTERVIEW

A Wagnerian Tuba-player: An Interview with Warwick Fyfe

Madeline Roycroft

Warwick Fyfe (b. 1969) is an Australian bass-baritone and a highly regarded exponent of the Wagnerian repertoire. His Wagnerian roles include Wotan, Alberich, and Fasolt (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*); Beckmesser (*Die Meistersinger*); Klingsor (*Parsifal*); Dutchman (*Der Fliegende Holländer*); Herald (*Lohengrin*); and Wolfram (*Tannhäuser*).

Fyfe has received numerous awards, prizes, and scholarships, including the Helpmann Award for Best Male in an Operatic Feature Role for his performance as Alberich in Opera Australia's 2013 Ring Cycle at the State Theatre in Melbourne. In 2015 he was awarded a Winston Churchill Fellowship to study Wagnerian vocal technique in Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Between March and April 2023, Fyfe performed Wotan/The Wanderer in Melbourne Opera's three cycles of the Ring at the Ulumbarra theatre in Bendigo. As I was also involved with this production and a temporary resident of Bendigo at the time, I visited Warwick and his wife Ruth at their accommodation in Kangaroo Flat on the second weekend of the second cycle. When I was explaining to Warwick why I wanted to include him in *Context's* interview series—which usually focuses on the compositional process, rather than performance—he began to respond, and I realised that the interview had started before I had posed any questions.

I have the impression from watching you work that you approach your singing from quite an intellectual place.

Well, it's quite interesting that you say that, because I realised towards the end of my twenties reading book after book after book after book about Wagner was going to make me into a bad Wagnerian. It's the kind of thing that makes you a bore—you would know a lot about Wagner and nothing about anything else. I realised that, because of my dyslexia, I hadn't covered enough of the canonical literature, and history, and so forth. I have read very few books on Wagner since my twenties for that reason. But I covered the main ones at that time. I honestly think that the best way of being a good Wagnerian is to be a cultivated person. A person with a broad cultural hinterland.

This has been a hobby horse of mine. You have to cultivate your inner garden. Nothing interesting, as a performer, can come out of you, if nothing has gone in before that. And then, there's a certain automatism. Yes, you need technique, and yes, you need calculation, but what makes it really interesting is that stuff you can't fake. You can't accidentally perform like a person with a cultural hinterland if you don't have it. If you haven't watched the best films, if you haven't read the best books, you can't accidentally pull that off. I honestly think that the hard and long path is what is needed, and that needs to be inculcated into young people, and it doesn't matter if all they're interested in is playing their instrument. 'I just want to play the flute.' All right, but you have to have a satisfactory answer to the question of 'what are you reading at the moment?' or 'who's your favourite film director?' What about your favourite painters? You have to have answers to these questions—that is your task, otherwise what do you want to be? A performing canary, or something that just ... makes noises?

Wow. I do a lot of teaching, and I've met many undergraduate students who would benefit from that advice.

I honestly think you should be prescribing them works of literature. When I was at Canberra School of Music as a tuba player, I remember our teacher saying 'you must all read *Paradise Lost!*' We were doing history of opera or something like that. Out of nowhere! That, actually, is the kind of thing that we need.

You played the tuba before you were a singer?

Yes, I took it up in school band in 1982. It flowed out of a science test! We did a test about hearing, and oddly enough, the next thing I was asked was 'oh would you like to join the school band?' Then there was this big instrument there and I thought, 'oh, maybe I could play that.' Initially I thought I wanted to play the drums, but then I saw the drum kit was just one manky-looking snare drum, and the guy who had originally wanted to learn the tuba decided he preferred the flugelhorn, so I took the tuba. And then there was this brilliant thing, because in Canberra—a bit of a laboratory experiment, that city—they have all these marvellous things you can do. So I did school band, and then I got into the Canberra Youth Orchestra Society and worked my way up through the bands, and eventually I did one year in the youth orchestra, which was the end of my career with them. Well sort of ... I also played in a jazz band. I had no interest in jazz, but I played in a jazz band with them!

Jazz on the tuba?

Yep, we had this group called Garage Jazz, it was a small big band. Anyway, it was really quite late in the day that singing intruded. It was when I was in Year 11, going to the Canberra School of Music after school to do a thing called preparatory music, which was meant to prepare you in Year 11 and 12 for tertiary study. We were studying opera, and I said 'oh, it would be good to be in an opera'—meaning in the pit! And someone asked me to come and audition for *Joshua*, which was a staged oratorio they were doing at the time. So I went along, and I didn't have a pianist or anything. I just had an LP, because I'd been buying LPs of all the things we'd been studying, and the thing we'd been studying was *Acis and Galatea* by Handel, so I thought well, I can't do the coloratura that well, but I can sing all the notes in 'O ruddier than the cherry.' So, I went in, and there was a pianist sitting there but I didn't have any music, so I just started going [sings:] 'O ruddier than the cherry!' And then people said 'well, whether or not you get into this show, can you come and join my choir?' 'No, he's joining my choir!' So, over the next few years, that sort of took over.

And when did you discover your love of Wagner?

Well, you know how when you finish Year 12, they have a student yearbook? There was a picture of me, and I had a mullet at the time, and a leather jacket and all the rest of it. And under my photo it said: 'Wagner is a groover.'

So already firmly established by the end of school!

Exactly, it was! The signs that I might have been interested in quite 'serious' music were there really quite early. Thanks to *Sesame Street*, which is exactly the same age as me—we were both born in 1969. I don't like *Sesame Street* now. Elmo? Yuck. Anyway, the early series, say '69 to '74, they were fantastic. But they also had a lot of classical music in them, whether it was Satie's *Gymnopédies*, or other things. But what appealed to me most was a segment that was essentially an octopus in a tank, just squishing around, and they'd say 'and now... the Octopus!' And then they'd start playing this tinny version of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 1. And I'd go 'yesss!'. I made up my own words to it and everything. Then Dad came home from work and worked out what I was singing. He had it on LP and would play it for me, and I would call it 'the Octopus Song.' He later got me this audiotope called *Classics for Today*, which had things like *In a Persian Market* and *Rondo alla turca*.

Then when I was in high school, Dad got—through a mail-order company called World Record Club—an LP that was brought out in conjunction with Tony Palmer's film *Wagner* (1983). You know how people say, regarding opera, you should work your way up through something nice, like Puccini? Well, not me! This invisible hand reached out and drew me in. The thing that got to me turned out to be Siegfried's Funeral Music from *Götterdämmerung*. I couldn't conceive of how such a thing could exist, really. I looked at the record sleeve and didn't even understand what I was looking at on the track listing. It was a series of excerpts, and the one that was Siegfried's Funeral Music might have said something like 'Götterdämmerung 3.' Meaning, the third excerpt from *Götterdämmerung*. But then of course I went to school band the next day saying: 'oh yes, I like Wagner, and my favourite is "Götterdämmerung No. 3."' I didn't realise that *Götterdämmerung* was this gigantic opera that was a subsection of an even more gigantic opera.

But eventually that sort of burgeoned. Well, it was that in combination with just being able to do stuff in Canberra. There was always something you could do in Canberra. That is what moved it forward. And I remember when I was 18 or 19, something like that, I went to this marvellous thing called the Bathurst Summer School for Singers. Basically, it was a couple of weeks of masterclasses. One was with John Matheson, who was a very distinguished scholar and conductor, and there were all these people getting up and saying 'what are you going to sing?', 'oh I'm going to sing "Non piu andrai,"' or 'I'm going to sing "Voi che sapete,"' and they asked me what are you going to sing? 'I said, "I'm going to sing Fafner's Death" [sings:] 'Du helläugiger Knabe!'. John was so kind. He just said, 'I've never seen this done as a solo before!'

You've mentioned a few times that recordings were important in introducing you to this world of music in which you now work. Thinking specifically of the Ring, where would you recommend people start?

Jump in the deep end! There are some recordings that are a fantastic place to start. Almost essential. Then later on, you can learn to find the beauty and perhaps even further greatness in others. I would send anyone who wants to start to the Solti Ring. The first one. But eventually there might come a time when you might say, well actually, even though it's not a studio recording, I enjoyed the frisson of the Keilberth Bayreuth recordings on the Testament label. Some of the singers were even more in their prime then. You can derive something else from it. I came to the Keilberth recordings really quite embarrassingly late. I had this silly idea that Keilberth was sort of like a Bayreuth Kappelmeister—no! Keilberth's recordings are astonishing, and they're their own thing. I still say jump in at the deep end, but also, you don't want to jump in and be put off. Like my mother who once went to a Korean restaurant, and it wasn't very good, so she decided she didn't like Korean food. No! Go to a good restaurant!

How has it been for you working with Anthony Negus in this Bendigo Ring Cycle?

I love working with him. With him and Carmen [Jakobi, the chief German language coach for these performances], it has just been the most warm and collegial relationship.

Had you worked with him before?

Yes, I first met him in Wales actually. In the big spaceship-like centre in Cardiff [the Cardiff Bay Opera House]. I met him in the foyer, and I thought I was auditioning for him, because my aim was to sing at Longborough. So, we went into a room, and I started singing one aria, then another aria, then another aria, and I started thinking, this is the strangest audition I've ever done. Two hours of it! Then it got to the end, and I said 'well, thank you Maestro, but I'm really tired.' And he said, 'aren't you going to pay me?' I said 'oh, I thought it was an audition.' I started scrambling around looking for money to pay him! He did then scoot up some stairs and speak to somebody, and then I later did an audition for them. I sang the Credo from *Otello* and the curse from *Rheingold*, and then they needed a Golaud for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, so I later worked with them covering that role. So yes, that was when I first met him, when we were at crossed purposes! In future years when I went over the UK I had some coachings with him. I find him very good to work with. He learned at the knee of Reginald Goodall, of course.

You've travelled across a good number of the roles across the cycle. Now that you've completed two cycles doing Wotan/The Wanderer, do you have a preference? Does one role speak to you the most?

Hmm. I feel a little ambivalent about going back to Alberich at the end of the year. I don't want to disappoint people. If this were a run of ten cycles instead of three, I reckon I'd probably get Wotan right by the end. But it'd probably also kill me—it's that hard. But when I did my first Alberich, actually I was sickening at that time. Rapidly. Even though I took over from John Wegner, who at that time was suffering from the encroachments of Parkinson's, I was also becoming sick with diabetes at that time. I won't go through the symptoms, but it was horrible. There was a time when Alberich felt like something I could do in my sleep, which is something I've never felt about Wotan. And then there came a point where I started to find it difficult, with the depredations of illness and age. But then I got this new teacher who has helped enormously to rebuild my technique. Actually, I did my first Wotan in Singapore in 2020 with swollen vocal cords, and really no idea how to do it because of that, because I was trying to sing around this problem, and it nearly killed me. It was only after that I was found by this teacher.

Who is this wonderful teacher?

Christina Henson, or Christina Henson-Hayes is her full married moniker. She's an American who married an Australian. Working with her remotely is almost as good as in person. She's certainly the best singing teacher I've ever found.

To come back to your question, in terms of the Ring Cycle roles, the first one I did was Fasolt in the '98 Ring, and I covered Wegner in the 2004 Ring in Adelaide as Alberich, and then in 2013 I was going to be doing the Donner but I was promoted to Alberich. Then of course the Singapore *Walküre* came along and I really, really struggled with that. By that time, I had done multiple Alberichs in different countries, and I started the task of putting Wotan together properly, and it is *much* harder than Alberich. Except, listening to Simon [Meadows] doing it, I'm aware that, ten years on, Alberich seems like a much higher role than it did at the time. So, it's just getting my voice back into that range. Thankfully I have a transitional role: I'm going back to my party piece, which is Amonasro in *Aida*, which will haul my voice up a bit. I'm not one of those natural singers, I'm not someone who has ever found it easy, and one of the things I have always struggled with is high notes. So, it will be interesting getting my voice back into Alberich mode. And no doubt hearing Daniel Sumegi doing Wotan, I'll be itching to come in on his lines. Actually, I did a sitzprobe for *Rheingold* last year, when they didn't have an Alberich for the sitzprobe, and I sang both the Alberich and the Wotan.

I was there! That was when I decided I wanted to interview you.

Carmen has this idea where we do *Rheingold* and I do both roles and they use a hologram. I wonder if that will ever come to anything ... no, it will be good discipline to get back to Alberich. This may very likely be the only Wotan I ever do in full cycles. Although it scares the living daylight out of me, as a role, I still think there would be a point in trying to refine it—trying to get it closer to where I'd like it to be.

John Wegner became a good friend of mine in his last years—more of a personal friendship as opposed to just a colleague—and he said to me once, when he was doing Wotan in Germany

somewhere, that one night he was doing *Walküre*—which is the heaviest part of the cycle—and he felt that he'd 'got it right.' And he was so excited. One of the most endearing things about him was that he always had this childlike, questing quality, and he was just ringing everybody saying, 'I got it right, I got it right!' And I know what that means. You sort of think, oh, well, something with so many moving parts, how can you say you got it right? Well, you kind of can! For instance, in this cycle, I would say that Act III of the first cycle *Walküre*, and Act I of the second cycle *Siegfried*, I kind of got right. I would put my signature to those.

You were happy only with those acts?

Well I just felt that everything was basically there. Everything I wanted to do. Every other act of every other opera, there were just a few blemishes here and there. It's a constant quest to understand why a note is difficult here when it's not difficult there. Why is my voice speaking well there when it's got a scratch in it there? And you just try and try and try, and the answers are so elusive, it's like trying to catch eels while wearing a blindfold, or something. It's so hard. And that's why there would be a point in trying to have another go at the role if another opportunity came along, but I can't see it will.

Well, you never know with Melbourne Opera ...

I think Melbourne Opera is a real hope for opera in this country. I'm a pessimist, culturally and generally, but specifically regarding opera, I think the future could be bleak. But I think that Melbourne Opera, although they might justifiably lament the fact that other companies get the state funding, it does give them an independence that means that all they do is put on opera—as well as it can possibly be done. That makes them unique in the landscape. I heard somebody say, 'this is the best Ring Cycle that's been done in Australia' and I think they're probably right. If we're talking about this sort of, almost ectoplasmic, hard-to-define 'something' about a show, I think this is the one. It speaks to Wagner aficionados, and it speaks to Wagner virgins. It's a Ring Cycle for everybody. My admiration for Melbourne Opera is limitless. This is the most interesting company in the country, in my view.

About the Author

Madeline Roycroft recently completed a PhD in musicology at the University of Melbourne. She is currently working on her first monograph, based on her doctoral research into the reception of Dmitri Shostakovich's music in twentieth-century France.