

Wagner Arrives in Australia

[The following item was shared in a letter from an Australian member; it is taken from an extended article and talk by Peter Bassett, given to the Wagner Society of Queensland in 2009. For the complete article, go to the Links page and then click on that Society.]

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

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

My very dear Sir,

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

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

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

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

Your most grateful servant,

Richard Wagner

[Our correspondent notes that performances by Opera Australia of many operas written in other language but given in English were commonplace up to the early 1970s but have largely disappeared in favour of the particular works' original language.]