

International Wagner Competition, Seattle

By Andrew Moravcsik

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Is the Wagnerian singer an endangered species? Today singers of Handel, Mozart and Rossini abound, but where are the younger voices hefty and healthy enough to project over Wagner's massive orchestra for five hours a night?

Many singers with potential lack the patience to await their Wagnerian prime, which generally comes past the age of 40. Those who do lean towards Wagner often complain that they are disadvantaged in formal competitions that favour younger (and slimmer) singers, a bright, clean style of vocal production, and the lively self-contained arias of the French and Italian repertoire. Rather than negotiate the tricky professional transition from lighter roles, many play safe and eschew Wagner for life.

Seattle, the city of Starbucks, software and summer scenery, might seem an unlikely site to seek a solution, yet it is a Mecca for Wagnerians. Since 1975, [Seattle Opera](#) has performed 35 Ring cycles, plus all of the composer's mature dramas. Under the dynamic direction of Speight Jenkins, celebrating his 25th year with the company, Seattle enjoys the highest per capita opera attendance of any American city.

Two years ago, in an effort to stem the decline of Wagnerian singing, Seattle Opera launched its biennial [International Wagner Competition](#). Only singers aged 39 and under with one professional Wagner performance under their belt need apply. About 50 applicants met the criteria; auditions cut them to eight. In the inaugural 2006 competition, many finalists (and both winners) came from London, suggesting British pre-eminence in Wagner training. This time round, only one finalist and no winner was British-trained.

Nearly 1,500 spectators gathered to hear each finalist sing two segments from Wagner operas, accompanied by members of the [Seattle Symphony Orchestra](#) under Asher Fisch. The awkward cuts (and lack of sets) occasionally recalled Ernest Newman's complaint against Wagner excerpt concerts ("so many chunks of bleeding meat on a butcher's block"), but the dramatic skill of each young performer was such that each transcended the setting's limitations.

After nearly four hours, a jury of six – including tenor Ben Heppner, former opera administrator at the Stuttgart and San Francisco operas Pamela Rosenberg and artistic adviser (and Wagner great-granddaughter) Eva Wagner-Pasquier – reached their verdict. Two singers received \$15,000.

Like many Wagnerian tenors, 37-year-old Swede Michael Weinius is a former baritone. Perhaps this explains why his rendition of the "Preislied" from *Meistersinger* seemed a bit heavy and awkward. But a dramatically compelling rendition of the "Amfortas! Die Wunde!" segment from *Parsifal* propelled him to victory.

The other judges' prize went to Elza van den Heever, a 29-year-old South African with a silvery soprano that Frankfurt and San Francisco have heard recently in Mozart. She portrayed Elsa and Elisabeth with bright tone, clear diction and youthful yet noble expression. Van den Heever also won a special prize awarded by audience vote – a populist touch that has given Seattle's competition the nickname "Wagnerian Idol."



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Yet the most compelling musical and dramatic moments came from a third singer. Nadine Weissmann (pictured), a 34-year-old, German-born but Indiana-trained mezzo, won a prize awarded by the orchestra for haunting performances of Erda and Waltraute. Her dark timbre and poignant phrasing recalled the great contraltos of the early 20th century. The Weimar Opera, which has already engaged her in these roles, is in luck.

None of the winners seems quite ready for a big house debut in a lead Wagner role. Van den Heever plans more Mozart and slow transition into *jugendlich* parts. Weinius is engaged to sing Loge under Kent Nagano but sings other Wagner parts in smaller venues. Weissmann's favourite role remains Carmen. But if any emerge as a great Wagnerian, this competition will deserve some of the applause.

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