

WAGNER IN THE NETHERLANDS



History of Wagner experience in The Netherlands

Since its introduction in The Netherlands in 1853 Wagner's music has, on the whole, with many ups and the occasional down, been received enthusiastically. The country certainly has a long tradition of performing his operas.

The former Wagnervereeniging (Wagner Society), which was active from 1883 until 1959, more or less played the role of national opera institution and was responsible for a number of memorable productions. Originally the Society only produced works by Wagner himself but in later years operas by other composers were also presented, invariably conducted by internationally renowned conductors and sometimes in stagings that were at the time considered quite avant-garde. In 1946 the task of stimulating (interest in) opera was taken over by the government. In the years immediately before and after the Second World War the Wagner Society was an important initiator in the founding of both the Dutch National Opera (1946) and the Holland Festival (1947), thereby in fact rendering the Society superfluous. In 1959, after 75 years of business, the Society ceased its activities.

Wagnergenootschap Nederland (WGN) / (Wagner Association Netherlands)

Despite the Wagner Society having become dormant the appreciation for Wagner's music in The Netherlands had by no means disappeared. There was an urgent feeling that the activities of the Wagner Society should be continued albeit in modernised form. Thus, in 1961, the Wagner Association was founded. The Wagner Society continued to exist on paper (until 1988) so the new name Wagner Association was chosen.

Today we can say that the 57 year-old Association is in fact a continuation of an already 135 year-old tradition of Wagner experience in The Netherlands.

The Wagner Association is a cultural community that aims to encourage a broad social interest in the cultural heritage of the composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and the expanse of knowledge and the perception of his works as widely as possible. The Association is an active organisation that, in the first place, concentrates its efforts on offering cultural information and experience to its considerable membership. With 360 members the Association is almost the tenth largest member of the Richard Wagner Verband International in Bayreuth, which has a worldwide membership of 24,000 spread over 135 Wagner societies.

Activities

During its first few years the Association had more the character of a study society, with Richard Wagner as its subject. Although in 1995 it was decided to join the Richard-Wagner-Stipendienstiftung's scholarship scheme, whereby scholarship holders presented themselves to Association members during specially programmed musical evenings, the focus remained on organising lectures and seminars.

However, in recent years a reorientation has taken place. Various new activities have come to the fore. Apart from the annual weekend seminars and a number of lectures, the Association's yearly programme now includes musical evenings, meetings and discussions with artists and one-day opera outings to performances in, for example, Germany and Belgium.

In January 2017 the Association organised a one-day symposium marking the 100th birthday of Wieland Wagner. Such was its success that it has since been decided that in future a likewise Wagner-related symposium is to be organised every year.

The organisation of the annual selection of three young musicians or singers, awarding them scholarships and sending them off to Bayreuth for an intensive study tour has gradually become more professional and is now an important part of the Association's core business.

At the same time an increasing amount of time, energy and money has been invested in the Association's periodical publication, transforming it from a modest bulletin into the informative, fully blown quarterly 'Wagner Kroniek' (Wagner Chronicle). The now frequently visited website and the monthly digital newsletter have also undergone makeovers. This coupled with regular postings on social media, e.g. Facebook, has allowed us to offer more topical information and to raise our profile considerably.

Activities with third parties

The decision to transform the Wagner Association from a 'closed shop' into a far more open community has led to a greater social participation.

A notable achievement in this development was the International Wagner Congress in 2013, entitled 'Conflict and Compassion', celebrating Wagner's 200th birthday. The congress took place at the instigation and under the management of the Wagner Association, in cooperation with Dutch National Opera, the University of Amsterdam and the Goethe-Institut Amsterdam. During the course of four days, 40 speakers from The Netherlands and abroad addressed the 260 participants who had come to see and hear the ambitious programme.

A large proportion of the lectures was incorporated in the book 'Conflict and Compassion', published by Dutch National Opera in 2014.

The congress concluded with Pierre Audi, Director of Dutch National Opera, being presented with an honorary membership of the Wagner Association, for his notable merits with respect to the frequency and the quality of his programming of Wagner's works. Former receivers of honorary memberships have been the late John Culshaw, Maestro Hartmut Haenchen and Hans Pot, cofounder of the WGN. In the spring of 2017 the members voted to present the couple Frank van Aken (tenor) and Eva-Maria Westbroek (soprano) with an honorary membership.

The Wagner Association strives to maintain as good a contact as possible with former scholarship holders. A good example of this is how the Association continues to follow the career of the concert pianist Camiel Boomsma. The Association has supported a number of his recitals and has also sponsored the release of a CD recording of him, playing works of Wagner.

Another project that the Association has sponsored is the first publication in Dutch of the complete prose works of Richard Wagner, translated and annotated by Dr. Philip Westbroek and published by IJzer Publishing. Of the scheduled nine parts, eight have already been published. This is considered to be an internationally unique project.

Richard Wagner Stichting Nederland (RWSN) / (Richard Wagner Foundation Netherlands)

As can be concluded from the previously mentioned projects, the social aspect has become more important of late. There is an increasing desire to systematically organise more activities for a much wider public. This has resulted in the setting up of a new, separate legal entity for the spreading and stimulating of knowledge about the composer Richard Wagner and his artistic legacy, for a broader section of the population. On 22 May 2017, Wagner's birthday, the Richard Wagner Foundation of The Netherlands was established. The RWSN has been recognized by the tax-authorities as a Dutch Cultural Public Welfare Institution (Cultural-ANBI), enabling that new financial sources can be explored.

Within the framework of the more public and national positioning, the implementation of the Wagner Prize, illuminated hereafter, has been transferred to the Richard Wagner Foundation.

Wagnerprijs van Nederland (Wagner Prize of The Netherlands)

After an agreement was reached with the International Vocal Competition in Den Bosch the Wagner Prize of The Netherlands was introduced in 2016, on the occasion of the Wagner Association's 55th anniversary. For external technical reasons, the Opera Competition of the IVC was postponed from 2016 to 2017. Therefore 2017 has been the first year that singers could compete for this new prize. At this year's competition in September 2018 the prize will be available for the second time.

The prize of €5,000 is to be awarded as a contribution towards the costs of studying with a Wagner specialist and will be awarded during each of the coming five opera-editions of the International Vocal Competition. As the IVC-Opera Competition, generally spoken, takes place every two years, the Dutch Wagner Prize embraces nearly a decade.

This educational award aims to further the professional development in the Wagner repertoire of the winner and the prize will be awarded to the candidate, who has been judged by the Wagner Jury to be the best singer/interpreter of a Wagner operatic excerpt in the Competition, and whose voice is suited to the singing of Wagner and for whom future prospects with the Wagner-repertoire are considered most promising.

Furthermore, with the awarding of the Wagner Prize of The Netherlands, we hope to encourage a greater interest in Wagner's works, not only from the public but also amongst musicians and young singers.