**Speech to the Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia by Kate Milligan, 19 April 2017**

Good evening everyone. It is such a pleasure to be speaking to you all tonight ….

I would like to express my enormous gratitude to you, the Wagner Society of WA, for hosting me both here and in Melbourne last December. Your unwavering benevolence and commitment to education has afforded me what could only be described as an opportunity of a lifetime. I would like to thank in particular one person I am deeply indebted to, and that is Mr. John Meyer, whose endless kindness and guidance I would have been lost without.

I would like to share with you some of my personal musings, provoked by my experience of the four wonderful music dramas that comprise Wagner’s Ring Cycle. I was quite unprepared for the shift in consciousness that would occur in me as a result of the experience. I would re-evaluate my own understanding of not only Wagner’s music, but also just music in general, from the perspective a young composer, and also as a young Australian.

The most important element to this trip for me was experiencing a thoroughly Australian incarnation of the Ring Cycle. Any production of this monumental size was always going to contribute to a more concrete national understanding of culture and the arts. I’m sure I don’t need to explain that this country’s relationship with Western Art Music, has in the past been problematic. For any Australian classical musicians, it is hard not to confront the apparent dichotomy between the thoroughly European roots of the art form, and the incessant need to break away and form a distinctly Australian sound. In order to maintain growth, we must consider not only the language of the music itself, but its reception and relevance to modern audiences. Indeed, these are things I like to question through my own music, and in doing so I have discovered that it is an infinitely complex issue.

So where does Wagner come into this web of complexity? On a surface level, he seems like an unlikely protagonist in the quest for Australian artistic identity. However, my experience with the Melbourne Ring Cycle has led me to the opposite conclusion. There was something in the music and its presentation that fed my optimism. What was it that made this production so remarkably Australian?

To answer this question, I have to begin with the people. This production boasted a marvelous diversity of international talent. For me, this really epitomizes Australian Art Music, in the sense that we represent a global meeting point for artists of all backgrounds. It must be said that these particular Wagnerian talents were the foundation for a series of concerts that can only be described as a universally human manifestation.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off the conductor, Pietari Inkinen from Finland, whose energy and consistency were absolutely mesmerizing. His performance really can only be described as athletic, as the emotion that he injected into the music was viscous and palpable.

Then there was immense array of vocal talent. For me, the stand-out was Lise Lindstrom, who blew me away with her endurance and power. She has inspired me as an artist, and as a woman, and has definitely become one of my musical idols. There’s something about those augmented triads that Brünnhilde sings for the Valkyrie leitmotif that just draw me in and capture my imagination.

Another standout for me was New Zealander Jud Arthur, the bass vocalist who brilliantly portrayed Fafner the dragon throughout the cycle. His performance at the beginning of Act II of *Siegfried* was possibly the most effective example of mute stage acting that I have encountered. Accompanied by Wagner’s orchestral introduction, the overall presentation of this scene was like nothing I had ever seen before.

The visual presentation of the drama was perhaps the most overly innovative aspect of this production, and was the brain-child of set designer Robert Cousins and director Neil Armfield. It was in this component of the music drama that I felt the Australian idiom was most consciously incorporated. This begins with the depiction of the Rhine at the beginning of *Das Rheingold*, where Aussie beach-goers en masse represent the movement of transformation of the gold-rich river. This scene also acts as commentary on contemporary social issues, like the human abuse of the world’s natural resources, portrayed through Alberich’s stealth of the gold.

I couldn’t help but feel especially proud that this particular group was gathered in Australia, and were driven by a fundamentally Australian brand of creativity. The Melbourne Ring Cycle has earned global respect precisely for this reason. It demonstrates the flexibility of not only the operatic genre, but also Wagner’s genius; its ability to mold to modern, multi-national contexts, and remain eternally relevant. It is productions like these that keep Western Art Music alive in this country, and it is my singular hope for its next occurrence, that it may be more widely available and accessible, especially for young musicians.

This leads me back to my own studies. I’m currently in my fourth year of composition studies here at the UWA School of Music, with a graduation recital just around the corner at the end of the year. I have learnt that, fundamentally, composition studies are about progressive thinking. New music must always search for the path into the future, and change is necessary to propel our creativity forward. The question that thus arises is: what use is it for a composer to cast their creative gaze into the past?

Though it seems anachronistic, new music and historical studies are intrinsically linked. Composers in the present occupy a unique place in music and culture, as their creativity stretches simultaneously into the future and into the past. It is only through an understanding of how our predecessors have thought, how they have written, and how they have performed, that we can make informed artistic decisions.

Wagner, to me, represents the most extreme manifestation of human complexity and depth. The sheer breadth of emotion encapsulated into approximately 16 hours of music is really indescribable. These four operas have reminded me of music’s agency in social transformation at every level. They have reminded me that, with enough determination, practice, and refining of compositional technique, something so intangible as an individual’s consciousness can be reflected, clear as a mirror, in sound. And, they have reminded me, that a true artwork can be appreciated across time, and across space, in different eras and cultures.

Thank you.