

RICHARD Wagner's epic, four-part *Ring* cycle often is described as a life-changing work of art, and not only for those prepared to sit through it. For the principal artists — those experienced singers on whose vocal talents Wagner productions are built — appearing in a complete *Ring* cycle is said to be a physical feat akin to running a marathon.

For a start, the four operas that make up a complete cycle run for 15 hours in total. Each performance is scheduled every second or third day, so a cycle goes for just more than a week. Any shorter and singers' voices can be put at risk. Any longer and the devoted audiences, those madcap Wagnerites who travel the world for *Ring* festivals, could not be expected to stay for the duration.

Little wonder that those singers who appear in Wagner's epic are relatively few in number. They jet between engagements largely in the US and Europe. Among them are Americans, Britons, Finns and, of course, Germans. There is also a handful of Australian Wagnerians, who have been engaged to sing in Opera Australia's first complete *Ring* cycle in Melbourne this November.

One Australian Wagnerian is Adelaide-reared mezzosoprano Deborah Humble who will sing the role of Erda, the wise goddess of earth who has the ability to see into the future.

"It's like a little family," she says of the singers who meet in different combinations for productions around the world.

After seven years in Paris, Humble joined former OA music director Simone Young at the State Opera of Hamburg in 2005. She has found herself singing Wagner with increasing frequency, albeit not exclusively.

She cemented her name in the Wagnerian pantheon when in 2008 she was a finalist in the International Wagner Competition held in Seattle, US. Then she performed five roles in Hamburg's *Ring* during the second half of the last decade. Hamburg's *Ring* was repeated in 2011 and last year.

"Wagner has certainly dominated my professional life for the past five years. There's been a lot of Wagner on," she says of the feverish build-up to this year's 200th anniversary of the German composer's birth on May 22, 1813.

Humble will spend six months in Australia this year, slightly more than most of the performers because her roles — she is also singing the valkyrie Waltraute — are in all four *Ring* operas.

It's a long time away from her work in the northern hemisphere but Humble says she relished the idea of returning to show Australians what she has been doing.

"I had to learn German," she says. "If you sing in German in Germany it's very, very important to get it right."

She says she had the idea of coming back and performing for her family and friends in the Melbourne *Ring*, "but they haven't got tickets," she admits ruefully. Premium tickets cost \$2000. "Let's say my friends are enthusiastic (about what I do) but not that enthusiastic," she adds, laughing.

Melbourne's three *Ring* cycles are expensive by international standards, with A reserve tickets priced at \$1600 and C reserve \$1000, but cost has been no barrier to sales. The three cycles quickly sold out.

A significant proportion of those tickets were snapped up by Wagnerites, those international jetsetters who circle the world for Wagner festivals and can be seen emerging from theatres hotly debating the sins and merits of every performance.

German-born, Australian-reared John Wegner is a 20-year Wagner veteran. He left Australia for Europe when he was 42 and will return to play the key role of Alberich, who sets in motion the *Ring* story by renouncing love and stealing gold from the Rhinemaidens.

Wegner's appearance in Melbourne will complete an Australian trifecta for the bass turned baritone, who also sang in the two Adelaide *Ring* cycles.

Wegner is generous about the Wagnerite



Daniel Sumegi, Miriam Gordon-Stewart, John Wegner, Deborah Humble and Stuart Skelton

The MASTER SINGERS

Opera Australia is bringing home some leading talent for its *Ring* cycle in Melbourne, writes **Michaela Boland**

scrutineers of his work. "They're usually delightful people and they come from all walks of life," he says. "The *Ring* nourishes them, it's a greater work than the sum of all its parts, it speaks to humanity."

Stuart Skelton also appeared in the 2004 Adelaide cycle, as the incestuous adulterer Siegmund, to significant acclaim. He will reprise that role in Melbourne.

Daniel Sumegi has carved out an impressive international career since his US debut in 1991. The Australian-born bass-baritone has travelled the world performing roles across the operatic repertoire. In the Melbourne *Ring*, to be directed by Neil Armfield, he will perform the roles of the giant Fasolt and, in *Götterdämmerung*, the villain Hagen.

Miriam Gordon-Stewart is a Wagner veteran on account of her time as a resident soloist with the Hamburg State Opera from 2005. She has portrayed the roles of Freia and Helmwig but in Melbourne she will sing for the first time the role of Sieglinde, Siegmund's twin and lover.

It has become customary for opera companies to stage a new production of *The Ring* across a period of years, performing an instalment each year and culminating with the complete cycle. But this is not how Opera Australia has decided to approach it. Not one to shy from a challenge, even when *Ring* cycles have brought bigger and better-resourced

opera companies to their knees, OA artistic director Lyndon Terracini is producing all four operas at once.

This approach is probably justified given Australia's geographical isolation from Europe and North America where these singers spend most of their time.

Rehearsals have been under way in Melbourne's Docklands for several weeks and will continue into next month. Each performer is required to be present for only the time their character is involved. Then they are required back in Melbourne in October ahead of the November 18 premiere of *Das Rheingold*. *Die Walküre* will premiere on November 20, then *Siegfried* two days later and finally *Götterdämmerung* on November 25 before the entire cycle is repeated twice.

OA music adviser Tony Legge is optimistic this *Ring* production will endure. He expects OA will be able to reprise it in the future, hopefully more than once. To that end all the understudies are Australian singers.

The lead roles of Brunnhilde, Siegfried and Wotan will be sung by British soprano Susan Bullock, German tenor Stefan Vinke and Norwegian baritone Terje Stensvold.

"We couldn't have Australians in those roles because there are so few people anywhere in the world who can do these parts," Legge says.

"They're just so big, it's like doing a

marathon. The most tiring thing is standing on a raked stage for a long time. You can be quite static because of the important conversations [the characters] are having, even in a love duet. In *Tristan and Isolde* they discuss the word 'and', really what it means."

OA has not revealed whether Melbourne's *Ring* cycle will have traditional staging or employ more modern visuals, as has been common in recent years at Wagner's purpose-built theatre at Bayreuth, where the *Ring* often is performed.

Wegner, the Wagner veteran, is thrilled with Armfield's approach to the work. "Neil likes to see what you can bring to it [but] he has a clear idea of the deep psychological direction he wants it to go in," he says. "It's always great working with Australians because the ideas flow from all sides, there's a feeling it's a co-production with the artists involved. Often when you're working overseas you're working to the director."

The production comes as Terracini is pushing for greater flexibility to cast international performers in the regular OA season.

Actors Equity allowed OA to engage double the number of international singers this year, 20 rather than 10, in recognition of the unusual demands of casting a *Ring* cycle. Terracini wants the exemption to be the new norm.

"I'm not saying it should be open slather but we need flexibility in the agreement to allow us to perform as well as we can," he says. One justification offered by the former singer is that more Australian performers are enjoying more opportunities internationally.

But all the singers *Review* spoke to expressed caution about OA's push.

"You have to motivate the next generation of singers to make the necessary sacrifices to pursue a musical career," Gordon-Stewart says. "I'm confident Lyndon is not being biased about importing people, but it's important to focus on building that resource within the country as well."

"I've not met a singer around the world who doesn't dream of singing in the Sydney Opera House. In that regard we could bring out whoever, but it needs to be balanced."

Wegner says: "I hope they keep a preference for young Australians who are performing overseas and keep bringing them back. Yes, Australian artists can just have overseas careers without being invited back, but it's so good for the soul to be invited back and it can help performers go to the next level."