

# Wagner on the POTOMAC

August, 2025

Volume 27

Among the Society's many achievements in 2024, nothing could have topped our October 4 Gala at the elegant Embassy of France, marking our 25th Anniversary. Under the gracious patronage of the Ambassador of France to the United States **Laurent Bili**, 180 members and friends enjoyed an evening of fellowship, music, the presentation of the Wagner Award, and the Embassy's impeccable food, wine, and service.

Luminaries included two of our founders, **Aurelius Fernandez** and **Barbara Karn**. A dozen participants attended from our Emerging Singers Program and the American Wagner Project, including Wagner Award recipients soprano **Jennifer Wilson** and tenor **Jay Hunter Morris**. Musical performances were by maestro **Jeffrey Swann** and violist **Jennifer Mondie**. The American Wagner Project's **Charlotte Kelso** sang selections from *Tannhauser* and *Die Walkure*. Other prominent guests included Wagner Award recipients Maestro Swann, **Saul Lilienstein** and **Francesca Zambello**.

We presented the Wagner Award to famed Wagnerian soprano **Luana DeVol** and the legendary mezzo soprano **Dolora Zajick**, our seventeenth and eighteenth recipients. The Society recognized them for their tireless work nurturing emerging singers through the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices and The American Wagner Project (AWP).

In turn, the Society's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary was recognized with framed citations from **Katarina Wagner**, Artistic Director of the Bayreuth Festival, **Harry Leutscher**, President International Association of Wagner Societies, and **Francesca Zambello**, Artistic Director, Washington National Opera.

2025/2026 promises continuity and change. We welcome a half dozen new board members, even as we thank outgoing board members **Bonnie Becker** and **Deborah Diamond** for outstanding service, with particular contributions to our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala. We will increase our live and zoom presentations, maintain our



*Frederic Harwood, Gala Chair, displays congratulatory citations with Chairman Holman, and Wagner Award recipients Luana DeVol and Dolora Zajick.*

twenty-five-year relationship with the Bayreuth Festival, expand Wagner in der Wildnis, and reshape the American Wagner Project. I want especially to invite you to attend our season-opening concert on September 21 featuring pianist **Jeffrey Swann** and the **Wagner Society Chamber Players**. As always, Maestro Swann will provide commentary on the selections and their relationship to Wagner. Typically, our programs are free of charge to members and their guests.

25 years would not have been possible without the abiding support of you, our members and particularly our Premium Members and contributors like the Pohanka Family Foundation that ensure our continuity. Every single membership, no matter how modest, confirms that our work is important. So please renew or join us today for the 2025-2026 season. And if you can, contribute at one of the Premium membership levels that support our work with the next generation of great singers. Welcome to what will be our 28th year.



*Jim*

**Jim Holman  
Chairman**

## The Wagner Society Publishes Jeffrey Swann's *The Music of The Ring*

The Wagner Society of Washington DC is proud to announce its publication of a major new work, Jeffrey Swann's detailed and comprehensive study, *The Music of The Ring*. Swann's book explores the work's extraordinary richness, describing how the music, text, dramatic action and meaning are intertwined to a degree found in no other work by Wagner or anyone else. This work focuses on the **leitmotif**, what Thomas Mann described as "the magic formula that ... links the past with the future, the future with the past ... to preserve the inward unity and abiding presence of the

whole at each moment." Maestro Swann has devoted his career to the study and performance of Wagner, from the time he played the entire *Ring* from memory while still a student at Julliard. The book will be available through the WSWDC office.

## Upcoming Programs

**September 21.** **Jeffrey Swann** and the **Wagner Society Chamber Players** will perform selections from Swann's piano transcription of Siegfried's passage through the *Magic Fire* and *Awakening Brunnhilde*, the slow movement of the Brahms *C minor Piano Quartet*, a movement from Chausson's *Piano Quartet*, and Chopin's *Piano Sonata in B*. Live and in person only. 7:30, **Arts Club of Washington DC**.



**October 16, Dan Sherman: “Wagner Lives at Theaters Everywhere”.** Wagner’s use of leitmotif, orchestral sound, and continuous melody were readily adopted by the film industry in the 1930s and 1940s and have evolved, allowing composers of film music to write with new instruments and melodic structures. Examples will be played from films, including *Casablanca*, *Vertigo*, and (of course) *Star Wars*. Dan Sherman holds a Ph.D. in economics from Cornell. A member of WSWDC since 2000, he is a frequent lecturer on topics like *Enjoying the Recorded Wagner* and *The History of Wagner at the Met*. **Arts Club of Washington, 7:30. Live and on Zoom.**



*Jakob Lehmann*

**December 14, Jakob Lehmann: Wagner and Bruckner.** Chairman **Jim Holman** interviews the Artistic Director of Eroica Berlin, a chamber orchestra founded in 2015. An authority on Romantic performance and the Bel Canto style, Dr. Lehmann will shift gears to consider Bruckner on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, Wagner’s influence, and the recent resurgence of interest in Bruckner’s music. **Zoom only 7:30.**

**January 15, 2026: Saul Lilienstein: Tristan: A Musical Portrait of the Man.** Wagner spoke of creating “moments of memory” through his leitmotifs. Tristan is most frequently presented to us through his memory of past events. He develops before our eyes and ears in full tragic dimension. Wagner’s accomplishment stands among the great portrayals found in the work of other 19<sup>th</sup> Century masters, including Hugo, Melville and Tolstoy. Wagner did it almost entirely with music. In this presentation Maestro Lilienstein will probe the sounds that reveal the poignant humanity of a sorrowing hero. **Zoom Only 7:30.**

**February, 2026. Wagner at the Movies.** For the third year the Society offers a film based on the story or life of Wagner. Arts Club, date to be determined.



*Dan Sherman*

**Future programs** will include **Jeffrey Swann’s** new book, an interview with heldentenor **John Treleaven**, mentor for singers in the AWP, an interview with **John Parr**, recently retired vocal coach for the Deutsch Oper-Berlin, and Maestro **Gianandrea Nosedà**, conductor of the Washington National Symphony and the Zurich Opera.

**The AWP Spring Recital**



*Blake Talbott, Heather Hjelle*

May 27 the AWP Spring recital featured soprano **Heather Hjelle** (biography on page 5) and heldentenor **Blake Talbott**, accompanied by pianist **Wei-Han Wu**. **Blake Talbott**, a four-time participant in the AWP, is preparing heldentenor roles such as Siegmund, Parsifal, and Erik. He works most intensely with John Treleaven, and traveled to Germany to continue his studies. He holds a Master’s degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Nevada, Reno.

For the recital, which was held at Katzen Hall, American University, Ms. Hjelle and Mr. Talbott performed a selection of arias and duets by **Wagner, Verdi, Beethoven** and **Leoncavallo**.



*Left to right: Heather Hjelle, Artistic Director Luana DeVol, Chairman Jim Holman, Program Coordinator John Edward Niles and Tenor Blake Talbott. Not pictured: Program Coordinator Joshua Baumgardner*

**The Silver Anniversary Gala**

180 members and guests celebrated our 25th Anniversary with a Gala held October 4 at the French Embassy, hosted by Ambassador **Laurent Bili**. The program included a cocktail reception, performance by concert pianist **Jeffrey Swann** and National Symphony Orchestra violist **Jennifer Mondie**, a recital by American Wagner Project soprano **Charlotte Kelso**, and an elegant dinner prepared and served by the embassy’s attentive staff.

Special guests included co-founders **Aurelius (Aury) Fernandez** and **Dr. Barbara Karn**. They were joined by five Wagner Award Recipients: pianist **Jeffrey Swann**, musicologist **Saul Lilienstein**, tenor **Jay Hunter Morris**, soprano **Jennifer Wilson** and the Washington National Opera’s artistic director **Francesca Zambello**.

A highlight of the evening was the presentation of the **Wagner Award** to the American Wagner Project’s Director **Luana DeVol** and to **Dolora Zajick**, founder of the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices. Letters of Commendation were read from **Katarina Wagner**, Artistic Director of the Bayreuth Festival, **Harry Leutscher**, President, International Association of Wagner Societies, and **Francesca Zambello**, Artistic Director of the Washington National Opera.



**The Gala Sponsors**

In support of the our American Wagner Project singers, the Gala exceeded its goal of \$125,000, thanks largely to the generosity of our Sponsors.

**Gold Sponsors, \$10,000 or more, were:**

**The Pohanka Family Foundation in honor of John Pohanka, Guillermo & Cecilia Schultz, Jim & Diana Holman, Frederic Harwood & Nedda di Montezemolo, Tom Powell, Allan Reiter.**

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**Bronze Sponsors, \$2,500, were:**

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The Wagner Award: Three Honorees

Since our beginnings, the Society has recognized notables who have made extraordinary contributions to the study and enjoyment of Richard Wagner with particular focus on the Washington DC area. In 2024 three artists were recognized.

**Dolora Zajick** founded the Dolora Zajick Institute for Young Dramatic Voices in 2009 to provide training for the big voices that are sometimes overlooked by vocal conservatories. In 2013, she spun off the American Wagner Project, for which her colleague Luana DeVol is artistic director. The Wagner Society of Washington DC provides support for both programs as the successor to our Emerging Singers Program. Ms. Zajick a mezzo soprano, has been described by the New York Times as “one of the greatest voices in the history of opera.”

**Luana DeVol** serves as executive director of the American Wagner Project (AWP), a program spun off in 2013 from Dolora Zajick’s Institute for Young Dramatic Voices. AWP is supported in part by the Wagner Society of Washington DC. Ms. DeVol is best-known for her performance in the German repertory, most specifically Wagner and Strauss. She was selected as Singer of the Year in both 1997 and 2000 by Opernwelt, a German opera magazine.



Luana DeVol (Left) and Dolora Zajick (Right)

The American Wagner Project

By Joshua Baumgardner and John Edward Niles



John Niles  
Joshua Baumgardner

Since 1999, the Wagner Society of Washington DC has been committed to developing singers with the potential to sing the Wagner canon. Starting in 1999 we sponsored the Emerging Singers Program, directed by opera stars **Thomas Stewart** and **Evelyn Lear**.

With Ms. Lear’s death, we transitioned to the **Institute for Young Dramatic Voices**, founded and directed by the great mezzo soprano **Dolora Zajick**. When Ms. Zajick saw that the big voices needed for the Wagner repertory required special training, she brought on famed soprano **Luana DeVol** and, with the Wagner Society of Washington DC, established the **American Wagner Project (AWP)**. Ms. DeVol serves as artistic director in partnership with heldentenor **John Treleaven** and **John Parr**, who recently retired as voice coach at Deutsch Oper Berlin. The WSWDC’s **Joshua Baumgardner** and **John Edward Niles** coordinate for the Society.

Future Developments

For the future, we intend to zoom some of the master classes and the annual end-of-Institute concert for our members. While we already pay participants’ room and board for the two week Institute, we will now cover travel in order make our program more attractive for the most promising candidates.

Beginning in 2026, the AWP will expand to include two distinct tracks: one for younger singers who demonstrate extraordinary promise in

Both Ms. Zajick and Ms. DeVol expressed gratitude for the essential support the Wagner Society of Washington DC gives to the development of new operatic talent.

Soprano **Christine Goerke** was honored at a Washington National Opera reception at the home of **Geoffrey Pohanka** and **Ann Kline Pohanka**.

Ms.Goerke is well-known to Washington and the Society, having sung Brünnhilde for one cycle of our 2016 *Ring*, and the role of Elektra just three years ago. She returned in October 2024 to sing in the Kennedy Center’s *Gods and Mortals: A Celebration of Wagner*.

Ms. Goerke has sung Ortrud for the Metropolitan Opera’s recent *Lohengrin*, Brünnhilde for Tanglewood and Aspen, and the role of Kundry in *Parsifal*. A versatile and passionate performer, she has sung in the most important opera houses, including the Met, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Covent Gardens, the Paris Opera, Deutsch Oper of Berlin, and La Scala.



Christine Goerke (front and center) et al. at the WNO Reception

Wagnerian roles, and another track for a select, elite group of more seasoned artists who are poised to launch or elevate their careers as Wagner specialists. These changes reflect our continued commitment to nurturing talent at every stage and ensuring that the next generation of Wagnerian voices receives the mentorship and support they need to thrive. These additional commitments will be covered by the funds raised by the Gala.

2025 participants

The 2025 participants are **Heather Hjelle**, soprano, **Lorna McLean**, soprano, and **Matthew Sink**, tenor. Two singers from Ms. Zajick’s Institute will sing part time with the AWP: soprano **Valerija Iljinaite** and tenor **Donovan Bales**.

**Lorna McLean** is a soprano from the UK. She is entering her third year with the AWP. Last summer she sang roles with Wexford, Ireland’s national opera. She recently sang the Wesendonck Lieder for the Sutton (England) Philharmonic.

**Matthew Sink**, an American from Las Vegas, has earned a Masters degree in Music from Northwestern University. He was a finalist in the Luminarts-Chicago competition.

Lithuanian soprano **Valerija Iljinaite** is a recent graduate “with distinction” from the Royal Academy of Music. She has won a number of competitions, including the Guber Belvedere Competition in Vienna.

**Donovan Ott-Bales** is a tenor who is originally from the Bay Area. He received a Masters Degree in Music from Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music and recently sang the role of Father Grenville in Chicago’s *Dead Man Walking*.

**Heather Hjelle** is entering her fourth year with the AWP. She is a two-time recipient of an Encouragement Grant from the Wagner Society of New York. A Minnesota native, she teaches voice at the University of Minnesota-Morris. Recent performances include multiple appearances with the Opera Festival di Roma, the title role Rusalka for the Toronto Summer Opera Workshop, and the title role in Opera MODO’s *La Gioconda*.



Lorna McLean   Matthew Sink   Valerija Iljinaite   Donovan Ott-Bales   Heather Hjelle

2024-25 Retrospective

by Bonnie Becker



Bonnie Becker

The 2024-25 season opened with the **25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala**, a festive reception and formal dinner to celebrate a quarter century of Wagner Society of Washington DC activities. With six former Wagner Award winners as special guests, the program featured performances by pianist **Jeffrey Swann** and American Wagner Project soprano **Charlotte Kelso**. **Luana DeVol** and **Dolora Zajick** were the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> recipients of the Society’s Wagner Award. Embassy of France, October 4.

**Christine Goerke**, a leading Brünnhilde in today’s opera world, was presented with the WSWDC Wagner Award at a special reception following her performance “**Gods, and Mortals: Celebration of Wagner**” at the Kennedy Center. Reception at the home of **Anne Kline Pohanka** and **Geoffrey Pohanka**. October 27.

Popular lecturer **Saul Lilienstein** invited his audience to “**Blame It on Wagner**” as he explained how tonal boundaries changed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century with *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* influencing other composers. Zoom, November 7.

**Dr. Justin Frank**, clinical professor of psychiatry, put “**Wagner on the Couch**” with an original view of Wagner in his lecture analyzing Wagner’s life and works through the principles of psychiatry. Zoom, December 12.

President of the New York Wagner Society **F. Peter Phillips** shared the insights on performance challenges he gained from his collaboration with heldentenor Stephen Gould that became their book: *Performing Wagner – A Singer’s Perspective on Performing Wagner*. Arts Club of Washington, January 23.

Our popular **Movie Night** with popcorn featured the documentary *Max Lorenz: Wagner’s Meistersinger—Hitler’s Siegfried* that chronicles the singer’s famous career that included, paradoxically, favorable regard by Hitler even though Lorenz was gay and married to a Jewish woman. Arts Club of Washington, February 20.

The annual Spring Recital showcased participants in the American Wagner Project. Soprano **Heather Hjelle** and tenor **Blake Talbott** offered a program of arias and duets by Wagner, Verdi, Beethoven and Leoncavallo, accompanied by pianist **Wei-Han Wu**. American University Katzen Arts Center, May 27.

Wagner Society at Bayreuth – 2024

Mark Golden



Adrienne Murphy, Nathalie Coupet, Robin and Art Sagoskin, Ingrid Meyer, Richard Soderquist, Mark Golden & Janet Hendley. (Not shown: David & Sheila Feinberg, Sara Green)

The annual society pilgrimage brought 11 members to Bayreuth to attend seven festival performances from August 20-26, 2024.

The new production of *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Thorleifur Örn Arnarrson, was resplendently sung by Camila Nylund and Andreas Schager.

The Valentin Schwarz *Ring* was in its third season at the festival. Returning singers Tomasz Konieczny, Catherine Foster, and Georg Zeppenfeld continue to impress.

The Jay Schieb *Parsifal* (as vacuous a production as I have ever experienced) was musically terrific under the firm hand of conductor Pablo Heras-Casado.

Other highlights included the traditional post-Rheingold dinner, hosted by the Wagner Society of Southern California, which offered an opportunity to interact with members from Wagner Societies from around the world and performers, including Simone Young, Ekaterina Gubanova, and Olafur Sigurdarson, among others.

There was plenty of Bayreuth drama behind the scenes, as well.

Under pressure from its government funders to reduce costs, the entire chorus was fired and would be required to audition for a position in the new chorus. During the first intermission of *Parsifal* chorus director Eberhard Friedrich announced his retirement, after 25 years in that role.

Festival Director **Katharina Wagner**’s contract has been renewed for 2025 through 2030, however, “management” has been placed entirely in the hands of General Manager **Ulrich Jagels**.

As further evidence of the financial pressures faced by the company, the 2026 festival, marking its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, has been drastically reduced. The season has been scaled back to a “semi-staged” performance of the *Ring* and revivals of the current productions of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Parsifal* and *Rienzi*.

If you might be interested in attending the 2026 or 2027 Festival, held the third week in August, contact me ASAP. Tickets sell out quickly.



An Evolving Board of Directors

We would like to express our appreciation to retiring Board members **Deborah Diamond** and **Bonnie Becker**. Deb, who joined the Board in 2019, was responsible for publicizing our events and for outreach. A particular achievement was writing the history of Emerging Singers Program and American Wagner Project for the 25th Annual Report. She summarized the career of every singer who entered our program, 110 singers in all.



Deborah Diamond

**Bonnie Becker**, a twenty-year member of the Society, has served on the Board since 2017. She has been in charge of tracking new and renewing memberships. For the 25th Annual Report, she tracked every presentation, reception and concert since our founding, some over 200 in all.



Bonnie Becker

Our Premium Members and New Members

The Wagner Society of Washington DC is committed to developing emerging Wagnerian talent. We could not fulfill that mission without the help of our Premium Members, our most generous donors. We thank the members who champion our mission.

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The Wagner Society of Washington DC

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MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

- An invitation to all lectures, a subscription to the WSWDC newsletter, and priority notice of all activities.
- Invitation to the Bayreuth Festival in Germany and to *Wagner in der Wildnis*
- Invitation to American Wagner Project Events

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- Recognition in programs and the newsletter for support of AWP and emerging singers

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Wagner in der Wildnis XXII

48 members and friends gathered May 30 to June 2 for the twenty-second annual Wagner in der Wildnis. For the past twenty-two years the retreat has been held at Capacon State Park, West Virginia.

**Simon Williams**, author and professor emeritus of theater at University of California, Santa Barbara, was in his 22<sup>nd</sup> year; **Jeffrey Swann**, concert pianist and professor of piano at New York University, was in his 21st year. The event is coordinated by **Sabrina Cassagnol**.

This year’s topic was Wagner’s Heroes. Professor Williams considered “Did the 19th Century Need Heroes,” “Rienzi, Lohengrin, and Siegfried: Saviors or Hooligans,” “Heroism and Tragedy in *The Ring*,” and “Is *Parsifal* the fifth opera of *The Ring*?” Maestro Swann addressed, with musical examples, “Heroes or Antiheroes: What Their Music Tells Us,” “Classical Heroes and Their Music,” and “Heroism and Redemption: What Does Heroism Mean in Wagner?”

Attendees have requested more free time at this beautiful park, so the 2026 Wildnis will extend from the late afternoon of Thursday June 11 to mid-day Sunday June 14 , with more free time.



*Left to right standing Professor Simon Williams, Maestro Jecrey Swann, Wildnis coordinator Sabrina Cassagnol. Seated WSWDC president emeritus, cofounder, and Wildnis co-founder Aurelius (Aury) Fernandez.*





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#### Incoming Board Members

**John Arbab** is a lawyer at the U.S. Department of Justice in the environment and natural resources division. He discovered Wagner when more or less at random he put on an LP from a boxed set that he'd purchased on a whim at a record shop sale. The tone arm landed on what turned out to be the "sword forging" scene from "Siegfried." He was hooked.



**Matt Chen** is a CPA who works for the Treasury Department. At the University of Illinois he spent his earnings from a record shop on Wagner CDs while enduring a professor who thought Verdi vastly superior to Wagner.



**Dominique Dillsinger** is an attorney with the Federal Election Commission and a retired Army JAG officer. She was born in Haiti and came to the US as a child.



**Allan Reiter** started piano study at age 7 when his family was stationed in Naples, Italy. He has played flute and piccolo in concert bands, symphony orchestras and chamber groups. He retired as a biochemist from the USAFR Biomedical Sciences Corps.



**Dan Sherman's** earliest Wagner moment was watching Bugs Bunny. Then he discovered the Solti *Ring* at his local library, sparking a lifelong passion for Wagner. He has been a member of WSWDC since 2000. He attended his first Bayreuth with the initial allocation provided by Wolfgang and Guttrune Wagner.



**Jonathan Terrell** holds a degree in musicology from Newcastle University (UK) where he specialized in Romantic opera. He has sung tenor in the scholas of St. Patrick's Cathedral (NYC) and St. Matthews Cathedral (WDC). He is founder and president of KCIC, a consulting firm in Washington DC.



The Wagner Society of Washington DC

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