

A Historic New York Debut: Zurich Opera House Reimagines Wagner at Carnegie Hall

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New York City is no stranger to *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Richard Wagner's epic operatic exploration of power, love, and fate. Some eight performances of the opera cycle have been staged at the Metropolitan Opera. But now, thanks to the gift of arts consultant and philanthropist Thurmond Smithgall and the artistic resources of the Zurich Opera House, New York audiences will experience something new: a concert performance of the Ring cycle at Carnegie Hall.

When in 1834, the curtain was raised on the Zurich Opera House's first production, audiences were treated to high drama—the opening of Mozart's *Magic Flute* in which three mysterious women rescue prince Tamino from a dragon and give him a picture of Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the Night. For Tamino, it's love at first sight and on learning the princess is a prisoner of the high priest Sarastro, he sets off to rescue her.

It was an appropriately exciting debut for an opera house that has built a reputation for a diverse repertoire, a mission to engage young people, and a willingness to experiment both artistically and technologically. With plans for a 2027 concert performance of Wagner's Ring cycle in New York, the institution is again breaking new ground.

"The Ring has never been done in Carnegie Hall before," says Thurmond Smithgall, an arts consultant and philanthropist who has made a major donation to support the New York production. "It's one of the great halls, and to have a Ring cycle done in sequence is a real artistic coup for New York."

Staged without sets or costumes, concert performances engage the imagination and make it easier to focus more closely on the music and words in lower-cost productions whose affordable tickets help attract new

audiences. "Opera in concert can introduce people to opera who might be a little intimidated by the idea of going into the opera house," says Smithgall.

PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT

With 1,100 seats, Zurich Opera House is relatively small compared to its international peers. Yet it stages more than 300 events annually—opera, ballet, classical concerts, and recitals—and attracts audiences and performers from around the world.

"We're a boutique theater. We like to call ourselves the smallest house in the champion league," says Katherine Waldvogel, who leads the organization's development and fundraising efforts.

"I'm very proud to support this Ring cycle because of the uniqueness of it, because it will bring people to opera and to Wagner, and because of the involvement of Carnegie Hall and the Zurich Opera House."

THURMOND SMITHGALL



As one of Switzerland's leading cultural institutions, Zurich Opera House has a home on Sechseläutenplatz in central Zurich in a building designed by Viennese architects Fellner & Helmer and constructed after the original Actien-Theater burnt down in 1890. While its façade has a neo-Baroque style and is decorated with classical busts of Weber, Wagner, Mozart, Schiller, Shakespeare, and Goethe, the organization is far from traditional.

It was, for example, Europe's first opera house to have electric lighting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it used live-streaming technology to bring productions to its audiences and a sophisticated network of microphones and video cameras to enable singers and musicians to maintain social distancing.

A SHARED SET OF PASSIONS

This longstanding commitment to innovation and to sustaining the art form for future audiences resonates deeply with Thurmond Smithgall. As founder and chair of the Lanie & Ethel Foundation, whose work includes advancing the careers of young performing artists and promoting educational outreach, Thurmond Smithgall

shares the Zurich Opera House's passion for supporting the next generation of musicians and performers. Having attended many performances in Zurich and with good friends who have sung and conducted at the opera house, he feels a close connection with the organization.

"The most important thing about this was getting the Ring done in a concert performance," he says, explaining why he was inspired to make his gift. "But it was also to get the Zurich Opera House the prominence in a place like Carnegie Hall. When people hear about the quality of the performance, this will bring them to opera in Zurich—and the electricity around this production is going to be palpable."

As a long-time Wagner enthusiast and member of the Bayreuth Festival's board of trustees, founded to perform Wagner's operas, he was naturally intrigued by Zurich Opera House's plan to perform the Ring in New York.

"I was struck the first time I heard Wagner as a young clarinetist at the age of 12," Smithgall explains. "Even though I didn't understand its complexity, there was something very profound about it."

“A lot of Americans visit the Zurich Opera House, so we get in contact with them, give them a backstage tour, and when they go back to the U.S., I link them to our advisory board. But we also need a professional organization like Myriad USA, which is well established in the U.S. philanthropic world, to help further develop our ideas.”

KATHERINE WALDVOGEL

WHERE SWISS ART MEETS AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

Smithgall first learned of the Carnegie Hall Ring at a New York gathering organized by Myriad USA to introduce Zurich Opera House to U.S.-based donors. Myriad USA has been a key partner from the outset, helping launch its American Friends Fund in 2024.

“We opened our American Friends of the Zurich Opera House at Myriad USA to unlock support for this tour,” explains Waldvogel. “The tour is a significant financial commitment, and this structure enables us to engage U.S. donors without the expense of establishing a separate U.S. charity.”

Zurich Opera House already has close ties with American audiences. Its general music director Gianandrea Noseda—who is also music director of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington D.C.—and artistic general manager Matthias Schulz share an international vision that includes overseas tours, including the upcoming performance of Wagner’s Ring at Carnegie Hall.

Looking ahead, Waldvogel looks forward to further expanding the Zurich Opera House’s U.S. footprint and

donor community. By broadening its reach among U.S. supporters, the Opera House is better positioned to invest in ambitious artistic collaborations, including partnerships between Swiss and American musicians, as well as tours and guest performances across the United States. This growing base of support also enables the Opera House to further its long standing mission of nurturing the next generation of musicians and performers, through American Swiss artistic exchanges and by supporting young American artists working and training in Switzerland.

Realizing this vision requires trusted, on the ground expertise in the United States, something Waldvogel says Myriad USA is uniquely equipped to provide. “The fundraising system in the U.S. is totally different from the fundraising system in Europe, the UK, and Switzerland,” Waldvogel explains. “Our donors feel well looked after at Myriad USA, which allows us to focus on our artistic mission. For us, it’s truly a win win.”

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