

WARWICK FYFE

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Fyfe makes his debut as Hans Sachs with Melbourne Opera next month



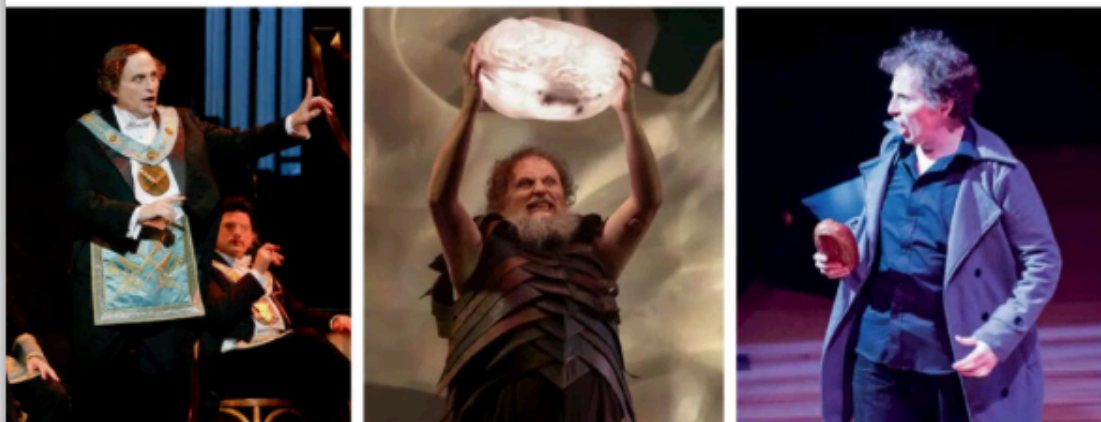
Warwick Fyfe's performances are always imbued with a streak of edginess, a fearlessness that underlines the dramatic and musical strengths he brings to his roles. This has made him one of Australia's finest bass-baritones, most notably in Wagner. In a way, Fyfe's visceral intensity brings to mind Jon Vickers, who was once memorably compared to 'a giant sculpture on which the hammer-blows are still visible'. Fyfe himself is simpler about his approach, saying, 'I have a bit of a habit of running towards danger'.

He qualifies this: 'It seems to me that being courageous and engaging in risk-taking might produce energy that has some sort of aesthetic dividend. That is good and, I would say, is evident in my work.' He pauses for a moment, then says, startlingly. 'I think it's also because I've got a big face, and it reads well. It's great having a big face.'

Fyfe, who was born in Canberra in 1969, belongs in the same pantheon (indeed, the same register) as at least two of his compatriots, the formidably versatile Neil Warren-Smith (1929-81) and the noble Wagnerian Bruce Martin, both of them compelling, deeply thoughtful singers who chose to forge their careers mainly in Australia rather than abroad. In fact, Martin, an old friend and colleague, has been very much on Fyfe's mind of late, as he prepares for his debut as Hans Sachs, in Melbourne Opera's new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Fyfe's association with this opera goes back through his professional career. In 1994, in Melbourne, he performed in a revival of Opera Australia's 1988 *Meistersinger* production by Michael Hampe. Bruce Martin sang the cobbler Sachs, and Fyfe, further down the bill, sang the soap maker, Hermann Ortel. 'I think I had only one solo line—"Immer am Ort"—which I sang so loudly it was like a detonation.'

It has taken some time for Fyfe to ascend the ladder of *Meistersinger* roles. In 2003, for OA, he sang Fritz Kothner and covered Sixtus Beckmesser, which he went on to sing in Melbourne in 2018, in the Royal Opera production. All the while, he was adding other Wagner roles to his already substantial repertoire, including Wolfram in *Tannhäuser*, the Herald in *Lobengrin*, and an acclaimed Alberich in Neil Armfield's staging of the *Ring* in Melbourne in 2013 and 2016. Fyfe's Alberich, I wrote at the time (February 2014, p. 163) was 'unexaggerated, deft and mercurial ... sung in a strong and supple baritone'. This was all the more remarkable since Fyfe took over the role at three



Warwick Fyfe as (l to r.) Beckmesser in Opera Australia's 'Meistersinger' in Melbourne, 2018; Alberich in Opera Australia's 'Das Rheingold' in Brisbane, 2023; Peter in 'Hänsel und Gretel' in Singapore, 2017

weeks' notice, after John Wegner withdrew due to illness. Fyfe sang the same role in the national company's new *Ring* in Brisbane at the end of 2023. Earlier that year he sang Wotan in the three cycles of Melbourne Opera's striking production in Bendigo, central Victoria. 'Warwick Fyfe was simply magnificent,' wrote Peter Rose in *Australian Book Review* of the *Walküre* Wotan. 'There seems to be no limit to his vocal power, yet he can also be subtle, intimate, almost conversational.'

Now comes what Fyfe affectionately, if still a little warily, calls 'the King Daddy of roles'. He has been saturating himself in Sachs, getting the character's total of two and a half hours of words and music into his head and heart. 'In terms of learning, people have different methods. There's a story that Bruce Martin sang the entire role through every day for six months. But he is a national treasure and a force of nature. Us mere mortals have different methods. I spent whole days, starting in the morning and going until bedtime to try to break the back of it. You know intuitively when the moment comes, when you can sing the whole thing with the score. But then there's getting it into the memory.'

Does learning a new Wagner role come any easier, having sung other roles in the same opera—say, Alberich and Wotan or Beckmesser and Sachs? It depends, he says. 'In *Rheingold*, for instance, there's a certain amount of osmosis between Wotan and Alberich, and I've known these works pretty well since my youth. But in reality, it was still like starting from scratch. The notion that you're either an Alberich or a Wotan can be exploded.'

Meistersinger, Fyfe says, also comes with its special challenges. 'For instance, Act 2 is so complicated for both Beckmesser and Sachs. For Beckmesser, he has to coordinate his hand movements to look as if he's actually playing that lute, and you have to make sure you don't accidentally sing the wrong verse. For Sachs, it's getting those hammer strokes right, but also being careful not to blow a valve with all those "Tra-la-leis" and "O-hos". But it's even more important that I get all the notes and words of the role right.'

Notes and words, however, are only part of a more complex mechanism that drives Warwick Fyfe. His view is broader, more holistic, and certainly not confined to Wagner. 'You have to cultivate your inner garden,' he said in a recent interview, adding, 'I realized

towards the end of my 20s that reading book after book about Wagner was going to make me into a bad Wagnerian. It's the kind of thing that makes you a bore. The best way of being a good Wagnerian is to be a cultivated person. A person with a broad cultural hinterland.'

Ultimately, this approach has meant a lot of risk-taking. It goes back to Fyfe's teenage years in Canberra, when he took up the tuba. 'I started with the protoplasmic ineptitude of the school band,' he says. 'Outside of school, the most important tuba playing I did was in the Canberra Youth Orchestra Society, a marvellous institution with multiple ensembles.' He began in the junior concert band, known as the Symphonic Band, then graduated to the senior band, known as the Wind Ensemble, and finally spent a year playing in the Canberra Youth Orchestra. By this time, Fyfe was also doing after-school preparatory studies at the Canberra School of Music: 'The best bit of music study I ever did.' He would stumble into singing—his words—a little later, and studied at the Opera Studio of the Victorian College of the Arts, in Melbourne.

Tuba playing suited him. 'I was trying to play things I wasn't ready to play. But I loved that.' He persevered, inspired by his hero of heroes, Winston Churchill, who was not known for playing the tuba but whose never-give-up philosophy was encouraging. 'I learned that there's a process of integrity, revealing something that has truth glowing at the centre of it. It will communicate itself inevitably.'

This persistence has gone on to prove a useful weapon in Fyfe's arsenal as a bass-baritone. He recalls being on a panel with some young singers a few years ago. 'They were saying the usual things—don't do big roles too early; be careful; be cautious, and I said there was also an argument for simply throwing yourself in. There was a time when I was singing in every Fach under the sun. People would laugh at my CV, because it

Fyfe as Wotan in Melbourne Opera's 'Die Walküre' in 2022



seemed so insane to them. My natural tendency is to take, dare I say, a heroic approach. Besides, no one's going to die, are they?'

Fyfe's CV is indeed ambitiously large and diverse. For example, his 2024 performances included Scarpia for Opera Australia, the Water Sprite in *Rusalka* for West Australian Opera, and the Speaker in Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* with the Sydney Symphony and its chief conductor, Simone Young. Other roles have included Amonasro in *Aida*, Sancho Panza in *Don Quichotte* and Trombonok in Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*. Further back, for OA, he sang the title roles in *Rigoletto* and *Falstaff*, Faninal in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Mandryka in *Arabella* and Dr Schön in the complete version of *Lulu*, which Fyfe was understudying. Sure enough, the Schön cancelled, and Fyfe was called in at the last moment. 'Everything went right, even the top G was good, but after *Lulu* shot me in Act 2 I hadn't been told how to get off stage. After lying there for a while, I thought, fuck it, I'd better get up. So I did, and walked off. Afterwards, someone asked me, "Did you come back to life?"'

At this stage it's worth mentioning that an interview with Warwick Fyfe is far from a formal question-and-answer process. Rather, it is an elaborate cadenza of themes and variations that go up and down the scale, with occasional returns to the tonic to make sure we're still on track. There's an agile, quicksilver mind at work there that is as provocatively challenging as it is irresistibly engrossing.

For example, after I emailed Fyfe, asking him for details of his 2015 Churchill Fellowship, to study Wagnerian opera techniques, he sent a lengthy and thoroughly entertaining reply. His main point—'I took [the fellowship] seriously and have endeavoured to act on my undertaking to bring back and make use of the knowledge gained overseas here in Australia'—was backed up with arguments and counter-arguments about the differences between European and Australian culture in terms of distance and language. 'There's something *ersatz*-spiritual about seeing things venerated for their absolute worth rather than popular enthusiasm being the only measure of things,' Fyfe wrote. 'In Germany one will see plinths with statues of philosophers and artists and so on atop them. Not just sportsmen or art-for-dummies style municipal art.'

As we see, Fyfe's sense of fearlessness extends well beyond the proscenium and concert platform. He is not at all afraid to answer back to his critics if they displease him. For example, following one review of Fyfe's performance in the SSO *Gurrelieder*, the singer wrote a letter to the magazine, citing in his defence everyone from Arnold Schoenberg to Simone Young. Why did he do this?

'I think that we should challenge this idea that singers should keep their peace. I've never understood this compact where people would say you just have to take it on the chin. The analogy I use is that if you're walking down the street and a stranger comes up and suddenly slaps you on the face, do you let him keep on walking? But people say, "No, no, no, he's a critic, he can do that, you know." I think, what the hell? You *should* be able to speak back.'

It is hardly surprising, for a man so loquacious and so well-read, that Warwick Fyfe is also an author. During Covid lockdown, in 2021, he wrote a 487-page novel, *Nail*. It was, he says, inspired by his revisiting an old childhood haunt in Canberra, the Black Mountain Tower. 'This made all the other ideas I'd written down in notebooks string



Fyfe in Italian opera: (l.) as Falstaff in Sydney in 2013; (r.) as Tonio in 'Pagliacci', with Rafael Rojas as Canio, at New Zealand Opera in 2013

together in a great long chain. I knew I had a story. So I just wrote it from beginning to end and got it between covers because I wanted something to exist.'

Even with his large opera and concert repertoire, Fyfe is always in search of new things to sing. His wish list contains more Wagner roles, such as Telramund and Kurwenal, Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*, to add to his Klingsor. 'Like Norman Bailey or Hans Hotter I'd like to go into some of the bass roles as well. Then there's a slew of parts in operas that will probably never get done here—for example, Jupiter in Strauss's *Die Liebe der Danae*, or Borromeo in Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, and maybe Moses in *Moses und Aron*.

'There are also roles that got away, usually ones I've covered endlessly that I didn't end up doing. For instance, Jokanaan, and La Roche in *Capriccio*. I also went to great lengths to learn Golaud in *Pelléas* for two different productions; I've still never done it. Another missed role, despite masses of work on it, was Iago, for Opera Australia.'

Fyfe is also keen to revisit certain roles. 'I think I could do them better now,' he says. 'Although I've sung Falstaff many times, I'd love to do it again.' In addition, he would love to sing more performances abroad. 'I've done a lot of work in Asia and New Zealand, and they gave me a go over at Finnish National Opera, with Athanaël in *Thaïs* and Amonasro.' For English Touring Opera, he sang the four villains in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.

Clearly, Warwick Fyfe at 55 is in his prime. 'My career has got this Indian-summer thing where I'm doing probably the best singing of my life.' He ascribes this to his teacher, the Sydney-based Christina Henson Hayes, whom he consulted in 2020, after he began to experience some vocal problems. 'She's the best teacher I've ever worked with. First, we healed my voice, and, second, we rebuilt my technique. She has helped me achieve more control and predictability in my singing. To use Christina's expression, I don't "leave it to Jesus" when I go for a tricky note, just hoping it will come out. Previously, there were times, say when I was ill or overworked, when I was just trying to figure out how best to get through something and get away with it rather than taking the harder path of doing it properly. The dividend is that this frees me to make artistic choices and gives me the ability to find my maximum resonance almost all the time. I'll never be perfect but I'm much more in command of the machine than I once was.'