

## From the Back Verandah

I met a really lovely bloke a few months ago who claims to be the current reincarnation of Nostradamus. Appropriately enough for these seductive millennial times, he calls himself "Our Ladies' Man".

When I asked him whether he writes prophecies in enigmatic quatrains, he replied, "Not on your rhymin' Nellie. People today are as suspicious of guru half-truths as they are of political promises, to say nothing of statements that require any personal effort of thought. I tell it to 'em straight and plain, taking Hollywood as my model."

"Would you care to make a few predictions for my *Bikwil* readers?"

"How many would you like?"

"Half a dozen'll do."

Here they are, then, just as he declaimed them to me. I offer them in their bare simplicity, without further comment.

Whenever schismatic beasts arise, the avenging eye of Vulcan must needs eclipse the mirror of reality.

Armageddon will chastise their titanic frenzy, but not before the centurial microbe devours the edge of time.

Have you heard? it's in the stars: next July we collide with Mars.

Pope springs eternal in the transformed messenger from the inner pyramid of Babylon.

The ph balance of fiery hair and golden breastplate, having seven times cursed the ancient mysteries of the friend's hammer, will then be taken up in Vesta's alabaster purging cloud.

The Charleston will never last.

— Fizzgig

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# BIKWIL

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## "You Must Remember This"

This issue not only ushers in *Bikwil's* Year 3; it also marks the start of a new essay series. It is intended that these articles will celebrate exceptional moments (or strings of moments) in musical history that are worth reflecting on, more for their individual human or wider social significance than for their technical content.

Some are poignant, others exciting, some funny, others downright bizarre, but none is easily forgotten. For example,

Which British composer wrote his own epitaph?

What about the crazy goings-on in Paris in 1913?

Is it true that we owe a particular classic to a feat of memory?

Is it possible to write a great opera immediately after fracturing a leg and being nearly asphyxiated?

You name it; we'll have it.

While the idea arose most directly out of things in the Wagner special, there had been precedents in other issues. Apart from the jazz chit-chat that appears now and then in Fizzgig's *From the Back Verandah*, one thinks particularly of Bet Briggs' *The Most Sublime Noise* and *For a Singer and His Song*.

So now, on page 12, we introduce the first of our *Memorable Moments in Music*, towards which *Bikwil's* many music lovers are hereby cordially invited to contribute their favourite stories.

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## A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

It's likely that even those of you who didn't study Latin at school are familiar with Julius Caesar's statement "All Gaul is divided into three parts" with which he begins his *Gallic War*. Indeed, if Caesar hadn't said something even more unforgettable ("I came, I saw, I conquered"), school children would have remembered those seven words as the most famous ever uttered in ancient Rome.

In Caesar's time the three tribes of Gaul were known as the Belgae, the Aquitani and the Celtae, each with their own language. Unlike many surrounding languages, the language of the Aquitani was not Indo-European but is thought to have been similar to that of the neighbouring Vascones. This latter people lived on both slopes of the western Pyrenees, and their name has given us the word for the most extraordinary language in modern Europe — Basque.

Today I want to briefly canvass what fascinates me about the Basque language, and to do that I first must offer a note on the term "Indo-European".

One of the preoccupations of 19th century language scholars was attempting to reconstruct the relationships between the better-

known European and Asian languages. One thing they soon realised was that the languages of most of Europe and those of Asia as far east as the Bay of Bengal all belonged to the same group. This language group came to be called Indo-European.

Linguists now believe that the speakers of the ancestral Indo-European grandmother tongue originated in about 5000 to 6000 BC somewhere north of the Danube basin, where they led a semi-nomadic existence. By 3000 BC some dialectal varieties of the Indo-European language were already established. Ultimately there developed nine main language sub-groups — Albanian, Armenian, Balto-Slavic, Celtic, Germanic, Hellenic, Indian and Italic. Among the scores of ancient and modern languages descending from that same Indo-European proto-language we can thus list those as diverse and just about mutually unintelligible as Greek, Latin, German, Russian, Persian, Sanskrit and English.

And what of poor old Basque?

Old is right. Long before the Romans or even the much earlier Celts had spread over their lands, the Basques occupied the southern

first performances of the *Enigma Variations* (1899) and *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900).

But on this extraordinary morning he was a trumpet player. According to legend, in order to practise out of earshot of the Villa, Richter had regularly rowed himself out into the middle of Lake Lucerne. The trumpet part is tiny, in so far as Wagner calls for it in a passage of barely 13 bars out of a total of 405. But because he cleverly saves its entrance until bar 295, its brief effect is all the more exhilarating, and therefore, one assumes, worth all that effort to get right.

At last the great day arrived, and the fourteen assembled on the stairs. Below them waited little Isolde and Eva and a few house guests, among them a frequent visitor to the Villa, a certain Friedrich Nietzsche, then in his mid twenties.

Quietly the music began — *ruhig bewegt, tranquillo mosso*.

Here is an extract from Cosima's diary:

When I woke up I heard a sound. It grew louder. I could no longer imagine myself in a dream. Music was sounding, and what music!

After the music had died away, Richard came into my bedroom and put into my hands the score of the

work he has called *The Siegfried Idyll*. As a birthday surprise for me he had set up his orchestra outside my room and thus consecrated our joyous home forever. I was in tears, but so was the whole household.

"Now let me die," I exclaimed to him.

The *Siegfried Idyll* (Wagner had originally intended calling it *Triebshener Idyll*, by the way) was never intended by Richard and Cosima to see publication, nor to be heard in public performance; it was an intensely private thing. On the manuscript Richard had even written 16 personal lines of verse to Cosima. It was thus a great blow when financial difficulties in 1877 forced them to sell the work to Schott's, who published the work the following year, including the dedicatory verse.

Not even this disappointment, however, could detract from the symbolic significance for the Wagners and their friends of this serenade, and for some years after its première on the staircase that same band of musicians would gather at the Villa on Christmas Day to perform again this lovely, unique birthday present — from memory.

Consequently Wagner composed the *Idyll* for just thirteen players – two violins, viola, cello, double bass, flute, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns and trumpet. With such a chamber ensemble he could achieve the “most exquisitely subtilized colouristic and contrapuntal effects . . . to express the impalpable nuances of his inspiration.” (Robert L. Jacobs, *Wagner*, 1947)

There is strong evidence that in the *Idyll* Wagner used drafts he happened to have been working on when he met Cosima in 1864, perhaps as part of a projected string quartet. He also introduced these same themes into Act III of *Siegfried*. Since they do not occur anywhere else in the *Ring*, it is believed that he composed the rhapsodic music accompanying the scene of Siegfried’s awakening of Brünnhilde to give full rein to his family happiness, and as a sentimental reminder of the “Cosima quartet sketches”.

Often the *Siegfried Idyll* is performed with a full complement of strings, instead of the solo string parts Wagner wrote. Both ways of playing it are satisfying to the modern ear, but let us not forget the sound Wagner was planning for Christmas Day 1870.

(Cosima had been born 25 December, 1837.)

But first there was the problem of rehearsals to solve, which all had to be carried out in secret. Then Wagner had to determine where to present his musical gift to Cosima. He decided on the staircase to her bedroom, where there was just cramped room enough for himself conducting and the thirteen instrumentalists. His intention, of course, was to perform the piece as she awoke.

One of the instrumentalists was Hans Richter, a young French horn player from Vienna, who had been working for the preceding five years as Wagner’s amanuensis, preparing opera scores for publication. In future years he would enjoy even more renown as a Wagnerian conductor than von Bülow.

It was he in fact who conducted the inaugural Bayreuth performances of the *Ring* (1876), as well as the first British performances of *Die Meistersinger* (1882) and *Tristan* (1884). From 1899 to 1911 he was conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester. It was Richter, too, who introduced to the world two of Edward Elgar’s greatest and most popular works, by conducting the

corner of the Bay of Biscay, as they do today. Exactly how old the Basques are is not known, but the culture dates back at least to Palaeolithic times, which makes their language the most ancient language of Europe in terms of continuous occupation of the territory where it spoken. As old as those hills that isolated it from the Indo-European tidal wave which washed traces of all other prehistoric tongues from the mouth and ear of mankind.

The oldest texts in Basque date from the sixteenth century, though there are inscriptions dating back to Roman times.

(Incidentally, as with the word “Basque”, so with “Biscay” and “Gascony” — all are derivatives of the Latin “Vascones”. The Basque word for their own language is “Euskara”.)

Because of its age, Basque is truly an orphan language, entirely unrelated structurally or historically to any language now spoken anywhere on the planet, or indeed to any known ever to have existed. Mind you, many attempts, none conclusive, have been made to find connections between Basque and other languages — the Caucasian language family (around the Caspian and Black seas), for example, and even various North African

languages. There was a time, in fact, when some scholars cherished the belief that Basque was the language spoken by all humanity before the Tower of Babel was destroyed. Such ideas are typical of myths that persist about Basque, such as the false notion that no outsider can possibly learn it.

In the late twentieth century, of course, we over here in Australia have heard nothing about the Basque language. Instead we have developed negative views about the Basque people, with zealous nationalism getting all its press coverage in terms of acts of terrorism by ETA on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. (Their less numerous French brothers keep a much lower profile.) ETA stands for “Euzkadi ta Azkatasuna”, meaning “Basque Homeland and Liberty”.

While we cannot condone such violence, it is understandable why they want to preserve their unique culture after centuries of domination by Celts, Romans, Catholic Church, French, Castilians and, in particular, Franco’s fascist Spain. In the latter period, local schools were forbidden to teach the language, as were the media and churches prohibited from using it. Public places bore Spanish signs only, no Basque names were permitted in baptism, books in the Basque language were

ceremoniously burned and Basque inscriptions on tombstones removed.

Such bitter memories linger long, and the desire to preserve the national identity, including the language, is at root no different from its recent resurgence elsewhere. In this context, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Inuit, Kurd and Australian Aboriginal culture come readily to one's mind.

Happily, by the early 1960s official policy had changed. Gradually Basque reappeared in church services, schools and on radio. In 1980, the first Basque Parliament was elected, with Euskara recognised as one of its official languages. Simultaneously, Basque literature has burgeoned, particularly poetry. There is now a Basque public TV channel.

Nevertheless, if the world isn't careful, the days of Basque as a viable language are numbered. Yes, despite an increasing and devoted interest in it by Internet enthusiasts from as far away as Norway, England, Germany and Canada, Basque is an endangered species. Today Basque speakers total less than 600,000 in Spain and 100,000 in France. Not all are equally proficient, however. While many understand the language, few of them make much of an attempt to speak

it, let alone write it. Hence the following warning:

Hizkuntza bat ez da galtzen ez dakitenek ikasten ez dutelako, dakitenek hitzegiten ez dutelako baizik.

(A language does not disappear because those who don't know it don't learn it, but because those who know it don't speak it.)

I'll leave you with a few intriguing pieces of Basque trivia.

- ◇ The Basques may well have been those "Saracens" who defeated Roland, Charlemagne's chief paladin, in the celebrated rearguard action at the Pass of Roncesvalles in Navarra in 778 AD. The battle was depicted in the twelfth century epic poem *La Chanson de Roland*.
- ◇ The Basque word "Jinkoa" (= God) is believed to be the origin of both the phrase "by jingo", and the word "jingoism".
- ◇ Converted to Christianity around 600 AD, the Basque people have brought forth many priests, and at least one saint. None is more illustrious than St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, i.e. the Jesuits, and canonised in 1622. He was born in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa.

— Harlish Goop

Wagner's music, he continued to work loyally on behalf of the latter's operas.

Liszt was also appalled by his daughter's behaviour, and for years would have no contact with Wagner on a personal basis. Like von Bülow, however, he went on championing his music.

Supported he may have been by musical crusaders like Liszt and von Bülow and financial backers like Mad King Ludwig, but it is no exaggeration to say that it was Cosima's love for Richard and deep appreciation of his art that turned Wagner's existence from potential defeat to certain victory.

As Milton Cross (*Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music*, 1962) puts it,

Emotional stability had finally entered Wagner's life. In Cosima he had found the woman for whom he had been seeking so restlessly all his life. To the last years of Wagner's life, they remained devoted to each other, Cosima providing him with the understanding and adulation he needed . . . Wagner could return to composition with a peace of mind he had never known.

Eighteen sixty-nine saw the birth of a son, the day before which Wagner completed the musical outline for Act III of *Siegfried*. What other name,

then, could the son have been given but Siegfried?

The following year, a few months after von Bülow had divorced her, Cosima and Richard were legally married. In a letter he wrote around this time, Wagner said of his life with Cosima,

She has defied every disapprobation and taken upon herself every condemnation. She has borne me a wonderfully beautiful boy, whom I call boldly Siegfried; he is now growing, together with my work; he gives me a new long life, which at last has attained a meaning. Thus we get along without the world, from which we have totally withdrawn.

Wagner's personal joy was without a doubt now complete, and before long he set about preparing a surprise gift for Cosima's next birthday, her 33rd. It was to be the performance of a new musical piece, one of his few purely orchestral compositions, written especially to celebrate the birth of their son — the *Siegfried Idyll*.

For obvious reasons, the music would have an definite relationship to the opera *Siegfried* and indeed feature several leitmotifs from that work, but for this family occasion the treatment had to be wholly different — tender, poignant and, above all, delicately intimate.

## Christmas Day Première on the Staircase

[ *Memorable Moments in Music* No. 1 ]

In my *Gaudeat Auditor* article in the Wagner issue (No. 10, November 1998), I alluded to the first performance of the *Siegfried Idyll*. I have been asked to write some more on that romantic event, and so I have decided to make it the first in our Memorable Moments in Music series.

In 1857 Hans von Bülow married Cosima, one of the three children resulting from the love affair in the 1830s of composer/pianist Franz Liszt and the Countess d'Agoult. Von Bülow was a pianist, composer and conductor who had studied piano with Liszt in 1853 and who was already an intimate friend of Richard Wagner and a devoted advocate of Wagner's music. Now usually considered the world's first virtuoso conductor, von Bülow unfortunately was psychologically unstable, and this fact coupled with Cosima's great intellect and strong-willed attitudes led to an unhappy marriage.

Wagner and Cosima were attracted to each other and became

lovers, a fact they took few steps to conceal from either von Bülow or Wagner's wife, Minna — or the world, for that matter. (Wagner had separated permanently from Minna in 1862; she died four years later.)

In 1865 Cosima bore him a daughter, whom in typically impudent shamelessness they called Isolde. To the extent that he was able, the miserable von Bülow accepted the girl as his own child.

"They will drag us through the mud. Let them do it, so long as I am by his side." So wrote Cosima in her diary in 1868.

But by then a second daughter had been born (Eva), and public contempt had become so great that the four fled to Switzerland and set up as a family at the Villa Tribschen on Lake Lucerne. Von Bülow is said to have complained, "If it had been anyone else but Wagner, I would have shot him." Instead, being the honourable Prussian nobleman he was, and — more importantly — the committed devotee of

## A Little Bit about Snakes

Here's another story for all you *naturalisti al'poltrona*.

This adventure took place on one warm summer's day when I went bush-walking with a friend along the Colo River. Not long after we started, I spotted a large snake lying in shallow water. By the shape of the head and large body we figured it to be a species of python. To my surprise, my friend suggested we capture it and have a closer look!

After some hesitation I agreed only on the condition that he grab the head while I took care of the less dangerous tail end. With the aid of a forked branch he had secured a tight grip on the back of the snake's head and I grabbed the tail. The snake immediately coiled its body around both our arms and tightened its grip. *Who was holding who?* The pressure it applied was surprisingly strong and it took some effort to unravel the snake.

We laid the snake out on the sand, still maintaining a secure hold of both ends, and marked its length. I then paced the length which measured 70 inches (1.8 metres). We noted that the snake had two tiny spurs on either side of its lower body, its rudimentary legs which are still evident on all pythons — an indication that snakes in the past actually did have "*a leg to stand on*".

I drew a rough sketch of the snake's head and skin pattern for later identification (dark olive green above with yellow markings) and then we released it back into the water. The python like all snakes is an excellent swimmer and within seconds it disappeared into the bank on the opposite side of the river.

On returning home, we identified the snake as a diamond python (*Morelia spilota*) — apparently a fairly common snake in NSW. Pythons are non-venomous but can give a nasty bite.

There are several venomous species of snakes which are found in NSW, two of the most venomous being the death adder and the tiger snake — a bush-walker's nightmare. The other poisonous snakes which are more often encountered in the bush are the red-bellied black snake and the brown snake. The red-bellied is not aggressive and will only attack if provoked; its bite causes severe illness but is not usually fatal. The brown snake, however, is aggressive and its venom very potent.

So if you do venture from your armchair and go into the bush, have a good day, *but tread softly*.

— Gianni

## If People Were Roses

[ From *The World Outside*, a book of poems, proposed, for children ]

If people were roses  
growing side by side,  
in the sun's warm tide  
they would flourish,  
they would nourish  
one another:  
they would grow together  
if people were roses.

If people were roses,  
in all seasons radiant,  
of colours rich and variant  
glowing in the sun,  
there would not be one  
that would offend:  
all colours would blend  
if people were roses.

Speech (1960)

- ◇ Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech (28 August, 1963)
- ◇ The shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald, by a reporter on the scene (25 November, 1963)
- ◇ The "one small step" communication from the moon (20 July, 1969).

If you don't have the RealAudio Player, you can download a copy for free from the site.

"What about local history?" I hear you ask. Ok, then.

The School of History and Politics at James Cook University and the Department of History at Melbourne University have jointly developed the site called *The Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*.

The editors of the *Journal* have a special interest in providing a peer evaluated forum for appraisal of new technologies in research and teaching. It is concerned with how interactive

multi-media be most effectively used to represent the past in all its richness and complexity . . . *EJANZH* exploits the possibilities of new communication technologies, but aims to do so in ways which complement the activities of established paper- based historical journals.

Categories included are

- ◇ Articles
- ◇ Book and CD Rom reviews
- ◇ Historical documents
- ◇ Teaching resources
- ◇ Bookstore
- ◇ Conferences.

A useful list of other academic history sites around the world (mainly Australian) is also provided. New work is continually being added, and there is a keyword search engine provided for all material in the *Journal*.

A small but growing site, with a scholarly emphasis.

— TR

### Internet sites referred to above:

- <http://bay1.bjt.net/~melanie//anglo-sa.html>
- <http://history.hanover.edu/modern/science.htm>
- <http://sunsite.unc.edu/expo/deadsea.scrolls.exhibit/intro.html>
- <http://www.TheHistoryNet.com/>
- <http://www.historybuff.com/realaudio/>
- <http://www.jcu.edu.au/aff/history/home.htm>



together site based on an exhibit at the United States Library of Congress will help you do just that — *Scrolls from the Dead Sea: The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Scholarship*.

There are five main sections:

- ◇ Introduction — The World of the Scrolls
- ◇ The Qumran Library
- ◇ The Qumran Community
- ◇ Today — 2,000 Years Later
- ◇ Conclusion.

In addition there is an Outline of Objects and Topics.

A very good site, with plenty of pictures.

Another American site is that prepared by the Cowles History Group and entitled *The History Net: Where History Lives on the Web*. This is almost exclusively about U.S. history, though there is a sub-page on world history. By the looks of it, it is regularly updated, so that the items will be different each time you visit. Last time I dropped in, *This Week's Features* were

- ◇ Lincoln and the Chicken Bone
- ◇ Coney Island: The Nickel Empire
- ◇ The Great Dinosaur Feud
- ◇ America's First Beach Resort
- ◇ Reckoning at Gettysburg
- ◇ Top 200 Traditional American Craftsmen

- ◇ Japan's Ace of Aces
- ◇ Collecting Cobalt Decorated Stoneware.

In addition to the weekly articles, there are unchanging regular features, or *Archives* as they call them, which include

- ◇ Civil War
- ◇ Personality Profiles
- ◇ World War II
- ◇ Interviews
- ◇ Eyewitness Accounts
- ◇ Historic Travel
- ◇ Homes and Heritage,

and so on.

A site with a difference is *History Buff's Audio Library*. The purpose here is to provide you with audio recordings of famous people and events. Again, all are American. Included are recordings in RealAudio format of the following sorts of things:

- ◇ P.T. Barnum giving the world's first recorded commercial plug (1890)
- ◇ A 1912 speech by Theodore Roosevelt
- ◇ A speech by Bruno Richard Hauptmann after his conviction for the Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping (1935)
- ◇ A 1935 speech by Amelia Earhart
- ◇ That famous on-the-spot report of the Hindenberg Disaster (7 May, 1937)
- ◇ J.F. Kennedy's Inaugural

If people were roses,  
for every bud that fell  
a gentle rain would tell  
its passing, attend  
with dignity its end  
and care awaken:  
not one would be forsaken  
if people were roses.

If people were roses,  
nurtured in the seed,  
with care banishing need  
all would survive,  
the young would thrive,  
loved from birth:  
they would grace the earth  
if people were roses.

— Bet Briggs

*So she broke her leg while working  
as an actress in London, did she? She  
must have done it sliding down a  
barrister.*

*Dorothy Parker*

*I only took the regular courses,  
reeling and writhing.*

*Lewis Carroll*

## Quintessential Quirky Quotes

*A gentleman is someone who can play  
the bagpipes — and does not.*

*Anonymous*

*Few things so speedily modify an un-  
cle's love as a nephew's air gun bullet  
in the fleshy part of the leg.*

*P. G. Wodehouse*

*Stafford Cripps? There but for  
the grace of God goes God.*

*Sir Winston Churchill*

## Web

For a technology originally designed for the rapid dissemination of current material, the Internet is nevertheless remarkably helpful for those unhurriedly probing for information on more ancient topics of interest. This issue we look at some Web sites devoted to the study of history. As always, the handful mentioned here represent just the tiniest fraction of what is available.

We start with England, in particular the England of the 5th to 9th centuries. Someone called Melanie runs the *Eclecticity* site, a sub-page of which is *Anglo-Saxon England*. Apart from a brief overview of the period (with maps), she provides several dozen link sites on related topics for you to explore, together with a bibliography.

While this site has not been updated for some time, it would make a useful jumping-off point for those interested in the subject.

Moving a little further afield, we come to a site run by the History Department of Hanover College, Indiana. It goes by the title



## Line

of *Texts and Documents: Europe*. I have had occasion to mention Project Gutenberg more than once in this column, and this site is in the same vein, with nu-

merous documents ready for your study. The texts are divided into four main periods: Ancient (to 500 AD), Medieval (500-1500), Early Modern (1500-1789) and Modern (1798 to the present). Each period has a number of subtopics, with Early Modern, for instance, so far containing:

- ◇ The Italian Renaissance
- ◇ The Protestant Reformation
- ◇ The Catholic Reformation
- ◇ Economic Theory
- ◇ The Scientific Revolution
- ◇ The Enlightenment
- ◇ Britain
- ◇ France.

For those who prefer to search by subject discipline, each era has general links such as literature, philosophy, theology, politics and science, plus dozens of further Web sites to connect to.

While on the subject of historical texts, why not explore the Dead Sea Scrolls? A well put