

\$5m gift allows Wagner operas to come to town

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EVERY opera needs a heroine, and as well as the Rhinemaidens and the goddess Brunnhilde in the massive new production of Wagner's Ring Cycle coming to Melbourne, there is one of the city's most prominent philanthropists, Lonely Planet co-founder Maureen Wheeler.

With her husband, Tony, she is contributing \$5 million to the \$15.5 million cost of mounting Opera Australia's biggest production, Wagner's masterpiece made up of four works over 15 hours. The individual operas - Das Rheingold, Die Walkure, Siegfried and Gotterdammerung - will be performed on separate nights spread over a week in spring 2013, with the cycle performed three times.

The donation is the largest in the company's history. It is supported by an estimated \$2 million from Victorian Major Events, adding to the state's lustre as a cultural destination.

Mrs Wheeler said from London that she had been trying for about three years to mount the cycle in Melbourne. "This has not come out of the blue. The government described our donation as a game-changer. After we put it forward nobody could say no."

She said it was a universal story, drawing on the same mythology as J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, and described the cycle's saga of humans, gods, Valkyries, Nibelungs, fire, heaven and hell as the pinnacle in cultural endeavours. "You have to stage it to fully claim the title as a significant cultural centre," Mrs Wheeler said.

Victoria's Arts Minister, Peter Batchelor, said it demonstrated the strength of the arts in the state, and built on the appeal of the Melbourne Winter Masterpiece series and the investment in musicals such as Mary Poppins. It will be directed by the outgoing director of Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre, Neil Armfield, and conducted by Melbourne composer Richard Mills.

It is a co-production with Houston Grand Opera but will premiere at the Arts Centre. Opera Australia's artistic director, Lyndon Terracini, said the four leads were among the world's top Wagnerian performers - English soprano Susan Bullock as Brunnhilde, Finnish bass-baritone Juha Uusitalo (Wotan), American tenor Gary Lehman (Siegfried) and Australian baritone John Wegner (Alberich). Most of the rest of the cast will be Australians performing overseas. In a dig at Sydney's Opera House, Mr Batchelor described the State Theatre as Australia's finest opera venue.

Branded the Melbourne Ring, the production will be staged exclusively in Melbourne and Opera Australia hopes to present it again in 2016. Shortcomings in the Opera House theatre and the lack of alternatives mean it will never be performed in Sydney.

'Opera Australia's 2013 production will generate significant economic benefits for Victoria, creating jobs and boosting our cultural and tourism sector, as well as promoting Melbourne as an exciting cultural destination to a global audience," Mr Batchelor said.