

INTRODUCTION

The Wagner Anniversary in Germany and Switzerland

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In recognition of Richard Wagner's bicentennial in 2013 there were innumerable conferences, celebrations, concerts, TV documentaries and newly published books in Germany and Switzerland, those being the two countries where Richard Wagner mainly spent his life. Our report can only be an incomplete survey.

Let us begin with Switzerland. The first item on the Wagner agenda took place in February with a production of *Tannhäuser* at the Zurich Opera. Nina Stemme was a fabulous Elisabeth and Michael Volle an outstanding Wolfram in a fairly good production.

On April 16, the Lord Mayor of Zurich opened an exhibition on Franz W. Beidler, the eldest grandson of Richard Wagner and a Swiss citizen. It covered a large part of Wagner's first daughter Isolde's life and showed what had become of the Swiss Wagner family branch after Franz W. Beidler left Germany in 1933. This exhibition—which included hitherto unknown photos and documents—was shown again in Bayreuth in 2014 and in Tribschen near Lucerne a year later.

The Swiss annual music festival, which is held in Zurich in June, was full of Wagner-related events. The overall programme—titled *The Greenhouse ...* (a reference to Mathilde and Otto Wesendonck's orangery)—included concerts with early works of the master, plays with references to Wagner, and artworks. The festival was opened by the composer's great-granddaughter Nike Wagner who gave a fascinating but also humorous speech on Wagner's time in exile in Switzerland, showing parallels to the situation today.

In May, a French film on Wagner's excursions in Switzerland was released, based on Eva Rieger's and Hiltrud Schroeder's book titled *Ein Platz für Götter: Richard Wagners Wanderungen*

in der Schweiz (A Place for the Gods: Richard Wagner's Walking Tours in Switzerland). The film features Antoine Wagner, Eva Wagner-Pasquier's son, commenting on the breathtaking scenery of the Swiss mountains with Wagner's music as a soundtrack. It was subsidised by the Swiss Tourist Organisation and is meant to be an appreciation of Wagner as well as a promotional film for Switzerland. The preview took place in the presence of Antoine's mother, Eva Wagner, in the Rietberg-Museum, the former home of the Wesendoncks.

In June, Gottfried Wagner launched his new book *Du sollst keine anderen Götter haben neben mir* (You shall Have no Other Gods before Me). Doors slammed as some visitors left, but we found the book an honest demonstration of his ambivalent feelings towards his grandfather, written in a radical but scholarly way. In the same month, Professor Laurenz Lütteken hosted a symposium at the University of Zurich on the theme of Wagner and Exile. The papers included discussions of all places where the composer had lived.

In Germany, the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater (The Research Institute for Music Theatre Studies) at the University of Bayreuth organised a multi-year series of events to take place around the world under the general heading *WagnerWorldWide 2013* (WWW 2013). This culminated in an international conference—*WagnerWorldWide: Reflections*—which was held at the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater at the Schloss Thurnau (an historic castle near Bayreuth) in December 2013. The events concentrated on five specific areas of inquiry: Environment and Nature, Gender and Sexuality, Media and Film, History and Nationalism, and Globalisation and Markets.

In November 2013 a conference was held in Würzburg, where work on the scholarly letter edition and a new edition of Wagner's writings is being carried out. The conference was titled *Schreiben für das Kunstwerk der Zukunft. Textsorten, Strategien und Inhalte in Richard Wagners Briefen und Schriften* (Writing the Art of the Future: Texts, Strategies and Topics in Richard Wagner's Letters and Documents). The discussions demonstrated the promise of recent and ongoing philologically precise work for future readings and interpretations of Wagner's writings.

Then it was time for the Bayreuth Festival. The town was not prepared for the event at all. Wahnfried was closed, the Festspielhaus had scaffolding all around it, the Margravian Theatre was also closed and the town full of street works and not at all festival-like. Yet it was encouraging to see Hannes Heer's exhibition *Verstummte Stimmen* (Silenced Voices) again in the Festival Park. In 2012 a conference had been held in Bayreuth about the Jews who worked there from 1876 until 1945, and this led to an exhibition with large photographs of Jewish singers and instrumentalists, accompanied by texts relating their experiences. Many members of the audience studied the posters during the long intervals, and were obviously moved by reading about the artists' fates.

The *Ring* cycle produced by Castorf was puzzling: over-active and shocking for many of the audience but not really inventive or new. Because of all the action on stage, one could not concentrate on the music or the singing. This was particularly irritating, as the Russian conductor Kirill Petrenko was excellent and the majority of the cast was convincing.

Disillusioned by Bayreuth's *Ring*, we were looking forward to the concert performance of the *Ring* cycle in Lucerne. There was a bit of acting on the stage, with minor gestures which—thanks to Doris Sophia Heinrichsen who organised the stage direction—created an atmosphere of suspense. The Bamberg Philharmonia conducted by Jonathan Nott played with much verve, and the singers were excellent without exception. Lucerne was at its best

and there was great praise and discussion in the balmy summer nights, topped off with the odd cocktail in the hotel bar.

It is amazing how many small theatres made a big effort to honour Wagner by performing one of his operas. In November the town of Oldenburg in Germany hosted a symposium on *Tristan and Isolde* and the theatre staged a performance of the opera with its own orchestra and house ensemble.

What can we say about the TV documentary *Der Wagner Clan*, produced by Gero von Boehm in 2013 and shown early in 2014? It contained a number of historical mistakes and exaggerated rather freely, but those who watched it and had no knowledge of the Wagner family later said they had found it quite informative. After the film had been shown there were interviews with Nike Wagner and others, to which historical flashbacks were added.

The last highlight for us was the *Ring* cycle in Melbourne, which showed such love and joy in the demanding enterprise. We will never forget the final night where the organisers hosted a party and thanked the staff for cooperating in such a fantastic way to make the project a pronounced success.