

What would Wagner have thought of Regietheater in modern Bayreuth?

During an interval of *Die Meistersinger* directed by Katharina Wagner, that I saw on my first visit to Bayreuth in 2011, a fellow-visitor from Dublin asked, what would Wagner have thought about the production? My response was that he would probably have hated it. My friend was not so sure.

Thinking about the question afterwards, I realised that my response had been extremely superficial. I had read Spotts's history of the Bayreuth festival, and was aware that for more than thirty years following Wagner's death in 1883 productions in Bayreuth changed very little¹. This was not, however, the result of a decision by Wagner himself, but reflected the primary concern of Wagner's widow, Cosima, who put the Festival on a regular footing, which was to preserve Richard's legacy. For *Parsifal* this was simple, since it had just received its premiere in Bayreuth, and it remained unchanged for 50 years. As other operas were introduced into subsequent festivals, she tried to ensure that their productions adhered as closely as possible to those that he had earlier supervised. So while it seems probable that Cosima would have hated Katharina's production, this might not necessarily have been true for Richard himself².

What we were seeing in 2011 was an example of *Regietheater* ("directors' or producers' theatre"), the term normally used to describe stagings that differ in some deliberate and significant way from what their composers or librettists expected or prescribed. It was so obviously very different from these early productions that if Wagner's Ghost had returned to the back rows of the Festspielhaus, unaware of the historical evolution of productions of his work, it would doubtless have been startled. It made more sense to imagine that the Ghost would have come to it only having followed closely all Bayreuth productions of his operas. The Ghost would therefore have expected in advance that the 2007-11 *Die Meistersinger* would be an example of *Regietheater*. In 1986-9, the New York Met produced a *Ring Cycle* using Wagner's original stage directions, and scenery that approximated to the 1896 Bayreuth *Ring* – what would be described in Germany as a *Werktreue* production. This was a deliberate reaction to what James Levine, the Music Director of the Met, regarded as the excesses of German *Regietheater*. Had the Ghost encountered such a production in modern Germany, it would have been astonished.

This is an expanded version of a paper given to the Wagner Society in March 2017. It provided a survey of how productions in Bayreuth had evolved over approximately its first century, culminating in the so-called Centenary *Ring* directed by Patrice Chéreau, staged from 1976 to 1980. This production is sometimes considered to have been the first example of *Regietheater* for an opera by Wagner, and although as noted below this is not strictly correct, it did entail a striking departure from earlier productions. It was filmed for television, and when shown in 1980 proved to be remarkably popular, especially in the UK, thus introducing *Regietheater* to a very large audience. My paper then jumped over the next thirty years of Bayreuth productions to have time to discuss the hypothetical reactions of the Ghost to Katharina's *Die Meistersinger* and to two other productions that I had seen in Bayreuth, *Lohengrin*, directed by Hans Neuenfels first performed in 2010, and the *Ring*, directed by Frank Castorf in 2013, which I saw in 2015.

¹ Spotts, Frederic. *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1994.

² With the exception of Richard himself, members of the Wagner family will be referred to by their Christian names.

I was asked if I could circulate a written version of my remarks. I have expanded these in order to include in the survey the Bayreuth operas between the fall of the curtain on Chéreau's *Ring* in 1980 and its opening on Katharina's *Meistersinger* in 2007. My knowledge of them is based on published reviews, occasionally supplemented by academic analysis. A few were filmed, and I have watched some of the DVDs, which has clarified what critics were saying, but I have not used the films to make any separate judgment of my own.

I have become aware of the very considerable differences in judging a production by reading critical opinions and by seeing a production inside the Festspielhaus. This is not simply a matter of the nature of the experience but also reflects the fact that when seeing a performance live in a theatre an audience, even a Bayreuth audience, has far less ability than a professional critic to place it in a comparative or historical context and will therefore be more likely to base its judgment directly on what it has actually seen and heard rather than how it measures up to some ideal or departs in some imaginative way from what they expected. There are obvious divergences of view among different critics, and audience views can be expected to be even more diverse, but in the closing section of the paper I discuss whether differences of view between audiences and professional critics are likely to be systematic or purely random. If they are systematic, then it is the views of audiences rather than of critics that would have been important to Wagner, with the whole Bayreuth project aimed to optimise audience experience.

One of the things that would have pleased Wagner's Ghost is that Bayreuth directors and conductors have not been permitted to make changes either to the musical score or the libretto. There are a few permissible cuts and a need to make choices among alternatives – for example, is the Dresden or the Paris version of *Tannhäuser* to be used and should the ending to *Der Fliegende Holländer* be that of the original (1843) opera or the later and more usual “redemptive ending” – but these production options came into existence in Wagner's lifetime. Although Wagner envisaged the death of both Ortrud and Elsa at the end of *Lohengrin* and of Isolde at the end of *Tristan and Isolde*, there have been Bayreuth productions of both operas where all three ladies quite clearly have a future existence. The Ghost would presumably not be happy, but there was no violation of the text. The Ghost would of course have preferred the musical quality associated with some productions compared with others, but this is not the concern of this paper which will focus on staging, including not only sets, costumes, lighting and technology, but also acting. Without variation in the score or libretto, the difference between productions, at least for Bayreuth's first century, could largely be observed in differences between the stage pictures, which I used to illustrate the talk. This was perhaps less necessary for a written version discussing recent productions but I have continued with them here.

Judgment Criteria

The standard English translation of Wagner's prose works fills 8 large volumes, and is supplemented by an enormous number of letters--some authors estimate that there were 10,000. I shall draw principally on his writing in the years after his participation in the 1849 uprising in Dresden had forced him to escape to Zurich, where he devoted himself to writing rather than composition. This included several essays and a book on the dramatic and musical content of opera and on practical aspects of its staging, (as well as the librettos to all four operas to *The Ring* in reverse order to their eventual performance.) Nobody who wrote as much as Wagner can expect to be wholly consistent, and his views on many

subjects changed over time, but there is no evidence that he repudiated in any significant way his Zurich essays.

There are three characteristics of Wagner that seem to me to be critical to understanding his reaction to new productions.

1. Wagner was a man of the theatre
2. Wagner was an innovator
3. Wagner was always interested in ideas.

1. Man of the theatre

Wagner grew up in a theatrical family. His stepfather was an actor and a painter. He had siblings who were in the theatre, his first wife was a singer. He enjoyed acting all the parts when reading the *Ring* librettos to his friends, who appear to have concurred that he was a very fine actor. In several places in his writing he stressed the importance of the acting dimension of an operatic performance, even suggesting that it was more important than the singing. Rehearsals of an opera, he suggested, should begin with a play-reading to ensure that a performer fully understands the dramatic requirements of a role before beginning to sing it.

The Zurich writings underline Wagner's belief in the importance of the theatrical aspects of opera. The first of the Zurich essays was *Art and Revolution*³. Wagner had not yet abandoned the left-wing idealism that had led him to the Dresden barricades, though he would soon do so, and the essay, which he dashed off in two weeks, has the tone of a political pamphlet. But leaving aside its political rhetoric, the essay begins to put forward artistic visions which are subsequently extended in his later writing. For Wagner, drama is "the highest conceivable form of art". It had reached its pinnacle in ancient Greece with the tragedies of Aeschylus. Tens of thousands of people from all over Greece flocked to the dramas of Athens, sat in free and classless seating, and were moved and inspired by the ancient myths of Gods and heroes, and by the dancers and singers of sacred choirs.

But then, as outlined in this first essay, and extended later in his book *Opera and Drama*⁴ published in 1851, a process of artistic decline set in. The dissolution of the Athenian state led to the downfall of tragedy. Drama separated into its component parts, of rhetoric, sculpture, painting and music. The Romans had used Greek architects, sculptors and painters to build giant theatres, but used these for wild animals and gladiators rather than drama. Pagan Rome had eventually been converted to Christianity, a faith which valued most highly a life spent imprisoned in a cloister. The contrast between such a life and the joy and edification that Greeks derived from a few hours in the theatre could not be more extreme. But despotic though it was, the Church could not suppress forever the creative forces of Nature. The Renaissance brought a new interest in the classical arts of the Greeks. Opera itself was a product of the late Renaissance, but it was now for the ruling classes, rather than for the mass of population. It had also failed as theatre. Originally opera had been dominated by performers, with arias that aimed to show off the virtuosity of singers. With Gluck, the orchestra began to be more than an accompaniment to the singing, and the composer became the dominant influence on opera. For Mozart's operas the relationship between composer and poet had been a happy one. But then, in Wagner's words, "the

³ Available at <http://www.encyclopaedia.com/ebooks/11/97.pdf> (accessed 3 April 2017).

⁴ Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama* (trans William Ashton Ellis). Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 1995. Original German ed, 1851.

whole cloud-body of the Aria had evaporated into melody"⁵. The poet became a nonentity. "With Rossini the *real life-history of Opera* comes to end...the taste of the theatre-Public had been recognised as the only standard for his {the Musician's} behaviour"⁶. More recently Meyerbeer had been concerned to produce "effect" rather than art. The performer had become little more than a costumed singer. The theatrical art had ceased to be genuine drama, and was now driven by commercial rather than artistic considerations. In the introduction to the book, Wagner summarised his view in bold type: "*the error in the art-form of opera consists herein: (italics in orig.) that a means of expression (music) has been made an end while an end of expression (drama) has been made a means.*"⁷

In his second major essay of the Zurich years, *The Artwork of the Future*, Wagner set out his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, for which his writing on the theatre is most widely known. Lengthy discussions of dance, poetry and music, lead Wagner to argue that "Only when the defiant independence of the three art forms breaks and becomes absorbed in the love of the others; only when each is able to love herself in the other; only when they cease to exist as single art forms, will all be capable of creating the total work of art."⁸

There are several ways in which Wagner's music-dramas reflect his admiration for the classical Greek tragedies. Like them, he draws on myths and historical legends, often featuring the interaction of gods and men. Several of his characters are drawn in considerable psychological depth. Wagner did not, however, follow the classical rule that the major action should take place off-stage. Wagner's music-dramas therefore need staging. He accompanied all his librettos with extensive stage directions. When Franz Liszt put on the first performance of *Lohengrin* in Weimar in 1850, Wagner, now exiled in Zurich and unable to return to Germany, sent him extremely detailed instructions about staging. But of course stage direction needs to be a hands-on affair, not merely following written instructions. In 1853 he wrote a sort of open letter to the increasing numbers of German opera companies who were beginning to produce *Tannhäuser*, in which he emphasised the need for a new style of *régisseur*, working very closely with the musical director and the scene painter⁹. (The term had come into use in Paris many years before, but it had referred to a stage manager rather than a member of the creative team.) For the 1876 *Ring* and 1882 *Parsifal* in Bayreuth, which were the only operas staged there in Wagner's lifetime, he chose to be stage director rather than conductor. After his death, the prominent critic Eduard Hanslick described Wagner as having been "the world's first *régisseur*"¹⁰.

As a stage director, Wagner was concerned that the audience should be fully absorbed by the drama, and that, within the constraints imposed by the mystical, magical or non-human features present in all the operas from the *Der Fliegende Holländer* onwards except for *Die Meistersinger*, the staging, acting and scenery should be as naturalistic as possible. It is difficult to understand why Wagner the librettist set Wagner the stage director such enormous technical problems, but he certainly did. In the Bayreuth *Ring Cycle* of 1876,

⁵ *Opera and Drama*, p.40.

⁶ *Opera and Drama*, p.45-6.

⁷ *Opera and Drama*, p.17.

⁸ Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future*. Special Edition of the Wagner Journal (www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk), p.57

⁹ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, (New Haven and London: Yale UP 2006) pp. 36-7..

¹⁰ Patrick Carnegy "Designing Wagner: Deeds of Music Made Visible", in Barry Millington & Stewart Spencer (eds) *Wagner in Performance* Yale UP, 1992, p.48.

copious use of piped-in steam and lighting effects (including the use of primitive electric devices that were still in an experimental stage) were used to mask on-stage scene changes, and Alberich's transformations into a giant snake and then into a toad. Wagner also rejected the suggestion of his ballet-master and assistant director, Richard Fricke, that Siegfried's fight with the dragon should take place offstage. In the first Act of *Parsifal*, a meadow scene was transformed into the Grail temple by having Guernemanz and Parsifal pretend to walk, while the scenery mounted on rollers moved behind them. During the first production, it was found that the music was inadequate for the time required for this transformation, and Engelbert Humperdinck, working as an assistant, composed the extra bars required. Eventually a way was found to speed up the transformation and to discard these bars.

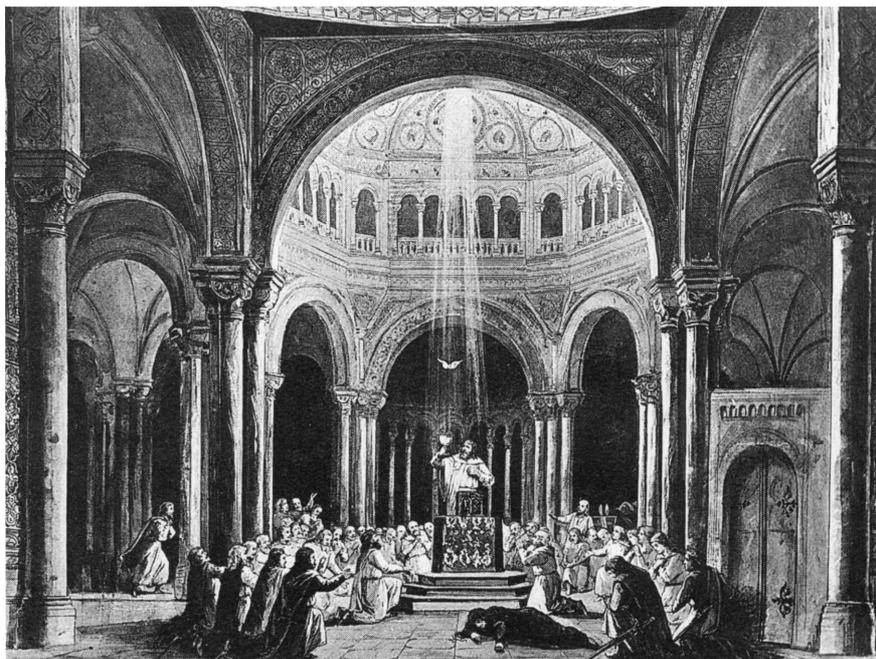
There are no photographs of the actual sets for the 1876 *Ring*. Sketches were made by Josef Hoffman, but these were not faithfully followed by the scenery painters.

This is a sketch for *Götterdämmerung*:



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AScribner's_Magazine_-_Josef_Hoffmann's_G%C3%B6tterd%C3%A4mmerung%2C_act_3%2C_scene_1.jpg

After Wagner's death, *Parsifal* was performed with the original (1882) sets at every festival before 1934. The temple of the Holy Grail was based on Siena Cathedral:



<http://www.murashev.com/opera/parsifal>

If audience is to be fully focussed a drama, distraction needs to be minimised. This begins with the design of the ideal opera house. Each member of an audience should be able to see the stage without simultaneously having to see other members. Horseshoe seating in contemporary opera houses failed in this respect, and they also offered excessively comfortable seating, encouraging their occupants to sleep. Wagner's design for the seating in the Festspielhaus reflects these concerns. Between the audience and the stage, a double proscenium creates what Wagner called a "mystic gulf". On-stage, irrelevant stage business should not deflect audience attention from the main action.

For audiences to find a production credible, it needs to be internally convincing—having what I shall call "theatrical integrity". By tracking past productions, the Ghost would probably have come to accept, if not to welcome, actors and singers that are very far from Wagner's original conception of their roles, and scenery that is abstract rather than naturalistic, but would surely draw the line at built-in inconsistencies. There may be no reason why the four components of the *Ring* tetralogy should be staged in the same place or time period—Gods are immortal and can travel anywhere in seconds, but recognizable time periods have to appear in a plausible order and Siegfried must find Brünnhilde in the same place as, and a later time than, Wotan left her.

2. The Innovator

In his music and its orchestration, in staging, and indeed in every aspect of operatic production, Wagner departed from established practice, and changed opera forever. The Bayreuth Festival was itself unprecedented-- a festival in a remote location devoted entirely to the operas of one composer, in a highly functional opera house like no other with virtually perfect sightlines from every seat, in a darkened auditorium and an unseen orchestra. This had long been his ideal.

Wagner valued theatrical innovation. In a letter to Liszt in 1852, he wrote "Children, do something new, new, always new. If you stick to the old, the devil of barrenness holds you in thrall, and you are the most miserable of artists." Another widely cited quotation from

Wagner is his remark to Fricke, at the end of the first Bayreuth season: “next year, we must do everything differently.”

One should not, however, exaggerate this apparent willingness to change. There was no money for another *Ring* in Wagner’s lifetime, so it is impossible to know what changes he had in mind in his remark to Fricke, but they may have been minor. It is unsurprising that, in staging four new productions simultaneously in an untried theatre of radically new design, many things had gone wrong in the first season, which had greatly depressed him.

Moreover Wagner was explicit that he wanted to establish a tradition in the production of his operas. He could also be scornful about what he conceived as a relatively lazy method of theatrical innovation. Writing, in 1878, about Mozart’s operas, he observed that their very quality had meant that they had outlived the “vital conditions that governed their creation and execution... To what torments of experience is the departed soul of such a masterpiece exposed when harried back to life by a modern theatrical medium for the delectation of a later generation! ... There is scarcely an opera producer alive who has not taken it into his head at some time or another to stage *Don Giovanni* in a contemporary setting; whereas every intelligent person should be telling himself that it is not this work which must be tailored to suit our times but we ourselves who must adapt to the time of *Don Giovanni* if we are to find ourselves in harmony with Mozart’s creation.¹¹”

This appears to contradict what Wagner said and wrote about the constant need for innovation. However in Mozart’s day, there were no staging manuals, which were introduced these into Italian opera only by Verdi at least half a century later. So a production of *Don Giovanni* in a contemporary setting might not have been seen as a deliberate departure from a traditional production in the manner of modern *Regietheater*. I have not been able to discover what provoked Wagner’s comment, but more than once he suggests that opera audiences seek mindless enjoyment, sit in excessive comfort and are too easily satisfied with superficiality. Full appreciation of a great work like a Mozart opera requires, he felt, considerable intellectual effort; modernising the setting makes it easier to avoid making this effort.

Although we cannot know what innovations Wagner might himself have introduced, we can assume that, having abandoned an original hope that performances of the *Ring* would be confined to Bayreuth, he would eventually have accepted in principle that others could innovate with his operas, and that his Ghost would not reject a production simply because it departed from his own staging. His respect for performance tradition would have been outweighed by the third characteristic: While in no sense a scholar, Wagner was extremely interested in ideas.

3. The Student of Philosophy

Wagner came of age at a time of considerable intellectual ferment in Germany. After the 1831 death of Hegel, who had long dominated German philosophy, his followers had divided and subdivided into several streams drawing very different political conclusions from his work. Wagner became involved with a left-wing radical and literary movement called Young Germany. Wagner’s own views became especially influenced by the utopian socialist ideas of Proudhon, and the anarchist views of Bakunin, who became a personal friend. This led to his participation in the Dresden uprising of 1849, from which he was

¹¹ Cited by Clive Brown, “Performing Wagner” in Barry Millington and Stuart Spencer (eds) *Wagner in Performance*, Yale, 1992, p.119.

lucky to escape into exile in Zurich. The materialist views of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach were also an important influence on Wagner, who dedicated *The Artwork of the Future*, to him. But in Zurich, Wagner's enthusiasm for political change rapidly cooled.

In 1854, Wagner encountered the deeply pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer – indeed not merely encountered but immersed himself in it. Wagner read Schopenhauer's major work, *The World as Will and Representation* four times in the next twelve months. Schopenhauer was deeply interested in the arts, in which he gave music pride of place. Compared with the other arts, which are representational, music refers to the innermost being of the world and of our own self..."the effect of music is so much more powerful and penetrating than that of the other arts, for they others speak only of shadows, but it speaks of the thing itself¹²." This led Wagner to modify his views about the equality of artistic forms.

Schopenhauer was highly critical of Hegel and built his philosophy on metaphysical foundations laid down by Kant. For Wagner, this caused him not only to change in his own personal philosophy, but also to see his own work in a new light. The principal characters in the *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin* could all be seen as having rejected the world in a Schopenhauerian way. In an 1856 letter to August Röckel, who had been both a musical and political associate of Wagner in Dresden and had been imprisoned since the uprising, he wrote "I must confess to having arrived at a clear understanding of my own works of Art through the help of another, who has provided me with the reasoned conceptions corresponding to my intuitive principles." I do not propose to discuss Schopenhauer's influence on Wagner's operas, but it was particularly important to the writing of *Tristan*.

What is significant for our purposes is that his interest in philosophy would have led Wagner to take *Regietheater* seriously. A director who had chosen a radically different way of staging his operas would have been given a respectful hearing, at least if he could explain the philosophical basis for this. A recent article in the Wagner Journal discussing the current Bayreuth *Ring* (directed by Frank Castorf) in the light of modern literary theory described Wagner as a "post-structuralist visionary."¹³ The Ghost would have been delighted, and would have gone off to read Derrida, and both his followers and his adversaries, in trying to understand what was meant.

Old Bayreuth

Except for *Parsifal*, which was performed with the original sets at every festival before 1934, Wagner had not left a group of productions that Cosima could simply put on the stage unchanged. Trying to recreate what she thought the Master would have wanted required a great deal of research and independent decision-making. Even the original Bayreuth scenery for *The Ring* was not available to her for its first Bayreuth revival in 1896, since it had been bought in 1881 by Angelo Neumann, a former singer, who had toured with it throughout Germany and to several other European cities, including London, Rome, Budapest, Moscow, St Petersburg and Prague. She thought that Wagner's concern for naturalistic detail in his *Ring* scenery had been excessive and commissioned simpler sets.

¹² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Kindle edition loc 12098.

¹³ Bortnichak, Edward and Paula M. Bortnichak, "Deconstruction and the Modern Bayreuth Festival". *The Wagner Journal* <http://www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk/archive.html> (accessed 11 April 2017).

The Met's production of the *Ring* (1986-9), which had its last run in 2009, based its designs on the 1896 version.



<https://www.pinterest.ie/pin/466615211366802664>

Cosima proved herself a formidable stage director in her own right¹⁴. She continued Wagner's emphasis on the importance of acting as well as singing. She insisted on extensive rehearsing, by the chorus as much as by the soloists. A negative consequence, noted by Shaw among other critics, was to lock the cast into a series of poses and tableaux.

Cosima's own productions define *Werktreue* as far as Bayreuth is concerned, and it is reasonable to classify all Festival productions up until the closure of the Festspielhaus in 1944 as *Werktreue*. This does not mean they were unchanging, or even that all the changes made were uncontroversial.

In 1906, Cosima notionally passed the reins to her son Siegfried, but she remained a powerful influence in Bayreuth until her death in 1930. Siegfried had had some architectural training, and was more interested in the visual aspects of stage performance than his father had been, but made few stylistic production changes before the Festival closed at the beginning of the First World War. When it reopened in 1924, finances were very tight and even though ticket sales were good, the money was ploughed back into improvements in theatrical technology and modernisation of old sets rather than new productions. Nevertheless, simpler three dimensional sets began replace painted backdrops, lighting was modernised and colour and a cyclorama were increasingly used to greater effect. Even these modest production changes attracted harsh criticism from traditionalists.

Siegfried himself died in the same year as his mother, 1930, and control over the Festival passed to his English-born widow, Winifred. Winifred had already been a supporter and close friend of Hitler for several years, and he was her frequent guest. He had a fanatical love for Wagner's operas and a lasting interest in stagecraft, acquired in Vienna in 1906 and 1907, where he had seen Wagner productions directed by Gustav Mahler countless times.

¹⁴ Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, pp 135-146. discusses Cosima's strengths and shortcomings as a stage director.

These were especially remarkable for the coordination of the colour and intensity of stage lighting with the musical score. Responsibility for the sets, costumes and lighting had been assigned to Alfred Roller, a founding member of the Viennese Secession, an association of modern artists. Hitler admired and had come to know Roller. Patrick Carnegy suggests that the Mahler-Roller productions marked “the birth, for the opera stage, of the shocking idea that production is not just the literal reading of the composer’s blueprint but can be creative in its own right.¹⁵” Although this sounds like a definition of *Regietheater*, Mahler and Roller regarded themselves as serving Wagner faithfully.

Winifred appointed of Heinz Tietjen as artistic director. Tietjen had been, and remained, the general director of the Prussian State Theatres. He was also a prominent Social Democrat in Weimar Berlin, at a time when its theatrical experimentation and modern musical composition provoked repeated accusations from the National Socialists of “cultural bolshevism”. One of his theatres, the Kroll Opera, under the artistic direction of Otto Klemperer, had been a frequent right-wing target. In 1929, its deliberately unsentimental production of the *Der Fliegende Holländer*, directed by Jürgen Fehling and designed by Ewald Dülberg, which used cubist-inspired stylized scenery (below), modern dress and a shaven Dutchman, aroused particular hostility.



Roger Parker, *Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*, p.432

In 1931, Tietjen closed the Kroll Opera, probably reflecting both political and economic pressures. In Bayreuth, the innovations that were made by him and his stage designer, Emil Preetorius, were not as radical. Simplified scenery, plainer costumes, and lighting that reflected changes of mood aimed to eliminate the romantic naturalism of traditional productions but changes were limited. The Valkyrie rock was reshaped but it was retained (below) as were winged helmets, and natural elements such as the rainbow bridge in *Das Rheingold*, Brünnhilde's horse, the swans in *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* etc.

¹⁵ Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, p.173.



<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/361976888777210147>

Hitler was not among the traditionalists, such as Siegfried's sisters, Eva and Daniela, who were highly critical of the new productions. It was at his suggestion that an aging and unwell Roller was invited to design a new *Parsifal*. The result was regarded as a disaster, at least by Winifred, who invited her son, Wieland, aged 20 to design new sets, with a no more successful outcome¹⁶.

Hitler ensured that the Festival was well financed which allowed Tietjen to indulge his liking for large-scale stage effects, such as massive stylized choruses; the Nuremberg singing contest, for example, was attended by about 800 people. Hitler would doubtless have preferred Bayreuth productions to have been even more explicitly nationalist, such as Benno von Arent provided in Nuremberg and Berlin, but he made no attempt to interfere with Bayreuth productions, while not hesitating to do so elsewhere in Germany. It is reasonable to assume that none of the innovations introduced into the productions of "Old Bayreuth" would have caused the Ghost to issue a failing mark.

Hitler's German nationalism and anti-Semitism had long been shared by most members of the Wagner family circle. When Hitler insisted that the Bayreuth Festival continue during the War with audiences of workers and military servicemen invited as a reward for patriotic service, the association in the public mind between Bayreuth and National Socialism was inescapable. Although Bayreuth was bombed in the closing months of the War, the Festspielhaus remained intact. In the period of denazification after the war, Winifred was unapologetic for her support for Hitler, and indeed came close to imprisonment. In order that the Festival might reopen, she had to agree to play no further part in its management. In 1949, the Festival and its assets passed into the control of her two sons, Wieland and Wolfgang. It reopened in 1951.

New Bayreuth

¹⁶ Spotts, Frederic. *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1994, pp.184-5.

The reopening in 1951 was the beginning of an era that came to be known as “New Bayreuth”. In order to rid to the extent possible the Festival from its previous association in the public mind with the Nazi regime, the brothers quite deliberately made a radical change in staging. They found inspiration in a design concept by Adolphe Appia dating from the 1890’s. Appia was a Swiss music student who came to Bayreuth in 1882, the first year of *Parsifal*. He was overwhelmed by the music, and impressed with the performance, but dismayed by the settings. He returned again in 1886 and 1888, and began to devise the visual principles on which Wagner’s music dramas should be staged. The physical world had little significance—it was the music that conveyed the essential elements of the drama and the inner feelings of the characters and the visual picture needed to respond. The key was to orchestrate the play of lighting on the stage in sympathy with the music. Painted flats and drops should be replaced by solid sets that were suggestive and symbolic rather than detailed and realistic, spaces should be uncluttered, and costumes should be simple. He began to sketch designs for the *Ring*, *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, which were published in book form in Paris in 1895, entitled *La Mise en scène du drame wagnerien*.

Appia had his Bayreuth supporters, especially Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the future husband of Wagner’s daughter, Eva, but Cosima very firmly rejected his ideas. If Wagner, who was born in the same year as Verdi, had lived as long (i.e. until 1900) what would he have thought? The proposed sets were so far from the naturalistic scenery he favoured for the *Ring* and for *Parsifal* that it seems likely that he would have reacted in the same way as Cosima. On the other hand, he was very interested in theatrical technology and the recent advances in electric lighting which Appia was proposing to exploit had not been available to him, so he would certainly have been considered it carefully.

Appia had only a few opportunities to see his ideas carried out in full on stage, and never under ideal circumstances. His influence, however, can be seen on the designs of Alfred Roller, Ewald Dülberg and Emil Preetorius already discussed. Other productions showing his influence included a *Tristan*, directed by Meyerhold in St Petersburg in 1909, and productions designed by Hans Wildermann in 1912—and several *Ring* productions designed by Ludwig Sievert between 1912 and 1927. But it was productions for the Festivals of Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, where his influence was most truly felt.

Although both brothers directed operas during the next fifteen seasons, the artistic leadership was provided by Wieland. I do not know when the term *Regietheater* (“directors’ or producers’ theatre”) first came into widespread use, but at least some sources, including Wikipedia, regard New Bayreuth as the first clear example.

The first production of the 1951 Bayreuth Festival was *Parsifal*. The stage direction and decor were the work of Wieland, who in the informal division of labour between the brothers was primarily responsible for the artistic side, while Wolfgang handled administrative matters. Lights came slowly up on an almost empty stage, with a low circular central platform and two small mounds. There was no wood or lake, merely the hint of grey tree trunks. The dimly-lit temple of the Grail was marked by four plain columns, a bare round table and benches. Klingsor had no castle; his head and shoulders appeared at the centre of a web of projected lines of white light which could be interpreted as a tower, but initially suggested a spider web; the Flowermaidens had no flowers, merely fluttering lights.



<http://www.wagneroperas.com/indexwielandwagner.html>

Parsifal was performed with only limited changes for 23 successive seasons. In the first season it was followed by *The Ring*, also directed by Wieland. Its departures from tradition were less radical, but quite enough to provoke hostile criticism from traditionalists. It continued in the repertoire until 1958, but with frequent adjustments. In 1952 the remaining naturalistic elements were stripped out, and 1953 saw the operas performed on a central, tilted disc, illustrated below by *Das Rheingold*:



<http://www.wagneroperas.com/indexwielandwagner.html>

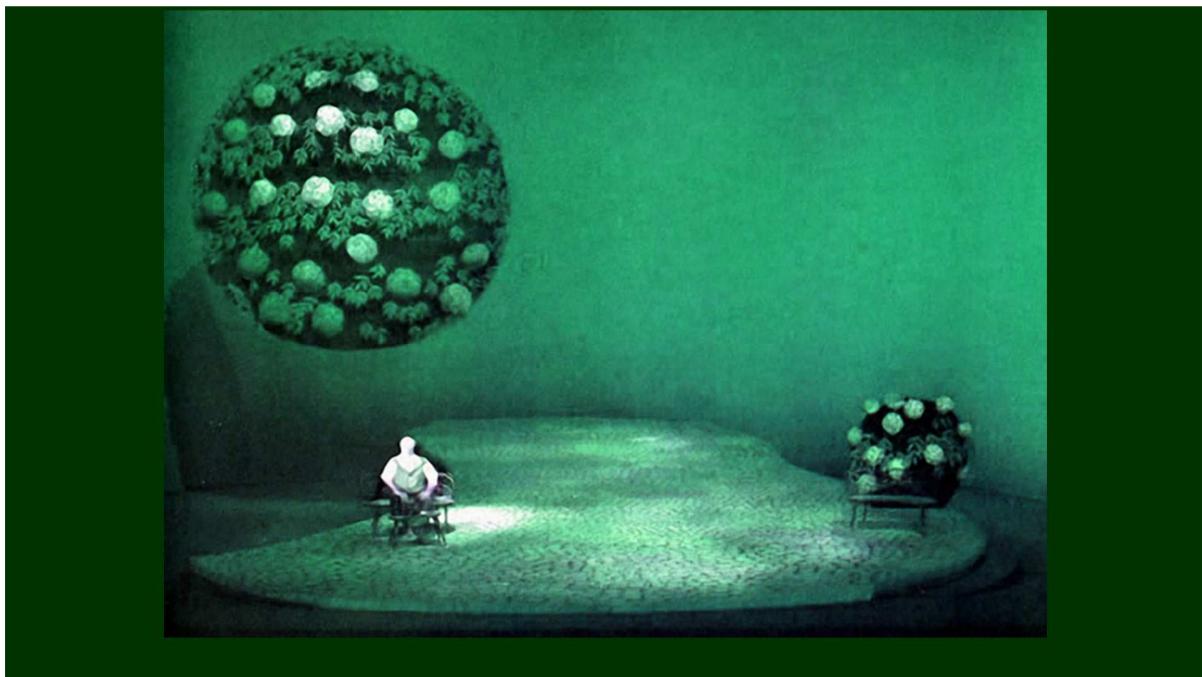
In 1952, Wieland directed a production of *Tristan* that discarded even more of the traditional staging than *Parsifal* had done, and put very little back in its place; for much of the opera, light focused on the two lovers against a blue-dark background. The sailors and the courtiers were nowhere to be seen. They returned in 1962 when Wieland staged a new

Tristan, which, if less abstract, was no more conventional. The setting of each of the three acts was dominated by a huge monolith, inspired by Celtic stela.

In 1951, many people, including Winifred, assumed that the main reason for the absence of scenery was economic. Money was indeed very scarce and the prewar scenery had been destroyed. Launching new productions of the entire *Ring* and two other operas with traditional settings would have been an impossible task. But Wieland's New Bayreuth was clearly a project based on his intellectual determination not merely to escape from the recent past, but also on his conviction that this was the way in which his grandfather's operas ought to be staged.

Although it was Wieland's innovations that shaped New Bayreuth, Wolfgang was also active as a director. His productions were recognizably New Bayreuth, but even at their best they aroused less excitement than Wieland's. His first production, *Lohengrin*, in 1953 was considerably brighter and less abstract than Wieland's stagings had been up to that point, and pleased at least conservative critics. But his later productions, especially his 1957 *Tristan* and his 1960 *Ring*, were less well received.

Die Meistersinger posed a serious challenge to New Bayreuth—in part because of its specific attachment to period and to place, and in part because it appealed to a German nationalism from which Wieland was trying to escape. A traditional production by Rudolf Hartmann had been staged during the first two festivals. Act One of Wieland's production of 1956 was highly formalized but at least was recognizably in a Church. But in Act Two, the street scene no longer resembled a street in any way—instant there was a kidney-shaped platform with two benches. A large floral globe hung over one of these, and a much smaller floral bush sat behind the other.



<http://www.wagneroperas.com/index1956meistersinger.html>

In the final scene, there was no procession of the guilds before the singing contest, which took place in a circus arena before an audience seated in tiered ranks and all dressed identically in yellow and white. One did not have to be a conservative to dislike this departure from everything the opera had been before. It was, however, also possible to find beauty in its settings, especially of the first two acts, and the production had defenders as

well as critics. There was much more hostility to Wieland's second *Meistersinger* in 1963, which quite apart from a bizarre staging, turned Nuremberg into a materialistic, class-ridden, unfriendly place, quite unlike Wagner's warm, friendly, and prosperous German town. Wagner's Ghost would have hated it, but would in any case have long before given the New Bayreuth project a failing mark.

It seems plausible that the Ghost would have tolerated the scenic simplifications associated with what I have called Old Bayreuth, but would then have decided that those of Wieland had gone too far. But the setting would have been only one reason for the failing mark. Another, probably more important, was the acting style. Wagner was always anxious to stress that his operas were dramas, and that his singers needed also to be actors. But the stagings of New Bayreuth were those of a Greek theatre—from the central circle the singers addressed the audience rather than interacted as Wagner clearly intended his singer/actors to do.

The Wolfgang Era

Wieland died in 1966. For the next 42 years, Wolfgang had total control over the Festival. He continued to be active as a stage director. At least one of his productions was performed in every Festival between 1967 and 2002, and often more than one. He never returned to *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Lohengrin* or to *Tristan und Isolde*¹⁷, and his last *Ring Cycle* (1970–75) was a refurbishing of his 1960 production, but his other new productions-- *Parsifal*, (1975) *Die Meistersinger* (1981 and 1996) and *Tannhäuser* (1985) -- aimed at stepping back towards realism without sacrificing the simplicity of New Bayreuth. They did not break new ground in staging or design, but they provided a reliable backstop to productions by directors that he had engaged which were frequently more interesting but often also more controversial. These included several directors from the GDR, whose dark and often political productions, contrasted with more eclectic and romantic productions from West Europeans¹⁸.

East German Directors

In parallel with New Bayreuth, a quite different approach to performing Wagner operas had developed in the GDR. Founded by Walter Felsenstein in 1947, the Komische Oper in East Berlin had become internationally famous for its ultra-realistic opera productions whose literally hundreds of rehearsals maximised the integration of theatrical and musical operatic elements. Wieland and Wolfgang had tried to eliminate association of Wagner's operas with political ideas, since inevitably these aroused memories of the Third Reich. These associations made Wagner politically problematic in all socialist countries and Felsenstein would not put them on, but elsewhere in the GDR, Wagner had continued to be performed, especially in Leipzig, Wagner's birthplace. Joachim Herz, the artistic director in Leipzig, had worked with Felsenstein and was heavily influenced by his style; he succeeded Felsenstein in 1976. His Leipzig *Ring* of 1973-6 drew its basic concept from Bernard Shaw's

¹⁷ Wolfgang did direct a *Tristan* in La Scala in 1978.

¹⁸ The distinction blurs because Götz Friedrich defected to the West in the year of his first Bayreuth production. It would also be a mistake to think of GDR directors as unambiguously grim. The Frankfurt *Ring* in 1983-5 was directed by Ruth Berghaus, with Rhinemaidens in tight cocktail dresses with bases that glowed red at moments of alarm, and a second act of *Die Walküre* that saw a playful Brünnhilde sitting astride a Wotan on all fours, wearing his hat and carrying his spear. Berghaus had been associated with several Berlin companies, but especially with Brecht's Berliner Ensemble which she directed for several years after his death. Her Wagner productions in Frankfurt are described in some detail in Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, (pp. 364-376).

suggestion, in his book *The Perfect Wagnerite*, that the *Ring* was an allegory of nineteenth century capitalism. This, and other GDR productions, was a reminder that Wagner had once held revolutionary socialist political views.

Although there was often difficulty in arranging for East Germans to perform in the West, the regime recognized that there was international prestige (and some foreign exchange) to be obtained by prestigious appointments, and direction at Bayreuth was undoubtedly prestigious. Götz Friedrich came from the Komische Oper to direct *Tannhäuser* in 1972. This initially provoked one of the most hostile reactions ever seen in Bayreuth. Some critics were quick to detect socialist political implications in its toning down of the religious elements, in possible hints of a Fascist regime at the Wartburg court, and in the proletarian dress of the final chorus. *Tannhäuser* himself was presented not only as an artist torn between erotic and spiritual love (and in this regard it seemed logical to have Venus and Elizabeth performed by the same singer) but also as struggling against the social order--the problem of artistic freedom in a totalitarian state. Since in the year of the production, Friedrich defected to the West, any political reading would be the reverse of socialistic. From its second year onwards, audience and critical regard for it increased enormously. In 1978 it became the first full-length Bayreuth opera to be recorded for television. The Ghost would have awarded Friedrich's *Tannhäuser* with high marks—it had enough individuality to make it interesting, without discarding Wagner's original theatrical values.



DG Recording 1978

Harry Kupfer, another director heavily influenced by Felsenstein, and who later succeeded Herz as artistic director of the Komische Oper presented *Der Fliegende Holländer* in 1978 as Senta's dream. Senta was on stage the entire time, clutching a picture of the Dutchman, watching the action when she did not participate in it. There were some moments of very skilful staging. The Dutchman's ship loomed out of the darkness above Daland's ship, its bow gripped by two enormous hands that parted to reveal the Dutchman chained inside. Having pulled the chains effortlessly away he virtually stumbled out. There was no

redemptive ending — the hands close again, the chained up Dutchman puts out to sea again, Senta jumps to her death from the window, and in the film version at least, Erik is left alone on the stage with Senta's dead body. The action itself was true in time and place to Wagner's original, and it seems likely that the Ghost would have approved.



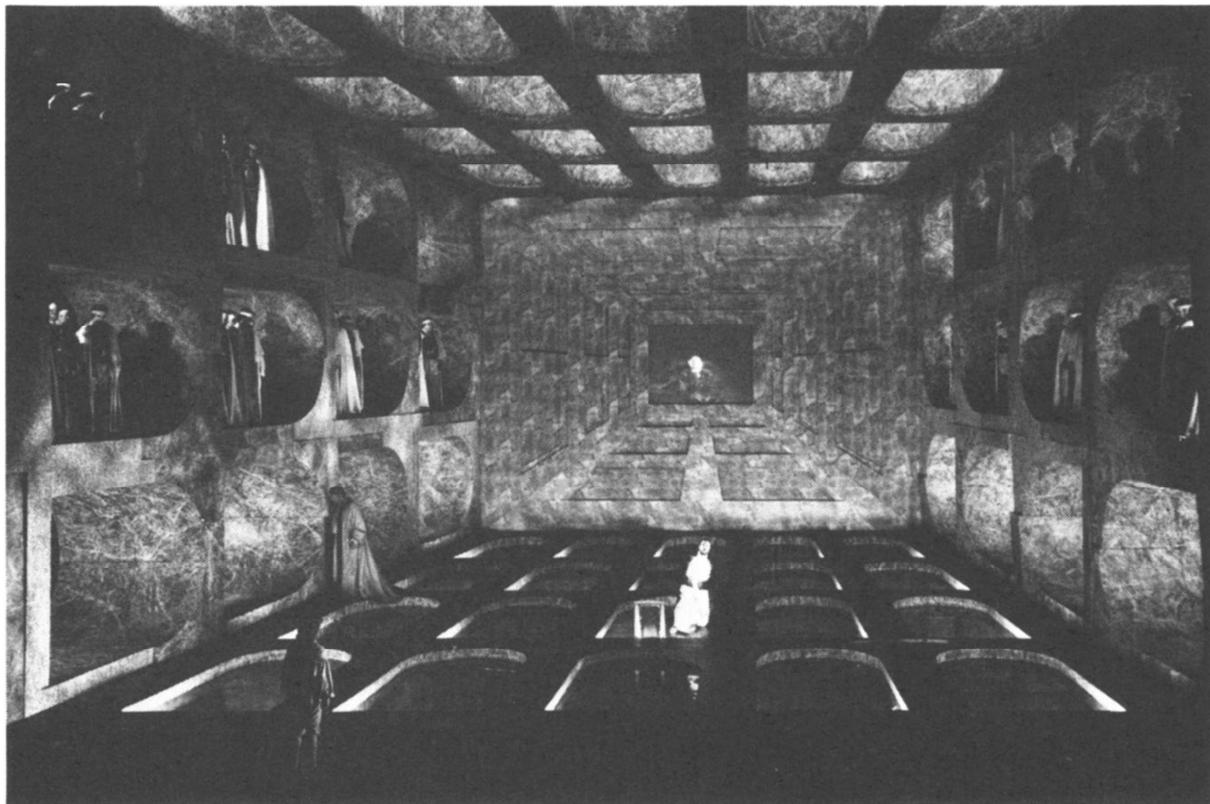
[http:// operaramblings.wordpress.com](http://operaramblings.wordpress.com)

In 1979, Götz Friedrich returned to Bayreuth with a new production of *Lohengrin*. Viewed at a distance of almost forty years, it seems by modern standards to have been relatively traditional. There was a good deal of criticism of its sets — dark, cold, and ugly — but both the costumes and the action were appropriately mediaeval, and replacing the swan with a revolving disc and a blinding light appeared to work quite well, at least in the filmed version of 1982. The production was well received.



YouTube

In 1982, Friedrich again returned with *Parsifal* – the only non-Wagner director in the postwar era to have three productions to his credit (and only Harry Kupfer has two.) Since this was the centenary of the only opera ever written specifically for the Festspielhaus, and that had been performed at almost every Festival since, it might have been expected to have received the same level of attention as the Chéreau *Ring*, but it failed to do so. The set, designed by Andreas Reinhardt, was an interior of a building turned on its side, with its roof upstage, and its walls composed of arched cells. According to one critic, “This was to emphasize the skewing of time and space and the varied way one looks at what he or she thinks is reality. Friedrich's vision of the story takes place in the medieval past, in the present, and in the future, after the big bomb drops, leaving a blasted landscape of burned trees and empty arches, with Parsifal as the redeemer-but not the Saviour-to bring spiritual ease to the seductress Kundry and to the Grail knights, Gurnemanz and Amfortas”. At the close, the knights of the Grail were joined by a group of women, which Friedrich explained was intended to symbolize the dawn of a new society that might put an end to *Parsifal's* inherent conflict between the sexes. The secular nature of the production was widely criticized, although Wolfgang judged that it was well received and “could unquestionably be described as a success”¹⁹.



Performing Arts Review, 6 no 3. 1982, p. 78.

The concept of representing time by a receding performing area obviously appealed to Friedrich. In 1984, he produced a *Ring* at Deutsche Oper, set in a “time tunnel” reported to be based on the Washington metro. He brought the production to London and Washington,

¹⁹ Wagner, *Acts* p.186

but it also stayed in the repertoire of Deutsche Oper, with its most recent performances, expected to be the last, in April 2017.

In 1988, Harry Kupfer returned to Bayreuth with a *Ring* that used a fairly similar analogy. The action took place along a highway stretched into the infinite distance-- "the street of history" along which mankind moved towards a grim destiny.



YouTube

The tone of grey desolation was set even before the first famous chord: groups of men and women stood silently on either side of the road looking at a body lying on it. Few people seemed to have liked the production much, and as Kupfer had made not-insignificant changes to the plot, such as having Wotan appear at Siegfried's funeral, it seems certain that the Ghost would not have done so either.

Another production by a well-known East German was Heiner Müller's *Tristan* in 1993. Although the Berlin Wall had been down for nearly four years, Müller, who was widely considered to be the most important living German playwright, was clearly identified with East Germany, though not with the Communist regime where he had had trouble with the censors. It was another fairly daring choice by Wolfgang, since virtually all his directing had been of his own plays and he had no experience with opera. Müller tried to the extent possible to reject the Schopenhauerian premise of the opera – the intensity of a love that can find its fulfilment only in death. There was remarkably little physical contact between the two lovers. It has been suggested that Tristan's death wish, revealed when he throws himself on to Melot's sword, was at least partly a recognition that he has betrayed King Marke – there is a political as well as an erotic dimension to the opera²⁰.

The stage sets, designed by Erich Wonder, were minimalist and highly abstract. The only hint that we are in the hold of a ship came from gently rocking lights at the side of the stage. The usual garden or forest in Act Two was replaced with a field of 300 breastplates, allowing for only limited movement among them. The stage in Act Three was covered with ash and other grey debris. Costumes were by a Japanese fashion designer, Yoshi Yamamoto.

²⁰ See Frölich, Margit, "The Void of Utopian Potentials: Heiner Müller's Production of *Tristan und Isolde*" *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 153-166.



YouTube

Needless to say, the production was highly controversial, with some people associating the starkness of the production with East German communism that had only recently been abandoned. It is hard to see the Ghost being happy with it.

West Europeans

The first director invited by Wolfgang was August Everding, a Munich theatre director. In 1969, his new *Der Fliegende Holländer*, designed by Josef Svoboda, aimed at a more romantic and less abstract production than those of New Bayreuth, and Svoboda's stage design combined abstraction with modern realism²¹. The production was generally well received by press and public and Wagner's Ghost might have liked it too, even though Svoboda made no attempt to return to the romantic naturalism of the original stage directions

The 1976 production of the *Ring* was bound to get special public attention as marking the centenary of the full Cycle, and of the Festival. Pierre Boulez agreed to conduct it, and recommended that it be directed by Patrice Chéreau, a young theatre director with little experience of directing opera and none of Wagner. The designer was Richard Peduzzi.

Like Herz, but quite independently, Chéreau built his production around Shaw's allegory, but felt no need to attempt consistency of location, time period, costume or degree of realism. The Rhine Maidens bespported themselves around a hydroelectric dam, Hunding's dwelling was a large villa, and the swinging Foucault's pendulum in Valhalla suggested that the tail-coated Wotan had a scientific interest in Earth's rotation – an obvious concern to any god. Fricka matched him for elegance. But Brünnhilde wore a helmet and breastplate for her meeting with him, and he armed himself with a spear as required. Mime worked with a huge mechanical forge. The forest was reasonably realistic, but the songbird was in a cage, and the dragon was mounted on a cart and manipulated by visible stagehands. The third

²¹ Spotts, p. 274.

act of *Götterdämmerung* opened back at the dam, but it was no longer functioning; the Rhine Maidens had lost not only their gold, but also their river.



fr.pinterest.com

The audience and critical reception in 1976 was overwhelmingly negative. The fact that the creative team were all French did not help- someone said the production was the revenge of the French for their defeat in 1870. Musically there was criticism of the very fast tempi of Boulez. The orchestra was known to be very unhappy, and more than 70 of its members decided not to return in 1977. Quite extensive changes in the production were made in subsequent years, but this cannot explain why hostility turned to enthusiastic support (at the last performance in 1980 there were 101 curtain calls.) A video-taped version made over some weeks in the summers of 1979 and 1980 had an astonishing success as a ten-part BBC television serial. In America the four operas were shown on public television, with a simultaneous stereo broadcast of their soundtracks.

Wagner's Ghost would surely have awarded a high mark to the Chéreau *Ring*. It was innovative, without destroying the key elements of the original drama. The acting style was naturalistic. In the present era of live streaming, this is taken for granted, but it was rare in 1976, and would have undoubtedly have pleased Wagner. There were of course incongruities – successful businessmen don't carry spears – but since this was all based on myth, and gods can dress however they like, these were easily forgiven. Even though Wagner had eventually found that the cause of Art was better served by flattering princes and capitalists than by rebelling against them, he was still in a revolutionary mood when he wrote the libretto and would have had little problem in acknowledging how well the Shavian interpretation of his work had been portrayed by Chéreau.

Although Chéreau *Ring* represented a giant step in the acceptance of *Regietheater* in Bayreuth and elsewhere, the productions that followed had relatively traditional stagings with a generally romantic tone; some people perceived this as a deliberate reaction. In 1981, *Tristan*, directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and conducted by Daniel Barenboim was highly praised for its beauty.

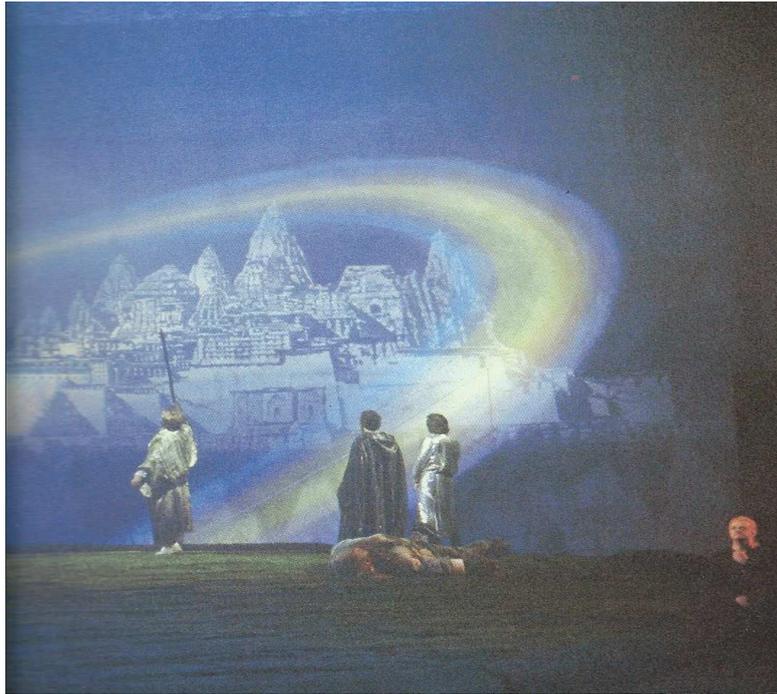


YouTube

Its only significant deviation from a traditional production was Ponnelle's suggestion that Isolde's arrival in Kareol was the product of Tristan's delirious mind. Originally he wanted the *Liebestod* sung from the orchestra pit, which was not acceptable either to Barenboim or to Isolde (Johanna Meier). A compromise was reached, in which Isolde faded away behind the split tree which dominated the stage, leaving Tristan alone with Kurwenal and the Shepherd.

For the next *Ring* (1983) Wolfgang Wagner turned to Georg Solti, a former musical director of several opera companies, including Covent Garden and a man whose Wagner recordings were already legendary. He proposed as stage director Peter Hall, the Artistic Director of the British National Theatre, who had also had a great deal of experience in directing opera, especially at Glyndebourne. As theatre designer they chose William Dudley, whose very considerable experience included one production at the New York Met. On paper, it would be impossible to have conceived of a stronger team. Hall and Solti hoped to be allowed to produce two operas in the first year, and two later, which would be normal practice in most opera houses but was not acceptable in Bayreuth.

Hall announced his intention of reemphasising the romantic elements in the *Ring*. He proposed to follow as closely as possible Wagner's own stage directions. The Rhine was represented by a tank of real water, and the Rhinemaidens appeared, through the use of mirrors, to be actually swimming in it. There really was a rainbow bridge (below).



Stephen Fay and Roger Wood, *The Ring*

But even with modern technology, Wagner's stage directions are extremely challenging. Changing the scene from the bottom of the Rhine to gates of Valhalla without a pause in the music and without lowering the curtain presented a challenge that was met by putting the playing area on to a platform which could be raised, lowered and rotated by a specially designed hydraulic lift. Trying to sort out technical staging problems took up far too much of the 1983 rehearsal time. There were several clashes between Hall and Wolfgang²². There is no dispute that the production was disappointing in its first year, and it was received poor reviews. Because of its initial poor reception, and Wolfgang's personal opinion of it, the production was the only *Ring Cycle* to be given in only four seasons since the start of New Bayreuth (the norm is five), and it was never filmed. Its reputation as a "disaster" or a "catastrophe" has persisted, though it may be undeserved. The quality of production had improved very considerably by its fourth and final year, largely because of the work of Michael McCaffery, who had previously worked as an assistant to Hall. At its conclusion there was a record number of curtain calls.

In 1987, Wolfgang invited Werner Herzog, the well-established film director, who had produced only one previous opera, to direct *Lohengrin*. The setting was moved to a snowy landscape, but was appropriately mediaeval. There were eccentricities. Every scene was out of doors. This included the bridal bed, with its swan headboard. At the very end of the opera, Eva and Ortrud reach out to each other in front of the returned Gottfried (below). I am not at all sure that the Ghost would have found this surprising ending acceptable. But

²² There are several accounts which discuss the production, and give some indication of what went wrong. The most detailed is Stephen Fay and Roger Wood, *The Ring: Anatomy of an Opera* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984). The account of this production in Wolfgang Wagner's autobiography, *Acts*, trans. John Brownjohn (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994), pp. 187-192, can be interestingly contrasted with Peter Hall's online discussion of it <https://www.webofstories.com/play/peter.hall/20>. This is one of 40 short commentaries by Hall on theatrical topics. The following one (no, 21) is also very relevant.

the production was very beautiful, and given the extraordinary variety and imagination of Herzog's films, it was perhaps surprising that the outcome was as close to *Werktreue* as one could expect to find in modern Germany.



YouTube

A 1990 *Holländer*, directed by Dieter Dorn, another very experienced director, was, in the words of a critic in the *New York Times* “a Bayreuth classic, almost universally praised by the critics and deliriously received by the audience²³.” The Act 2 spectacle of an entire house revolving in a starry sky appears to have appealed to everybody, no matter how conservative. Unfortunately the production does not seem to have been recorded on film, or at least made available on DVD.

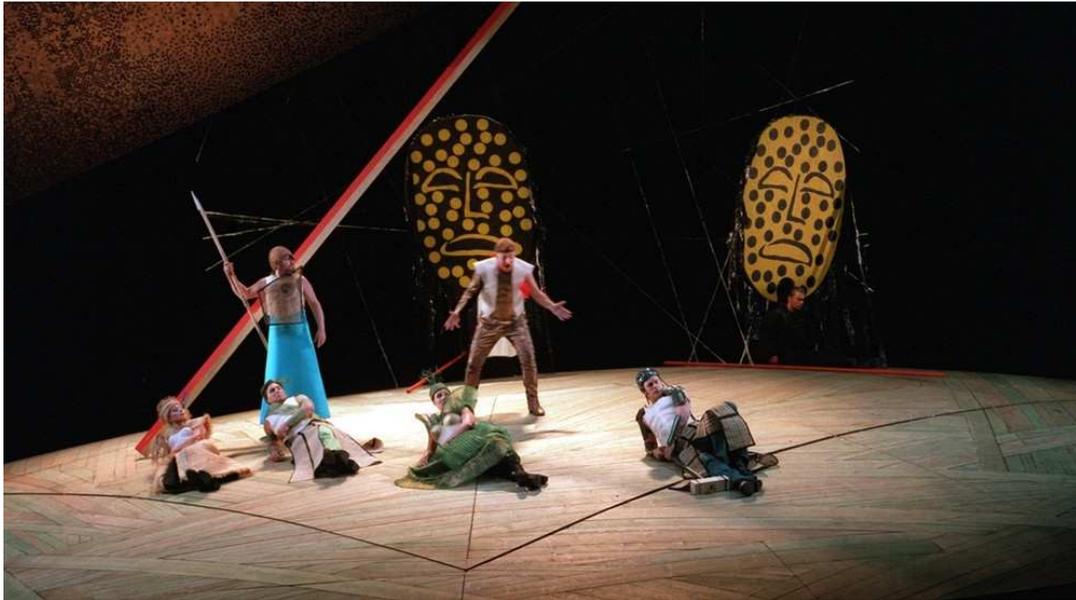
²³ John Rockwell, “A Theme Of Endless Variations: Wagner”, *New York Times*, July 31, 1993.



<http://wanderer.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/08/01/>

If, at the conclusion of the 1993 season, regular members of the Bayreuth audience, including the hypothetical Ghost, looked back at the thirteen seasons since the conclusion of the Chéreau *Ring*, they should have been well satisfied. There had of course been some disappointments and considerable controversy and nobody can have been pleased all the time. By the standards of contemporary German *Regietheater*, such as those in Frankfurt under the artistic directorship of Michael Gielen, including the Berghaus *Ring* footnoted above, productions had been conservative. But within the constraints imposed by the conservatism of Bayreuth audiences and the limitation on repertoire imposed by the traditions of the Festival, productions had been diverse and imaginative.

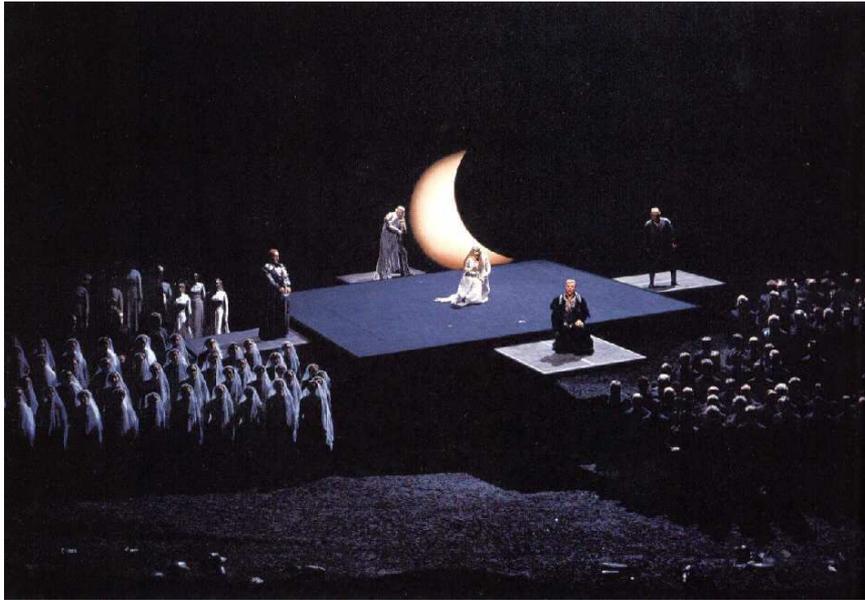
In contrast, the next thirteen seasons were much less satisfactory. The *Ring* of 1994, directed by Alfred Kirchner, was criticised for lacking coherence – any political or ideological content was deliberately avoided in favour of emphasising visual images and costumes, created by a designer who went by the professional name of Rosalie. There was widespread criticism of her work, and especially of costumes which were considered unsuited for the characters who wore them, and were often difficult to sing in.



<https://www.br-klassik.de/aktuell/news-kritik/rosalie-kuentlerin-gestorben-bilder-100.html>

During the following four years there were no new productions, except for Wolfgang's *Die Meistersinger* in 1996, which was more a reworked than a new production. The productions of Wagner's operas that were generating controversy were elsewhere, such as the Richard Jones *Ring* at the Royal Opera where the gold was represented by a Rhinemaidens' slipper and Wotan carried a road sign with the arrow pointing upwards instead of a spear. Although such a production would hardly have been welcomed in Bayreuth, there was a sense that the Festival was stagnating, with its self-imposed limited repertoire and a dearth of new ideas.

The next two productions, though controversial, were sufficiently interesting to alleviate the concerns that the Festival was in a rut. Some critics found the 1999 *Lohengrin*, directed by Keith Warner and designed by Stefanis Lazaridis too dark, unromantic, and excessively intellectual in its use of symbolism. Others were impressed with its technological sophistication--in the first act King Heinrich descended from the flies on a stage-wide platform which then hovered clad in armour.



<http://www.omm.de/veranstaltungen/festspiele2003/BAY-2003lohengrin.html>

In 2000, the *Ring* was directed by Jürgen Flimm. It was set in the world of the modern corporation, with both Wotan and Alberich as competing business executives. The association of the operas with modern capitalism was not of course a new idea. The published criticism in English-language publications was very positive. I understand that this was not the case in Germany.



<http://www.therestisnoise.com/2010/09/ten-bars-of-the-ring.html>

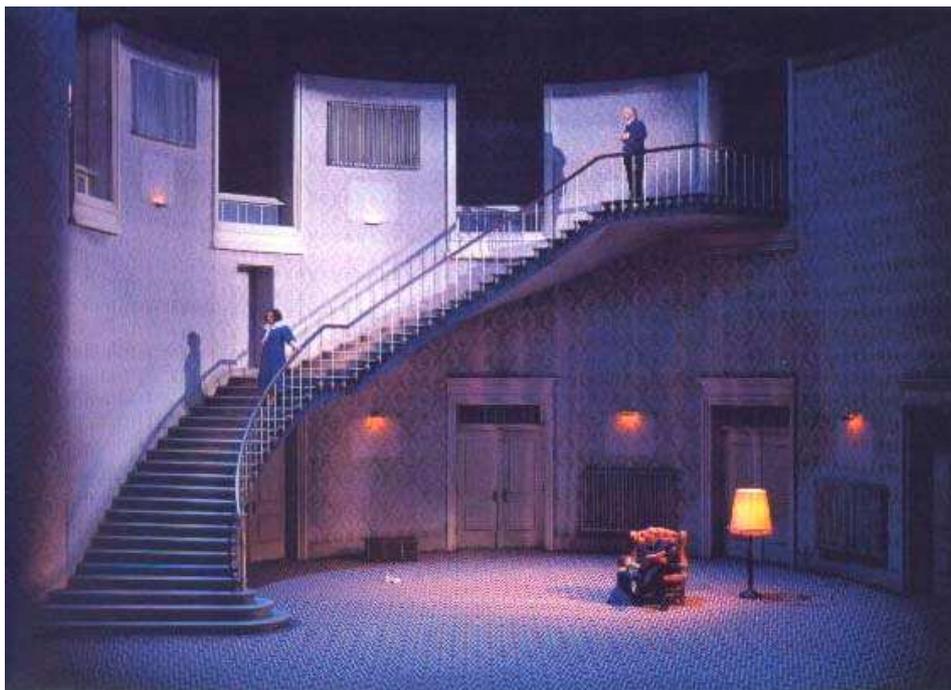
The last few years of the Wolfgang era were not among his most successful. The review by Jochen Breiholz in *Opera* (October 2002) of Philippe Arlaud's 2002 direction and design of *Tannhäuser* as a "total failure and embarrassment....The sets....resembled the decoration of a cheap, tasteless, design shop." In contrast, the review by Roger Parker in the same journal in November 2003 considered that the same production worked well, and commended "in particular the melding of highly innovative stage machinery with old-fashioned costumes."

This contrast illustrates two difficulties in making retrospective assessments of Bayreuth productions, especially from critical reviews. The first is that, as with any art form, professional critics can disagree. The second is that Wolfgang was explicit that Bayreuth was a “workshop” and that the production team was not only encouraged but expected to return in the years following the premiere, and to make significant improvements. This has been especially important for the *Ring* since launching the tetralogy in a single season limits rehearsal time and almost inevitably leaves some loose ends or things the director would like to have done difficultly. So although it is unlikely that the Arlaud production of 2002 could have improved so much by the following year to explain the contrasts in these reviews, the position in the usual five year life of a production can influence considerably the tone of a review. The improvements in the quality of the production (and also of the performance) were noted in the *Opera* review of the Arlaud *Tannhäuser* by Andrew Clark in October 2004.



<http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2007/Jul-Dec07/bayreuth2.htm>

It was possible to find the same divergence of view about the 2003 *Der Fliegende Holländer*, directed by Claus Guth, with sets and costumes by Cristian Schmidt. The opera became a psychological study of a young girl growing up, whose father tells her the story of the Dutchman, and she obsessively conflates the two. In his *Opera* review of November 2003, Roger Parker commented that he was “often bored”, and that he didn’t see the point of much of it. In contrast, William R. Braun, in *Opera News*, June 2013, remembered a 2005 performance as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, “so deep and complex that it became almost literally unbearable.”



www.nytheatre-wire.com

With his selection of Chéreau, Herzog, and Müller, Wolfgang had shown himself willing to take the risk of choosing a director with little or no previous operatic experience) and all had been considered a success (if less unanimously in the case of Müller). Christoph Schlingensiefel, who directed *Parsifal*, in 2004, was already well-known as a socially provocative theatre and film director and performance artist, but had never directed an opera. Wagner was known to be interested in Buddhism and using non-Christian rather than Christian rituals might conceivably have worked but this dark and jumbled production combining Asian and African elements, and a stream of filmed images including seals on a beach and a decomposing hare appalled most reviewers. But not everybody. Tom Service admired the “imagination and unpredictability of this staging ... its vision of what Parsifal means today, unfettered by its past²⁴”. In a conference presentation available on YouTube Edward A. Bortnichak and Paula M. Bortnichak discuss the production and relating it to the Tibetan Book of the Dead²⁵. Nevertheless, in spite of his interest in non-Western religions and philosophical ideas, it is hard to see the Ghost giving this production a passing mark.

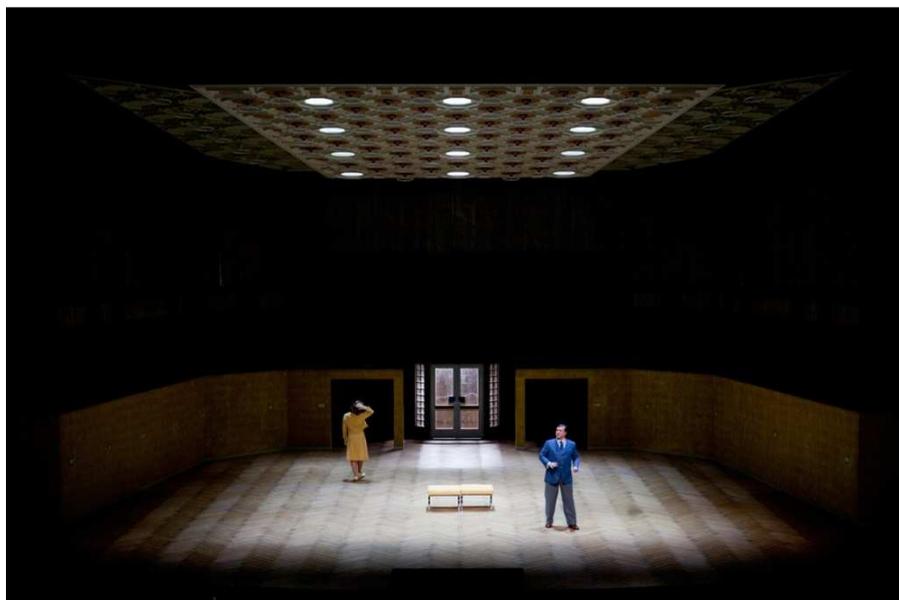
²⁴ *The Guardian*, 4 August 2006.

²⁵ https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=OFhKiK0t_6M_.



http://www.schlingensief.com/projekt_eng.php?id=t044

In 2005, *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Christoph Marthaler and designed by Anna Viebrock, also proved controversial. Postwar Europe, ordinary people, little change of set...what some critics saw as deliberate understatement and subtlety, others complained as lacking romance or excitement.



<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/317574211197608554/?lp=true>

After Lars von Trier pulled out in 2004 from the direction of the 2006 *Ring* announced three years earlier, Wolfgang turned again to a man who had never staged an opera—Tankred Dorst, aged 80, a writer and occasional director, best known for his plays, but also as a filmmaker. The action took place in variety of modern settings—a graffiti-ridden public park, a power station, an abandoned classroom, an unfinished flyover, a stone-quarry, a

hotel lobby etc. and its main concept was that the gods played out their drama in the midst of a public carrying out its regular work and recreational activities. Most reviews were negative about the staging, but there was universal praise for Thielmann's conducting.



http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2009/Jul-Dec09/bayreuth2009_0708.htm

Katharina Wagner era

The rules of the Richard Wagner Foundation state that members of the Wagner family should, if qualified, receive a preference in filling the chief administrative position of the Festival. Speculation about the managerial succession to Wolfgang began as he approached the age of 80, which he reached in 1999. At that time he made it clear that, having a contract for life, he would retire if and only if his second wife, Gudrun, could take over his position. Other members of the family were not the only people unhappy about this prospect, and in 2001 the Board (which is dominated by the public officials which provide much of the finance for the Festival) declared that his successor would be his daughter from his first marriage, Eva Wagner-Pasquier.

Gudrun died in 2007. By that time it had been widely suspected that Wolfgang had been grooming Katharina Wagner, his daughter from his second marriage, to take over management of the Festival. Beginning with *Der Fliegende Holländer* in Würzburg in 2002, she had already directed four operas by the time she came to direct *Die Meistersinger* in Bayreuth in 2007 and so when Wolfgang finally retired in 2008, she clearly met the

qualification requirement. The Board decided that the two half-sisters should manage the Festival together²⁶.

By 2011, when I first visited Bayreuth, the Katharina era was firmly established. This was the fifth (and final) year of her *Die Meistersinger*. It had been followed in 2008 by *Parsifal* directed by Stefan Herheim, and in 2010 by *Lohengrin*, directed by Hans Neuenfels, both of which I saw in 2011 in reverse order. Both Herheim and Neuenfels had reputations as two of the more extreme exponents of operatic *Regietheater*. For Herheim, this derived particularly from a production of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Salzburg in 2003 that reportedly bore no relation at all to the plot, location, or time period of the original²⁷; for Neuenfels, this dated back at least thirty years, to a highly controversial *Aida* in Frankfurt 1981 that portrayed the Ethiopian slave as a cleaning woman²⁸. 2011 was a year without a *Ring*; in addition to these three operas, there was a new *Tannhäuser*, directed by Sebastian Baumgarten, and a revival of the 2005 *Tristan and Isolde*, directed by Christoph Marthaler, neither of which I saw. In the remaining part of this paper, I shall discuss only the operas that I actually saw in Bayreuth—the above three in 2011, and a *Ring* and a new *Tristan* in 2015.

Die Meistersinger

Die Meistersinger is a challenge to any stage-director who wants to impose an individual stamp on its production. Its main character is a historical person, living in a well-known city. While details of the action may be imaginary they are not implausible, and the characters and the relationships among them are convincingly portrayed. There is a lot of conversation but it keeps to the point. Possible variations in the stage pictures, especially in the setting for the song contest, and in the characterisation of Beckmesser are open to directorial decision, but if there is to be any relationship between the music, libretto and stage action, there is not much else that gives the director a free hand.

One possibility is not to worry about matching the libretto to action, let alone identifying time or place, and tell quite a different story. Katharina Wagner's production used painting, rather than singing, as its cultural focus. Walther is an arrogant art student, contemptuous of rules, who daubs paint all over the place. He is subjected to an examination by a group who are all cultural conservatives except for Sachs, who is a natural nonconformist who goes around barefoot. Over the course of the opera both Walther and Sachs become more socially conformist. Beckmesser moves in the other direction, shedding a coat and tie to become, it appears, a performance artist. In the third act, life size puppets, representing German historical and cultural figures, attack Sachs. One of the objectives of this may have been to repudiate in advance Sachs's statement of the need to preserve Holy German Art, even if foreigners destroyed the Holy Roman Empire. It is hard to blame Wagner for the fact that this should have struck some postwar ears as having Nazi associations, and as a nationalist statement in a country that had not yet become a nation it strikes one as mild compared with, say, John of Gaunt's paean to England ("this scepter'd isle") in Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

²⁶ Eva withdrew from this arrangement in 2014. There was considerable press speculation about the reasons for this, especially when Katharina reportedly banished Eva from Bayreuth in 2015.

²⁷ See review of production by Shirley Apthorp, *Opera*, vol. 54, no. 11 (November 2003) pp. 1351-2.

²⁸ See review of production by Hildegard Weber, *Opera*, vol. 32, no. 5, (May 1981) pp. 510-11.



DVD (Opus Arte)

Beginning with the televised *Ring* of Chéreau, I had seen many *Regietheater* productions, or at least productions that were very far from *Werktreue*, but nothing that departed so radically from what was originally envisaged by the composer (and/or librettist) as this *Die Meistersinger*. I prefer, if possible, not to read published criticism of an opera before seeing it so I was quite unprepared for it. As had become the Bayreuth norm, there had, I understand, been considerable tweaking since its first production, including a reduction of some of the obscene elements noted by reviewers in 2007. I could not understand either the central point or the mass of stage business whose main function appeared as a means to shock. I understand that the 2007 programme had an article by the dramaturg that was not included in the 2011 programme, which might have helped the understanding.

Clearly Wagner's Ghost would not have been pleased by this inversion of his ideas or of the total lack of theatrical credibility, but it is unlikely that Katharina would have wanted her great-grandfather's approval.

Lohengrin

Lohengrin was first production by Hans Neuenfels in Bayreuth, and I think probably of any Wagner opera, so there was great interest in what he would produce. It seems unlikely that anybody was disappointed. Neuenfels and his designer, Reinhard van der Thannen developed a concept that startled his first audiences, but which eventually won them over. During the prelude, a man was trying very hard to enter a door in a white wall; it was not immediately clear that this was Lohengrin trying to get into a laboratory, in which some sort of experiment was taking place. The nature of the experiment was never clear, let alone who was in charge of carrying it out. This did not matter very much.

The chorus was for most of the opera was a collection of laboratory rats participating in the experiment. At the outset, the males were black rats and the females were white rats. They changed clothing according to the emotions of the principals. In the first act, as Lohengrin

approached drawn by his swan, they took off rat costumes but not their rat masks to reveal them dressed in yellow tail coats; their rat costumes were taken briskly up to the flies. Eventually they were pushed off the stage to leave the principals alone, and when they returned, they were humans in the same yellow suits, wearing boaters. In Act 2, there was a similar switch, although the women continued to wear their rat-tails. Elsa and Ortrud both wore swan costumes, one white and black. For the wedding chorus of Act 3, some of the rats became pink mice. There was other colour coding as well, in the clothing of the principals. Telramund and Ortrud were dressed in shiny grey, but Telramund himself actually became a black rat when attempting to assassinate Lohengrin.



DVD (Opus Arte)

In an interview in the programme book Neuenfels comments that “When 80 rats sing, it is something very different than when 80 men in helmets sing.” This clearly reduces any lingering association of the patriotic rallying of the troops with the Nazi regime, and so have something in common with Katharina Wagner’s *Meistersinger*, but this could contribute only a small amount towards understanding the staging. It is unlikely that anybody seeing this production without special preparation would have understood the colour coding, or the switches between rat and human forms. There was also some puzzling stage business. Why did Elsa enter the first act pierced with arrows? And why was a team of rats apparently carrying away the proceeds of a robbery, with a dead horse and a wrecked coach near the front of the stage during the prelude to the second act. Nothing that I have read about the production since seeing it has helped very much.

The opera proved popular with audiences, helped by some superb singing, especially by Klaus Florian Vogt. What would the Ghost have thought? The production was certainly innovative, although he would probably have been puzzled by some of its features. He might have felt anxious lest he was missing some modern subtext. But he would have noted that these uncertainties did not destroy the theatrical integrity of the production, or damage the human relationships that he wanted his opera to portray. He would have awarded a passing mark.

Parsifal

Seen after the conceptual puzzles posed by *Der Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*, the essence of Stefan Herheim's *Parsifal* was understandable and theatrically persuasive. It is now some years since I saw this production, and at the time I was not expecting to write about it. There was much in this highly complex, multi-layered structure that I could not hope to understand fully at a first viewing and the collection of quotations that constituted the programme notes were of little help²⁹. Successive scenes were set against the principal events of German history from the time of the opera's creation to the present day. This provided a stable framework for the portrayal of the evolving psychological relationships among the principal characters.

In the first Act, Parsifal is born in what is clearly Wagner's own house, Wahnfried, which is transformed into a Grail Hall resembling the Siena Cathedral set of the original 1882 production. At the beginning of the second Act, Klingsor presides over a First World War field hospital, the Flower Maidens are nurses, Klingsor in white tie becomes an MC in a Weimar cabaret, and the final destruction of the castle is carried out by Nazi storm troopers, signally the approach of the Second World War. The last Act in post-war, opening in a ruined Wahnfried, and the final scene of the Grail Hall is representation of the Bundestag.

The historical survey provides a gloss on Wagner's original conception without damaging its integrity. Once Wagner's ghost had reluctantly accepted that *Parsifal* would not be performed unchangeably and only in Bayreuth, I see no reason why it would have any problem in approving this production.

²⁹ In contrast, there is a very valuable online interview with Stefan Herheim <http://www.wagneropera.net/interviews/stefan-herheim-parsifal.htm>, and several other articles discussing the production: see <http://www.wagneropera.net/articles/articles-bayreuth-2008-herheim-parsifal-skramstad.htm#> and/or <http://www.wagneropera.net/articles/articles-bayreuth-2008-herheim-parsifal-skramstad.htm#> and/or <http://boulezian.blogspot.ie/2008/08/bayreuth-festival-parsifal-6-august.html>.



<http://boulezian.blogspot.ie/2011/08/bayreuth-festival-4-parsifal-3-august.html>

A DVD was promised but, sadly, has never been issued.

The Ring 2013

2013 was the bicentenary of Wagner's birth. There were many new Wagner productions put on to mark the occasion but a new Bayreuth *Ring* might have been expected to get even more than normal attention. Frank Castorf was well-known for his avant-garde productions in Berlin's Volksbühne, where he had been artistic director for 20 years, but he had very little experience with either directing opera or with its production traditions. He was surprised to find that his Bayreuth contract forbade him to rearrange the text as he had been able to do with plays in Berlin.

The central theme of making oil rather than gold as the *Ring*'s most-desired mineral seems at first glance to have some potential. Oil has been so socially and economically important more-or-less everywhere, that the idea of setting the different operas of the tetralogy in different historical and geographical settings chosen to reflect the interaction between the oil industry and politics dates is appealing. American oil consumption is here represented by staging *Das Rheingold* in a seedy motel on US 66; prerevolutionary Russia by an oil derrick in Baku (*Die Walküre*); Mime's workshop is in a trailer park in the shadow of a Communist Mount Rushmore (*Siegfried*)



<http://www.wagneropera.net/images/Castorf-Ring-800px-Siegfried-Rushmore-Orange.jpg>

The later scenes of *Siegfried* take place in Alexanderplatz in East Berlin. At one point Wotan rather conspicuously reads Pravda, and the Wanderer appears disguised as Bakhunin. The New York Stock Exchange provides the setting for the final act of *Götterdämmerung*, but rather unexpectedly survives. But perhaps that was the point. The revolution has fizzled out. Oil as a theme suggests that a better substitute for the Rhine would be an oil rig rather than a motel swimming pool, but perhaps this is to take the idea more seriously than Castorf did. In any case it would have had the problem that gold plays such an essential part in the Ring that one cannot substitute oil – Freia was covered by gold bars rather than oil. It is also rather difficult to think of any oil-based substitute for a gold ring.

I saw this opera in 2015. There was much to dislike about this production. A stream of distracting stage business included vulgarities intended to shock but which by now merely irritate. A decision to have Siegfried shoot rather than fight Fafner was inexplicable. A video screen showing both flashbacks and concurrent events on the stage dropped down annoyingly from time to time. There were various references to film that would not have been recognized by many members of the audience – *Siegfried* ended with Siegfried and Brunnhilde in a café in the Alexanderplatz (in Berlin) where any enjoyment they might have received from the bottle of wine they were sharing was clearly destroyed by a family of crocodiles snapping at their feet. I learnt afterwards this was a reference to a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who was both a friend to and influence on Castorf. In *Götterdämmerung* a pram full of potatoes pushed down a long flight of steps at some moment of high emotion was presumably a reference to *Battleship Potemkin*. One of the major strengths of this production is its elaborate and remarkably realistic sets. So it is puzzling and distracting that having gone to the trouble to create a motel of the 1960's that is realistic down to its rotary dial payphones, it should also offer Wi-Fi.

In the paper cited above, Bortnichak and Bortnichak produce some sort of rationale for much of the apparently irrelevant side business, including multiple *Ring* associations for the

caged turkeys kept by Sieglinde, (though they do not explain why the mime character who appears regularly throughout the cycle subsequently occupies the cage and reads a book.) Their explanation of the crocodiles in the Alexanderplatz rests on the fact that crocodiles existed contemporaneously with the prehistoric reptiles kept in a nearby museum, at a period when the oil that forms the central connecting feature of this *Ring* was being created. The deliberate anachronisms, such as Siegfried's semi-automatic, and the frequent changes in scenic time and place are seen by the authors as deliberate attempts to disorientate the audience "and jolt it into recognition of new patterns of association." But the audience is not so much jolted as distracted, since it cannot possibly comprehend in real time this eclectic collection of stage events, and is denied the emotional absorption and intellectual focus that Wagner wanted his audiences to achieve.

Even if there were none of these distractions, the structure of this *Ring* would lack theatrical integrity. There may well be no reason why the settings in the four parts of the Ring should relate to each other. Gods move freely around the world. Time passes at an unspecified rate. But there is an underlying narrative that takes place over time, and time is unidirectional. In *Das Rheingold*, Valhalla is under construction. In *Die Walküre* Wotan and Freia have moved in. In this production, unfortunately, *Die Walküre* opens in pre-revolutionary Baku, several decades before gas-guzzlers drive along Route 66, to enjoy the favours of the Rhinemaids, join Alberich in playing with a rubber duck, and participate in the Wotan family gathering at the Golden Motel.

Wagner may have been a "post-structuralist visionary", but it is hard to believe that his ghost would not have hated the production.

Tristan and Isolde (2015)

Katharina Wagner's conception of this opera diverges significantly from that of her grandfather. Since it is a love story, romance could not be entirely eliminated, but it was kept to a minimum. Any idea that Act One takes place on a ship needed to be quickly abandoned. It is true that there might be something vaguely nautical about the stairs and handrails of the complex set—a billionaire's yacht, possibly—but there was nothing that suggested even the slightest motion. The vertical movements of the steps and connecting platforms assist Brangaene and Kurwenal in keeping apart two lovers who need no love potion to stimulate their mutual desires. When eventually they were able to embrace, they pour the potion away.



<http://www.wagneropera.net/images/545-Bayreuth-2015-Tristan-Katharina.jpg>

In Act 2 it is clear that King Marke runs a harsh regime. Isolde and Brangaene have been imprisoned. Tristan has to overpower a guard to break in. High above them, Marke and guards, equipped with spotlights, keep them under surveillance. Marke himself is portrayed more as a gangland chief than as a monarch. When he arrives in the prison with his guards, Tristan is immediately bound and blindfolded. At the very end of the Act, he drags Isolde off, leaving Tristan to be stabbed in the back and left for dead, gangland style.

In Act 3 the delirious Tristan imagines multiple Isoldes in three dimensional pyramids. Mostly these float above him out of reach, but some he can enter, and in one case found only a collapsing set of empty clothes. In another, he embraces an Isolde figure who lifts off her own head. At the very end of the opera, the more sympathetic Marke of the text reverts to his Act 2 gangster type and drags Isolde off.

In 2015, Isolde was sung by Evelyn Herlitzius. She is a wonderful singer, whom I had seen the year before singing Elektra in Dresden, and who had more recently sung Brünnhilde in Vienna, but for my taste she brought slightly too much of these forceful women into her Isolde. One could argue, however, that this was in keeping with the relatively unromantic flavour of the production. In other respects, both musically and in its staging, particularly in its use of light, the production was superb. The Ghost would be unlikely to approve the disparity between his text and the action, but it would have been proud of how effectively this production uses the resources of the Festspielhaus.

Regietheater in Bayreuth

Like many other people who derive a living from opera, whether as contributors to the complex process of producing and performing it, or writing about it, Wagner regarded typical audiences with some contempt. In his first major essay, *Art and Revolution*, he wrote “when the prince leaves a heavy dinner, the banker a fatiguing financial operation, the working man a weary day of toil, and go to the theatre: they ask for rest, distraction, and amusement, and are in no mood for renewed effort and fresh expenditure of force”. His operas, however, required a fitting audience. Over the next few years, in *The Artwork of the Future* and in several letters, he outlined a solution—his operas should be performed at a festival in a temporary theatre in a quiet place away from “the smoke and disgusting industrial smell of our urban civilization”³⁰. By the early 1850’s he was already envisaging his still uncomposed “Nibelung dramas” performed sequentially at such a festival. Whatever his Ghost would have thought of individual productions, it would have immense satisfaction in the fact that more than 160 years later the Festival has remained so close to its original conception. Moreover it still takes place in the theatre originally designed for it. It is difficult to think of any comparable cultural achievement.

Expected to be temporary, and largely made of wood in a town which was bombed in 1945, the Festspielhaus has proved to be astonishingly durable. Its unique design assures a remarkable balance of sound between singers and orchestra, and its superb acoustics and perfect sightlines remain at least the equal of any opera house anywhere. There are many people who would want to experience a performance there at least once in an opera-going lifetime, irrespective of the quality of the production. It is therefore possible that the Bayreuth Festival could have survived as the *Werktreue* Festival that Cosima envisaged. Most of the opera world would have regarded it as a museum piece. But there is nothing to be scorned in museum pieces. Nobody expects *Regietheater* when they see *Swan Lake* in Moscow or St Petersburg. It might have become, like the Louvre or the Roman Forum, an almost mandatory stop on a European cultural Grand Tour. It would have found itself in competition with much more imaginative Wagner productions elsewhere, and being inaccessibly located, expensive and uncomfortable (hard seats, and no air-conditioning either in the Festspielhaus or in almost all hotels) it would have lost most of its regular patronage and might well have faded away as did Radio City Music Hall in New York and D’Oyly Carte in London. Instead its evident vitality, maintaining the interest of thousands of regular attenders and generating a vast excess demand for tickets (the waiting list is usually estimated to be about ten years) undoubtedly owes much to *Regietheater*. Not only is there a new production by a new director in almost every Festival, directors are expected to return in the immediately following years to make changes—the so-called “workshop” concept. This has been especially important for the *Ring*, since the management insistence that all four individual operas be launched simultaneously is extremely demanding and likely to leave considerable room for improvement. So every Festival brings something new.

Regietheater versus *Werktreue* has ceased to be, at least in Europe, an intellectually live issue. But is it possible to generalize about what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful *Regietheater*? Except for the productions I have seen personally, my survey of Bayreuth productions has depended on evaluations by scholars and professional critics, and I have been conscious that critical views of *Regietheater* may diverge from those of the majority of

³⁰ The evolution of Wagner’s ideas for a festival devoted to his own work, and its actual realization, is described in Spotts, *Bayreuth*, pp 29-54.

paying customers. Compared with the average member of the audience, a professional critic who may well have seen several other productions of each of the Wagner opera is likely to value innovation more highly, and is also in a position to note how subtle variations from the norm elucidate the director's own concept of the opera, and to understand the meaning and purpose of otherwise baffling stage effects making reference to other cultural objects, such as a film. Divergence between the views of critics and audiences may be less pronounced in Bayreuth than elsewhere, since audience members probably have some familiarity with the operas, (since even those who have never seen them before will have time to study them while spending several days in a small town without major competing attractions), and are used to tolerating at least minor discrepancies between the libretto and stage action. But if there is such a divergence, the audience evaluation is more important. Wagner had designed both the Festival and the Festspieltheater to optimise audience experience and would have been much more concerned with the views of audiences than of critics.

I cannot of course speak for any member of an audience except myself, but I find myself placing *Regietheater* productions into one of three categories. There are those which arouse positive enthusiasm. The core narrative remains close enough to Wagner's original conception to be theatrically consistent with it, and the musical transition between scenes does not seem forced. The Herheim *Parsifal*, is an example, where a century of German history provided a backdrop for a much more complex set of events. It did not matter that not all that one was seeing could not be fully understood at a single viewing. For example, what was the significance, of the wings worn by Gurnemanz and others – did it imply that we were in a dream? These puzzles did not distract from the beauty and coherence of the production.

A second subjective category contains productions that seem perfectly acceptable. It seems to me that it is possible to appreciate a well-staged, internally consistent interpretation of an opera, without approving or even understanding the underlying concept. I was gripped by Katharina Wagner's *Tristan*, even though it was too hard-edged and unromantic for my personal taste. Its generally favourable reception suggests that Bayreuth audiences can tolerate significant differences from Wagner's own conception of the opera. I also personally enjoyed Hans Neuenfels' *Lohengrin* even though I felt that there was some hidden explanation of the rats that was eluding me. Both were examples of *Regietheater* that I would consider "acceptable".

There is a third category of productions that fall below some minimum standard of "acceptability". One example is Katrina Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, whose departure from Wagner's original concept was too far to make sense of its libretto, or indeed any internal theatrical sense in its own right. It also contained far too many contrived and distracting pieces of stage business. Even worse in both respects was Frank Castorf's *Ring* with clusters of stage activity unrelated either to the text or to each other, and making cultural references which only a limited part of the audience could hope to understand. If physicians are enjoined "first, do no harm", perhaps stage directors should be enjoined "first, do not distract".