

# AUTHORITARIAN VISION

DEVELOPMENT AND STAGNATION IN THE DESIGN OF WAGNER'S *RING OF THE NIBELUNGS*



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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the development of stage design at Bayreuth festival for the opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelungs* by the German composer Richard Wagner.

Wagner is without doubt one of the most controversial composers of all music history and the operatic festival which he founded at Bayreuth in 1876 is not only the world's oldest and best-known, but likewise the most controversial. After Wagner's death and until today, his descendants have managed the music festival, but conflicts within the family have set their mark on the festival.

Wagner hand had a very clear idea of how he wanted the *Ring* to be staged and oversaw every aspect of the first production at Bayreuth. For a long time, the visual interpretation of the *Ring* did not change and productions at Bayreuth were extremely true to the original. I will look into finding points in the history of staging the *Ring* at Bayreuth where deference towards the original starts to diminish and radical decisions were made that influenced later productions all over the world.

More recent productions have interpreted the story much more freely although Wagnerian productions can still be found.

## CONTENTS

1. Introduction .....	4
2. Wagner's Vision for <i>The Ring of the Nibelung</i> .....	4
3. Multi-Layered Meaning and Interpretation.....	5
4. The <i>Ring Cycle</i> at Bayreuth .....	6
4.1 Wagner's <i>Ring</i> – The Sacred Original? .....	6
4.2 Cosima's <i>Ring</i> .....	9
4.3 Bayreuth and German Nationalists.....	10
4.4 Rehabilitation and "New Bayreuth" .....	11
4.5 Wolfgang's Bayreuth.....	12
4.6 The Latest <i>Ring</i> .....	14
5. Development or Stagnation? .....	15
6. In Conclusion.....	17
Bibliography .....	18

# AUTHORITARIAN VISION

## DEVELOPMENT AND STAGNATION IN THE DESIGN OF WAGNER'S *RING OF THE NIBELUNG*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* or *The Ring of the Nibelungs* by Richard Wagner is often regarded as the mountain that all opera companies have to climb. It contains four operas and takes over 15 hours to perform, and really tests an organization to its artistic – and financial limits. It is a complex tale with themes of greed, corruption and loss. The operas, *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*), *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*) are an incredible work of art and resound with social, political and economic messages and the author's shifting philosophical convictions, all bearing witness to the revolutionaries, socio-economists, and philosophers whose work Wagner read or with whom he associated with (McKinnon, 2014, p. 353 and Magee, 1990, p. 1). Wagner had a very clear idea of how his *Gesamtkunstwerk* should be staged and oversaw every aspect of the production. A producer, stage manager, director, singing coach, orchestral adviser, final arbiter on sets and costumes – he was each of them (Spotts, 1994, p. 55).

The production history of *The Ring Cycle* is complex. In his essay *A Select Production History of the Ring*, Erik Neher says: "Each era, each opera house, each major artist has created, recreated, rejected, reaffirmed and recycled its own *Ring* staging, often as a tribute to or a direct assault on previous stagings of the work. And each staging seems at once to reflect *and* prescribe the society in which it exists" (Neher, 2006, p. 173).

Since the seventies, there has been an astonishing array of visual and dramatic interpretations of the *Ring*. But from the premiere performances at Bayreuth in 1876 to the first post-World War II performances there in 1951, most operagoers all over the Western world, saw the *Ring* done by performers going through much the same motions, in similar costumes, against sets that were altered only very gradually (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 204).

What was Wagner's original vision for the *Ring* and why has the design of the first production been so influential on later productions? It is inevitably difficult to produce a history of stage productions of *The Ring Cycle* from Wagner's own lifetime until today. But landmarks do stand out. Looking at the *Ring* from the perspective of a theatre designer I want to look into if I can detect points in history of staging the *Ring* at the Bayreuth Festival, where radical decisions were made that influenced the level of deference towards the original production.

### 2. WAGNER'S VISION FOR *THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG*

Richard Wagner has always cast a long shadow in the opera world and *The Ring Cycle* is without doubt one of the greatest masterpieces of musical history. Wagner believed that art could only be rescued through the creation of a modern equivalent of the theatre festivals of Periclean Athens and came up with a concept of a unified art work, where he laid out his criteria for a new idealistic artwork of the future: The *Gesamtkunstwerk* or *Total work of art*. Wagner was extremely critical of the state of opera in Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and saw the *Ring* as leading the way forward.

He believed that this new performance concept which he called *Music drama* would raise art above the level of mere entertainment, the level to which he believed had sunk in a capitalist society (Schonberg, 1997, pp. 301-302).

Wagner wrote the libretto and music for the *Ring* in the years 1848 to 1874. With *The Ring Cycle* he had created a unique work that could at that time, not be compared with any precedent. He had high ambitions and a clear vision of the piece as a whole and wrote detailed scene directions of minute and often unrealizable detail. Although Wagner's previous operas had found success by the mid 1860's and he had gained a good reputation, he was still not satisfied with presentations of his works. Wagner required a new minimalized scenic concept, but nineteenth-century opera houses were not understood as a scenic space, and resembled a picture with naturalistically painted decorations. When the young king Ludwig II of Bavaria, that admired Wagner's work, offered his financial support, Wagner immediately drafted plans to build a theatre at Bayreuth, an opera house dedicated solely to his opera dramas, where he could realize his *Gesamtkunstwerk* and be in control of every aspect of the production – from the design to staging to the architecture of the building itself (Neher, 2006, pp. 173-174).

Wagner could perhaps be described as an extreme example of an *auteur* of his artwork according to the *auteur theory* of film making, arising in France in the late 1940s as an outgrowth of the cinematic theories of André Bazin and Alexandre Astruc. The *auteur theory*, which was derived largely from Astruc's elucidation of the concept of *caméra-stylo* (*camera-pen*), holds that the director is viewed as the major creative force in a motion picture, who oversees all audio and visual elements. His personal creative voice is distinct enough to shine through studio interference and the collective process, as if he were the primary *auteur* of the movie than is the writer of the screenplay. In other words, such fundamental visual elements as camera placement, blocking, lighting, and scene length, rather than plot line, convey the message of the film (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016).

### 3. MULTI-LAYERED MEANING AND INTERPRETATION

*The Ring Cycle* tells a story of the Rhinegold, guarded by three Rhinemaidens. The dwarf Alberich steals the gold and makes a ring out of it that whoever owns, also rules the world. The story revolves around the possession of the ring of gold, which promises world dominance to anyone willing to renounce love. It is a tale of heroism, greed, betrayal as well as love and redemption. Wagner uses elements of nature in an atmospheric way – as metaphors and as indicators of emotional tone – in virtually every scene of the entire cycle (Guenther, 2006, p. 95).

Countless books have been written discussing *The Ring Cycle* as music drama, and relating it to Wagner's theoretical writings, "but the work itself remains larger and more mysterious than the sum of all these attempts to explain it" (Osborne, 1990, p. 184). Like any great work of art, whether long or short, the *Ring* reveals layer after layer of meaning and has been subjected to a variety of interpretations. It is so vast that its meaning must inevitably become a question of individual interpretation and temperament. It has been seen both as a history of the world and as a treatise on the corruption of the world, ranging from Marxist Bernard Shaw's analysis of the work, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, as a political allegory to Robert Donington's description of it in terms of Jungian psychology (Osborne, 1990, p. 184).

Wagner was a controversial figure during his lifetime, and has continued to be so after his death. Even today he is associated in the minds of many with Nazism and his operas are often thought to

praise the virtues of German nationalism. His disputed writings on music, drama and politics have attracted extensive comment since the late 20th century. Most of these perceptions arise from Wagner's published opinions on a number of topics. But his most controversial booklet, "Judaism in music" in which he held the Jews responsible for everything in German art that was derivate and mediocre, hangs as a great shadow over Wagner's life and reputation, especially as his music later became a symbol for Nazism. Wagner was promoted as one of Adolf Hitler's favourite composers and Hitler and the Nazi regime used Wagner's theories to support their own racist ideology (Schonberg, 1997, pp. 301-302).

#### 4. THE *RING CYCLE* AT BAYREUTH

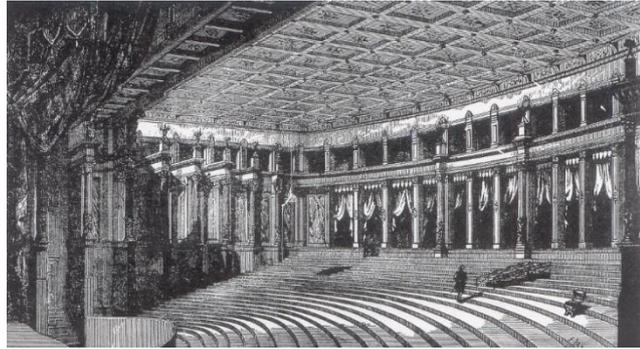
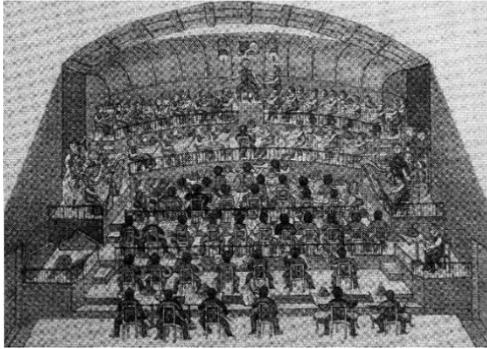
The Bayreuth Festival Theatre opened in August, 1876, with the very first full production of Wagner's four-opera *Ring Cycle*. The yearly month-long opera festival is without doubt one of the most intriguing phenomena of modern European cultural history. It is not only the world's oldest and best-known festival, but likewise the most controversial. Bayreuth was from the beginning not simply a place for model performances of Wagner's works but equally the centre of an ideological cult, a place of pilgrimage for music-lovers, a model for opera houses everywhere and an artistic goal for singers and conductors (Spotts, 1994, p. vii).

Bayreuth is inevitable connected with the political fate of the German nation as it became enmeshed in nationalism, racism and fascism until it was ultimately debased into what Thomas Mann labelled "Hitler's court theatre". The post-war revolutionary productions of Wagner's operas though eventually liberated Bayreuth from its disgraceful political associations and have made it to most exciting of operatic institutions (Spotts, 1994, pp. vi-vii).

After Wagner's death, his descendants have run the festival. A history of Bayreuth is therefore at the same time it is also a chronicle of the Wagner family and its long-simmering power struggle of leadership of the festival. In founding the festival theatre at Bayreuth, Wagner created a world headquarters and began a family directorate, which were to "exert a quasi-dictatorial, profoundly conservative power over *Ring* productions there and elsewhere for decades to come" (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 205).

##### 4.1 WAGNER'S *RING* – THE SACRED ORIGINAL?

*The Ring Cycle* is an enormous challenge to any producer. Among the four operas there are thirty-four roles to direct and thirty-six scenes to stage, many of them the most complex in all opera (Spotts, 1994, p. 5). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it was custom that the responsibility for all aspects of stage presentation lay with the stage manager and the composer primarily concentrating on achieving the best possible music performance. Wagner, on the other hand, was obsessed over every part of the production. He wanted the entire theatre to be darkened for the performance so that the audience could focus on the music and drama and arranged that the orchestra was placed in a sort of covered cave beneath the stage so that the conductor and musicians were hidden from the audience. His concern was that the scenic demands of his score were faithfully realized and therefore oversaw every aspect of the festival, from the design and construction to coaching and directing the conductor and the cast (Carnegy, 2013, pp. 5, 70,75).



Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Fig. 1. The hidden orchestra pit. Fig. 2. The auditorium.

In his book *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*, Frederic Spotts points out that beyond the intent of fascinating his audience, Wagner actually had little or no idea of how to translate his fantastic inner vision into flesh and blood, staging within a proscenium frame. What had to be put on stage was an operatic universe with a river bottom, rocky heights, rainbow bridge, forge, forest, royal hall and castle, along with its population of Rhinemaidens, gods, giants, dwarfs, flying horses, bear, toad and dragon – all to be consumed in a “fiery cataclysm”. The *Ring*, with its mythic symbolism, had to collide with the stagecraft of the time, with its elementary gas lighting, primitive stage machinery, painted backdrops and papier-maché props (Spotts, 1994, pp. 56-57).

Wagner never really faced up to either the theoretical or the practical dilemmas that underlay the staging of his works. He gave nature and landscape crucial roles in the *Ring* and actually preferred a realistic style, even if the indications in the scores speak of another language in his visions. He turned to the Viennese artist Josef Hoffmann whose sketches and paintings were translated into practical scenery by the theatre studio of Max and Gotthold Brückner. Wagner’s myth of the beginning and end of the world was not made visible through elaborate scenic miracles and illusions – a stage that copied real events stood in the way of the imagined world of the *Ring*. A design that has become some of the most influential designs in operatic history, setting the style at Bayreuth and elsewhere for over half a century (Carnegy, 2013, p. 86, Heldt, 2006, p. 151, Spotts, 1994, p. 57).



Design sketches by Viennese artist Josef Hoffmann for the 1876 premiere of the Ring Cycle. Fig. 3. Siegfried, act 1. Fig. 4. Die Valküre, act 1.



The distance between picturesque romantic fantasy and what was actually possible on stage can clearly be seen by comparing these two paintings: Fig. 5. Hoffmann's sketch of the Rhinemaidens and Albreich in *Das Rheingold*, act 1. Fig. 6. The attempt to realize it as seen from behind.

The costume designer for the first production of the *Ring* was Carl Emil Doepler, whose winged and horned helmets have been part of *Ring* lore ever since. Wagner had begun by asking Doepler for timeless costumes of mythological world, something unique and inventive, with no association with any known experience. But in going on to mention "the costumes of the Germanic peoples in Roman authors" he made a fatal mistake, for Doepler plunged into historical research and came up with designs resembling Greek gods, encrusted with ornamental detail that were exactly the kind of decorative kitsch which the composer was so anxious to avoid. Neither Wagner nor his wife Cosima liked Doepler's designs. Changes were made, but the composer remained not satisfied with the results (Carnegy, 2013, pp. 82-83).



Doepler's original drawings. Fig 7. Brünhilde. Fig. 8. Wotan.  
Fig. 9. The Rhinemaidens.

After the premiere in Bayreuth in 1876, music critics from around the world rendered their verdict. The reviews were as different as they were many. The staging was judged both as a success and a failure, but on one point though everyone seemed to agree. The festival was not just the cultural event of the century; it was one of the great moments in cultural history. Spotts believes it was unfortunate that Wagner began his Bayreuth venture with a work of such surpassing difficulty and

that he did so at the time of low taste and primitive technology. The staging was an indigestible combination of literalism and romanticism. Spotts points out that the Norwegian composer Edward Grieg seems to have been the only one to put his finger directly on the problem. He argued that by being so realistic and so obvious, the settings detracted from the drama. Much better would have been to let the audience “use its imagination to create devils and demons within its own mind” (Spotts, 1994, pp. 71, 74).

#### 4.2 COSIMA’S RING

After Wagner’s death in 1883, his widow, Cosima, ran the Bayreuth Festival for the next twenty-three years. She saw it as her mission to perpetuate Wagner’s work in a manner as faithful as possible to his intentions, from the music to every detail in setting and costumes. She enshrined the original designs, insisting until her death in 1930 that all subsequent performances be copies of the original. Cosima refused new theatrical ideas that were beginning to emerge around her. So extreme was her dedication to perfecting the nineteenth-century aesthetic of realistic stage illusion that she could conceive of no other. Especially significant was her rejection of the Swiss designer Adolphe Appia, whose proposals for a drastic simplification of the stage picture were to be hugely influential. (Carnegy, 2013, pp. 84, 146, 147). As a result, the Hoffman-Brückner set design and Döpler’s costume designs – with their winged and horned helmets and shields for women along with the other fabricated Teutonic fashions – were the models for Wagnerian productions for the decades to come (Spotts, 1994, p. 58). Cosima insisted that all subsequent performances be copies of what she declared she remembered of her husband’s originals and also made sure that her son, Siegfried, kept the rituals intact after he took over in 1906, until her death in 1930 (Neher, 2006, p. 176).



*Fig. 10. The 1896 Valkyries. Fig. 11. Adolphe Appia’s stage proposal for the Ring. He proposed an approach that was minimal, spare, and controlled by light rather than by objects like sets and props.*

Most productions elsewhere in Europe and North America also followed the original production well into the middle of the 20th century. The reason for the durability of the original concept, is the fact that the *Ring* staging was assumed to have Wagner’s imprimatur and was therefore not incidental to the work but as much as a part of his conception as the score and the text. So great was Bayreuth’s prestige that the 1876 settings and costumes were imitated in opera houses from St Petersburg to New York and followed for the next seventy-five years – and in a few places, in outline, even up till today (Spotts, 1994, pp. 75-76).

Siegfried Wagner took over the control of the festival in 1906. He had been closely schooled in the Bayreuth style, having served both as a conductor and assistant to his mother. Although he was far more open to new ideas of stage design, like the ideas of conductor Gustav Mahler and the artist Alfred Roller, his freedom of action was constrained by his mother's longevity. Mahler and Roller's production in the Vienna Court Opera of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1903 had marked the movement of liberation from the stranglehold of nineteenth-century orthodoxy and opened up a new era in which it was seen that new solutions to old performance problems could reveal previously unsuspected layers of meaning. On the other hand, Bayreuth's only use for new ideas and technology was to serve "faithful" performance, and the new trail pioneered by Mahler and Roller, therefore all too swiftly petered out. Cosima died in 1930 at the age of ninety-two, but Siegfried only survived her by four months (Carnegy, 2013, pp. 149-150, 157, 234). One could wonder, given a free hand, if Siegfried's custodianship would have been far more adventurous than it was.

In his essay *Whatever Became of the Breastplates?* David Littlejohn argues that despite the cultural phenomenon called "Wagnerism" that spread through Europe and the United States between 1870 and 1900, and despite Wagner's own claim to have created total and indivisible art works – no aspect of the composer's work actually has stood the test of time – except his music. Not his historical and aesthetic theories, not his philosophy, certainly not his radical theories, not his plots and librettos and at last – not his ideas on operatic staging. His vision of the stage possibilities was radically limited by European tastes and traditions of the second half of the nineteenth century (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 208).

#### 4.3 BAYREUTH AND GERMAN NATIONALISTS

After Wagner's death, Bayreuth increasingly became a focus for German nationalists attracted by the mythos of the operas, incorporating it into their heroic mythology of the German nation. After the deaths of Cosima and Siegfried Wagner in 1930, English-born Winfried Wagner, Siegfried's widow, ran the festival. She was a personal friend of Hitler, who was equally admiring of Wagner's music. They both turned the summer festival into a Nazi showplace in the 1930s and until 1944, when the festival was closed (DiGaetani, 2006, pp. xi-xii). A fateful development occurred and covered Bayreuth into a mighty fortress in defence of "true German values", in other words, a stronghold of reaction, nationalism and anti-Semitism. Thus evolved the fatal equation: Wagner equals Bayreuth equals fascism. A concatenation that was not broken until in the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Spotts, 1994, p. viii).



Fig. 12. The Wagner family in 1881. Fig. 13. Winfried Wagner and her sons Wolfgang (left) and Wieland (right) with Adolf Hitler.

During the thirty years after World War II Richard Wagner had a very tainted name. But within the last forty years, there has been a revolutionary change in attitude. In his essay *The Cycles in the Cycle*, John DiGaetani asks what caused such a major change in attitude to Wagnerian opera. Beyond the simple passage of time and the magical quality of this composer's operas, one of the major factors was actually the Wagner festival at Bayreuth (DiGaetani, 2006, pp. xi-xii).

Partly because of its identification with the Nazi cause, partly because of Germany's postwar poverty, the Bayreuth festival was not resumed until 1951 when Winfried's and Siegfried's sons, Wieland and Wolfgang, managed to reopen the festival. Their revolutionary new approaches to staging Wagner's operas helped to revive audience interest, presenting Wagnerian opera in a new visual style and without its previous political associations (DiGaetani, 2006, pp. xi-xii and Littlejohn, 1992, p. 209).

#### 4.4 REHABILITATION AND "NEW BAYREUTH"

The relaunch of Bayreuth festival, with Wieland's production of *Parsifal*, also marked the beginning of a new era in Wagnerian staging at the Bayreuth Festival. The ground-breaking performance not only celebrated the reopening of the Festival after the horrors of World War II, but the production itself began a revolution in Wagnerian stage design that continues to influence the visual representation of Wagner's works up to our days. "It was apparent that a sacred Wagnerian rite had been rigorously secularized, but no doubt remained that the old orthodoxy in interpreting and staging Wagnerian opera had been irreparably shattered" (Spotts, 1994, p. 212). Wieland's distinctive vision, his artist's eye and musical sensibility created a new visual landscape, that sprang from his conviction that the values of myth and archetype were pre-eminent, and that the *Ring* was "a profound map of the human psyche" (Carnegy 2006, p. 263).



The "New Bayreuth" minimalistic style. Fig. 14. Wieland's 1951 *Rheingold*. Fig. 15. Wieland's 1951 *Siegfried*.

*Parsifal* was followed by Wieland's *Ring Cycle*, which caused the same reaction. The production represented a radical break; traditional ornaments, props and costumes were gone. The "New Bayreuth style" focused on a central, circular acting area that was subtly and diffusely lighted. A world of darkness lay beyond its edges in an indeterminate time and place. There were no walls, no ceilings, mountains or trees. Light and shadow were used to create scene changes, and as few objects as possible served for example as seats or an anvil. The costumes usually were simple robes

or tunics – without helmets and armour. Audiences were compelled towards the inner meaning of the dramas, and the psychological implications were made obvious as never before. Changes in style over the next twenty-five years occurred mainly in the lighting of the stage and the gigantic cyclorama behind it (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 210 and Spotts, 1994, p. 213).

Littlejohn points out that the “New Bayreuth” style has been explained in three ways. First, as Germany was strapped for cash in 1951, this was simply the least expensive way to produce a new *Ring Cycle* that could still be imposing. Two, the legacy of 1933-1945 had left the traditional Teutonic style in much political disfavour, as Hitler saw it as a real expression of his vision of a heroic “master race”. The only way to start the new festival would therefore be to strip the stage bare of its nationalist associations – and begin with modernist “less is more” style. Three, such style was in fact quite defensible in the 1950s and 1960s, of a piece with related movements in architecture, painting, sculpture and film (Littlejohn, 1992, pp. 209-210).

Littlejohn also says that the Wagner brothers’ productions of 1951-1975 as well as the many stripped-down, light-created, atmospheric and abstract versions that followed, do in fact owe more to Adolphe Appia than anyone else, “the first modern theatre designer to dispense with all inessentials in order to carve stage places out of changing washes of colour and light” (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 209). Since 1892, he had been working on series of timeless, stunningly simple, geometric designs for Wagner’s music dramas, drawings rejected by Cosima, but are now regarded as one of the landmark creations in the art of the stage (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 209).

“New Bayreuth” was successful, dominating Wagner productions worldwide until 1976. The performances in 1951 were the beginning of what has grown to become a golden age for Wagner, in some ways *the* golden age. Although Wolfgang did his own productions from time to time in these years, Wieland was the pathbreaker and over the next fifteen years Wieland’s work never lost its ability to shock and surprise. At first it met with much resistance, but by the time he died, it was generally regarded as one of the “most compelling and far-reaching theatrical manifestations of the twentieth century” (Carnegy, 2006, p. 264).

According to Spotts, the brothers Wieland and Wolfgang never really got along. Through the years, relations inside the Wagner clan had been increasingly strained by differences extending from the personal to the political – but by far the deepest rift was between the brothers. After a cooperative start, their association had degenerated into a “rivalry and eventually into irreconcilable animosity. ... Wieland's productions were magnificent. For that very reason there were frictions” (Spotts, 1994, p. 248). Relations between the two families had inevitably followed the same course, and at one point, even their children weren't allowed to speak to one another. Wieland wanted out and was disgusted with the situation. But then in 1966 he died at only 49 after short illness. After Wieland's death, Wolfgang tossed all his brother's family out of the enterprise. Later, Wolfgang also managed to cut off ties with his own children (Spotts, 1994, pp. 248-249).

#### 4.5 WOLFGANG’S BAYREUTH

Some say that Wieland's early death in 1966 left a gap that has never really been filled. While Wolfgang assumed full control of the festival, his own productions rarely won much favour. Though retaining some of Wieland's spareness, they were criticised as visually undistinguished, even ugly. (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 211). Wolfgang had proved an able administrator and was clever in his choice of conductors and directors. The centennial *Ring* at the 1976 Bayreuth Festival produced by Patrice

Chéreau and designed by Richard Peduzzi proved to be a landmark in operatic production, and highly influential on productions to come. In his extremely controversial production, Chéreau took off from George Bernard Shaw's 1898 Marxist analysis of the *Ring*. The story was interpreted as an allegory of the evils of the Industrial Revolution. Sets and costumes did not depict the medieval Rhineland or some abstract mountaintop like before, but Western Europe in 1876. The characters were costumed in clothing that indicated their social class positions, the doom of the gods thus signifying the downfall of the old ruling class in an industrializing society. This departure made the production vivid and compelling, but also lead to screams from the self-appointed guardians of Wagnerian purity who booed and walked out despite fine performances. Still, that production released a flood of modern theatrical approaches, some of them bizarre, especially in Europe (Friedman, 2006, p. 69 and Littlejohn, 1992, p. 212).



Fig. 16. Chéreau 's 1976 *Rheingold*, scene 1. The dwarf Alberich steals the gold. Fig. 17. Chéreau 's 1976 *Rheingold*, scene 2. The giants drag Freya away.

It is easy to understand why this *Ring* had such a huge impact. Like most landmark productions it was found shocking because it disrupted a prevailing orthodoxy. It took on the awkward corners of the composer's dramaturgy and tackled it scene by scene as an epic rather than a seamless music drama. Carnegie points out that it was a critical interpretation that "honoured the massive complexity, the many-sidedness of the work, and which engaged with the internal contradictions at its heart" (Carnegy, 2006, p. 363).

Since 1951 Bayreuth had witnessed productions that were conventional and scandalous, beautiful and ugly, dull and thrilling, and that were cheered and jeered. Under pressure of competing with others, and even sometimes with their own earlier work, producers were driven to ever further extremes of originality and provocation. But none of the remaining *Ring* productions during Wolfgang's directorship were as influential as Chéreau's. In fact, they were rather the opposite. Peter Hall's *Ring* in 1983 was for example considered one of his most magnificent flops, being old-fashioned and naturalistic, Harry Kupfer's production in 1988 had raised hopes of thought-provoking masterpiece, but received little praise, and Tancred Dorst's 2006 production was tepidly reviewed (Spotts, 1994, pp. 293, 299, 304 and Goldmann, 2013).

In 2008, aged 88, Wolfgang Wagner finally resigned having run the festival since 1951. After years of power-struggle within the family, he at last agreed that the director's job should be handed over to a new generation. On 1 September 2008, his daughters Eva Wagner-Pasquier and her half-sister Katharina Wagner were named as joint directors of the Bayreuth Festival (Hall, 2008). But the

dispute has continued, and in 2015 Eva left her co-managerial duties with her half-sister, who now solely runs the festival (Service, 2015).

#### 4.6 THE LATEST *RING*

The latest Bayreuth production of *The Ring Cycle*, and even the most controversial yet, was premiered in 2013 as a part of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Richard Wagner's birth. Directed by Frank Castorf, Oil – the black gold – is the underlying theme in the production. Castorf's radically incoherent production of the *Ring* was met with boos and jeers when it premiered, but he takes an essentially non-Wagnerian view of the work. As example, Siegfried finishes off the dragon Fafner not with a blow from his sword but with a burst from his Kalashnikov, while Wotan, king of the gods, is a pimp who receives oral sex from Erda, the earth goddess and in one scene, giant plastic crocodiles crawl across the stage and eat one of the singers (Oltermann, 2014).



Fig. 18. Castorf's 2013 *Rheingold*, Loge and Mime arguing at the petrol station. Fig. 19. In Castorf's 2013 *Siegfried*, Mount Rushmore displays not the heads of US presidents but those of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong.

Angela Merkel's office refused to comment on whether she had enjoyed the show and a Berliner Zeitung's reviewer wrote that the performance was perfectly bearable – but only as long as one kept one's eyes closed. Castorf's defenders have though pointed out that the Bayreuth festival has never [since 1951] been scared of pairing tradition and the avant-garde, and reminded that both Wieland Wagner's production in 1951 and Chéreau's political interpretation in 1976, which now are being hailed as classics, were greeted with disfavour and bad reviews (Oltermann, 2014).

This raises questions: Does the audience have its presumptions and therefore find it hard to see something unexpected, or is the director's vision simply outrageous? Is there an idea that mythical figures are timeless and therefore they should not change? It would be interesting to know how this production will be thought of in 40 years' time. Will it still be thought of as a disrespectful production that crossed too many boundaries – or will it belong to the influential landmark productions like Wieland's and Chéreau's?

## 5. DEVELOPMENT OR STAGNATION?

In the past decades we have seen influential productions that definitely have set their mark on later productions. All kinds of experimentations have been done and modern technology has opened up for new possibilities. Robert Lepage's production for the Metropolitan Opera in 2010, did for example receive much attention. The set design was clever, where a huge machine, designed by Carl Fillion, served as a single set for all four operas.

Looking through the history of the *Ring* productions outside Bayreuth, especially the costume design, it is noteworthy how very much alike many of them look, seeking inspiration in the original designs. The fabrics and colours may have changed slightly, but we still see the same old horned helmets and breastplates, even in up today productions. Certainly, there are numerous productions where the visual interpretation is all but like the original, but in that case, they very often have a political reference.

When comparing different designs for the character Wotan, it is interesting that even though the set design was quite modern for the Metropolitan Opera's production in 2010, the costumes referred very strongly to the original.



Fig. 20. Bayreuth 1876



Fig. 21. Seattle Opera 1975



Fig. 22. Metropolitan Opera 2010

Examples of political interpretation of Wotan:



Fig. 23. Scottish Opera's 2001



Fig. 24. Melbourne Opera 2013

Like Wotan, visual interpretation of the Valkyries has changed little through the years, and again, the Metropolitan production from 2010 almost copies Bayreuth's costumes from 1896.



*Fig. 25. Bayreuth 1876*



*Fig. 26 Bayreuth 2006*



*Fig. 27. Houston Opera 2015*



*Fig. 28. Bayreuth 1896*



*Fig. 29. The Metropolitan 2010*



*Fig. 30. Wermland Opera 2011*

In more political interpretations, the Valkyries have for example been presented as wartime pilots and nurses.



*Fig. 31. San Fransisco Opera 2010*



*Fig. 32. Munich 2003*



*Fig. 33. Melbourne 2013*

## 6. IN CONCLUSION

From its premiere in 1876 in Bayreuth, *The Ring Cycle* has been controversial. Even though Wagner was a great artist, innovative, independent and revolutionary, when it came to staging, he still was the conventional man of his times, shackled by the traditions of Central European romantic naturalism (Spotts, 1994, p. 74). The power of the *Ring* lies without doubt in its ambiguity, its meanings are diverse and change upon each individual encounter with the work. As the great masterpieces of Shakespeare, *The Ring Cycle* is timeless. It can be staged and interpreted in endless ways, offering new perspectives on our current times. There is no “right way” of interpreting Wagner’s intentions and conveying the full richness of the drama.

Nevertheless, as a result of philosophical and generational struggles within the Wagner clan, productions of *The Ring Cycle* did hardly change for over half a century from its premiere until the reopening of the Bayreuth Festival in 1951. Wieland Wagner’s extremely influential production of the *Ring*, marked the beginning of “New Bayreuth”, presenting Wagnerian opera in a new minimalistic style without its previous political associations with the Nazi cause. Since then, finding new meanings through reassessing the dramas, has been the essence of Bayreuth’s work. Bayreuth has witnessed productions that were conventional and scandalous, beautiful and ugly, dull and thrilling and that were cheered and jeered.

Since 1976, the castle has indeed collapsed, the house of the gods gone up in flames and rivers overflowed. Productions of every imaginable sort, from the most picturesque and safe to the most grotesque and nonsensical have been produced. But there are still those who contend, with Cosima, that the composer knew exactly what he wanted, and that production with any other aim than the perfection of Wagner’s intentions is therefore nothing but “intransigence and apostasy” (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 213 and Carnegie, 2013, p. xi).

Will we ever really know what Wagner’s vision for *The Ring Cycle* really was? The scenic effects he demanded, totally impossible to perform when the operas were written, provide fresh challenges to modern designers and encourage them to come up with clever solutions and create fascinating new productions. Many of the visual effects he wanted seem cinematic and still seem impossible to achieve on stage; Valhalla in flames, Rhine overflowing and the ending of *Gotterdammerung*, with the hall of the Gibichungs afire (DiGaetani, 2006, p. xiii). One could wonder, if Wagner were alive today, how he would execute his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Perhaps he would be producing films; given his vision and the almost impossible illustrative demands he made of the operatic stage.

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## Images

Fig. 1. *The hidden orchestra pit at Bayreuth Festspielhaus*. [Online Image]. Available at: <http://www.cabradigital.es/imagenes/bayreuth/bay3.jpg>. [Accessed 27 July 2016].

Fig. 2. *The auditorium at Bayreuth Festspielhaus*. [Online Image]. Available at: [http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bayreuth\\_Festspielhaus](http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bayreuth_Festspielhaus). [Accessed 27 July 2016].

Fig. 3. *Design sketch by Josef Hoffmann for Siegfried, act 1*. [Online Image]. Available at: <http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2012/10/a-history-of-ring-cycle-productions-or.html>. [Accessed 27 July 2016].

Fig. 4. *Design sketch by Josef Hoffmann for Die Valküre, act 1*. [Online Image]. Available at: <http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2012/10/a-history-of-ring-cycle-productions-or.html>. [Accessed 27 July 2016].

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Fig. 8. *Carl Emil Doepler's design for Wotan*. [Online Image]. Available at: <http://www.germanicmythology.com/works/DoeplerRing.html>. [Accessed 27 July 2016].

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