From the Editor

We are busy planning the upcoming season and have a number of interesting events in the works. The first is a talk and book signing by Professor Nicholas Vazsonyi, author of Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand, published by Cambridge University Press. The book was very well received when it was released last March. A reviewer from the Wall Street Journal wrote: "Written with panache and élan, conveying with refreshing brevity a palpable sense of Wagner's indefatigable industry . . . the first scholarly text to take seriously Wagner's incessant self-promotional activity, Mr Vazsonyi's book assumes considerable importance not only in musicology but also in the history of marketing." According to Opera magazine, "It is . . . a cracking good read as we learn about Wagner's abilities to turn himself into a 'brand' or to act as his own 'PR agent.' An important book, too, as Vazsonyi foregrounds an aspect of Wagner we hear too little about, re-aligning a great 19th-century figure through the filter of an avowedly 21st-century sensibility." This book was also reviewed by Professor Hans Rudolf Vaget in the spring issue of Wagneriana. For details on the October 16 talk and book signing, see the back page.

Our second event is a talk and audiovisual presentation by Hilan Warshaw, a talented young filmmaker and musician. This event was originally planned for September, but the date has now been changed to November 13. Titled "From Bayreuth to Hollywood: Richard Wagner and the Art of Cinema," this special presentation will feature a film screening of excerpts from the rare film Der fliegende Holländer, made in East Germany in 1964 and directed by Joachim Herz. See the back page for details.

On February 13 (the anniversary of Wagner's death in 1883), Vice President Erika Reitshamer will present a tribute to the Wagnerian soprano Hildegard Behrens at the Brookline Public Library. And for the early spring, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Gustav Mahler's death, we are planning a talk and concert on Wagner and Mahler, with Wagner's Wesendonck Lieder and Mahler's Des Knaben Wunderhorn. The lecturer and pianist will be the Boston Wagner Society’s Music Adviser Jeffrey Brody. The soprano will be Andrea Matthews, who sang Elsa for us at our May concert this year. Due to the early-June premiere of Brody's opera The Picture of Dorian Gray, there will be no May concert this season.

In this issue, three members report on their 2010 Bayreuth experiences. Richard Miles briefly reviews Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and Parsifal. He also gives practical advice on travel, dining out, and so on. Brian Reasoner writes about his long trajectory from his childhood in Wyoming to his peak experience of attending the Bayreuth Festival for the first time. And Sarah Mason provides a whimsical report on the social aspects of attending the Bayreuth Festival. Richard Miles also reviews the Welsh National Opera's Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, with Bryn Terfel as Hans Sachs.

Boston-area members will have an opportunity to hear Terfel’s Sachs, as well as his Dutchman and Wotan, at the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s all-Wagner concert on October 2, at 6 p.m. James Levine will conduct. For tickets, go to www.bso.org or call 888-266-1200.

We note with sadness the passing of loyal BWS member Arnold Garrison. A memorial will be included in the next issue.

–Dalia Geffen, President / Founder
Welsh National Opera’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Cardiff, June 20, 2010
Conductor: Lothar Koenigs; director: Richard Jones; Chorus and Orchestra of the Welsh National Opera
Hans Sachs: Bryn Terfel; Walther von Stolzing: Raymond Very; Eva: Amanda Roocroft; Sixtus Beckmesser:
Christopher Purves; Magdalene: Anna Burford; David: Andrew Tortise; Veit Pogner: Brindley Sherratt

Bryn Terfel is a Welsh bass-baritone much better known to the public than are most singers who take on Wagnerian roles. Though he has not ignored Wagner, he is far from a specialist, having built his reputation over the last 20 years through diverse opera roles, concert performances, and recordings across a range of musical genres (including a recording of Wagner excerpts). But for Wagner lovers, he has always been the man who was born to sing Hans Sachs—a role that (despite his sky-high reputation as a singer) he has perhaps resisted taking on until he was certain of being ready for the challenge.

The test came on 20 June, in Cardiff, with the opening of the Welsh National Opera production of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. The run ended with a concert performance at the Proms, in London, on 17 July.

Having been fortunate enough to attend both performances, I do not expect ever to hear Sachs sung—or acted—better. Some great bass-baritones—including those who have also genuinely inhabited the role of Sachs—give the impression that their singing is a titanic struggle for mastery over a voice that is an awesome and barely controllable force of nature, and their triumph is all the greater for this heroic dimension. Terfel’s voice, by contrast, has a natural quality, as though there were hardly a distinction between speaking and singing. He sounded unfurled right across the range, conveying the humanity and humor of Sachs’s conversational exchanges, but with tremendous power in reserve for his public declamations.

The production illuminated the meaning of the work without gimmicks or apologies. It was left to those on-stage, and of course the music, to tell the story, a celebration of the process of artistic creation while attempting to resolve the claims of innovation and tradition inherent in that process. In this regard, the production has been criticized by some as “unchallenging,” not that Meistersinger has ever seemed to demand or benefit from such a treatment. While The Ring invites ever more far-fetched interpretations through the very breadth of its portrayal of the entire human psyche—including its more negative and destructive elements—Meistersinger is essentially genial in tone.

The so-called difficulties in the piece—the supposed anti-Semitism in the portrait of Beckmesser and Sachs’s appeal to German nationalism at the end—were handled in an intelligent and illuminating way. (I must admit to not finding these difficult at all—unless one is to have nothing whatever to do with Wagner on account of his failings as a human being—but these are clearly real difficulties for some.)

Christopher Purves, an excellent comic actor as well as a fine singer who makes the most of the rather beautiful music Wagner gives his “villain of the piece,” treats Beckmesser as ridiculous instead of sinister. Anyone who has ever attended a business meeting or sat on a committee will immediately recognize the type: unimaginative, pedantic, quick to take offense, and prone to be difficult. Beckmesser has set his heart on Eva; this is his fatal flaw, exposing him to ridicule. It is difficult to see him as anything more than a stock dramatic figure of fun, one of a long tradition in European literature. In another work, he would already have gotten the girl, and his role in the plot would be that of a cuckold. The comic interplay between the wearily amused and ironic Sachs and the exasperated Beckmesser was one of the highlights of the piece.

The second issue that can create discomfort for those in the audience unable or unwilling to accept the opera on its own terms, without its historical baggage, is the final paean to German art. Before the performance and during the overture, a collage of several hundred iconic figures from the world of German culture was displayed on the front cloth (part of the entertainment was to try to identify them). These provided a reminder of the astonishing richness of German culture. During the final chorus, everyone onstage held up a portrait of one of these figures, so that as the curtain fell, the stage was a sea of Beethovens, Schuberts, Mozarts, Haydns, and others. The particular trumps the general: confronted with these well-loved and greatly admired figures, it is hard not to sympathize with Sachs’s claims. Few operas create such feelings of exultation and exhilaration as the curtain falls, and this production allowed them to be felt without any reserve.
The first act opened to a relatively bare, unadorned Lutheran church, with the chorale superbly sung by the excellent Welsh National Opera (WNO) Chorus. With the benches removed, this gave way to a dark green space, in which, during David’s singing lesson, the apprentices hanged portraits of the German masters. Andrew Tortise (David) sang the lengthy catalogue of tones and melodies expressively; for some, this is one of the longueurs of the opera, but he infused it with interest and humor.

The Mastersingers arrived in their work clothes and transformed themselves by putting on their robes over them—highlighting their dual existence as independent, individual tradesmen and Masters. Sachs stood apart, refusing to don his robe at first, preferring to remain the independent-minded cobbler for a little while longer. His quiet entrance on the stage was electrifying for those who had not seen Meistersinger before: here was the man everyone had come to see, who had started out as almost a member of the chorus, with little to sing. The first scene-stealing phrase was “Ein guter Meister!” — delivered with great expressiveness, indicating that Sachs is firmly open-minded about Walther’s claims to be a Master.

Brindley Sherratt sang Pogner’s “Auf grüner Au’” with lyrical beauty, and as the Masters’ committee meeting proceeded, Terfel portrayed Sachs as the perfect moderator, with a balanced approach to the rulebook and an amused, tolerant, but not uncritical way of dealing with the difficult Beckmesser. Anyone lucky enough to attend such meetings in real life might well wish for such a chairman!

The linden-scented summer night in Nuremberg in Act 2 was conveyed by roofing the houses in a floral-print wallpaper — more effective onstage than it might sound on the page. Terfel’s Sachs was playful. At one point he headed a football into the crowd of apprentices, and he then goaded Beckmesser into a frenzy with such gleeful anarchy that a public inquiry into the ensuing riot might well have censured Sachs for his role in provoking it.

The real quality of this production was revealed in Act 3. Here we were inside Sachs’s home and workshop, which contained shoes, cobbling equipment, books — lots of books — photographs, and hunting trophies. This was the home of a poet and craftsman who was equally at ease in his town and in the surrounding countryside, and even — until Eva arrived — at ease with himself.

The overture to Act 3 and this interior combined to take us inside his mind. Sachs rose from his bed, and “Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!” was delivered with initial introspection, followed by astonishing power. There seem to be no limits to Terfel’s voice. Sachs dealt with his visitors with equal wisdom and humanity, but always with reserve: a generous but not effusive master to David; a creative midwife to Walther, one who did not impose his own ideas but encouraged the dream to flow and had the reverence and humility to “take dictation”; amused and even-tempered with Beckmesser.

Only when Eva arrived did his composure slip. Realizing that letting her go would cause him agony, he raged against his fate until his sense of humor and balance restored themselves and he realized he had to carry on with his role of facilitating a happy outcome — for Eva, Walther, David, Magdalene — not to mention Pogner, who had gone well out on a limb by awarding his only daughter to whoever may emerge as the winner of the singing contest. All of this — and ultimately his Schopenhauerian self-denial — was perfectly conveyed by voice and stage presence, an outstanding performance.

After the quintet, which provided the “private” emotional climax of the opera, the rest was official, public business. Christopher Purves was again hilarious as Beckmesser gets his come-uppance, and Sachs rounded off the satisfactory ending with plenty of power in reserve for the final appeal to German art and character.

The Welsh are known for their choral singing, and the WNO Chorus were duly outstanding, both during the chorale and in the exhilarating final chorus. In summary, there was wonderful acting from Bryn Terfel, Christopher Purves, Anna Burford (Magdalene), and Andrew Tortise. There were no significant weaknesses among the soloists, though Raymond Very (Walther) sounded near the end of his vocal resources by the close of the Prize Song. Of the lesser-known singers, the very youthful Anna Burford (Magdalene) and Andrew Tortise (David) were exceptional, and none of the more established performers disappointed. Amanda Roocroft was a subtle, believable Eva — a girl who still had not outgrown filial piety but who also knew what she wanted, not someone who would end up dutifully married to Beckmesser, even if his singing had gone better.

The centerpiece of this outstanding production was of course Bryn Terfel’s Hans Sachs, thanks to his astonishing voice, acting, and stage presence. However, he was very well supported by all the other elements of the production, chorus, orchestra, and cast. It is hard to believe it will not be revived.

—Richard Miles

Richard Miles, a member of the Boston Wagner Society, lives in Surrey, England.
Short Notes on the Bayreuth Festival 2010

Parsifal, July 28; conductor Daniele Gatti; production Stefan Herheim; stage design: Heike Scheele; costumes: Gesine Völlm; Parsifal: Christopher Ventris; Kundry: Susan Maclean; Gurnemanz: Kwangchul Youn; Amfortas: Detlef Roth; Titurel: Diógenes Randes; Klingsor: Thomas Jesatko

Parsifal was a highly psychological interpretation involving constant references to Parsifal’s mother, his birth, and his childhood. I would need to see it again to unpick all of this. Also entertaining and visually stunning was an ingenious set (modeled on the interior of Wahnfried, Wagner’s house in Bayreuth) that moved and changed dimensions without interrupting the action. This was superbly played and sung throughout.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, August 2; conductor: Sebastian Weigle; production: Katharina Wagner; stage design: Tilo Steffens; costumes: Michaela Barth / Tilo Steffens; Hans Sachs: James Rutherford; Walther von Stolzing: Klaus Florian Vogt; Eva: Michaela Kaune; Sixtus Beckmesser: Adrian Eröd; Magdalene: Carola Guber; David: Norbert Ernst; Veit Pogner: Artur Korn

The Bayreuth production of Meistersinger made a very different impression from the WNO’s. Highly entertaining and incomparably played by the Bayreuth orchestra, the constant flow of ideas sometimes spilled over into self-indulgence and silliness, and it did not (for me at least) illuminate the meaning of the work as much as the WNO had done. The young British bass-baritone James Rutherford sang an excellent Sachs. If he did not dominate the work as Terfel did in Cardiff, that was partly because the production did not allow him to. Klaus Florian Vogt as Walther was superb—the one area where Bayreuth clearly scored over Cardiff. The Bayreuth choir was beyond excellent, but so was the WNO’s.

The sheer opulence of these productions sets Bayreuth apart (and presumably accounts for the ticket prices, which have now become very expensive). Whatever one thinks of the eccentricity of the productions, Bayreuth is a unique experience, combining innovation with uncompromising quality. It will long remain the Mecca for Wagner lovers.

Thoughts on Bayreuth

Here are a beginner’s thoughts from someone who has visited Bayreuth twice.

Driving there: Bayreuth is an eight-hour drive from the Channel Tunnel and so very manageable for anyone based in London or elsewhere in Western Europe. However, a UK motorway—let alone a U.S. highway—is no preparation for German Autobahns, where driving is gladiatorial combat. There is no speed limit, so cars driving at racetrack speeds share the road with trucks that move at the same speeds as trucks the world over. At any speed you choose, you are equally likely up to come up behind a truck doing 42 m.p.h. and pulling out to overtake another truck doing 41 m.p.h., or to find a black BMW in your rear-view mirror, lights flashing, wanting you out of the way because you are doing less than 150 m.p.h. (It might be a Mercedes or an Audi, but it will be black, and it will be 20 feet behind you, because that is the best place to occupy your mirror and intimidate you into moving over.) Although exhilarating, this was a severe test of concentration, nerve, and speed of reaction.

Food and drink: These are uniformly excellent, with innumerable local breweries and many wine producers. The Festspiel coincides with the mushroom (pfifferling) season, and there are many local delicacies to try, mainly veal- and pork-based dishes. The steaks are very good, and salads are served with almost everything and often include shredded cabbage and radishes. Kartofelsalat (potato salad) is tasty throughout Germany and quite different from anywhere else. For the more adventurous, there is good offal, such as calves’ head terrine. The breakfasts are excellent in any hotel.

Countryside: The countryside is beautiful, with hills big enough for skiing to the east of the town and lower, rolling countryside to the west, with small, picturesque villages (many with their own breweries). This is also great walking and cycling country.

Places to visit: Bamberg, Kloster Banz, and Waldsassen are worth seeing. Slightly farther afield, there is Würzburg, which, as I found out to my embarrassment, was razed to the ground by the RAF in one tragic hour in March 1945 but which has been lovingly restored. It includes the Residenz, an enormous and astonishingly ornate palace gutted by fire in 1945, whose restoration has required 18th-century craft techniques to be relearned.

Bayreuth itself: Bayreuth is a delightful and prosperous small town with much to see and do: Wagner’s house, the original theater (Margravine Wilhelmine’s opera house), which took Wagner there in the first place, and great shops and restaurants.

–Richard Miles
Thirty years ago, in the summer between my junior and senior years in high school, I purchased my first Wagner set on LP: a live Bayreuth Ring cycle on 16 discs, conducted by Karl Böhm in 1966–67 and released by Philips. I was working in a small regional record store, Budget Tapes & Records, in Casper, Wyoming, and wanted to know what was in the grooves of this behemoth.

Needless to say, it took a few years for me to even begin to digest what the four dramas were about. In the meantime, I ventured into other Wagner operas, first the studio version of Karajan’s Parsifal, then recordings of Wagner’s other mature stage works. In 1983 I watched (and videotaped) the PBS broadcasts of Patrice Chéreau’s centenary Bayreuth Ring (recorded in 1980); these performances were unquestionably the “visual imprint” versions for those of us too far away to see the cycle live in a theater.

Shortly thereafter, I began collecting Bayreuth performances; first the “officially” released recordings (the 1962 Knappertsbusch Parsifal and the 1962 Sawallisch Tannhäuser, both on Philips), the “pirate” recordings of many broadcasts from the 1950s and 1960s (notably the 1953 Krauss Ring), and most recently by trading CDs made from the annual Bayreuth radio broadcasts on cassettes (each year the first performances of every opera are broadcast live in their entirety). I dreamed of one day making the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, but for years it was just a pipe dream unlikely to happen on a teacher’s salary.

All that changed this year. My school, Buckingham, Browne and Nichols, awarded me a faculty summer study and travel grant to go to Bayreuth, and thanks to Dalia Geffen I was able to secure tickets to performances of the third cycle of the Ring (the final performances of the Tankred Dorst production, conducted by Christian Thielemann), as well as Parsifal (a Stefan Herheim production, conducted by Daniele Gatti), Lohengrin (the debut of the Hans Neuenfels production, conducted by Andris Nelsons), and Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (a Katharina Wagner production, conducted by Sebastian Weigle).

While riding the Deutsche Bahn from Munich to Bayreuth via Nuremberg, I spent part of the journey rereading Frederic Spotts’s excellent book Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival. Almost against my resolve, I dwelled on the festival’s relationship to the Third Reich and its continuing operation during World War II. Suddenly I felt great shame at being such a fan of Wagner’s music. For several hours, I was terribly sad and wondered if it had been ignorant of me to admire and worship Wagner’s music dramas all these years while completely ignoring the composer’s dark tendencies and his influence on political and social extremists of the 20th century. It is a question with which all admirers of Wagner’s work must grapple at some point.

I can’t recall how I slowly emerged from this haze of guilt as my train headed north, but it was comforting to meet other people traveling to the festival, some of whom I would see regularly throughout my stay. People from the United States (via Poland!) and Austria were in my vicinity, and their cheerfulness and enthusiasm for the upcoming performances helped lift me.

The feeling of a positive shared experience was reinforced at a gala dinner I attended after the performance of Das Rheingold (the first of the seven operas I would see). There I met many, many Wagner enthusiasts, but I was most thankful to have sat with fellow Boston Wagner Society members Preston and Carolyn Reed from South Hampton, New Hampshire, Sarah Mason from London, as well as Peter Heller from Washington, D.C. On subsequent nights we would congregate at the lower restaurant during the intermissions and have lively discussions about the productions we were seeing. On one of the days off, we drove to Weimar to visit the Goethe and Schiller houses, the Bauhaus museum, Goethe’s summer garden house, and several art exhibitions. I am also grateful to fellow BWS member Carla Birarelli from Wayland, Massachusetts, who sat next to me for all four Ring operas and was a delightful conversationalist.

I was also fortunate to have been included on a one-and-half-hour tour of the Festspielhaus in the early afternoon before the performance of Die Walküre. We toured the entire facility, including the stage works underneath the stage and the uppermost catwalk several hundred feet above. The highlight of the tour was the sunken orchestra pit. Over the years, I had become obsessed with the famed Bayreuth acoustics, and though I’ve seen many pictures of musicians and conductors in this space, nothing prepared me for how excited I felt to finally be in it. I sat at the conductor’s podium and...
conducted (in my head, of course) a short passage from Siegfried’s Rhine Journey (Götterdämmerung). One can dream!

The performances I experienced had many outstanding aspects, but space (and time!) prohibit a thorough explanation. Briefly, I loved most aspects of Dorst’s Ring, especially Christian Thielemann’s nuanced conducting and command of the score and Lance Ryan’s truly outstanding Siegfried. I also found much to like in Herheim’s Parsifal but was disappointed by both Katharina Wagner’s Meistersinger and Hans Neufels’s Lohengrin. The latter was anticlimactic because tenor Jonas Kaufmann (as Lohengrin) canceled due to illness (we had the New Zealander Simon O’Neill instead). Kaufmann was sensational in the audio broadcast in July, but he is not scheduled to return next year; he will be replaced by Klaus Florian Vogt, who was terrific as Walther von Stolzing in Meistersinger. At some point I hope to write more extensively about the performances I saw, but suffice it to say I was absolutely thrilled to finally make it to Bayreuth and to be sitting in that glorious theater.

— Brian Reasoner

Brian Reasoner teaches chamber music and orchestra at Buckingham, Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Notes from Bayreuth of a Nonmusical Variety

I am pleased and relieved that other Boston Wagnerians, considerably more capable than I, will do the “heavy lifting” and write the music reviews of our Bayreuth Ring [see the brief reviews of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and Parsifal on page 4; there may be other reviews in the fall issue]. Consequently, I will focus on what we did outside the Festspielhaus.

The first evening’s elegant dinner (August 20), hosted by the Wagner Society of Southern California, was a wonderful place to meet and greet other members. Almost immediately, I linked up with Preston and Carolyn Reed; several minutes later we found the irrepressible Brian Reasoner, all of us members of the Boston fraternity. Also with us during the week was the lovely Carla Birarelli from Boston (who has seen more Rings than all of us put together). In addition, we made new best friends with members from a variety of other associations: Washington, D.C.; San Francisco; and New York, to name but a few. Interestingly, there are active Wagner societies in far-flung locations such as Melbourne, Australia, and (surprisingly) Israel. Eva Wagner-Pasquier and our Brünnhilde, Linda Watson, joined the gala dinner, which was lively and full of operatic chat. Linda, with her long blond hair and flowing caftan, looked every bit the diva.

Speaking of matters sartorial, I can report that many of the ladies attending the opera looked absolutely stunning. There were sequins and furs a-go-go (notwithstanding the 80-plus-degree heat during Rheingold, August 20, and Die Walküre, August 21). And, with less success, there were even a few dirndls. Our favorite outfits were worn by a couple we affectionately named “the Greens.” On each of the Ring’s four nights, they sported matching outfits of a single color. On the first night their clothes were bright green, and on each subsequent night, they meandered across the color chart, wearing canary yellow, tangerine orange, and then bright blue. Perhaps they were hoping to demonstrate the colors of the rainbow bridge to Valhalla.

The Bostonians teamed up with our new friends from other societies and took a day trip to Weimar, where we visited the houses of Goethe and Schiller and the Bauhaus Museum. On another day off, we went to Bamberg — also charming. In the evenings, we met up for postopera drinks or for dinner on the nights when there was no opera. Most people attended the morning lectures given by John J. H. Muller, who got rave reviews. I was not present at any of these lectures. Alas, I was the target of disdainful comments after I announced I would not attend the talk on Siegfried because I had a hair appointment! All in all, we had a terrific time and made new friends, with whom we hope to stay in touch. And, oh yes, there was the music, but others may tell you about that!

— Sarah Mason

Sarah Mason, a member of the Boston Wagner Society, lives in London.
The Influence of Feuerbach on the Libretto of Parsifal

This essay is an expanded version of a talk that Paul Heise delivered to the Boston Wagner Society on May 30, 2007. Due to its length, it is being serialized in several issues of Wagneriana. This is part 9.

Brunnhilde, by holding for Wotan his fatal hoard of knowledge of the bitter truth, frees him from the despair embodied in his confession: “To my loathing I find only ever my self in all that I encompass. That other self for which I yearn, that other self I never see.” Through his confession to Brunnhilde, Wotan becomes his other self, Siegfried, protected now by the veil of Maya, or Wahn, the magical protection from abhorrent self-knowledge which Brunnhilde’s love provides Siegfried.

I believe that Parsifal’s ignorance of his true identity has an identical explanation. After all, Wagner stated in his essay “Epilogue to ‘The Nibelung’s Ring’” “that Siegfried and Brünnhilde are virtually the same characters as Tristan and Isolde”:

With the sketch of “Tristan und Isolde” I felt that I was really not quitting the mythic circle opened-out to me by my Nibelungen labours . . . .
For the grand concordance of all sterling Myths, as thrust upon me by my studies, had sharpened my eyesight for the wondrous variations standing out amid this harmony. Such a one confronted me with fascinating clearness in the relation of Tristan to Isolde, as compared with that of Siegfried to Brünnhilde. . . . Here, . . . two seemingly unlike relations had sprung from the one original mythic factor. Their intrinsic parity consists in this: both Tristan and Siegfried, in bondage to an illusion which makes this deed of theirs unfree, woo for another their own eternally-predestined bride, and in the false relation hence arising find their doom. . . . What in the one work [the Ring] could only come to rapid utterance at the climax, in the other [Tristan und Isolde] becomes an entire Content, of infinite variety; and this it was, that attracted me to treat the stuff at just that time, namely as a supplementary Act of the great Nibelungen-myth, a mythos compassing the whole relations of a world. [Richard Wagner’s Prose Works, trans. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols., 2nd ed. (1895; repr., St. Claire Shores: Michigan Scholarly Press, 1972), 3:268]

And Cosima reports that Wagner described Kundry as having experienced, in her prior incarnations, Isolde’s final transfiguration hundreds of times:


In a sense all of the leading characters in Wagner’s prior operas and music dramas are reborn in the protagonists of Parsifal, where all their parallel existences seem to come together and merge outside of time and space.

In the following extract, in which Feuerbach describes all that a human soul would have to renounce within the physical world in order to attain supernatural immortality in heaven, we find further ground for our thesis that through Wotan’s confession to Brunnhilde, he is reborn as Siegfried (who in turn is reborn as Parsifal), who lacks conscious knowledge of both his prior history and his true identity:

Only when history is nothing, when the naked individual who is stripped of all historical elements, all destiny, determination, purpose, and measure, and goal, only when the vain, abstract, meaningless, empty individual is something, and history is nothing, is the nothing after death something. . . . As they [Christians] posit a future life, they negate actual life. [Ludwig Feuerbach, Thoughts on Death and Immortality, trans. James A. Massey (1930; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 133]
It is important to recall here, apropos of Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity’s promise of immortality, Wagner’s remark in the tribute to Feuerbach he wrote for his autobiography that what pleased Wagner about Feuerbach was his notion that the sole authentic immortality adheres only to noble deeds and inspired works of art. In other words, according to Wagner, what religious folk took to be a literal immortality of the spirit in heaven lives on figuratively in the historical celebration of the great deeds of our past heroes (our immortals, so to speak), and in great and inspired works of art that become part of civilization’s legacy, as immortal, iconic works.

Wagner is clearly referencing Feuerbach’s remark above (compare Feuerbach’s “naked individual” with Wagner’s “naked Man” below) when he describes below how he peeled away the layers of historical man to rediscover the mythical man, Siegfried:

I drove step by step into the deeper regions of antiquity, where at last to my delight, and truly in the utmost reaches of old time, I was to light upon the fair young form of Man, in all the freshness of his force. . . . What here I saw, was no longer the Figure of conventional history, whose garment claims our interest more than does the actual shape inside; but the real naked Man. [“Communication to My Friends,” in Richard Wagner’s Prose Works, trans. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols., 2nd ed. (1895; repr., St. Claire Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1972), 1:357–58]

With the conception of “Siegfried,” I had pressed forward to where I saw before me the Human Being in the most natural and blithest fulness of his physical life. No historic garment more, confined his limbs; no outwardly-imposed relation hemmed in his movements. . . . It was “Elsa” who had taught me to unearth this man: to me, he was the male-embodied spirit of perennial and sole creative instinct. [Ibid., 1:375]

—Paul Heise

Paul Heise is an independent Wagnerian scholar and a research consultant for the Wagner Society of Florida.

Future Events

Lecture and book signing by Professor Nicholas Vazsonyi
Saturday, October 16, 2010, 2 p.m.
Hill House
127 Mt. Vernon Street
Boston, MA 02108
Free to All

“From Bayreuth to Hollywood: Richard Wagner and the Art of Cinema”
Lecture and audiovisual presentation by Hilan Warshaw, filmmaker and musician
Includes clips from the rare film Der fliegende Holländer (Joachim Herz, Dresden, 1964)
Saturday, November 13, 2010, 2 p.m.
Boston Public Library, Boston Room
Copley Place, Boston, MA 02116
Free to All

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Publisher and Editor: Dalia Geffen
Logo design: Sasha Geffen

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