In fernem Land...

Reflections on the Bayreuth Festival

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In August 2014 I was greatly privileged to attend the Bayreuth Festival as this year's *Stipendiat* of the Wagner Society of Scotland. In the course of the visit, I attended performances of *der Fliegende Holländer*, *Die Walküre* and *Lohengrin,* and met fellow scholars from all over the world. As part of the scholarship programme we enjoyed guided tours of the Festspielhaus and town, pre-performances talks, receptions with conductors and other artists, a scholars' concert and more. The experience was immensely satisfying, inspiring and greatly beneficial to my musical development.

At the opening reception, Eva Wagner-Pasquier set out clearly the high ideals and sense of patrimony at the heart of the *Stipendienstiftung*, reminding us that roughly a third of those working at the Festival had once been scholars. This year's *Stipendien* had travelled from far and wide to represent most of the world's 137 Wagner Societies - among them young singers, instrumentalists, conductors, theatre directors and set designers. There was however a sizeable majority of both singers and German-speakers in the group, which made a high level of spoken German invaluable to the whole experience.

Before my visit to Bayreuth my familiarity with Wagner's music had grown mainly through recordings and DVDs, perhaps most memorably the Solti Ring Cycle and James Levine's ebullient *Meistersinger* from the Met. Among the works/bleeding chunks I had performed as an orchestral violinist were *Siegfried Idyll* and the *Prelude and Liebestod* from *Tristan*. My first experience in the pit came last year playing in the Scottish Opera *Dutchman* under Francesco Corti, an experience as exciting as it was exhausting. Donald Runnicles's *Tristan*, which I attended at the Deutsche Oper Berlin last year, also made an enormous impression on me.

When writing on Wagner or Bayreuth, the difficulty perhaps lies in knowing where to start. So much has been written already on almost every facet of his life and influence that it is hard not to slip into speculation or received wisdom. Moreover, much of Wagner's own writing might be described as verbose or even impenetrable, and oftentimes steeped in a cocktail of grievance, acrimony and misappropriation.

Having spent some considerable time in Germany over the past ten years, I was well aware of Bayreuth's unique place both in the national consciousness and in the musical/orchestral hierarchy. That Wagner's lifetime more or less coincided with German unification and the creation, or even appropriation, of a pan-Germanic culture, plays heavily on the imagination. It is not then without irony to consider that Wagner drew so overtly on the shared Christian consciousness - epic, cathartic tales of redemption and sacrifice, assuredly Christ-like protagonists and obliquely liturgical imagery - he so vigorously denounced until late in life. Wagner's high artistic ideals and later dreams of a truly popular Athenian theatre were at times sullied by his rampant acquisitiveness and naked pursuit of a public persona. Indeed, as one wizened Bayreuth veteran wryly pronounced to me, he was 'a bastard who went through life spending other people's money, fleeing his creditors and sleeping with other men's wives.' Then again, maybe the roguish and decidedly Romantic image conjured up by the apocrypha of Wagner's biography only added to his appeal amidst a collective memory of Young Werthers and heroic Friedrich landscapes.

Harder to acknowledge is that Wagner, whether by accident or design, conferred a certain nobility on discredited racial theories through his art, later impelling dark currents in the already febrile waters of post-imperial Europe. Were its effect not so insidious, one might take his boundless personal invective - in tracts such as *'Das Judenthum in der Musik'* – with a pinch of salt, a puzzled smile and fleeting gratitude for rays of genuine insight. If it does at times pain us to recall how Wagner expressed himself in the public square, it is heartening to reflect that the legacy of ideals infinitely more worthy remains at Bayreuth.

In its commanding position aloft the *Grüne Hügel*, the Festspielhaus itself threw up a number of surprises during my time there. Although the edifice itself is in many respects unremarkable, envisioned very much as a public and resolutely unostentatious 'temple of art', the thoroughness and precision of its design is all-consuming, and quite in keeping with Wagner's obsessive attention to detail in his artistic output. The Festspielhaus's every detail is geared towards an attentive and rather intense experience of the music dramas: its entirely wooden construction and spartan, pew-like seating which amplifies every nuance of the score; the orchestra pit and conductor completely concealed under the enormously deep stage, with the sound emerging ethereally as if from another world; the egalitarian seating plan with practically the whole audience (including the German Chancellor when she attends) placed in a single series of long rows without a central aisle or in fact a toilet in the building. There is at Bayreuth a real sense of threshold, both between the theatre and the outside world, and indeed between the auditorium and the *Heiligtum* of the stage itself. During the performances the rapt attention of the audience has an almost devotional quality, as Mark Twain noted on his visit in 1891: *'I have seen all sorts of audiences--at theatres, operas, concerts, lectures, sermons,*

funerals--but none which was twin to the Wagner audience of Bayreuth for fixed and reverential attention, absolute attention and petrified retention to the end of an act of the attitude assumed at the beginning of it.'

These various elements converge in a feeling that the audience is somehow participating – a sort of mute but acutely involved Greek chorus, completing the drama through its reception and engagement, perhaps as Wagner conceived: *'History gave me a model also for that ideal relation of the theatre to the public which I had in mind. I found it in the drama of Ancient Athens.*'

The sense of ritual is imparted yet further by other Bayreuth peculiarities, not least the *extra omnes* spectacle of the audience processing out at the start of each hour-long interval before the doors are ceremonially locked, as if the theatre were a consecrated space too hallowed for idle chatter. Admittedly, however much Bayreuth encourages the suspense of our disbelief (and it really does), the reasons for this are likely more prosaic, with the mass evacuation of the wooden theatre accommodating those desperate for a smoke. The reopening then heralded by a brass fanfare trumpeted from the front balcony - and specific to the particular act of the evening's opera - recalls everyone from champagne-and-*Maisel's Weisse*-fuelled levity back to the lofty seriousness of the evening's proceedings. There is something in this combination of extravagance and asceticism which marks Bayreuth out from Salzburg, Glyndebourne and other stops on the glamorous festival circuit. Wagner himself certainly maintained that high-minded artistic integrity need not preclude popular engagement, and that entry should always be available to 'friends of his art' - yet the extent to which this has been realised at Bayreuth is questionable. In this respect, the *Stipendienstiftung* performs perhaps an increasingly necessary role at the Festival.

As regards the singing, conducting and orchestral playing, I found the three performances uniformly excellent and profoundly engaging. Comparisons on this level can seem invidious and superlatives would abound in any criticism, so I almost hesitate to mention that I found Thielemann's taut and lithe *Holländer* especially gripping, perhaps partly because I was most familiar with this score beforehand. Johan Botha's appearance as Siegmund in *Die Walkre* was another highlight, and the final act of Andris Nelson's *Lohengrin* had the audience completely under its spell during *'In fernem Land'* and *'Mein lieber Schwan'*, reduced to parody only at its very apotheosis by the appearance of a floating foetus, replete with bulging veins and umbilical cord.

As regards the staging at Bayreuth, it is worth observing that where Wagner sought to reconfigure art's relationship to its audience, later generations haughtily disregarded it altogether. And it is this gaping disparity between Wagner's painstaking stage directions and the gnawing sense of arbitrariness at the on-stage shenanigans, which many find hard to reconcile. Though as a violinist, I must admit that any bewilderment was tempered somewhat by sheer elation at being able to see the set and stage at all - Soviet kitsch, rats and placentas notwithstanding! Much is written about Neuenfels' *Lohengrin* rats, the *Holländer* electric fans and of course, the revered and reviled *bête noire* of German *Regietheater*, Frank Castorf - likened by one critic to the villainous Alberich, who 'steals the gold, renounces love and wants to rule the world'.

I would only note that Castorf's rejection of a linear narrative and textual fidelity in favour of so-called 'hyper-realist deconstructionism' rather relies on his audience's very thorough familiarity with the score and libretto. He appears to reject the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* altogether by contending that the music should have to fight through his staging, and his rather expedient separation of mere taste from objective aesthetic value places the blame for bewilderment squarely at the feet of those watching. The prevailing sense is one of fleeting and almost random nods to all manner of influences. *Die Walküre* featured what was perhaps a nod to the *Verfremdungseffekt,* by way of handheld-filmed episodes more *Blair Witch Project* than Brechtian. Castorf views theatre, some might say euphemistically, as 'therapy for the post-modern condition': a deep malaise, endemic here in the West, whose sufferers are reportedly beset by an existential angst free from hard-nosed scepticism. As the scandal of today will, we are assured, be the cult of tomorrow, we rest easy knowing that Castorf's salary is paid while he waits for the crowning of posterity. Yet though hardened cynics might observe that his anti-establishment *Weltanschauung* flourishes only on the lavish state subsidy of Europe's richest nation, ultimately one cannot fail to acknowledge and somehow begrudgingly admire Castorf's sheer brazenness and vivid imagination.

The idea that Wagner's music dramas equate to something more than the sum of their parts is one which lingers in the mind while at Bayreuth and long after one has left. My visit to the Festival left me filled with enthusiasm and delighted to have met so many immensely-talented young musicians and artists. From the performances themselves to the twilight vision of a couple of staggering Teutonic basses, drunk or otherwise intoxicated, belting out *'Die Frist is um'* over Richard and Cosima's grave, I am indebted to the Wagner Society of Scotland for such rewarding memories.

The extraordinary world Wagner fashions exists perhaps only *in fernem Land, unnahbar euren Schritten* - somewhere perceived and imagined, but seldom reached. He once wrote that he could not *'conceive the spirit of music as aught but love'*, and, rather like the eponymous hero of Goethe's Faust, Richard Wagner strove and strove towards a higher ideal - that, despite everything, he might earn redemption still.