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- HAUS WAHNFRIED -

*Direktor Dr. Sven Friedrich*

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The »Honorable Lady«  
An Appraisal of Cosima Wagner

Sven Friedrich

Always was I, / always would be, / haunted with hope's / hungering sweetness -- / and always to save thy ill!" -- It is these words, sung by Brünnhilde in Act 3 of Siegfried, to which Richard Wagner added one of his most affectionate melodies he ever composed. The tune is touching in its stunning simplicity, while at the same time it constitutes, in fact, the crucial motif of the Siegfried Idyll. The motif had occurred to Wagner as early as in 1864, at the beginning of his relationship with Cosima in Starnberg. However, it was not until the year 1870 - precisely four months after Cosima had become Mrs. Wagner, finally - that the Siegfried Idyll delightfully surprised her when it emerged for the first time out of the hallway in Tribschen on the morning after Cosima's thirty-third birthday. Wagner's very personal and private work thus musically envisions Cosima and the love he felt for her. When Brünnhilde confesses her love to Siegfried, the melody we listen to therefore is identical to the one which expresses Cosima and Richard Wagner's love for one another. Hence, Brünnhilde's words can virtually be construed as an epitaph referring to Cosima's love for Richard Wagner, as it were: „Always was I, / always would be, / haunted with hope's / hungering sweetness -- / and always to save thy ill!" -

At first sight, the life of Cosima Wagner seems to be characterized by a certain amount of inconceivability which constantly eludes us. It was a life designed to serve the „Meister“, finding its entire self-realization in this very service. Cosima was Wagner's secretary, his friend, lover, mother of his children and, eventually, his wife as well. But as for Cosima herself - who was she? Did she have any kind of identity beyond Wagner's biography and the history of his legacy at all? Most definitely not! - Cosima's identity is the very identity which is derived from Wagner's life, his works, and of the aftermath thereof. Even in her "second life" that followed Wagner's death, and which was then to last for almost 50 years, in turn, she led her life but from within and out for Wagner's works entirely. If there was anything existing in addition, this is marginal. On April 7<sup>th</sup> in 1869, Cosima wrote down a sentence in her diary which reads as follows: „It seems strange to me, too, that women who are loved by great men do not feel that they are what they are because of these men and this love, and imagine they are something

else besides in themselves."<sup>1</sup> As for Cosima, this is far from being coquetry; it is no pose, but heartfelt earnestness.

Following Wagner's death, she cut her long hair, put it in his coffin and imploringly tried to succeed him in what was almost deathlike torpor - much like Isolde in the *Liebestod*. Eventually, however, little did she remain a freeze image of a widow, but accepted Wagner's heritage with determination. The first Bayreuth Festival in 1876, with its first complete performance of the *Ring*, had, after all, remained unsatisfactory from an artistic point of view; and what is more, it had resulted in a shortfall, enforcing a close-down of the festival house for the time being. In the end, this close-down was to last six years, and it was not until 1882 that the festival house could be re-opened with the debut performance of *Parsifal*. Given these circumstances, Wagner had left behind what was, in principle, not much more than a deficient provisional solution on the Green Hill when he passed away on February 13<sup>th</sup> in 1883. It was then up to his widow, Cosima, to continuously expand the repertoire, covering all the works from the *Flying Dutchman* to *Parsifal*, eventually. It was Cosima who managed to establish and strengthen the festival to the point that it became the renowned cultural institution that it still is up to the present day. For this reason, she is what I would like to call the actual founder of the Bayreuth festival, in terms of the latter serving as an institution.

In addition, by making her son Siegfried the sole heir, Cosima created the Wagner dynasty. Finally, she both collected and preserved all the documents and references about Richard Wagner's life and works that were accessible, and thus set up the cadre of the archive located at Wahnfried.

Meanwhile, obscurities entwine around her birth, which may seem astonishing with regard to the indeed scrupulous chronicler and custodian of Wahnfried. Her birthday: was it December 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup>, to be exact? The sources provide us with both dates. And next, her place of birth: Bellagio or Como? Here, too, both statements persist. Effectively, she was born late at night on December 24<sup>th</sup> in 1837 in Como; due to the significance of Christmas Eve, her birthday in Tribschen and at Wahnfried was always celebrated on

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<sup>1</sup> Cosima Wagner's Diaries, transl. by Geoffrey Skelton, New York/London 1977, p. 83.

Christmas day, however. This elucidates the supposition of December 25<sup>th</sup> being her actual birthday.

Her true birth, as a matter of fact, can be seen in her first encounter with Richard Wagner on October 10<sup>th</sup> in 1853. Cosima, a teenager who had not yet turned 16 years, served as a silent and unimposing decoration to a dinner with her father Franz Liszt and the loquacious, scintillatingly witty genius of the "Zukunftsmusik." Wagner must have resembled an impressive force of nature to this shy, pale, and skinny teenager, who had been educated by a strict French governess. Four years later, now at the age of 19, the young woman met Wagner again: this time on her honeymoon with Hans von Bülow, of all things, in September 1857 in Wagner's "asylum" at the Villa Wesendonck in Zurich. And once more, Wagner was fervent and rousing, absorbed in Tristan, out of which he was reciting, and taken up with his love for Mathilde Wesendonck. Cosima, on the contrary, a buttoned-up, lanky appearance amidst Mathildes's ravishing beauty and Minna's elderly moroseness, was not less timid than during the first encounter; according to Wagner, she remained silent all the time and started crying when she began to feel pressed.<sup>2</sup> What was the reason for this emphatically emotional behavior? After all, she suggested a joint suicide to Wagner's awkward protégé Karl Ritter on the Zurich lake. Ritter, in turn, foolishly applied Cosima's secret suggestion to himself, whereas the young woman's despair in truth originated in nothing else but the sudden lucidity about why her marriage to the commitment-phobic Hans von Bülow, which had, as we remember, only just begun, was doomed to failure. So far, she had been looking for internal reasons, as the way she had been raised would actually suggest, blaming and accusing herself that she could not be happy with Bülow. Due to Wagner's Tristan, however, Cosima conceived the idea of an all-embracing, existential, frantic love that vanquishes both life and death. "On her return, Cosima appears to be very exhilarated, and this became particularly obvious when she was spasmodically, impetuously affectionate with me. Even on parting the next day, she was at my feet, covering my hands with tears and kisses," Wagner wrote shortly afterwards into his Venetian diary, which was addressed to Mathilde Wesendonck, out of all persons; this was as little discreet as it was

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<sup>2</sup> *Mein Leben*, p. 567, transl. Yvonne Nilges.

typical of him.<sup>3</sup> But indeed: from this very moment, Cosima was possessed, inebriated by and steeped in Wagner and his works. This was the starting point of what should later on lead to situations like the following, which Wagner dictated to Cosima for his autobiography *My Life*:

Cosima appeared to have lost the shyness she had evinced towards me when I visited Reichenhall in the previous year, and a very friendly manner had taken its place. While I was singing 'Wotan's Abschied' to my friends I noticed the same expression on Cosima's face as I had seen on it, to my astonishment, in Zurich on a similar occasion, only the ecstasy of it was transfigured into something higher. Everything connected with this was shrouded in silence and mystery, but the belief that she belonged to me grew to such certainty in my mind, that when I was under the influence of more than ordinary excitement my conduct betrayed the most reckless gaiety. As I was accompanying Cosima to the hotel across a public square, I suddenly suggested she should sit into an empty wheelbarrow which stood in the street, so that I might wheel her to the hotel. She assented in an instant. My astonishment was so great that I felt all my courage desert me, and was unable to carry out my mad project.<sup>4</sup>

This was in the summer of 1862. One and a half years later, on November 28<sup>th</sup> in 1863, the following event occurs, which Wagner, too, depicts in his autobiography. At this time, almost precisely 10 years after her first encounter with Wagner, Cosima is nearly 26 years old.

As Bülow had to complete the preparations for his concert, I drove out alone with Cosima on the promenade, as before, in a fine carriage. This time all our jocularly died away into silence. We gazed speechless into each other's eyes; an intense longing for an avowal of the truth mastered us and led to a confession - which needed no words - of the boundless unhappiness which oppressed us. [With tears, we sealed the confirmation to belong to each other only.<sup>5</sup>] The experience brought relief to us both ... . Our farewell reminded me so vividly of that first exquisitely pathetic parting from Cosima at Zurich, that all the intervening years vanished like a dream of desolation separating two days of lifelong moment and decision.<sup>6</sup>

Being a child of the illegitimate relationship between Franz Liszt and the countess Marie d'Agoult, Cosima, in turn, thus commits adultery and henceforth lives with Richard Wagner; from the outside, this resembles a life as a mistress, and Cosima does not seem to care at all about her reputation and prestige. Yet we have to keep in mind that this inconceivable and astonishing relationship did, in fact, outlast all obstacles and eventually proved to be a unique and solid life and work alliance. What began as a bohemian, scandalous concubinage beyond all conventions and moral conceptions was legitimized

<sup>3</sup> Kapp, Julius: *Wagner und die Frauen*, Berlin 1951, p. 152ff. (primary publication).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life*, London 1911, p. 832.

<sup>5</sup> transl. S.F. This sentence is missing in the English edition of *My Life*.

<sup>6</sup> *My Life*, p. 876.

not until nearly seven years later, that is after the birth of Cosima's and Wagner's three children, on August 25<sup>th</sup> in 1870 in Lucerne when the couple finally got married. In effect, Cosima's devotion, her being taken up in Wagner's life and works, was so exhaustive that she humbly endured all mortifications and vituperations, thinking of these as a deserved penance for her "betrayal" to Bülow, as was typical of her enthusiastic pathos linked with suffering.

As a consequence, this may explain why Cosima, despite her stunning perseverance, her self-awareness and apparent disregard of moral values, never actually got close to the women's movement, with which many a strong woman of her time and also of her social circle sympathized: George Sand, Malwida von Meysenburg, or even her own mother Marie d'Agoult, to mention just a few of them. From the outside, indeed it might have been expected to see Cosima become a representative of an emancipated, self-determined woman, who claimed and fought for equality of the sexes in family life and in society. Cosima, however, despised the women's movement. Her notion of emancipation comprised the kind of redemption and salvation that Wagner had conveyed in *Tristan and Isolde*: the individual dissolves, and the "I" turns into a "we." „Tat twam asi!“ - All this is you! It is this wisdom of the Upanishads, the idea of a complete self-realization through the beloved counterpart, which became enigmatically substantial with regard to Cosima's relationship to Wagner. And for this reason, Cosima, who was herself leading a life at the edge of what was customary, next to an artist as egomaniac and eccentric as Wagner, came to stress ultra conservative values like orderliness and subordination all the more.

Cosima, it follows, appears as a true incarnation of a conservative, restorative philosophy of life. Being Richard Wagner's alter ego, she rejected materialism, capitalism, utilitarianism, technology, and industrial advancement - modernism, in a nutshell. It was only conservative, eternal, and transcendental values to which she felt obliged by considering art the highest inventive expression that was possible. Later on, she said: "I wonder how one could actually manage to live in this world, if one did not turn to art the way one sees religion as a place of refuge." Much like Wagner, Cosima does not refer to contemporary art in this utterance, however, since the latter was, according to her and her

husband, mostly shallow, trivial, solely begging for fashionable effect as well as economic success. To her, contemporary art was synonymous with a decline of culture, mirroring a society that was run-down. Her - and Wagner's - authoritative examples can be found in classical antiquity instead, in the renaissance, and in German classicism. Hence, Richard Wagner's musical drama was the only true, sincere, and ideal form of contemporary art in Cosima's opinion: one that originated in the deepest creative power of the artist, and which, simultaneously, comprised the highest transcendental values and dimensions. As a consequence, it is obvious that she did not notice the revolutionary potential in Wagner's art at all. Cosima was not politically interested - and here, she departs but once from her husband's point of view, who preserved his personal attraction to anarchic, revolutionary topics even in the last years of his life; she never questioned law and order, let alone any institutions of the state.

Cosima was affected by a strong, autonomous mother and a father who was not only continually absent, but who also resembled a godlike figure due to his superior command of the entire musical world. She must have felt mediocre and lonely right from the outset. Furthermore, and following on the way she was brought up by French governesses who taught her how to act in the utmost ceremonial manner, but who failed, by all means, to show her affectionate, human warmth, Cosima internalized remarkable strategies of self-denial even as a child. As far as the common depiction of Franz Liszt is concerned, the portrayal of an ever so gracious, friendly, tolerant, and generous cosmopolitan becomes somewhat questionable, though, if we take a look at this portrayal from his daughter Cosima's perspective. Indeed, the relationship between Liszt and Cosima was neither affectionate nor intensive, but rather stiff, reserved, and afflicted with formal conventions. Franz Liszt always acted towards his daughters with severe strictness, oftentimes behaving like a taskmaster; on occasion, he was even offensive and cantankerous. It was everything but easy to please this kind of father; in order to win and to maintain his love, his daughters had to subordinate and exercise themselves in self-denial. When Cosima found her true self in her relationship with Wagner, this meant, at the same time, a discord with her father, who was deeply outraged at this development. For eight years, there was a complete silence between the two of them. But even after what was a tentative rapprochement in 1872, the bond between father and daughter

remained clouded, to the effect that Cosima's retained and businesslike reaction to Liszt's death on July 31<sup>st</sup> during the festival 1886 seems somewhat comprehensible (even though some outsiders were taken aback). And it seems plausible, from a psychological point of view, to link Cosima's devoted image of a muse to this very demon of a proponent, distant, and inaccessible father who was always out of reach.

Consequently, Cosima's understanding of the sexes was determined by an articulate notion of hierarchy as well: it goes without saying, as it were, that the man dominates the woman, whose task is to serve him to all intents and purposes. Much like Kundry in Act 3 of Parsifal, Cosima sees only one way that leads to female redemption, in effect: this is by means of serving - "Dienen, dienen." A relationship to include equal rights among the sexes, as is our modern understanding, was beyond Cosima's ken. This is why her marriage to Hans von Bülow inevitably had to lead to a full-grown frustration on her part, since she could not fulfill her mission, which was, according to her and as we have already seen, being a servant and a muse to a productive, highly original genius. Quite on the contrary: with Bülow, she experienced a paralyzation of someone who may have been not less capable, in fact, but who was, in any event, prevented from producing significant works of his own in Richard Wagner's overwhelming presence. Instead of riding on Pegasus himself, Hans von Bülow outshone his considerable talent as a conductor by serving Richard Wagner's ends entirely. Bülow's creative impotence and his unconditional subordination to Wagner thus had to lead Cosima into a fundamental crisis revolving around her understanding of the sexes and of masculinity; her husband's poor health and unstable psyche only added to this effect. What she could have given to Bülow was not of any use to him - and the other way round. This marriage, it follows, was a fatal misalliance - by no means on social, but all the more on mental and emotional terms. As early as ten years before, Cosima's mother, Marie d'Agoult, had appropriately and clear-sightedly characterized her daughter and Cosima's marriage, which had recently been celebrated: in a letter to Herwegh, she writes as follows:

Cosima is a girl endowed with ingenious character traits, similar to her father; her mighty imagination will drag her off the common paths; she feels her inner demon and will always be determined to sacrifice whatever it demands. Circumstances have pushed her into a marriage in which, I am afraid, nobody will be happy.

Cosima's father, Liszt, had been complaining about his daughter's standards being exceedingly high when she was still a child, and correctly predicted that her future husband would have to be either "a Nabob or a Beethoven." Likewise, Hans von Bülow, in the sarcastic tone that was typical of him, is reported to have uttered the following remark after Wagner's death: "Now she must get married to Brahms ... !"

As for Cosima herself, a statement about her relationship to Bülow, written down into her diary on January 8<sup>th</sup> in 1869, reads:

It was a great misunderstanding that bound us together in marriage; my feelings toward him are today still the same as 12 years ago: great sympathy with his destiny, pleasure in his qualities of mind and heart, genuine respect for his character, however completely different our temperaments. In the very first year of our marriage I was already in such despair over this confusion that I wished for death; many errors arose out of my distress, but I was always able to get a grip on myself again, and your father knew nothing of my sufferings - I do not think he will withhold his testimony that I always stood by him, in suffering as in joy, and that I helped him to the best of my powers. Never would he have lost me if Fate had not brought me together with the man for whom I had to recognize it as my task in life to live or die. I have not a single reproach to make to your father, even if our last years together were hard for me beyond all imagining. I wanted to try combining my former existence with my new life, I believed in the possibility of fusing together all the diverging feelings - abuse and insults proved to me that I was being a fool, and all that remained was for me to make the choice that was no choice.<sup>7</sup>

And yet: when Wagner first entered Cosima's female consciousness, his and her personal backgrounds essentially differed from each other. The idea of a possible relationship would have been frenzy; social conventions, the constellation of the triangle Bülow - Liszt - Wagner, Wagner's extremely controversial reputation in the artistic as well as the social world and, not to forget, his alarming financial situation - all these aspects made the secret thoughts and longings which Cosima might have had at that time merely utopian. The event that bridges this abyss does not occur until the year 1864, when King Ludwig II. of Bavaria wondrously changes Wagner's situation. From within, Wagner was close to a breakdown, and from the outside, there was impending ruin from which Wagner then was saved and flung into the very state of wealth he had enviously despised and yet always been wishing for. Now he became a privileged protégé of the king and was, as such, feudally furnished and protected. It was through this change that the abyss between him and Cosima began to become smaller at least to the extent that Cosima, who at first officially functioned as his secretary, finally made up her mind to

cross the dangerous catwalk leading to Wagner entirely. She did so against all odds, and her decision was an ultimate one. She was consistent, unflinching and unerring in her choice. For this reason, we can think of Ludwig II. as of the indirect as well as unintentional benefactor of Wagner's and Cosima's relationship, which, in turn, should turn out to cause him serious difficulties.

On March 8<sup>th</sup> in 1866, Cosima arrived with her daughter Daniela in Geneva, and the following day, she began to write down Wagner's autobiography. On the occasion of a trip to the Vierwaldstätter See, Cosima's and Wagner's attention was drawn to the idyllically situated House Tribschen on a peninsula near Lucerne - a house which Wagner then immediately rented, having in mind a shared dwelling place with Cosima. As early as on May 12<sup>th</sup>, Cosima arrived in Tribschen with her daughters Daniela, Blandine, and Isolde, never to leave Wagner again. Ten days later, on Wagner's birthday on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, a visitor suddenly announced himself as Walther von Stolzing. It was King Ludwig, who had secretly left Munich. He went back to Schloß Berg after two days, still in the dark as to the true nature of Richard's and Cosima's relationship, be it out of naiveté or out of repression. Given the tense political situation - it was not even four weeks before the Prussian-Austrian war was to break out - , it caused much indignation in the Cabinet and public that the king had been feeling he had nothing better to do than go and see Wagner of all people, who was in the doghouse as far as Munich was concerned. In the meantime, however, at least Hans von Bülow had been entirely let in on Wagner's relationship to Cosima; he asked for his dismissal in Munich and arrived in Tribschen. When he and Cosima talked things out for the last time, he said: "Je pardonne!", and Cosima replied: "Il ne faut pas pardonner, il faut comprendre!" - Back in Munich, malicious speculations have been circulating all over the place. For this reason, Wagner prompted Ludwig to sign a declaration he had composed himself, and which was addressed to Bülow, though intended for the press, effectively. This declaration came to Bülow's and Cosima's defense and was, virtually, a royal apology as far as Wagner, Bülow and Cosima were concerned. By doing so, Wagner eventually cuckolded his royal sponsor as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Cosima Wagner's Diaries, p. 33.

It follows that it is only possible to conceive Cosima's decision as a sensible or even calculating one if we are mistaken by Wagner's personal situation even after 1864. For in spite of Ludwig's royal patronage, Wagner continued to be "used to standing at the edge of an abyss," as he himself once put it in a joke when his musicians pointed out to him that he was about to fall off the conductor's podium. Ludwig's favor remained uncertain and shaky. In fact, there were several occasions leading to a discord, since time and again, Wagner made the king put up with dangerous stresses and strains, as we have already seen. Cosima's existence next to Wagner therefore remained extremely insecure - both in financial and in social terms.

Wahnfried, finally, became the place where Cosima's imagination - as well as Wagner's - found its peace. ["Wahnfried," in German, is a contraction of the nouns "imagination" and "peace".] As a symbol of their relationship and, indeed, created together, Wahnfried, from 1874 onwards, became a shared home and resort which belonged to both of them in equal measure and exclusively. Yet Cosima, as was characteristic of her principled and strait-laced disposition, suffered from her bad conscience and feelings of guilt until her death. When Cosima's consciousness began to fade towards the end of her long life, the hallucinating aged woman is reported to have uttered words which were directed towards Hans von Bülow and her conscience, which was burdened with guilt. We may thus conclude that truly, Cosima's decision to unconditionally lead a life together with Wagner had been based on the inescapable imperative her inner demon had imposed on her. It was the latter that led her to an all-embracing symbiosis with Wagner - a symbiosis on which Wagner commented the evening before his death when he remarked: "Once in 5000 years, it actually works out!" -

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This very identification with Wagner's life and works seems to be the reason why Cosima was almost numinously mystified by her contemporaries, who called her the female "Meister," "mistress of Bayreuth," the "honorable lady," the "guardian of the grail," and even the "greatest woman of the nineteenth century." It seemed as if Richard Wagner continued to live through his widow. And even if most of this may have been a projection from the outside, it is true that Cosima herself emphatically strived to work on the foun-

dation and fixation of the "Wagner myth," at whose center she was after Wagner's death herself, and of which she gradually became the most important part. Against this backdrop, Wahnfried, as a mythical place full of taboos, was treated as a museum and put on stage, as it were. There were words not to be vocalized and objects not to touch. The remembrance of Wagner was omnipresent through a cultic form of worship, with Wagner serving as a saint. And the spirit of the "master" was hovering above everything else, embodied in his wife, Cosima. However, Cosima did not shrink away from dubiously interfering with "corrections" in the sources - "corrections" that were, indeed, on the borderline of forgery. She did so in order to eternalize the Wagner myth, suppressing, prohibiting and actually eliminating everything that might, according to her, hamper Wagner's monument, affect it or even relativize it in any undesired way. To give a few examples, she burns her and Wagner's correspondence, Nietzsche's letters which have been addressed to her, or Wagner's letters to Mathilde Wesendonck - even after the latter had already been published, if only in a censored edition. Still, in Cosima's opinion, it never was all about her, never did she act out of conceitedness; she was serving the Wagner myth. That way, the cult of an idol - exercised amongst wafts of mist - becomes common practice at Wahnfried: a practice as effective as, at the same time, cataclysmic.

It was not least her ripe old age of 92 years which additionally contributed to Cosima's mystification: in her final years, she was a living monument of the nineteenth century - leading an insular life and separating herself from the public, most of the time, since she had resigned as a supervisor of the festival in the year 1907, that is more than twenty years before her death. Cosima then appeared as an auratic guess about what the "magic moments of Bayreuth," as it were, had actually been like once upon a time. Cosima, in a nutshell, was a kind of female Titirel in the grail area of Bayreuth.

Along with Cosima, the aristocracy moved into Wagner's life. In this manner, Cosima's turning to Wagner was the grounding for what should become essential to the festival: support, at least attention from the international establishment. Wagner, the revolutionary, who had so far at best gained access to a few representatives of the newly rich, owed his further social advancement, his acceptance and appreciation in circles of the

High Society to Cosima, at last. Whereas Ludwig II.'s adoration for Wagner had been dismissed as an odd quirk by many of those belonging to the aristocracy, Wagner's relationship to Cosima, who was a member of the social, mental, and cultural nobility and who had been raised and educated following the French example, effectively legitimized Wagner's admission to these circles which then was far more intimate. By means of her unmistakable understanding of ceremonial proceedings, Cosima deftly managed to win over even those who had been eying Wagner suspiciously and from a distance. Likewise, and for Wagner's and her cause, Cosima wins favor with utterly wealthy, influential friends, as countess Marie von Schleinitz, for example, or countess Muchanoff-Kalergis. It is doubtless Cosima who makes Wagner and the festival reputable, yes, even fashionable all across the European aristocracy.

Consequently, Bayreuth is supported by Cosima's social circles right from the start, and far less by Wagner's acquaintances. Not only does this guarantee the eventual success of the festival, but it also makes Cosima - and not Wagner - the center of "Bayreuth society," a society that the "master" with a revolutionary past found rather unpleasant, as a matter of fact. It is the spirit, the style and the social contacts that Cosima brought into the relationship which provided the means for the enterprise Bayreuth, thereby adding a powerful, glamorous social touch to the festival and its conception. Therefore, the "crowd" which the revolutionary Wagner had originally had in mind turned into an aristocratic community, eventually, and it follows that the typical audience did not consist of people like Röckel, Uhlig, Fischer, Semper or even Bakunin any longer, but of families that belonged to the highest European aristocracy: restorative, monarchistic, anti-democratical powers of the Second German Reich.

In spite of inner reluctance, Wagner was not able to prevent this very development - and did not want to in the end, we may suppose. If possible, he assigned his representative duties to Cosima, however, who was so much more urbane, and focused on his musical works and theoretical writings instead. Whenever this proved to be impossible, one always had to count on Wagner's snubs or even affronts as he was mixing with representatives of public and economic life. This was the case, for instance, after the last performance of Parsifal in 1882: when the curtain rose following the last act, all the

artists, assistants, and technical staff assembled on the stage. Wagner was among them, giving a rather long speech with his back to the audience, to the effect that the latter did not understand very well what he was saying. Upon finishing, he turned around and went to the edge of the stage in order to address the "mystical abyss" of the orchestra from there. "And you, my dear musicians!" he began his talk, in a voice that sounded particularly affectionate, and even intimate. But then, he stepped back, jerkily straightened up, and dryly, almost contemptuously, threw the following laconic words into the audience: "And so, my patrons, I take my leave - of you!"<sup>8</sup> That was his last, in its tone as well as in its scantiness almost rebuking farewell to the money lenders of the festival. Dealing with sponsors was not Wagner's strongest suit.

Hence, Bayreuth does not emerge from the foundation of the social pyramid, as Wagner had originally intended - from a "democratic spirit of the people," that is - , but from the top of this very pyramid, which Bayreuth increasingly aims to address as time goes by. It does not help that in his heart, Wagner preserves character traits of an anarchic revolutionary: he was some sort of Loge-Wotan in dual union, as it were. Bayreuth, quite on the contrary and to Wagner's own astonishment, is in the grip of social and economical establishment, the very establishment he has, 30 years ago, been climbing the barricades against, and against which he has acrimoniously been writing. The festival, therefore, presents itself under the auspices of the Second German Reich from the outset, and of the potentates thereof. This, above all, is due to Cosima.

Thus, one cannot help but think that Wagner's death makes the last element of uncertainty, which has been obstructive to the self-portrayal of political and social power, eventually disappear. Wagner had been the revolutionary wolf in feudal sheep's clothing, an irritation to manorial self-content; only Bayreuth which was reigned by Cosima alone ultimately consolidated the cultural self-understanding that was typical of the fin de siècle by stressing what was called "tradition." As a result of Wagner's death, the democratic, vanguard, revolutionary part of Bayreuth died as well. What was left was a ceremonious great fuss, the affirmation of a pseudo-religious, sometimes even preposterous cult, the wrongful use of the festival in favor of political, ideological goals, as well

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<sup>8</sup> Following a depiction by Houston Stewart Chamberlain.

as in favor of the self-display of the establishment. Cosima's leadership gave way to a conservative, reactionary spirit in Bayreuth, which then successively would lead to an ideology that made Bayreuth more than receptive to anti-democratic, nationalistic tendencies during the time of the Weimar Republic.

This ideology of Bayreuth, this absolute commitment to *Gesinnung*, *Weltanschauung* and "Wagner orthodoxy" is thus due to the dogmatic guardian of the grail, Cosima Wagner. Suspicious of any modern, contemporary tendencies, sectarian-like caught up in the idea of being surrounded by enemies, Cosima solemnly stylized aesthetical experience into *Weltanschauung* and religion. It was the conformism and pseudo-scholarship of the "Bayreuther Blätter" as well as the self-proclaimed apostles of the "Wagner ideology" at the "Bayreuth circle" that supported her to this effect. Cosima's aesthetic orthodoxy thus was filled up with dangerous and hardly bearable essentials. Generally speaking, it is typical of sects to derive some sort of enemy from their ideological strictness, a threatening enemy that welds together the community even more. Here, too, Cosima complies with Wagner, and so the enemy in question is not difficult to find: Jewry, which is, according to Wagner's obsessive claim in his late treatise *Know Thyself*, the "plastic demon of human decline." The commitment to Wagner's heritage is therefore always denoted by a sharp anti-Semitism, which Cosima adhered to as strongly as Wagner. Further particulars on behalf of Wagner include the following: theory of the races and mysticism of blood, chauvinism, obsession with Aryans, and fanaticism. This anticipates, in turn, the connection of Wahnfried and the festival to the ideology and propaganda of the NS state and its Führer, the Wagnerian Adolf Hitler.

Meanwhile, however, Cosima's façade, which has been built up painstakingly enough, begins to crumble and, indeed, is close to breaking down: back then, Siegfried's homosexuality was considered perverted and criminal, and, in any event, improper, disgusting and unimaginable for the alleged hero son of the most exemplary German artist, as it were. His sexual orientation, therefore, had to be hushed up at any rate. This was why the aging dandy was married to the young, maiden-like Winifred and forced to suppress his true, internal nature. Cosima, one could argue, thus bequeathed the curse of self-denial to her son. The clash between one's own identity and family identity, between

internal and external calling, seems to me to have become a leitmotif of Wagner family psychology - and differs so much from the ancestor, Wagner himself, who never suffered in terms of this very issue.

It was not only Fidi, though, the longed for, pampered son of the Valsungs, who should not outlive his mother for any longer than nearly half a year, who turned out to be a problem child. In public, particularly Isolde's trial against her mother Cosima caused a furor. The delicate course of this so-called "Beidler Trial" began with a firework of the press in 1914, and indeed, it was not even the festival itself, but the Wagner family that caused a stir: Isolde, called "Loldi," who was the first and favorite daughter of Richard and Cosima, the most attractive one, one might add, a "child of love and ecstasy," as Cosima had once referred to her, born on April 10<sup>th</sup> in 1865 in Munich, sued her mother Cosima on January 24<sup>th</sup> in 1914 at the County Court Bayreuth. - Outrageous! - What was it all about?

Wagner had not made a will which would have taken care of his estate and the future of the Bayreuth Festival in any way that was legally binding. As a result, the Bayreuth banker Adolf von Groß complied with Cosima's urgent request and set off to make Siegfried, next to herself, the sole heir, and to endow Siegfried's siblings merely with a legal portion. Von Groß was in charge of the financial and legal business of the family and had been appointed guardian of the children after Wagner's death. Cosima, therefore, had founded a dynasty, which was essentially synonymous with a disinheritance of her daughters. In the year 1900, Isolde had gotten married to the ambitious Swiss conductor Franz Beidler, who had been claiming higher family rights, as it were, due to Isolde's being Richard Wagner's oldest daughter - a claim which was directed to Houston Stewart Chamberlain especially, who, in turn, was married to Wagner's second daughter Eva. In effect, it all revolved around the "succession to the throne" of Isolde's son Franz Wilhelm, who had been born in the year 1901, and who was Wagner's first grandchild. From a legal perspective, however, Isolde was considered Hans von Bülow's daughter, since she had been born while Cosima was still married to the latter. Back then, this was the legal situation. Still, it was an open secret that Isolde, in truth, was Richard Wagner's daughter - a fact even Carl Friedrich von Glasenapp, the official historian at Wahnfried,

did not strive to cover up. As for Wagner himself, he too had always considered her his own daughter and once had said to her: "You know, don't you, that you're my child and not Bülow's, in effect," and had kiddingly added: "I suppose you'd rather belong to the aristocracy ... ?" Finally, Franz Beidler's and Houston Stewart Chamberlain's rivalry resulted in Beidler's serious discord with his mother-in-law Cosima, who stuck with Chamberlain, whom she adored, whereas Isolde loyally supported her husband and thus turned into a *persona non grata* at Wahnfried. Incited by Beidler, she refused to accept what the newspapers referred to as a "deprivation of the father," though, and thus sued her mother in order to obtain legal authentication of Richard Wagner's paternity, which, *de facto*, no one was challenging anyway. Due to the legal situation I already mentioned, Isolde's action, however, was a lost cause from the outset, and so the court dismissed her petition, unsurprisingly, on June 19<sup>th</sup> in 1914, abiding by the principle: "*pater est, quem nuptiae demonstrant.*" From then on, to Cosima and her well-obeying children, Isolde did not belong to the family any longer. In Cosima's presence, Isolde's name was not to be pronounced.

The Beidler Trial was the last tangible scandal of a perishing world at the eve of World War I. It was not only the names and the background of those involved that caused a sensation, but also the delicate issue the trial was about. Among other very personal, intimate things which Cosima was forced to comment on, for instance, she found herself having to swear an oath to the effect that during the time of conception, she had been having sexual intercourse not with her husband Hans von Bülow, but exclusively with Richard Wagner. In a famous caricature of the "*Simplicissimus*," meanwhile, Isolde complains in Siegmund's words: "Wagner I cannot be called; / Bülow would that I were; / but to Beidler only I answer!". From other sources as well, pronounced polemics did not fall short. There was no journalist who would not rub salt into the wounds of the family and its embarrassment. Maximilian Harden, for example, was ranting and raving about the "mantle of lies among the noble people who dwell on consecration and whose imagination is, indeed, ever so peaceful" (this was an allusion to the word "Wahnfried," of course); he was decrying the "delusional sense of dynasty" the Wagner family adhered to. - We may sum up that Cosima's system of denial was dramatically unmasked - in spite of her judicial success. Nine days after the decision of the court had been an-

nounced, however, the Austrian heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, was shot in Sarajevo, with the result that the world enthusiastically rushed into the First World War. At the beginning of the latter, the festival was cancelled and would not recommence until ten years later. Bayreuth faded from public perception. As for Isolde, though, who was suffering from lung tuberculosis, the lost trial sounded the death knell: after suffering in a sanatorium in Davos - Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain" - she died in Munich on February 7<sup>th</sup> in 1919. - Cosima, on the contrary, soon had every reason to be pleased again: on September 22<sup>nd</sup> in 1915, Siegfried and Winifred got married at Wahnfried, and the birth of Wagner's second grandchild, Wieland, on January 5<sup>th</sup> in 1917, secured the continuance of the dynasty. Isolde's son, Franz Wilhelm, was definitely no longer in the race.

And yet: one cannot help but deeply acknowledge Cosima's accomplishments and merits on behalf of the festival. Her bravery of becoming the head of an enterprise like Bayreuth is stunning, especially if we bear in mind that she was given a hard time back then because she was a woman. There is not even an explicit authorization for Cosima's becoming the director of the festival which Wagner would have given. She could claim, of course, to be Wagner's living will, as it were, and her being his widow doubtless added to her tall, Victorian appearance and made her more authoritative; however, this alone would probably not have sufficed to turn into what she is, intrinsically, remembered for until the present day: Cosima was the most successful female artistic director in the history of theater.

The basic essentials to this success can be summarized, in principle, as follows: Cosima resembled Brünnhilde, in a way, and had a charismatic, honorable appearance that was characterized by her severity. Next to that, she did indeed have a profound artistic talent and knowledge, based on an outstanding cultural and literary education, so that applying what she was familiar with came natural to her. Cosima occasionally bent down to her poor artistic folks like a *Mater gloriosa* or, as was often the case as well, silently instructed the musicians what to do. To this effect, and invisible to the common people, she wrote down her requirements on slips of paper and, out of a crate, imperiously

passed them onto the stage, thereby proclaiming her and the "master's" will as if it was the Gospel, virtually.

The years of 1883 and 1884, in which but the performances of Parsifal were exclusively repeated, presented themselves as a sacred sort of requiem in Wagner's honor. In 1885, there was a break at the festival house, and the following year, three years after Wagner's death, Cosima submitted her first stage direction she had entirely produced herself, when Tristan and Isolde received eventually its premiere. At the same time, this was the first step to broaden the repertoire at the festival and make it comprise all of Wagner's works, beginning with the Flying Dutchman, as had been planned right from the start. If we put aside the enormous musical challenge that this work presented, Tristan was relatively easy to put on stage, given that the crew of characters is small and that the settings do not change in the course of any act. With Tristan and Isolde, however, the stage director Cosima chose to have her debut linked to the very opera, out of all operas, which, in turn and as an *Opus metaphysicum* of love, emphatically connected her to Wagner; Cosima's adulterous avoidance of Hans von Bülow comes to mind here, too. Her own conflict is aesthetically transcended, and one could come to think that by staging Tristan and Isolde, Cosima was striving to conjure up the very demon we have talked about, and which, according to her, had assigned her to Wagner just as much as Isolde was assigned to Tristan, inescapably. The choice of Tristan thus legitimized Cosima's reign as the mistress of Bayreuth who had now become autonomous: and it did so, at least in Cosima's subconsciousness, through the very spirit of a demon that was serving the compelling, inevitable metaphysics of love.

The performance itself, it would figure, followed the debut performance Tristan had experienced in 1865 in Munich. Later on as well, Cosima was always keen to carry into effect what she considered the incontestable wishes of the "master." Therefore, to her, drama was by no means an independent, interpretive expression of art with its own aesthetic rules and with its own legalities. Setting an opera on stage did not mean a permanent recreation of the work against the backdrop of the present time, but it was, rather, an image set in motion according to the solely binding ideas of the composer. Thus each and every single stage direction had to be taken literally, nothing was to be omitted,

nothing to add to what Wagner himself had written. The freedom of being creative was extremely restricted and only imaginable where it did not clash with either Wagner's statements or the ultra-orthodox exegesis that was her own. And of course, that did not exactly happen very often. Incidentally, and needless to say, she claimed to be the only person to know what was right and what was wrong, what was good and what was not.

For this reason, Cosima made use of scenical patterns which Wagner had approved of whenever this was possible. The fact that Wagner, as a matter of fact, had been ultimately satisfied extremely rarely, as well as his comments contradicting each other on occasion, was then by all means ignored. Hence, Cosima was seeking to eternalize a way of staging which Wagner, at least in part, would have considered to miss the point, and which he would have depreciated. It was only incontrovertible deficiencies and scenical details that should be corrected and emended in order to maximize the appearance of perfection, to the effect that a scenical example was established, an example intended to last in perpetuity.

As for the other productions: *Meistersinger* in 1888, *Tannhäuser* in 1891, *Lohengrin* in 1894 and finally the *Flying Dutchman* in 1901, these too were modeled on previous performances, the ones in Munich in particular, which were referred to as "exemplary performances." The stagings at the festival were designed to copy the latter, and to bring these old performances into perfection even more. In this respect, Cosima, above all, stucked with the brothers Max and Gotthold Brückner, whose studio in Coburg had already supplied the decorations for the *Ring* in 1876 and the debut performance of *Parsifal* in 1882, respectively. As professional and experienced decorators, the brothers had an excellent understanding of the kind of naturalistic historicism and heroic landscape illustrations that were in Cosima's favor. Essential to the performances was someone else as well: the engineering director Friedrich Kranich.

Cosima followed her path consistently and undeviatingly, and at the beginning of the 1890s, the festival finally began to function in economic terms as well. The demand for tickets was growing, and the universal Wagner euphoria, yes, even Wagner adoration supported the institutional character of the festival at the turn of the century, its constancy and continuance. In 1896, twenty years after the complete debut performance of

the Ring at the first festival, there was another considerable challenge: a new staging of the tetralogy. For indeed, it truly was a new production, since Wagner, due to the short-fall following the first festival, had been forced to sell his pool to the dramatic advisor Angelo Neumann in Leipzig. As a result, now all the decorations and costumes had to be manufactured anew by the brothers Brückner and Arpad Schmidhammer, respectively, who used drafts by Hans Thoma as a model. Provided that all deficiencies of 1876 were to be resolved, Cosima created a production that became a normative iconographic model not only for Bayreuth for the next decades to come. It is here that the stereotyped notion of Wagner performances originated, in effect: historicizing and heroic decorations and costumes, bear-skins, helmets, accessories that were supposed to look Germanic, horses on the stage, and allegedly "real" requisites should convey the atmosphere of authentic, perfectly naturalistic illusion. On the other hand, out of the provisional arrangements of 1876 and 1882, Cosima then managed to establish what became the most representative and authoritative theater institution and cultural center of that time; unlike any other festival, Bayreuth enormously affected the public and the world, near or far, for better or for worse, and has continued to do so until the present day.

Given that there is a lot of postmodern arbitrariness nowadays, even on stage at the festival house in Bayreuth, one could come to the conclusion that Cosima's overkill, as it were, is now missing out. - It is thus Cosima's undeniable merit to have restored the theater, which had, to a large extent, been degenerating and turning into shallow entertainment, to a dignity undreamt of, and even to a sacred pride. Cosima's institutionalization of the Bayreuth Festival became a place of self-conscious, autonomous, and independent art and, simultaneously, a lasting home and demanding workshop to artistic activities and the endeavor to promote artistic excellence by serving as a role model. However, as is always the case dealing with Wagner and his impact, this, too, entails a lot of doubtfulness.

On December 6<sup>th</sup> in 1906, Cosima suffered from a slight stroke, the consequences of which should accompany her until her death. In addition, her vision had been noticeably decreasing, to the effect that she had been dictating her letters after 1885 almost without

any exceptions. All in all, she saw fit to pass on the supervision to her son Siegfried, according to her primal intention; Siegfried, in turn, had been prepared for his new post since the year 1896. Cosima then increasingly backed out of the public and set off to regions belonging more to the realm of dreams than to reality. Her journey would last more than 20 years, again; she was looked after by her daughters Daniela and, especially, Eva. In the end, she was but here merely physically speaking - mentally, however, far back in the past and finally in the eternal realm of those who had passed away long since and to whom she had belonged.

Upon dying on April 1<sup>st</sup> in 1930, she was, like Brünnhilde, burnt into ashes as she had requested, and her urn was placed at the head end of the master's grave. Yet her burial did not even occur within his vault, but inconspicuously in the grave hill, without any indication whatsoever: without a cross, without any memorial stone, so only well-informed people know where Cosima's remains actually are at rest. That way, even in death and in eternity, she wholly melts into the life and afterlife of Richard Wagner: „Always was I, / always would be, / haunted with hope's / hungering sweetness -- / and always to save thy ill!"

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