

# WAGNER IN PERFORMANCE

Edited by

Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON • 1992

# *In memory of Sir Reginald Goodall*

Copyright © 1992 by the contributors and Yale University

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the US Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press) without written permission from the publishers.

Set in Baskerville by Textflow Services Ltd., Belfast  
and printed and bound by Biddles Ltd., Guildford and Kings Lynn

## Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Wagner in performance / edited by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-05718-0

1. Wagner, Richard, 1813-1883—Performances. 2. Opera—Production and direction. 3. Performance practice (Music)—19th century.

4. Performance practice (Music)—20th century. I. Millington, Barry.

II. Spencer, Stewart.

ML410.W19W12 1992

782.1'092—dc20

92-4964

CIP  
MN

# Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Introduction	viii
1 Conducting Wagner: The Search for Melos <i>Christopher Fifield</i>	1
2 Wagner and His Singers <i>Desmond Shawe-Taylor</i>	15
3 Producing Wagner <i>Mike Ashman</i>	29
4 Designing Wagner: Deeds of Music Made Visible? <i>Patrick Carnegy</i>	48
5 'Fidelity' to Wagner: Reflections on the Centenary <i>Ring</i> <i>Jean-Jacques Nattiez</i>	75
6 Performing Practice <i>Clive Brown</i>	99
7 The Reception of Wagner in Vienna, 1860-1900 <i>Amanda Glauert</i>	120
8 Taking the Waters at Bayreuth <i>Matthias Theodor Vogt</i>	130
9 Wagner on Record: Re-evaluating Singing in the Early Years <i>David Breckbill</i>	153
10 Anton Seidl and America's Wagner Cult <i>Joseph Horowitz</i>	168
Notes	183
The Contributors	201
Index	204

## Chapter 8

# Taking the Waters at Bayreuth

*Matthias Theodor Vogt*

Wagner's detractors have always found it easy to write off the Bayreuth Festival as a musical steam bath designed for earnest Teutons. Wagner scholars, by contrast, seem not to have noticed that in this apparent contempt lies rather more than a grain of truth: for even the often subtropical temperatures inside the Bayreuth Festival Theatre are intimately related to the composer's festival ideal. And this ideal, in turn, is bound up with the ideology of hydropathic cures.

In *Mein Leben* Wagner explains that the crucial breakthrough in writing the *Ring* brought with it the idea of a festival: 'This exhilarating turn of events gave a great fillip to my spirits, and at once the decision matured in me to realise my original sketch for the *Nibelungen* in its entirety, irrespective of whether any part of it would be actually performable in any of our theatres'.<sup>1</sup>

The 'turn of events' in question was bound up with the annual income of eight hundred thalers which Julie Ritter made over to Wagner in November 1851. (Wagner himself had asked Ferdinand Heine, his friend in Dresden, to approach Frau Ritter on the subject, so her offer of support was something less than a total surprise.)

But the place and background of Wagner's decision make it unlikely that, by reducing his resolve to purely economic factors, as *Mein Leben* sets out to do, he was doing justice to the complexity of his thinking. At the time when he took his decision — a decision so central not only to the *Ring* but to the history of the Bayreuth Festival — Wagner was taking the waters (a 'water diet', he called it) at the hydropathic centre of Albisbrunn, near Zurich, a nine-week ordeal from which he resolved to return only when 'fully restored to health'.<sup>2</sup>

The following is an attempt to relate Wagner's attitude towards water and hydropathy to a detailed account of his concept of a festival — in other words, to the genesis of the *Ring*. This will be

followed by what might be called a sanatorial view of the festival. But first let us take a look at the cultic role which water has played in society generally.

### *Water: Swimming, Bathing, and Balneology*

#### Wagner's Age and Its Attitude towards Water

Water now flows freely from taps in every household and at least one shower is part of the fittings of almost every home in these temperate regions of ours, so that personal hygiene at home is taken for granted, while even quite small places pride themselves on their luxury indoor swimming pools. Only the surfeit of different types of mineral water on supermarket shelves can offer a dim reminder of water's mythic qualities.

We tend to forget how recent our relationship with water as a therapeutic agent really is. As early as 1697 the empirical philosopher John Locke had recommended that boys be taught to swim, but in Germany it was not until 1817 that General von Pfuel officially opened a military swimming pool in the River Spree; not until the late 1850s were the first public swimming baths opened in Berlin. After that there was no holding back. By 1873 swimming was part of the syllabus of Prussia's teacher-training colleges, and by 1899 there were no fewer than seventy-seven municipal baths at the public's disposal in Berlin alone, an *embarras de richesses* which was due, not least, to pressure from doctors anxious to halt the spread of disease.

Wagner lived to see this gradual state recognition of the prophylactic powers of water. The aim, of course, was public health, but behind it lay far older beliefs, including a magic awe of water which could still be observed as late as the early nineteenth century. During Wagner's youth, we know of cases where young people were banned from swimming in rivers on the pretext that to do so offended against common decency.<sup>3</sup> By the end of his life a different view of water had gained acceptance, an attitude which, in the main, still typifies today's society.

#### Cultic Ritual

'Of all the different heathen cults', Max Höfler wrote in 1888, pointing out links with his own age, 'the one which is best preserved today is the cult of water'.<sup>4</sup> Central to this cult was the concept of purification through bathing in rivers, in other words, in water which was not stagnant. (Siegfried, after all, calls for 'Ein Quell!

Ein Quell!', rather than simply 'Wasser!', — the water he wants should be from a spring.) Thus Charlemagne set aside special days for bathing in rivers; and even as late as the seventeenth century, suicides in rural areas were not buried on land but committed to swift-flowing rivers.

The cult of springs and fountains as a prototype of flowing water was widespread throughout the Alpine region, where it took the form of veneration for the primeval Norns, a veneration echoed in Wagner's *Ring*, where the First Norn sings:

Im kühlen Schatten rauscht' ein Quell: Weisheit raunend rann sein Gewell': da sang ich heil'gen Sinn.	In the cooling shade a spring welled forth: whispering wisdom it rippled along: there I sang my sacred song.
---	--

(GSVI, 178)

Ideas such as these can be traced back at least to ancient Egypt. As part of the cult of Isis, the waters of the Nile were channelled through the goddess's temple: the aim of the cult was to wash away sins, mystery cults in general being a subdivision of purification cults. Traces of many such cults can be found in the *Ring*: most striking of all is the correlation between the cult of Isis and the end of *Götterdämmerung*, where the Rhine overflows its banks. We are often unaware how tenacious cults may be (not only churches and opera houses are repositories of such beliefs). Suffice it to mention those fearless swimmers who take the plunge on New Year's Day not only in London's Serpentine but in other countries, too: in Rome in the years around the birth of Christ, it was votaries of the cult of Isis who hacked away the ice on the River Tiber to cleanse themselves in its waters.<sup>5</sup>

Mystery cults demanded a very high price of those who sought initiation, a price involving surrogate symbolism, as in the self-castration of would-be priests of Cybele. A close reading of the text suggests a similar symbol in the opening scene of the final part of the *Ring*:

Ein kühner Gott trat zum Trunk an den Quell; seiner Augen eines zahlt' er als ewigen Zoll.	A dauntless god came to drink at the spring; one of his eyes he paid as toll for all time.
---	---

(GSVI, 178)

It is difficult to imagine a more unequivocal formulation of the supreme significance of water in terms of the symbols, characters, and dramaturgical framework of the narrative than in this act of partial self-immolation on the part of the chief of the gods.

How close Wagner came, again and again, to ancient cultic beliefs is clear from Hagen's use of the optative 'fließe' (flow) when exhorting the vassals to make preparations for Gunther's wedding with Brünnhilde:

Starke Stiere sollt ihr schlachten: am Weihstein fließe Wotan ihr Blut.	Sturdy steers you should slaughter: let Wotan's stone flow with their blood.
--	---

(GSVI, 217-18)

Under Emperor Claudius (AD41-54) the cult of the Great Mother, Cybele, publicly sanctioned, quickly spread to the whole of the empire. Unlike the earlier state religion, the cult of Cybele was a redemption cult; in other words, it sought to answer a question hitherto inconceivable: What followed after death? In the sacrificial steer, or taurobolium, the cult discovered a ritual which combined redemption with purification in a highly impressive way. According to the early Christian poet Prudentius, the priest descended into a trench covered by a platform of planks pierced with fine holes, on which a bull, magnificent with gold and flowers, was slain, its blood raining down on the hierophant's head and clothes. Soaked by the gore, he would then emerge from the pit, presenting himself to the faithful as an object of veneration.<sup>6</sup>

Descent into the pit betokens dying. The blood which bespatters the priest was believed to possess the power to cleanse the adept of his sins. Baptised by the blood, he rises out of the pit and enters on a new life. The parallel with the episode in the *Nibelungenlied* in which Siegfried kills the dragon does not need underlining: the hero of the lay achieves a subtle kind of immortality in the form of his inviolability through bathing in the dragon's blood. In the *Nibelungenlied*, of course, the Rhinegold does not play the role which Wagner gives it in the *Ring*, where its function is to purify, the act of purification involving water rather than the blood which a genuinely Germanic heroic opera might otherwise have suggested. In order not to duplicate the mystery of purification and thus deprive it of its persuasive power, Wagner suppressed the scene where Siegfried bathes in the dragon's blood and replaced it with Brünnhilde's blessing.

#### Societal Factors

A name no doubt well known to Wagnerites is that of Hans Foltz. The Nuremberg barber, surgeon, and Mastersinger is the author of the oldest surviving essay on bathing in German, a work that dates from 1480. Among the remedies he prescribes are soaking in mineral water

for a hundred hours during a three-week course of treatment intended to combat skin diseases. Humoral pathologists believed the resultant 'bathing rashes' a desirable reaction,<sup>7</sup> so that Wagner's rashes in Albsbrunn and his positive reaction to them have, as it were, a healthy tradition.

Bathing for reasons of hygiene has an equally long tradition among the Germanic peoples. We know that bathrooms existed from at least the seventh century on every farmstead in rural areas. Not until the seventeenth century did the cultivation of flax produce a change in clothing habits which affected the lower orders, too. As soon as clothes could be washed or replaced at reasonable cost, there was far less need to bathe, with the result that bathing, and the culture bound up with it, fell slowly into decline in rural areas.

The ancient view was that water was 'the best of all the elements'<sup>8</sup> — a viewpoint which took on a whole new meaning when social bathing came into vogue. To what extent such baths were also brothels, as Hans Peter Duerr has claimed, is a question we must leave open. More important in the present context is the widespread feudal practice of visiting thermal spas, a practice which, independent of the age's love of water, was already well attested by Michel de Montaigne in his *Journal de voyage* of 1580–81. In 1793 Duke Friedrich Franz I of Mecklenburg-Schwerin donated the princely sum of seventeen thousand thalers to establish the first coastal resort on German soil, at Heiligendamm, although opportunities for swimming were not among the duke's provisions. By 1800 spas had become the meeting-places of Europe, the possibilities for contact which they offered on more or less neutral ground being used, above all, for political ends. In 1818, for example, the Holy Alliance of Austria, Russia, and Prussia was renewed in Aix-la-Chapelle, but even more famous are the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, which gave rise to that reactionary climate in which the young Wagner grew up and against which he later rebelled.

By 1850 Baden-Baden, with its thirty thousand annual visitors, was the leading resort in Europe, following by Bad Homburg with ten thousand, Carlsbad with nine thousand, Teplitz (to which we shall soon be returning) with eight thousand, Bad Ems with seven thousand, Bad Kissingen with five thousand five hundred, Bad Schwalbach with four thousand, Bad Nauheim with two thousand and Schlangenbad with fifteen hundred.<sup>9</sup> Their guest lists read like previews of the ones for Bayreuth before the First World War.

In 1857 the *Balneologische Zeitung* pointed out a highly important aspect of this 'balneological epidemic' — the effects of the Industrial Revolution on what had once been feudal institutions. 'If we take a closer look at the state of health of the less affluent members of

society, we shall see that it was incomparably better before the railways opened up in Germany and that it has grown perceptibly worse as each new section of track has been laid'.<sup>10</sup> It was precisely because Bayreuth lacked a railway link that it had virtually no local industry in 1871, thus making the sleepy Bavarian town a perfect place for Wagner, whose festival ideal had little time for industry.

Spa casinos attracted not only those in search of health and companionship but also gamblers such as Dostoyevsky. There was, however, a further concern on the part of many of those who took the waters which should not be underestimated. Since the early Renaissance, the medieval fear of Nature's darker forces had gradually been transformed into a longing to return to Nature which was later seen as typically Romantic. It was this feeling, no doubt, which prompted Goethe to spend no fewer than 1114 days — in other words, some three and a quarter years — at watering-places during his life.

The nineteenth-century artist's nostalgic desire to return to Nature and wallow in thermal baths is well summed up by Justinus Kerner (1786–1862), a writer much in vogue around 1850 and one whom Wagner often read. In his pseudo-medical treatise *Das Wildbad im Königreich Württemberg* (The thermal springs in the kingdom of Württemberg),<sup>11</sup> Kerner offers what almost amounts to a code of conduct for festival visitors:

The waters of the thermal spring have this advantage over many spas in that it is not easy for people to go there if they are not really ill or if they want only to indulge the world and its pleasures. . . . Healing springs are all that bubble here; here there are no faro tables, no theatres, no tables groaning with sumptuous food. For Heaven's sake! . . . Let those who are genuinely ill visit these salubrious springs. Let them come in love and trust: for if they place their trust in simple, bracing Nature and if they organize their way of life accordingly, they will find a cure for their ailments. Those who really want to get better and who do not intend merely playing with water must bear in mind, above all, that only a simple lifestyle, healthy and natural, accords with the silent simple greatness of Nature in this place of healing.<sup>12</sup>

#### Medicinal Springs and Anti-scientific Hydropathic Centres

The use of mineral springs for medicinal purposes characterizes many cultures — Celtic, Greek, and Germanic, if not the traditional state religion of the Romans — although it is not always clear where the dividing line should be drawn between medical and cultic aims.<sup>13</sup>

The oldest known case of a spring being used for medicinal ends is St Maurice's Spring at St Moritz in the Engadine, which, dating back to the Bronze Age, is known to have been in existence for over three and a half thousand years. Wagner himself took the waters there in 1853.

In 1815 Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762–1836), Goethe's doctor and the private physician to Queen Luise of Prussia, published his *Praktische Uebersicht der verschiedenen Heilquellen Deutschlands* (Practical survey of the various medicinal springs in Germany), an introduction to Germany's mineral springs which attests to an almost superstitious belief in the healing powers of spring waters, traditional faith in the efficacy of such cures making up for a lack of understanding of how such procedures actually worked. A few years earlier, in 1803, Johann Wilhelm Tolberg (1762–1831) had opened the first salt-water bath at a salt-works outside Magdeburg. Only slowly did scientific methods gain acceptance in balneology, which under the pressure of an increasingly materialist and mechanistic trend in medicine, was generally regarded with some suspicion during the hundred years or so that followed Hufeland's publication. If attitudes slowly changed, it was due above all to men like Friedrich Wilhelm Beneke (1824–82), who, in 1859, devised a form of treatment for circulatory disorders. But even in cases where medicine was powerless to help, doctors would pack off their patients to watering-places and balneatic resorts. Hundreds of consumptives, including cases of galloping tuberculosis where the risk of infection was not sufficiently clear to their fellow patients, together with syphilitics, who were treated with mercury, making them sweat out the poison in communal salt-baths, flocked to such spas in the desperate hope of a cure. In 1894, for example, Hans von Bülow, by now incurably ill, allowed himself to be talked into making the journey to Cairo, only to die there shortly after arriving. In much the same way Wagner himself, having spent lengthy periods during the 1840s and 1850s taking the waters, hoped that, at the end of his life, he might find relief from his countless afflictions by wintering in Italy, beneath whose southern skies he died.

The years around 1850 witnessed the culmination of a wholly different tradition in balneology involving trends which, half progressive, half anti-progressive, reproached scientifically orientated medicine for having lost sight of the wholeness of the human body and soul. In advancing such a view of man, these theories could call on a long tradition: as early as 1784 Heinrich Matthias Marcard (1747–1817), a hydropathic doctor from the old principality of Pymont, had published a 'Dietetics of the Soul'. In the neo-naive trust which adherents of hydrotherapy (essentially a kind of critique

of progress) placed in the power of water to heal all ills, we find traces of those heathen traditions which, given the lack of medical knowledge at the time, appear in writings on hydrotherapy as an early branch of hygienics: in 1738 the Silesian physician Johann Sigmund Hahn (1696–1773), whose writings Wagner himself was to study in 1851, had published his *Unterricht von Krafft und Würckung des frischen Wassers* (Information on the power and effect of fresh water), in which he declared that 'water has the power to cleanse and to wash away'.<sup>14</sup>

It was around 1830 that Vincenz Prießnitz, a farmhand hailing, like Hahn, from Upper Silesia, though lacking Hahn's medical training, caused something of a stir. Prießnitz discovered a means of fortifying both body and central nervous system by pouring cold water over the patient's naked body while standing him by an open window. He found supporters all over Europe, to the great misfortune of countless souls such as tuberculosis cases, who, adopting his methods, died in their thousands during the 1830s and 1840s. The hydropathic centres which he established sprang up like mushrooms after a shower and included the one at Albisbrunn, not far from Zurich, on the River Albis, which was run by a certain Dr Christoph Zacharias Brunner,<sup>15</sup> thanks to whose radical management the place enjoyed an excellent reputation.<sup>16</sup>

Sebastian Kneipp (1821–97) had already been given up by his doctors in 1847. With the help of Hahn's little treatise, he cured himself by hydrotherapeutic means and later went on to evolve the science of physiotherapy. Kneipp's autobiography *Meine Wasserkur* (1886), translated into English as *My Water-Cure*, became a bestseller; as did his later *So sollt ihr leben!* (*Thus Shalt Thou Live: Hints and Advice for the Healthy and the Sick*), one of the earliest books to expound a healthy lifestyle (a genre which now accounts for 10 per cent of all books sold). At least as far as laymen are concerned, current thinking on the complex issue of 'health' derives in essence from Kneipp's ideas on the one hand and from Eastern spiritual beliefs on the other, beliefs, in short, which Wagner imbued from the mid-1850s onwards, not least in the wake of his reading of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Aiming at a holistic way of life, Kneipp preached a return to Nature in terms of both body and mind. Wagner, by contrast, was looking for ways of fleshing out his aesthetico-political total work of art; he subjected himself to the rigours of a hydropathic regime in order to turn its key ideas to his own artistic advantage. What attracted Wagner was spelt out by Ludwig Diemer (1814–76) in 1855: 'The idea of sweating out all that was sinful and impure by means of the Prießnitz method led thousands upon thousands to visit hydropathic centres'.

### Wagner and Watering-Places: The Cold-Water Cure

#### Wagner Takes the Waters

'I mistrust everything connected with the theatre of today', Wagner wrote to his niece Franziska on 4 June 1850, 'and I feel the same about actors as the police do about those people whom they consider rogues until such time as they find compelling proof to convince them of the opposite. How many of you ever get round to noticing that you're really dealing with the most unspeakable rabble; even fewer of you escape from this morass to find solace in artistry pure and simple'.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of Wagner's declared contempt for all that was bound up with the theatre, scarcely five months were to pass before he conducted not only *Don Giovanni* (in his own revision) but five other operas, too, in Zurich's Aktientheater. Their success was to guarantee him a place in the musical life of the town, leading not only to the first ever Wagner Festival — a concert programme devoted entirely to his own works and performed three times in May 1853 to mark his fortieth birthday — but also to his decision, the following June, to embark on plans for the first performance of the *Ring*: the festival was to have taken place in 1856 on the banks of the River Limmat, but the deficit incurred by the May concerts soon put paid to his plans.

*Don Giovanni* had marked Wagner's début as a conductor, in the tiny spa of Bad Lauchstädt, on 2 August 1834. He had come to Bad Lauchstädt straight from another watering-place, Teplitz (modern Teplice), where, in the June of that year, he had found a cure for his first recorded attack of erysipelas (a skin disorder caused, in Wagner's case, by nervous tension) and, at the same time, had written the prose draft of *Das Liebesverbot*. The same basic pattern of taking the waters during the summer months, when he felt at his most creatively inspired, accompanied Wagner during his years in Dresden. By far the majority of his works were conceived and sketched in spas. In June 1842 he drafted *Tannhäuser* in Teplitz; in July of the following year (again in Teplitz) he read Jacob Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology*, discovering many ideas there for several later works; in the summer of 1845, this time in Marienbad (modern Mariánské Lázně), he sketched both *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger*, while the initial idea for *Parsifal* was already germinating within him. In a word, we are reminded (not least by Wagner's own account of the matter) of Archimedes, who is said to have leapt from his bath in Syracuse, shouting the word 'Eureka' and running home without stopping to dress. If there is truth in the saying that many ideas are snatched from the air, it is equally true that Wagner found *his* ideas in water.

#### The New Religion of Hydropathy

From the middle of 1850 onwards, two of Wagner's closest friends, Theodor Uhlig and the painter Ernst Benedikt Kietz, bombarded him with hydropathic literature. Uhlig recommended the writings of J. H. Rausse (the pseudonym of H. Friedrich Franke). Rausse had founded a hydropathic centre in Mecklenburg, which he ran according to Prießnitz's principles, and, prior to his death in 1848, had been director of a similar institution at Alexandersbad, north-east of Bayreuth.<sup>18</sup> What attracted Wagner to Rausse's writings, he later told Uhlig (qualifying his earlier enthusiasm), was 'above all their fresh approach to Nature',<sup>19</sup> which did not prevent him from finding out as much as he could about water, dietetics, and other ways of getting better, joining in a discussion that raged in countless pamphlets, articles, and books. After all, he himself had already addressed one aspect of the discussion a short time earlier in his own article *Kunst und Klima* (Art and climate), a piece which, apparently unconnected with art, had appeared in a periodical launched only recently under the catch-all title of *Deutsche Monatsschrift für Politik, Wissenschaft, Kunst und Leben* (German monthly for politics, science, art, and life).

Wagner's first reply on the subject is dated 9 October 1850, and in it he scoffs at hydrotherapy, adopting a tone which he himself was shortly to frown on. Yet even here, in two or three apparently unconnected phrases, we already find him sketching out a framework of socio-political ideas which, still indebted to revolutionary thinking, was to characterize his attitude to water in all its later manifestations: 'Next time I'll write at greater length, especially on the subject of your views on water! I only drink water when I feel thirsty, and yet I am far less sanguine than you!' And he goes on without a break: 'What do you want to experience? — be true, implacably true, rejoice in the truth, for its own sake alone, and you'll have enough to be going on with! We shall not put the world to rights, but what does that matter? Should we therefore start to tell lies?' There seems little doubt that what Wagner had in mind here was the cause of revolution. Even more important, however, is the sudden switch from 'water' to a way of life which sets store by the 'truth', followed by the precipitate outburst: 'How happy I am, now that it has become increasingly clear to me how empty and worthless everything is that relates to the state and to public life and art! After all, everyone knows now that they are thoroughly miserable'.<sup>20</sup>

Two weeks later Wagner noted down a chain of ideas which was, I believe, to remain of central importance throughout the coming twelve months: 'Look, just as we need a water cure to heal our bodies, so we need a fire cure in order to remedy (i.e. destroy) the cause of

our illness — a cause that is all around us'.<sup>21</sup> But within the year, I would argue, Wagner must have realised that a 'fire cure' — in other words, revolution — could no longer be achieved, either by himself or by anyone else: 'We shall not put the world to rights, but what does that matter?' During the twelve months in question Wagner developed an altogether different kind of hydrotherapy, a musical panacea designed to improve society — in other words, his festival.

In judging Wagner, we need to bear in mind his tendency to make conceptual links between disparate ideas. His early Paris essays are remarkable for a linguistic brilliance indebted to Heine and Börne, but all the more astonishing is their unquestionable ability to draw the most startling conclusions. Unlike his revolutionary essays, which are concerned with affairs of the moment and written in a style of eruptive inconsequentiality rather than one of logical coherence, the aesthetic writings that date from his early years in Zurich tend to disprove the artistic reproach that they are no more than an exercise in self-help. 'The argumentative, hectoring tone, carried to extremes in the aesthetic essays of the Zurich period, undoubtedly ruined his style', according to Martin Gregor-Dellin.<sup>22</sup> It is not only Wagner's essays, however, which betray such constitutional confusion in their increasingly vegetative line of reasoning; even in his dramatic sketches and drafts he clearly lacks the gift of concision or careful self-correction. The fate of *Götterdämmerung* is eloquent proof of this failing: events that had once been merely recounted in *Siegfrieds Tod* were now portrayed on stage in the prefatory parts of the cycle, without corresponding cuts being made.

That we can all be redeemed from the current state of so thoroughly unnatural a condition only by means of this radical element is certain. . . . Superfluity and deprivation, these are the two destructive enemies of present-day humanity. . . . Everything is superfluous that encloses the walls of a town. . . . Until now we have encountered expressions of enslaved human nature only in crimes that disgust and appal us! — Whenever murderers and thieves now set fire to a house, the deed rightly strikes us as base and repugnant: — but how shall it seem to us if the monster that is Paris is burned to the ground, if the conflagration spreads from town to town, and if we ourselves, in our wild enthusiasm, finally set fire to these uncleanable Augean stables for the sake of a breath of fresh air? . . . Just wait and see how we recover from this fire cure: if necessary I could finish painting this picture, I could even imagine how a man of enthusiasm might here and there summon together the living remnants of our former art and how he might say to them — who among you desires to help me perform a drama? Only those people will answer who genuinely

share that desire, for there will no longer be money available, but those who respond will at once reveal to the world, in a rapidly erected wooden structure, what art is. — At all events, it will all happen quickly, for you can see there is no question here of gradual progress: our redeemer will destroy with furious speed all that stands in our way! . . . Look, just as we need a water cure to heal our bodies, so we need a fire cure to remedy (i.e. destroy) the cause of our illness — a cause that is all around us. Shall we return then to a state of Nature, shall we reacquire the human animal's ability to live to be 200 years old? God forbid! Man is a social, all-powerful being only through *culture*. Let us not forget that culture alone grants us the power to enjoy life to the full as only mankind can enjoy it. . . . Water will restore us to our former health, but we shall not be truly healthy until we can also drink wine without harm to ourselves!<sup>23</sup>

Thus Wagner's train of ideas comes full circle: (1) hydropathy as a means of curing the ills of the body; (2) a fire cure as a means of curing the ills of society; and (3) reform of the theatre: the above quotation is prefaced by a two-page report on the way in which Wagner had stood in for Karl Ritter at the Aktientheater in Zurich, an incident which Wagner recalls not without a certain pride: 'To cut a long story short, let me say only that, completely unnoticed, what was once a *flea-pit* has now been transformed into an institution in which my public seeks only *true artistic enjoyment*'.<sup>24</sup>

The theoretical foundations for the musical language of the *Ring* were laid in the winter of 1850–51. In a preliminary announcement to Theodor Uhlig of 12 December 1850, Wagner uses a distinctively watery simile in setting forth the tripartite structure of *Opera and Drama*: opera (part I) or, rather, the music in opera is 'a life-bearing organism', drama (part II) a procreative force, while 'the poetic intent' is 'the fructifying seed'. Finally, in part III, Wagner planned to describe 'the birth of the poetic intent through the consummate language of music'.<sup>25</sup> In the same letter he returns to the subject of hydropathy, commenting on Uhlig's poor state of health, before continuing: 'I, too, am undertaking a kind of Water Cure; in addition to morning baths, I'm drinking cold water in bed'.<sup>26</sup>

The water cure soon began to show results. 'I, too, have become a semi-aquarian', Wagner wrote to Uhlig on 20 January 1851: 'I've been following your advice with the Neptune Belt [a cold-water poultice wrapped round the torso]! I hope it will do me some good. On the whole I feel noticeably better than last year: I'm working very hard, i.e. uninterruptedly, and appear not to be suffering as a result; it also helps, no doubt, that my domestic affairs are now a little



calmer — that is, clearer, wiser, more sensible — or however you like to put it — !'<sup>27</sup>

A slightly different emphasis emerges from another letter to Uhlig from the end of August 1851. Uhlig had just returned to Dresden, following his visit to Zurich, and had given Wagner a number of Rausse's books on hydrotherapy: 'For the last six days I have been on a strict water diet. . . . My head feels much lighter, sometimes even somewhat dull; I suppose this is one of the short-term effects'.<sup>28</sup>

### Albisbrunn

And finally comes the decision:

My dearest friend! I am going to the hydropathic centre. — I have just returned from Albisbrunn, where I spoke with the doctor and agreed that I should move in on Monday, the 15th. — I cannot stand doing things by halves: the diet on its own was a waste of time. But such is my present state of health that, had I set about composing 'Young Siegfried' [the libretto of which Wagner had written during the spring of 1851 while taking a series of sulphur baths], I should perhaps have been incurable by next spring. I now feel a great desire to sort out the matter once and for all: the thought of being completely well again is altogether novel, but it is bound up for me with Things and Plans of the greatest Importance [as the use of capitals, normally scorned by Wagner, makes abundantly plain].<sup>29</sup>

The visit to Albisbrunn was planned to last from 15 September to 23 November 1851; for part of that time Wagner was joined by Karl Ritter and Hermann Müller, a soldier whom Wagner had got to know in Dresden at the time of Müller's affair with Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. Minna was less than wholly delighted, not least when, as a result of over-exertion, Wagner developed a fever, and over-excitement caused a recurrence of erysipelas. He leapt to his own defence: 'I'll not hear a word against my cold-water cure, that is something quite different, and I now have every confidence that it will be a complete success'.<sup>30</sup> It is, however, scarcely surprising that Minna should have protested at the drastic treatment to which Wagner subjected himself at a time when his health was not of the best:

My daily routine is now as follows, 1st, half-past-five in the morning wet pack until 7 o'clock; then a cold bath and a walk. 8 o'clock breakfast: dry bread and milk or water. 2nd, immediately afterwards a first and then a second clyster; another short walk; then a cold compress on my abdomen. 3rd, around 12 o'clock: wet rub-down; short walk; fresh compress. Then lunch in my room with Karl

[Ritter], to prevent insubordination. Then an hour spent in idleness: brisk two-hour walk — alone. 4th, around 4 o'clock: another wet rub-down and a short walk. 5th, hip-bath for a quarter of an hour around 6 o'clock, followed by a walk to warm me up. Fresh compress. Around 7 o'clock dinner: dry bread and water. 6th, immediately followed by a first and then a second clyster; then a game of whist until after nine o'clock, after which another compress, and then around 10 o'clock we all retire to bed. — I am now bearing up quite well under this regimen: I may even intensify it.<sup>31</sup>

From a purely medical point of view, such treatment could scarcely promise success, and, in his *Annals*, Wagner was forced to admit: 'Drag out pitiful existence with unsuccessful cure'.<sup>32</sup> Such an approach was distinctly antediluvian: much the same sort of treatment would have been meted out by Hans Foltz, involving, as it did, drenching and soaking patients until they came out in a bathing rash, followed by water and yet more water administered from above and behind. Without implicit faith in the healing powers of water *per se*, such treatment must have been intolerable. But just such faith sustained Wagner, a faith which was founded in nothing but blind conviction and which can be seen as a protest against the march of progress. 'For me', he concluded in *Mein Leben*, 'this was something of a new religion', but his energetic advocacy of it long after his return from Albisbrunn began to bore his friends, who finally demanded that he study chemistry and medicine instead of regaling them with half-digested theories.<sup>33</sup> His devotional attitude to this 'new religion' ended abruptly, however, when the doctor in charge of a hydropathic clinic at Mornex, near Geneva, where he stayed in 1856, advised him to abandon such treatment, while offering him accommodation in a cottage in the clinic grounds, since 'vous n'êtes que nerveux' (you're only suffering from nerves). For the rest of his life Wagner preferred a change of climate to hydropathic cures. At the same time, however, his nine weeks in Albisbrunn, where 'the avoidance of any other kind of intellectual labour' soon resulted in growing strain and nervous irritation',<sup>34</sup> were not without important repercussions: his 'new religion' brought with it a crucial breakthrough for the *Ring* and hence for Wagner's festival ideal.

### Wagner's Festival Ideal

#### Heroic Operas

According to Wagner's own account, it was Jacob Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology* which, in 1843, introduced him to the subject-matter of the

*Ring*. In the conscious reappraisal of the past which constitutes *Mein Leben*, he considered his bathtime reading in Teplitz to have been a total 'rebirth'.<sup>35</sup> Only a few years later his enthusiasm for the past was rekindled by Droysen's translation of Aeschylus and by the former's *Didaskalien*,<sup>36</sup> which 'helped to bring the intoxicating vision of Attic tragedy so clearly before me that I could see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye as if actually being performed'.<sup>37</sup> At least as important as the *Oresteia*, however, was the concept of catharsis which Droysen, appealing to Aristotle's *Poetics*, described as the central pillar of the theatre of ancient Greece and glossed as the purging or purification of the protagonist, who represents the community of spectators moved by the hero's fate.<sup>38</sup>

Myth as a subject for opera, the action as a form of purification, and the performance as a quasi-religious festival are constitutive elements of the later *Ring*. They had still not crystallized out when, taking time off from his articles for Röckel's revolutionary *Volksblätter*, Wagner completed the earliest draft of *Siegfrieds Tod, Die Nibelungensage (Mythus)*, on 4 October 1848. But his thoughts kept turning away from myth and back to historical subjects. He toyed with the subject of Friedrich Barbarossa and, early in 1849, penned that curious essay *Die Wibelungen. Weltgeschichte aus der Sage* (The Wibelungs: World history from legend), with its etymological musings.

What Wagner was looking for was a character who could embody his revolutionary hopes for fundamental change. His thoughts turned initially to great figures from history: between 1848 and 1850 there were plans for works on the lives of Friedrich I, Jesus of Nazareth, Alexander the Great, and Achilles. But his reading of Hegel had made it clear that historical facts were not universally valid: history could never predicate the future.

Nevertheless, 'world history from legend' showed the way. By going back a stage further, into the prehistoric past, Wagner was able to bypass the historicity of the past and hold up a mirror to his own age. His Siegfried was the hero who — unlike some exotic Egyptian prince who, for that very reason, could elicit only astonishment — would be the potential progenitor of both rulers and the ruled among the composer's audience, shaming those who did not stand by their oaths and deeds in a similar spirit of self-sacrificial duty and opening the eyes of others to the failings of their perjurious colleagues.

And yet it was heroes rather than gods that peopled Wagner's prose draft for *Siegfrieds Tod*, noted down in October 1848, the month in which he had finished his outline of the Nibelung legend. Only in the scene where Siegfried assumes the shape of Gunther does a supernatural element enter the work. The draft was versified in November. The following month Wagner read it aloud to a circle

of friends, who failed to grasp the work's linguistic form, but even more important was the objection raised by Eduard Devrient, who pointed out that the plot's prehistory was constantly taken for granted rather than shown on stage. Wagner's response was to preface the poem with Siegfried's farewell to Brünnhilde, after which he added the Prelude for the Norns — the first mythic scene that he wrote.

Meanwhile, a mythic scene of a somewhat different order was unfolding in Dresden. In the elections held on 10 January 1849 the Radical Democrats had polled sixteen thousand votes, the Liberals six thousand six hundred, while the Conservatives had failed to take a single seat. If the legally elected members of Parliament (including several who, until then, had been living in exile or serving terms of imprisonment) had sat it out and sought, in that way, to affect the general mood, the king of Saxony would, sooner or later, have had to accept the new constitution, and a substantial improvement in political and economic conditions would inevitably have followed. But the Romantically inflated belief that the revolution would, of itself, bring about a new situation played into the hands of the king and his prime minister, who fanned the flames of unrest till insurrection broke out in the streets of Dresden in May 1849 and toppled the Saxon government. Revolution as myth triumphed over revolution as an almost tangible possibility, driving one of its keenest supporters, the court conductor, Richard Wagner, into self-exile for more than a decade.

He fled to Weimar, where Liszt attempted to obtain a commission for him to write an opera for Paris. But Paris, to Wagner, was like the Augean stables which revolution alone could cleanse, so the failure of his efforts was a source of self-congratulation. He drafted *Wieland der Schmied*, begun in Zurich in January 1850 and completed in Paris three months later. Chained to an anvil, his tendons severed, this Nordic Daedalus represents the alienated *Volk*. Finally Wieland forges a pair of wings for himself and flies away to a life of freedom, having first taken care to set his oppressors' court on fire. The motifs of magic, redemption, and fire are variants on the Nibelung theme, which Wagner had not lost sight of.

'I've already acquired some manuscript paper and a rastrum from Dresden: whether I can still compose, God alone can say', he wrote to Uhlig on 27 July 1850.<sup>39</sup> Liszt, he went on, had told him that he could reckon on a commission to write *Siegfrieds Tod* for the Court Theatre in Weimar, involving an advance which would, he thought, allow him to go on eking out his existence. But in making it clear to Liszt that he would 'never write *Siegfried* in a vacuum',<sup>40</sup> he had put his finger on one of three points which still stood between him and the completed *Ring*. It required the visit to Alsbisbrunn, in November 1851, to precipitate the decision 'to realize my original sketch for the *Nibelungen*

in its entirety, irrespective of whether any part of it would be actually performable in our theatres'.<sup>41</sup> By return of post he sent back the two-hundred-thaler advance which Weimar had paid him, defining 'freedom', at least for the present, as disregard for the need to have his works performed. But by August 1850 he had not yet reached this point, and so he broke off composition of *Siegfrieds Tod* while working on Scene 2.

### Myth

The work was still an heroic opera. No doubt it was up-to-date, and no doubt, too, it took account of the progressive tendencies of his latest operas, even breaking new ground in respect of its use of words (none of his friends who heard him declaim it could have known of the close correlation between phonological sound and musical pitch,<sup>42</sup> so their dismay is not altogether surprising), while Wagner's definitive break with the old division into arias and recitatives could be seen, at a glance, from the text. From a dramaturgical and structural point of view, however, the work is little more than a latterday *Lohengrin*, an attempt, in Wagner's words, 'to present a crucial turning-point in the whole vast action, and to present it as a drama suited to our present-day stage'.<sup>43</sup>

The 1848 scenario, *The Nibelung Legend (Myth)*, had already traced the *Ring* in outline, from the theft of the Rhinegold to the end of the gods, anticipating the form in which we know the work today. It was in Albisbrunn that Wagner made up his mind to 'realize' this 'original sketch . . . in its entirety'.<sup>44</sup>

He wrote to Liszt on 20 November 1851: 'According to my newly acquired [!] and innermost conviction, a work of art — and hence the basic drama — can make its rightful impression only if the poetic intent is fully presented to the senses in every one of its important moments; and I least of all can now afford to sin against this insight which I now recognize as true. In order to be perfectly understood, I must therefore communicate my entire myth, in its deepest and widest significance, with total artistic clarity; no part of it should have to be supplied by the audience's having to think about it or reflect on it.'<sup>45</sup> Thus the seed of disaster was sown in the form of Wagner's fear of leaving anything out, to say nothing of his love of repetition, which reflection and a surfeit of dramatic underlinings did nothing to discourage. The letter goes on:

I cannot contemplate a division of the constituent parts of this great whole without ruining my intention in advance. The whole complex of dramas must be staged at the same time in rapid succession . . . : the performance of my Nibelung dramas must take

place at a great festival which may perhaps be organized for the unique purpose of this performance. It must then be given on three successive days, with the introductory prelude being performed on the preceding evening. Once I have achieved such a performance under these conditions, the whole work may then be repeated on another occasion, and only after that may the individual dramas, which in themselves are intended as entirely independent pieces, be performed as people wish: but, whatever happens, these performances must be preceded by an impression of the complete production which I myself shall have prepared.<sup>46</sup>

Wagner was still in Albisbrunn when he wrote the earliest sketches for *Die Walküre* and *Der Raub des Rheingolds* (as he initially thought of calling it). Thus the Gordian knot was cut, allowing him to write the libretto of *Die Walküre* the following June and that of *Das Rheingold* between 15 September and 3 November 1852. The existing parts were then revised and a new ending added to *Siegfrieds Tod*, prior to the private printing of the poem in February 1853. Not until the autumn of that year did he begin composition of *Das Rheingold* under the impression, as he later claimed, of the sea at La Spezia.<sup>47</sup> A further twenty years were to pass before the full score of *Götterdämmerung* was completed in Bayreuth, on 21 November 1874.

### Festival

The third of the points which Wagner resolved when he took the decision in Albisbrunn to write the entire *Ring* without regard to financial support was that of a festival performance.

He had just received Karl Ritter's report on the first performance of *Lohengrin* in Weimar, a production which, under Liszt's direction, had been adequate musically but a failure in terms of its staging. It was under this impression that Wagner wrote to Kietz on 14 September 1850: 'But you know me well enough by now to realize that I no longer expect any results either from this or from similar efforts made on behalf of our cause in general or of me in particular. But since I am still alive, and since, with the best will in the world, I can live only in the *here and now*, I must needs do something that accords with my temperament.' There follows a speculative plan based on what he would do when his assistant's uncle died:

I am genuinely thinking of setting Siegfried [*Siegfrieds Tod*] to music, only I cannot reconcile myself with the idea of trusting to luck and of having the work performed by the very first theatre that comes along: on the contrary, I am toying with the boldest of

plans, which it will require no less a sum than 10,000 thalers to bring about. According to this plan of mine, I would have a theatre, made of planks, erected here on the spot [in Zurich], have the most suitable singers join me here, and arrange everything necessary for this one special occasion, so that I would be certain of an outstanding performance of the opera. I would then send out invitations far and wide to all who were interested in my works, ensure that the auditorium was decently filled, and give three performances — free, of course — one after the other in the space of a week, after which the theatre would then be demolished and the whole affair would be over and done with. Only something of this nature can still appeal to me. I shall receive the sum when Karl Ritter's uncle dies.<sup>48</sup>

This happened in November 1851. In the event, however, it was not Karl himself who inherited the estate but his mother who, as mentioned above, increased Wagner's annual allowance.

But by November 1851, as noted earlier, Wagner had made up his mind to expand the work to the four-part *Ring*. And so he wrote to Theodor Uhlig on the twelfth of the month to tell him of his plans to produce the cycle at a special festival:

With this new conception of mine I am moving *completely* out of touch with our present-day theatre and its audiences: I am breaking decisively and for ever with the formal present. . . . A *performance* is something I can conceive of only *after the Revolution*; only the Revolution can offer me the artists and listeners I need. The coming Revolution must necessarily put an end to this whole *theatrical business* of ours: they must all perish, and will certainly do so, it is inevitable. Out of the ruins I shall summon together what I need: I shall *then* find what I require. I shall then run up a theatre on the Rhine and send out invitations to a great dramatic festival: after a year's preparations I shall then perform my entire work within the space of *four days*: with it I shall then make clear to the men of the Revolution the *meaning* of that Revolution, in its noblest sense. *This audience* will understand me: present-day audiences cannot.<sup>49</sup>

In referring to the revolution, Wagner was thinking quite concretely of the elections due to take place in the spring of 1852. During the early part of 1850 he had gone to Paris to follow up plans for *Wieland der Schmied* (plans, it must be said, for which he had little enthusiasm) and had attended a vast electoral meeting, which had inspired him with revolutionary hopes for the 1852 elections. It appears that what he was planning was nothing less than a message of greeting addressed to the French *avant garde* by those still loyal to the revolution — and

planning to do so, moreover, with a work that was based on Germanic mythology. The coup d'état organized by Louis-Napoléon (later Napoléon III) on 2 December 1851 put an end to all these prospects, and Wagner and Uhlig decided to go on dating their letters 'December 1851' until such time as new elections were called in France. He had, however, already resolved to write the four-part *Ring*, and with it had come his decision to mount his own production, a decision taken during his cold-water cure in Albsbrunn near Zurich.

### The Festival Hill as a Magic Mountain

The festival was to take place 'on the Rhine', and so indeed it did, at least in a figurative sense. In German-speaking countries, the Rhine is the archetypal river, far more so than the Danube, for instance, from where Wagner had transferred certain episodes from his literary sources, relocating them in Germany. And in flowing water, guilt not only could but *had* to be washed away, in keeping with the heathen tradition cited at the outset of this chapter. Hagen himself, at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, commits a kind of ritual suicide, which traditionally had to take place in flowing water. The whole of the story of the *Ring* aims at this washing away of guilt.

The idea that is central not only to Prießnitz's cold-water cure but also to Wagner's revolutionary theories<sup>50</sup> is that of purification. Indeed, I would even go so far as to claim that it was in Albsbrunn that he realized that a festival performance of the four-part *Ring des Nibelungen* could have the same socio-cathartic effect as his cold-water cure had had, and that it could do so, moreover, by means of an art embedded in Nature.

The decisive step that was taken in Albsbrunn was from an heroic opera (in one or two parts but promised, at all events, to Weimar) to the representation of myth with its totally different requirements. This step, moreover, brought with it a sense of liberation for the whole of Wagner's later oeuvre. If the early parts of the *Ring* had been tentative in their compositional approach, he was now free to write both *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger* in his new-found style; and after the *Ring* came *Parsifal*. That this latter work, with its Sacred Bath and Spa March (to quote Wagner's own description of the March to the Holy Grail in conversation with Cosima on 27 December 1877), is very much a dramatisation of Vincenz Prießnitz's principles is manifestly plain, albeit irrelevant to the present discussion.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, we need to make a minor adjustment to the image of Archimedes which, as mentioned above, Wagner used to describe his visits to the watering-places of Teplitz and Marienbad during the 1840s: Archimedes-Wagner did not climb into his bathtub in

Albisbrunn only to discover his principle by chance; rather, he clambered into it because he hoped to find the principle of the *Ring* already there. In support of my hypothesis that water was of fundamental import for the work, I may cite the fact that, according to the original conception of *Siegfrieds Tod*, Siegfried's Rhine Journey would have been the overture; the link between the beginning and the end which was later forged by the Rhinemaidens' vocalization in the opening scene of *Das Rheingold* was not, therefore, something new, since it merely restored what was there from the outset.

Hagen's ritual suicide is emblematic of this inner connection: at all events, it is for him alone, and for that other suicide, Brünnhilde, that the Rhine overflows its banks. According to the stage directions for this final scene:

Hagen who, since the incident with the ring [when the dead Siegfried's arm had been raised in a threatening gesture and Brünnhilde had entered to slip the ring from his hand], has been watching Brünnhilde with increasing concern, is seized with extreme alarm at the sight of the Rhinemaidens. He hastily throws aside his spear, shield, and helmet and plunges into the floodwaters like a man possessed . . . Woglinde and Wellgunde twine their arms around his neck and, swimming away, draw him with them into the depths. Floßhilde leads the way as they swim towards the back of the stage, holding the regained ring aloft in a gesture of jubilation.<sup>52</sup>

The ring which Alberich had earlier cursed is purified at last and restored to the children of Nature. The world of the gods goes up in flames, taking with it the symbol of empty power, while the human survivors, children of Nature once more, refuse to be cowed by the sight, but stand, undismayed by the rising flood-tide and watching, 'deeply stirred'<sup>53</sup> (in other words, in a mood of religious awe), as the glow from the fire grows in the sky. Thus a fire cure is reserved for the gods, a water cure for their mortal counterparts. But such a cure offers no prescription for the new beginning which has now become so necessary if the human race is to rise again from the ashes.

This inner connection, already contained, in part, in the basic idea behind *The Nibelung Legend (Myth)* and partly (we may suppose) thought out in advance in a series of vivid images, may well have attracted Wagner to Prießnitz's theories, so that, at least as far as the *Ring* is concerned, he hit on the notion of taking the waters only as an afterthought. If cold-water cures proved crucial, it was partly in terms of the type of decision he took and partly because they persuaded him of the need to hold a festival, a festival born of the spirit of hydrotherapy.

But the first decision has to be taken by members of the public. As with a cold-water cure, they must leave the big city behind them, so that they feel not only a sense of inner distance from the city but, by extension, an inner closeness to the impending performance. If Wagner's initial plan was to stage the *Ring* on the banks of the Rhine, it was certainly not Cologne that he had in mind. When Ludwig ordered Gottfried Semper to design a stone-built theatre along the lines of a temple, Wagner did what he could to undermine the project and finally won the day.

Wagner's decision to turn his back on the city is bound up, of course, with the loathing he felt for the conditions which have always existed in theatres in every major town and city. Above all, however, the model performances he planned were a protest against the custom of hurrying off to the theatre after a tiring day at the office, in search of mere entertainment, while mind and body were still elsewhere. Wagner demanded exclusivity for his work as an artist, taking up arms against the tradition of underrating the type of art which he himself was promulgating and of using it for social, non-artistic ends. Even the emperor would have to come to him in order to see the *Ring* — as, indeed, he did in 1876. This readiness to travel to Bayreuth represents an important breakthrough in art's struggle to gain acceptance not only for its beauty of form but, more especially, for the message it implies.

A central point in Wagner's festival concept was that Nature herself should be pressed into serving the cause of art. As far as I am aware, the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth is the only theatre of any size that was consciously planned without a foyer. The public is therefore obliged, not least by the length of the intervals, to promenade around the grounds, an idea modelled, in part, on the frequent walks which Wagner would undertake in the course of his daily routine while taking the waters in Albisbrunn. Their spiritual basis, however, stems from the passage by Justinus Kerner, cited above, where he speaks of the 'silent simple greatness of Nature in this place of healing'.<sup>54</sup> The Festspielhaus is thus drawn as far as possible into its natural setting.

'Get rid of the ornaments', Wagner wrote on an early plan of the theatre, demanding instead the simplest possible type of building which would give the impression of being provisional. It was to be a building in which the lighting and stage technology would be as perfect as possible, so that, quite apart from the unplanned excellence of the acoustics and the intended high standards on stage and in the pit, the audience would be held in thrall as though by some magic spell. Wagner productions make their mark through the very intensity of the experience.

This experience is now conditioned in various ways, an essential part of the process — which Wagner himself both preached and practised — being the way that the visitor's day is strictly divided up. It was never necessary to lay down rules of conduct, since these emerged of their own accord: shopping expeditions or visits to casinos were out of the question in Bayreuth — anyone who did not stay at home and study the vocal score or at least read some of the secondary literature on the subject (which even then was already voluminous) would go for a walk. After lunch (the search for something to eat, which, in 1876, seems, for Tchaikovsky at least, to have been more memorable than the music itself, appears to have borne unpredictable fruit), the early start and effort of sitting still and concentrating for long periods on seats which, at that time, were rather more comfortable — not least because of their sudorific properties, even if their occupants were forced to wear unduly formal dress — suggested a siesta. The walk up the hill to the Festspielhaus was a chance to stretch one's legs, and, after sitting for at least an hour — two in the case of the regrettably protracted opening act of *Götterdämmerung* — the visitor was happy to flee the airless and overheated auditorium in search of a little fresh air and exercise; and the same was true of the second interval, when it was also possible to have a bite to eat. And after the evening's performance was over, Bayreuth's brewers (at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were no fewer than two hundred brewers in a town of ten thousand inhabitants) offered the ideal nightcap. This strict division of the day's activities had two important consequences: concentration on the performance and a palpably healthy way of life.

During my years on Bayreuth's Green Hill, what impressed me most of all was a charming couple from France who had been coming to the festival for almost half a century. It was they who first made me think of writing this essay when they told me they needed to come to Bayreuth for reasons of health. Although the time they spent there was certainly tiring, filled as it was with intense experiences, each of which they savoured to the full, they always returned to France refreshed and fortified for the rest of the year. Those who mock the festival are, therefore, probably wrong: for, although a visit to Bayreuth is unlikely to lead to redemption, any more than Wagner's cold-water cure in Albisbrunn could restore his ruined health, it helps the visitor to stand aside from everyday life through the help of a conscious awareness of art and the feeling that he or she is close to Nature. From the point of view of medical history, Wagner's 'mystic abyss'<sup>55</sup> turns out to be a fountain of youth, but, unlike its models, it works, keeping its visitors healthy and itself eternally young.

## Chapter 9

# Wagner on Record: Re-evaluating Singing in the Early Years

David Breckbill

The performance history of every musical repertory is subject to high and low points if the works it encompasses remain continuously before the public for an extended period, and Wagner's operas are no exception. For more than a century they have been performed conscientiously and haphazardly, in note-complete renditions and cut by as much as a third, in concert and in excerpts. Most of all, they have been performed very frequently. Periodizing the history of Wagner performance is thus less a statistical exercise than an evaluation of the appropriateness of the numerous styles through which Wagner's works have been encountered by audiences over the decades. Historians have used evidence in a variety of ways to buttress arguments that one era or another was notable. Ernest Newman (writing in the 1940s) concluded that 'the 1876 performances [of the *Ring* at Bayreuth] were equal at their least good to the average good of today, and, at their best, better than the present-day best',<sup>1</sup> and that the Bayreuth *Parsifal* 'was better sung and acted in 1882 than it is as a whole today'.<sup>2</sup> One can recognize in Newman's gratuitous and methodologically naive comparisons a desire to believe that performances supervised by a genius of Wagner's magnitude must have been better than those to which he (Newman) was accustomed — a strain of wistful hero worship which many would endorse. On the other hand, I recently heard a person involved in a long-established *Ring* festival assert that the 1980s and 1990s constitute a 'Golden Age' of *Ring* performance. Underlying this sentiment is not only a parochial and self-aggrandizing belief that what one knows is best, but also the tendency to believe that as technical standards rise, so do general performance standards. Since in at least cosmetic respects technique in general has never been more impressive than it is today, it might seem logical to conclude that ours is indeed a Golden Age.

On the other hand, a growing minority opinion holds that Wagner