WAGNER – HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

Part One by Terence Watson

"Winckelmann consciously constructed a new style of German. His first writings show an educational and reforming purpose, expressed through a new use of language: it clarified in order to be interpretative, whereas previously it had been largely rhetorical"

David Irwin Ed. 1972
Winckelmann Writings on Art

I'm writing this reminiscence of a recent trip, the main purpose of which was to share in the celebrations of Anton Bruckner's 200th anniversary in Linz, after returning from Simone Young's and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's continuing triumphant presentations of The Ring Cycle, this time *Die Walküre*, with a cast of impressive singers. Since most of the Wagner Society in NSW's members were present on Sunday 17 November (judging by the people I recognised in the almost packed hall), I need not say more about the performance than that it was a sensationally exciting and musically rewarding experience and richly deserved the standing ovation.

Apropos my topic, it proved again that Wagner is "Here," in Oz from Bendigo to Brisbane in 2023, from Perth (WASO's 2023 Richard Wagner *Die Walküre*: Act I) to Melbourne (MSO's 2024 *Tristan und Isolde* Prelude and *Liebestod*), and of course Simone Young and the SSO's magnificent 2023 concert performance of *Das Rheingold*, and *Siegfried* already announced in their 2025 program.

On the way to Linz, I spent a week in London attending plays and musicals, as well as revisiting some of my favourite places. The Wagner connection appeared in the British Museum, which I had visited primarily for the ancient Greek and Roman (and, which was new to me) the Etruscan exhibitions. Ancient Greek exhibits always awaken memories for me of the Graecophile Wagner, since, from his childhood, during which he had to learn ancient Greek (and Latin) and Greek literatures, through his adolescence, when the powerful element of Panhellenism was still surging through German culture. He was, though, generally dismissive of the significance of ancient Rome, which empire he considered too militaristic and in artistic. His fascination with ancient Greece was further cultivated by his Uncle Adolph, himself an adept translator from ancient Greek. During his time in Dresden, he also visited, along with all the famous names of the period in German culture, history, etc, the wonderful collection of ancient Greek sculptures (mostly plaster, but some marble, copies) in the *Skulpturensammlung* housed in the *Semperbau am Zwinger*.

Tristan Tiles: 13th century; Lead-glazed earthenware floor tile with inlaid design; (Photo: Andreas Praefcke)

This captivation of the German cultural imagination can largely be traced to Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) and his 1764 *History of Ancient Art*. His 1755, based on his own knowledge of Greek literature and his new research materials, *Thoughts on the imitation of Greek works in Painting and sculpture*, impressed most readers in Germany (and France and England when it was translated) with its content and style. His fame made it inevitable that one of his dicta from the book became a standard benchmark for cultural aspiration in German states: "[t]he one way for us to become great, perhaps inimitable, is by imitating the ancients." David Irwin notes that Winckelmann deliberately cultivated a clear and accessible writing style in part to ensure his views were understood and influential: "Winckelmann consciously constructed a new style of German. His first writings show an educational and reforming purpose, expressed through a new use of language: it clarified in order to be interpretative, whereas previously it had been largely rhetorical" [David Irwin Ed. 1972 *Winckelmann Writings on Art*]. We could compare Winckelmann's commitment to informed, clear, and considered writing with Wagner's generally rushed, often unclear, opinionated, and tortuous language. Winckelmann's work remained influential in German long enough for Wagner to have read his works, and discussed him with Uncle Adolph and friends, and apparently to own his collected works ["Wagner appears to have possessed his *Collected Works* (published in 12 vols, between 1825 and 1829)" [*Cosima Wagner Diaries* 1977 Trans. Geoffrey Skelton, Vol. 1, page 1017, note 10 February 1869]. Yet another unexplored influence on Wagner by a distinguished predecessor, whose influence he does not acknowledge.

After musing on the links between ancient Greece and Wagner's various responses to its culture, and the imitation of its literature and art in his time, I wandered into the European exhibition to refresh some university memories of mediaeval history, and was rewarded with an unexpected Wagner connection: 13th century Tristram Tiles (left):

King Marke on his throne. 2. Tristan playing triangular harp before the sick King Marke. 3. Tristan Embraces King Marke (no, Marke is not poking his tongue out!). 4. Cornish barons lamenting that the King of Ireland will take their sons as tribute.

Apparently, they were excavated from Chertsey Abbey!! However, they might have been intended for one of King Henry III's palaces. Isolde does not appear in these, although some websites show tiles with Iseult and Tristram together.

"Careful examination of the Tristan tiles from Chertsey revealed that the scenes adhere closely to the twelfth-century Tristan romance as told by the troubadour poet, Thomas of Britain. Thomas's version of Tristan's tale focuses on Tristan's adventures and his demonstration of courtly virtues rather than the hero's affair with Mark's wife, Iseult (Isolde). The scene of Tristan and King Mark's embrace takes place as Tristan departs to slay the Irish knight Morhaut …. "[https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=32225].

How differently do modern productions of the artwork present the figures in this story to us! A production with costumes and settings in the style of the tiles would seem quaintly anachronistic to us now.

From London, I travelled to Munich. My only theatre experience there was a short opera by Carl Orff, *Der Mond*, of which I knew nothing, except that it was to be performed in the Cuvilliés Theatre, a wonderfully over the top Baroque theatre. Fortunately for me, it was a modern, not baroque, opera. It turns out to be based on a tale collected by the Brothers Grimm. Orff seems to have little regard for Wagner, despite hearing his first opera in 1909—Wagner's *The flying Dutchman*. Orff did, though, formulate a concept of *elementare Musik*, which appears to build on Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and shares similar building blocks: tone, dance, poetry, image, design, and theatrical gesture, or movement. The Grimm Brothers being another connection with Wagner, I think, since their tales about Sleeping Beauty and the Fool Who Knew No Fear were intertwined into The Ring Cycle.

Der Mond features four brothers who leave their land with no moon and discover a land with a moon, and decide to steal it. When they return home with it, they each decide they wanted their quarter for themselves. They end up dead, but St Peter takes pity on them and returns them to life on the condition that they put the moon back together for a portion of a month. A nice didactic story for children. Orff produced some lovely, relatively straightforward, music for it (not that I want to rush out and buy a copy!). The set was beautiful. A kind of Indonesian cutout forest from their Shadow theatre style, but in 3D, and on a revolving set. The set was white, but often bathed in coloured light to indicate action (e.g., when the brothers fight) or mood. The production featured a young cast and orchestra, with a young female conductor who kept the ensemble together very precisely. I gather that it was produced in coordination with the local arts and music university. The silliness of the story gave the director many chances to have the characters perform very physically—dancing, acrobatics, chasing each other, even doing a vaudeville routine with their four hats. All the costumes were grey, producing a very monochrome aesthetic, even with the odd bursts of coloured lights. From my front row seat, I enjoyed the verve of the performers, some of whom had impressive voices, and, I hope, will go on to a decent career.

"The painted wood carvings and other tier fittings of the Cuvilliés Theatre had been removed to safety in 1943 and they are all that survive of the original theatre. In 1956 they were presented to the Bavarian Administration of State-owned Palaces, Gardens and Lakes, which restored them over the next two years and reassembled them in a new building near the Apothecary Courtyard in the Residence. The Cuvilliés Theatre – also known as the Old Residence Theatre, to distinguish it from the new, post-war building…." [https://www.residenz-muenchen.de/englisch/cuv/index.htm] As far as I can tell, there is no Wagner connection to this theatre, though almost next door, at the State Theatre, *Tristan*, *Meistersinger*, *Rheingold*, *Walküre*, were premiered at King Ludwig II's orders. Much later, *Die Feen* was premiered on 29 June 1888.

It is, though, easy to wander around central Munich and find traces of Wagner. After Ludwig called him to Munich in May 1864, he lived in the Villa Pellet, on the eastern shore of Lake Starnberg, rented for him by Ludwig. Ludwig then made a larger villa at 21 Briennerstrasse available to Wagner

"How differently do modern productions of the artwork present the figures in this story to us! A production with costumes and settings in the style of the tiles would seem quaintly anachronistic to us now."

Cuvilliés Theatre—III built in 1751-55 by Elector Maximilian Joseph as his "new opera house." Originally reserved exclusively for members of court, the theatre is close to the Residence. Many lavish opera productions were mounted here, including the first performances of Mozart's *Idomeneo*, in 1781. The building housing the theatre was destroyed on 18 March 1944.

"It is easy to imagine Wagner in the heyday of his relationship with Ludwig being escorted through the magnificent Residenz to a private audience with the king, as well as he and Cosima walking through the old city, the Residenz gardens, eating at fashionable restaurants, and attending the theatres in the city, especially the *National Theatre* for rehearsals and premieres of his works."

and his "amanuensis" and "housekeeper" Cosima von Bülow. Wagner spent many months cultivating his friendship with the young king, and trying to manipulate his financial and artistic policies in his own favour, while trying to keep secret from the king his relationship with the wife of the talented conductor and composer. This behaviour quickly earned him the antipathy of many of the court officials who were already trying to curb the young king's extravagances, and resented the time and attention paid to the upstart revolutionary, whose exile from Saxony and other states was only fully lifted in 1862. Some of the press were also antagonistic for the same reasons, as well as for Wagner's supposed secret Roman Catholicism, as "evidenced" in Tannhäuser, and then his deceitful behaviour to the king about Cosima. In December 1865, they were forced to leave for Switzerland, and another of Wagner's many houses, Triebschen, again paid for by Ludwig.

It is easy to imagine Wagner in the heyday of his relationship with Ludwig being escorted through the magnificent Residenz to a private audience with the king, as well as he and Cosima walking through the old city, the Residenz gardens, eating at fashionable restaurants, and attending the theatres in the city, especially the *National Theatre* for rehearsals and premieres of his works. The premiere of Tristan und Isolde, on 10 June 1865, was, ironically, conducted by Hans von Bülow.

It is similarly easy to imagine Wagner in Vienna. He visited a number of times. The first time was to accompany one of his adolescent heroes: "I was especially captivated by Count Vincenz Tyskiewitsch, a man of exceptionally powerful physique and manly features, who impressed me by a combination of noble bearing and calm self-assurance I had not encountered before. To see a man of such regal quality…made me realize at once my foolishness at having worshipped the ludicrously decked-out little rowdies from our student world" (the *Burschenschafter*) [ML 59]. When Tyskiewitsch came to leave Leipzig in summer 1832 to seek asylum in Galicia because of his role in the 26 May 1831 Ostrołęka uprising by Poles against their Russian overlords, Wagner decided to accompany him on part of his journey, and then to continue to Vienna. And then, it seems, forgot entirely about this special friend.

Wagner remained in Vienna for some 6 weeks. After recovering from sunburn acquired during the summer walk, he "could again devote [him]self to worldly pleasures," though he does not tell us whether or not there were other "pleasures" than cultural. He reports that he had an inspiring or productive stay in Vienna—"I went to the theatre, listened to [Johann, the elder] Strauss, made excursions and generally indulged myself.... The impressions of musical and theatrical life were certainly very stimulating, and Vienna remained for a long time my idea of creativity rooted in the originality of the people" [ML 62].

Performances of his artworks appeared in the 1850s: 28 August 1857—Tannhäuser by the *Theater in der Josefstadt*, the third opera company in Vienna at their summer theatre the *Thaliatheater* outside the city and revived during the Theatre's winter season in the city; 19 August 1858, *Lohengrin* opened the new season at the Imperial Opera's *Kärntner-Tor* theatre; at the same theatre - *Tannhäuser,* on 19 November 1859; 9 December 1860, *The Flying Dutchman*. It seemed then, that it was likely to be the place for the premiere of his latest work *Tristan und Isolde*.

End of Part 1 Part 2 will be in the March 2025 issue