

Guarding the Legacy: Cosima in Bayreuth

A talk by Robert Gay for WSNSW 2 February 2025

■ DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Franz Liszt (b.1811) & Marie d'Agoult (b.1805)

3 CHILDREN: **Blandine**, b.1835 (d.1862) – **Cosima**, b. 24/12/1837 – **Daniel**, b.1839 (d.1859)

Cosima Liszt (19) & Hans von Bülow (27) marry in 1857

2 CHILDREN: **Daniela**, b.1860 – **Blandine**, b.1863

Hans von **Bülow** (b.1830) = Liszt's star piano pupil

Hans & Cosima stay with the **Wagners** at the 'Asyl' in **Zurich** while on their honeymoon – Sept 1857

Cosima von Bülow & Richard Wagner (b.1813)

3 CHILDREN: **Isolde**, b. April 1865 – **Eva**, b. Feb 1867 – **Siegfried**, b. June 1869

Wagner (51) is summoned to **Munich** by **King Ludwig II of Bavaria** (18) – April 1864

Richard & Cosima first cohabit at **Lake Starnberg** in June 1864

Tristan und Isolde premieres in **Munich** on 10 June 1865 – conducted by **Hans von Bülow!**

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg premieres in **Munich** on 21 June 1868 – also conducted by **Bülow**

Cosima (32) & Richard (57) finally marry in **Lucerne** in August 1870

Der Ring des Nibelungen premieres at **Bayreuth** under **Hans Richter** (33) – August 1876

= FIRST BAYREUTH FESTIVAL – 3 cycles in the new **Festspielhaus**

Parsifal premieres at **Bayreuth** under **Hermann Levi** (43) – July/August 1882 – 16 perfs!

Production 'directed' by **RW** = SECOND BAYREUTH FESTIVAL

Wagner dies in Venice on 13 February 1883, aged 69, leaving NO will – **Cosima is 45**

[Daniela 22 – Blandine 19] [Isolde 17 – Eva 16 – Siegfried 13]

■ COSIMA STEPS FORWARD

1883 THIRD FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [12 perfs, cond. **Hermann Levi** (44)] – staging re-rehearsed by **CW**

1884 FOURTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [10 perfs] – **Levi**

1885 NO FESTIVAL

1886 FIFTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [9 perfs] & *Tristan und Isolde* [8 perfs, cond. **Felix Mottl** (30)]

• **Cosima's father, Franz Liszt**, dies in **Bayreuth** on 31 July, aged 74, during the Festival

1887 NO FESTIVAL 1888 SIXTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [9] & *Meistersinger* [8 perfs, c. **Richter** (45)]

1889 SEVENTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [9] – *Tristan* [4] – *Meistersinger* [5]

1890 NO FESTIVAL

1891 EIGHTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [10] – *Tristan* [3] – *Tannhäuser* [7 perfs]

Pauline de Ahna (28) as **Elisabeth**, coached by **Richard Strauss** (27) – the couple marry in 1894

1892 NINTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [8] – *Tristan* [4] – *Meistersinger* [4] – *Tannhäuser* [4]

1893 NO BAYREUTH FESTIVAL

1894 TENTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [9] – *Tannhäuser* [5 perfs, cond. **Strauss** (30)] – *Lohengrin* [6]

1895 NO BAYREUTH FESTIVAL

1896 ELEVENTH FESTIVAL *Der Ring des Nibelungen* [5 cycles] = 20th anniversary

3 conductors: **Richter** (53), **Mottl** (40) & **Siegfried Wagner** (27)

■ DISINHERITING THE GIRLS

Cosima's four girls were all born while she was still married to Hans von Bülow which made Bülow – in the eyes of the law – the legal father of all four, even Isolde & Eva. Wagner claimed to be the father only of Siegfried, who was legitimised by his parents' marriage in 1870. In March 1883, Bülow signed – at Cosima's urgent insistence – a declaration to the effect that he was not the father of Siegfried, thus making Siegfried RW's only second-generation heir.

■ DYING ALONE IN BAYREUTH

Liszt (b.1811) & Wagner (b.1813) had been close friends from the time of the Dresden Revolt in 1849. Wagner had always been hugely impressed by Liszt's pianistic skills, and he had also quietly absorbed many of Liszt's radical compositional ideas. With his peripatetic lifestyle, Liszt slowly developed a dread of dying in Bayreuth, fearing – rightly as it turned out – that his death there would go almost unnoticed. Liszt had visited the Wagners in Venice just prior to Wagner's death – composing *La lugubre gondola*. He was in Bayreuth in July 1886, at Cosima's request, but was not invited to stay at Wahnfried.

■ LEVI REQUESTS PERMISSION TO LEAVE

Hermann Levi (52) – conductor of the premiere of *Parsifal*, and most of the performances since then – struggled through the 1891 Festival feeling constantly undervalued and insulted. At the end of the Festival, he wrote to Cosima (54) asking to be released from his contract. She coaxed him back, and he conducted his last *Parsifal* performances at the 1892 & 1894 Festivals. Levi died in Munich in 1900, aged 60.

■ FALLING OUT WITH RICHARD STRAUSS

At first, Cosima was very taken with the talented young conductor Richard Strauss (b.1864). Tailor-made for Bayreuth, she thought. She even imagined that he might be a good match for her Eva (b.1867) but Richard, already deeply in love with his Pauline (b.1863), was not interested. Strauss also composed dazzling orchestral 'tone-poems', which eclipsed Siegfried's comparatively minor efforts. But when Strauss had the audacity to compose a piece directly inspired by a famous prose-poem written by 'excommunicated' (by the Wagners) Friedrich Nietzsche – *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896) – it was too much, and Strauss was not invited back to Bayreuth.

■ THE METROPOLITAN STEPS OUT OF LINE

Early in 1903, Heinrich Conried (54), managing director of New York's Metropolitan Opera, announced his intention to stage *Parsifal*, thus violating Cosima's strict 'embargo' on performances anywhere other than at Bayreuth. Using singers from the Bayreuth 'stable' – including Anton van Rooy (33) as Amfortas – the production opened on 24 December (Cosima's 66th birthday). – 1903 also marked the 90th anniversary of Wagner's birth and the 20th of his death –

■ COSIMA RETIRES UPSTAIRS

In December 1906, Cosima (69) experienced a serious health crisis involving heart spasms. Siegfried (37) stepped in, even though 1907 had already been designated a Festival 'rest year'.
1908 EIGHTEENTH FESTIVAL *Parsifal* [7] – *Ring* [2 cycles, Richter] – *Lohengrin* [5 perfs, SW]

■ SIEGFRIED MAKES AN UNEXPECTED MOVE

On 22 September 1915, Siegfried (46) married Winifred Williams (18).
4 CHILDREN: Wieland b.1917 – Friedelind b.1918 – Wolfgang b.1919 – Verena b.1920

■ A DOUBLE EXIT

Cosima Wagner died on 1 April 1930, aged 92
Siegfried ('Fidi') Wagner died on 4 August 1930, aged 61