



All Wagner, All the Time

Bayreuth offers something almost vanished from our modern existence: the chance for total immersion in a single artistic medium

By Andrew Moravcsik
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Aug. 26 issue — My hotel room has two televisions playing Wagner opera 24 hours a day. The bus across town weaves through streets named for Wagner's characters—Wotanstrasse, Tristanstrasse—all the while playing taped lectures on his musical motifs. The opera house on a green hill outside town stages nothing but Wagner's last 10 operas. There are no supertitles, since everyone knows the words—even if Wagner wrote them in faux archaic German.

TO A NON-WAGNERIAN, it sounds monotonous. But for opera buffs, the Richard Wagner Festival, held in Bayreuth, Germany, every August is the hottest ticket in the world. Each year nearly a half-million requests pour in for just one tenth as many seats, leaving the average spectator waiting 10 years to get in.

This to spend precious beach time in a sleepy, soggy little city in the woods of northern Bavaria. Even if there were sun, surf or sights, there would be little time to enjoy them, for the opera starts daily at 4 p.m. sharp. Bayreuth audiences sit, generally in formal dress, on rows of wooden seats without armrests or legroom, through operas that run as long as seven hours. Even the most elegant spectators bring cushions, debating discreetly whether they are better placed to dull the pain on the back or the bottom.

So why the excitement? One attraction is authenticity. Founded by Wagner himself and now run by his 82-year-old grandson Wolfgang, the festival has an ambience that has changed little in 125 years. Wagner also designed Bayreuth's opera house—an acoustic and dramatic marvel. It is small, half the size of New York's Met, and its curved rows, raked steeply upward like the communal amphitheatres of ancient Greece, afford everyone an excellent sightline. The orchestra is entirely hidden in a unique covered pit, so the hall goes truly dark and spectators can focus entirely on the stage. The dampened orchestral sound reaches the audience only indirectly, imparting a uniquely warm and mellow quality. Any Wagnerian worth his *Salz* wants, at least once, to experience that magical moment when the first note of "Das Rheingold"—a musical metaphor for the creation of the world—rises up mysteriously out of the darkness, as if from the depths of the building itself.

The isolated, spartan setting also contributes to the festival's appeal. Wagner deliberately created Bayreuth as a refuge from harried city life, and from the bejeweled 19th-century opera goers he disdained. Climbing the hill outside Bayreuth offers something almost vanished from our fragmented modern existence: the opportunity for total immersion in a single artistic medium. Hour-long intermissions are designed not just for sipping champagne, but for strolling, discussing and reading the text in the lovely grounds of the theater—and most patrons do just that. Such contemplation is invited by Wagner's complex and open-ended works, in which analysts have found, among other things, fascism and socialism, Christianity and paganism, environmentalism and humanism. Few aesthetic experiences match the focused intensity of Bayreuth, and few are so rewarding.

Yet beneath the surface, Bayreuth is in crisis. After World War II the composer's grandson Wieland Wagner renewed Bayreuth by throwing out the dragons, castles and swans his grandfather had placed onstage. In their place was empty space and abstract designs in semi-darkness. The deeper point was to free Bayreuth from the Nazi tint left by Hitler, who adored Wagnerian opera and often visited the house.

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Yet today Bayreuth seems to lack both a clear identity and consistent quality. This year's semi-traditional rendition of "Die Meistersinger" designed by Wolfgang—billed as the last ever by a Wagner grandchild—was cheered by the traditionalists who dominate Bayreuth audiences, but most critics insisted rightly that the tired production had little new to say about this ambivalently comic masterpiece. German theater director Jurgen Flimm's bold reinterpretation of the mythological "Ring" cycle as a feminist morality play elicited the opposite reaction. Perhaps unfairly, audiences rejected its radicalism and critics called it incoherent.

All this would be of little importance if musical standards remained high. Yet in recent years the festival has lost the services of Wagnerian superstars like Plácido Domingo and Waltraud Meier. Instead one hears younger, often untried singers who, despite their dramatic plausibility, lack either the vocal stamina or the interpretive maturity for Wagner's more demanding roles.

Does it matter? Those lucky enough to get a ticket still cheer and stomp at the end of performances. Yet a theater that demands so much of its listeners must make an equal effort in return. After visiting Bayreuth in 1891, Mark Twain famously quipped, "Wagner's music is better than it sounds." But few remember that he also confessed having "never seen anything so great and fine and real as the devotion" of its audiences. If the festival fails to retain its pre-eminence by truly being great, something irreplaceable will have been lost.

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