



An imaginary recreation of the scene at Tribschen when Wagner conducted the *Siegfried Idyll* outside the bedroom of the waking Cosima, seen here fully dressed with the infant Siegfried.

a birthday present for Cosima and first performed on Christmas Day 1870 (Cosima's birthday was actually the 24th, but she celebrated it on the 25th). The circumstances of the premiere were remarkable, to say the least. This is how they were recorded by Cosima herself:

When I woke up I heard a sound, it grew ever louder, I could no longer imagine myself in a dream, music was sounding, and what music! After it had died away, R. came in to me with the five children and put into my hands the score of his 'Symphonic Birthday Greeting.' I was in tears, but so, too, was the whole household; R. had set up his orchestra on the stairs and thus consecrated our Tribschen forever! *The Tribschen Idyll* – thus the work is called.⁷

The *Siegfried Idyll* was also a celebration of their son, Siegfried, whose birth the previous year had brought such joy to the couple. With the formal dissolution of Cosima's marriage to Bülow, there was now no barrier to their own matrimonial union, which took place in the Protestant church in Lucerne on 25 August 1870. On visiting Bayreuth the following year, they established that the sumptuous Baroque theatre of the Markgräflisches Opernhaus was too small to accommodate the *Ring*. There was nothing for it but to build a new theatre that would do justice to the mighty tetralogy.

23 A Home for the Gods: The Bayreuth Project

Hallowed by the German spirit that shouts to us across the centuries
Wagner on the Bayreuth Festspielhaus

The story of how Wagner created not only a four-day musico-dramatic work of art, demolishing all established conventions, but also a new kind of theatrical space in which to perform it is one that perfectly embodies the triumph of idealism. Over a period of nearly three decades Wagner conceived his project, persuaded, inspired and cajoled countless others to support him, and finally realized it at Bayreuth, establishing in the process an institution that has held its place at the forefront of international music festivals to the present day.

Two years after setting down his first outline of what was to become the *Ring* cycle (see Chapter 10: The Rise and Fall of Valhalla), Wagner – in a state of some excitement – began to tell his friends how he planned to present his great 'artwork of the future' to the world. A letter postmarked 14 September 1850 to an old friend from the Paris days, Ernst Benedikt Kietz, adumbrates the scheme:

According to this plan of mine, I would have a theatre erected here on the spot, made of planks, and have the most suitable singers join me here, and arrange everything necessary for this one special occasion, so that I could 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.¹

At this point Wagner and his more progressive friends were still hoping that the revolution might come and sweep away all the privileged corruption and superannuated conventions of the existing order. The utopian aspect of his project is even more evident in another letter a week later, to Theodor Uhlig:

After the third [performance] the theatre will be demolished and my score burned. To the people who enjoyed it I shall then say: 'Now go away and do it yourself!'²

As time went on, the somewhat drastic symbolism of adding the score of the *Ring* to Brünnhilde's funeral pyre was quietly forgotten, though

Interior of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus today, with its semi-upholstered seats, the pillars at the ends of rows that form a series of false proscenia, and the functional boxes (right).



the idealistic nature of the project remained. The following November, by which time the work had begun to take further shape, Wagner was still proposing to 'run up a theatre', now on the Rhine, 'and send out invitations to a great dramatic festival'.³ The element of provisionality is still evident, and the project is still essentially part of his revolutionary programme, but Wagner was obliged to abandon the notion that the world had to change before the work could be performed ('A performance is something I can conceive of only *after the Revolution*'⁴) in the light of that revolution's failure.

Just a few months later, Wagner was entertaining the possibility of establishing the festival in Zurich, where he was resident. Liszt supported him wholeheartedly, but the Swiss themselves were slow to open their wallets. Yet it was a setback that allowed him to return to his primary

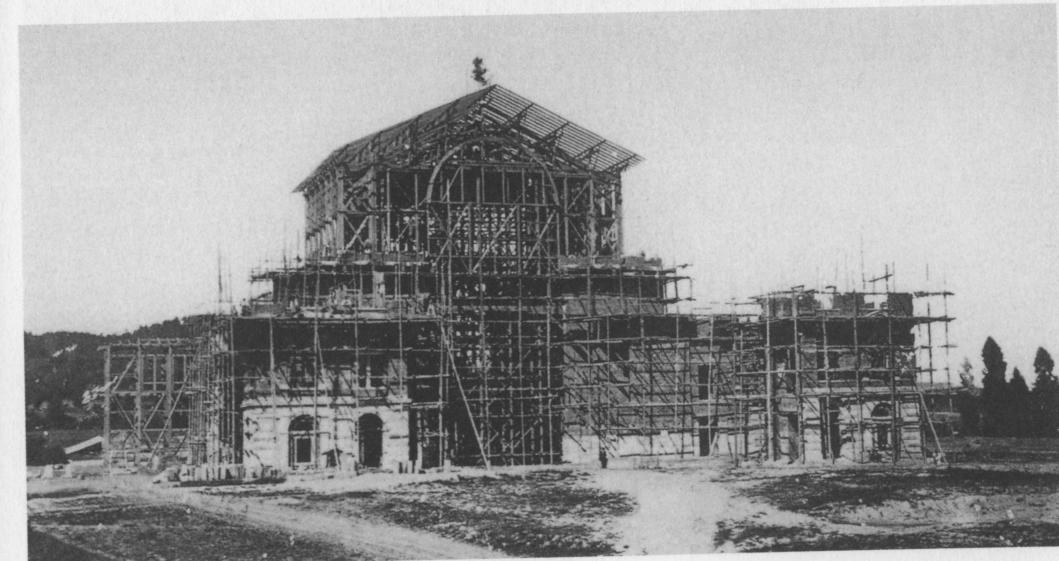
objective of producing a German work for the German people in his native land.

The collapse of the revolutionary ideal inevitably undermined the utopian thrust of the *Ring* project. Yet Wagner made progress with the cycle in the 1850s before setting it aside, temporarily, in 1857, when he paused to carry out the projects of *Tristan und Isolde* and, afterwards, *Die Meistersinger*. Though sustained work on it was not to be resumed until 1869, Wagner published the poem of the *Ring* in 1863, prefacing it with an exposition of the project. In this preface he posits three performances of the cycle in a provisional theatre constructed in 'one of the smaller towns of Germany',⁵ suitably appointed, where there would be no conflict with existing institutions. The theatre was to be made, possibly, out of wood and was to feature an amphitheatre-like auditorium and an invisible orchestra. Wagner's preface goes on to foreshadow one of the aspects of the Bayreuth experience that has retained its appeal to pilgrims:

This visit at the height of summer might rightly be regarded by each individual as a refreshing excursion in which his first duty would be to shake off the cares of his daily round. Instead of having, in the usual way after a heavy and worrying day at the counter, in the office or laboratory or wherever his work may be, to seek relaxation and distraction in the evening – a state of mind for which mere superficial entertainment according to taste must seem the best remedy – he will now relax during the daytime and, with the onset of dusk, gather his wits together as the signal sounds for the start of the festival performance. Thus, his faculties refreshed and ready to be stirred, the first mysterious note from the hidden orchestra will arouse in him that contemplative mood without which no true artistic impression is ever possible.⁶

Central to Wagner's concerns was his desire to see the work presented as a special occasion: this was not to be the kind of shallow entertainment

The Festspielhaus on 2 August 1873, the day of the roof-raising ceremony.



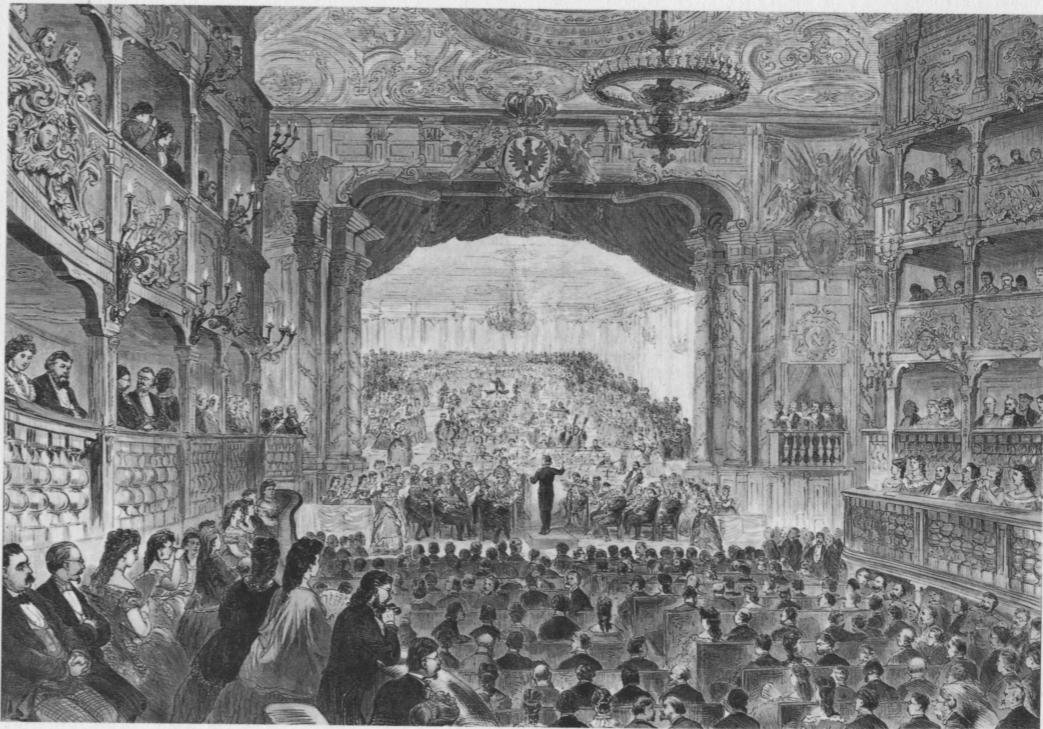
offered by conventional theatres, but a life-changing event. The features mentioned earlier in his preface – a wooden structure, an amphitheatre-like auditorium and an invisible orchestra – were incorporated into plans for a festival theatre in Munich, discussed with the architect Gottfried Semper shortly after the accession of Ludwig II in 1864 and marking the first stage of Ludwig's enthusiastic patronage of the composer. That scheme proved abortive, but the 'Festspielhaus', or festival house, that was eventually built in Bayreuth (the roof-raising ceremony took place on 2 August 1873) incorporated all the elements fundamental to Wagner's conception: the wooden construction (the outer walls are lath and plaster); the amphitheatre-like auditorium (both more Greek and more democratic than the traditional horseshoe design with balcony and side boxes); the sunken (and covered) orchestra pit; and a double proscenium (with six pairs of parallel proscenium pillars receding to a final pair at the rear of the stalls). The purpose of these tricks of perspective, and of concealing the orchestral musicians in the pit, was to create a unique theatrical space that would revolutionize the relationship between the spectator and what was onstage:

Between [the spectator] and the scenic picture nothing is clearly visible, only a sense of distance in suspension, achieved by the architectural arrangement of the two proscenia, a phenomenon which presents the removed picture with the unapproachability of a dreamlike vision, while the spectral-sounding music rising up from the 'mystic abyss', like the vapours wafting up from the sacred primeval womb of Gaia beneath the tripod of the Pythia, transports him into that inspired state of clairvoyance in which the scenic picture becomes the truest simulacrum of life itself.⁷

Siegfried Wagner
and members of
the orchestra in
the crowded
Festspielhaus pit.



224 A HOME FOR THE GODS



Pouring rain on
22 May 1872 – the day
the foundation stone
of the Festspielhaus
was laid – necessitated
the relocation of
the performance of
Beethoven's Ninth
Symphony, under
Wagner's baton, to
the Markgräflisches
Opernhaus.

Having decided that a purpose-built theatre was required in Bayreuth, Wagner and Cosima turned their attention to the raising of capital. A budget of 300,000 thalers was drawn up (the thaler being worth approximately 3 marks in the 1870s; Wagner's annual salary in Dresden had been 1,500 thalers) and a scheme hatched whereby 1,000 'patrons' certificates' would be issued at 300 thalers each. One acquaintance of Wagner, Heinrich Esser, totting up the various production expenses likely to be incurred, queried at an early stage whether 300,000 thalers would be anything like enough ('Now I'm not very good at arithmetic, but Wagner is no good at it at all,' he wrote to Wagner's publisher, Franz Schott, in December 1871). But even that amount proved formidably difficult to raise. At the instigation of Emil Heckel, a music dealer from Mannheim, a network of Wagner Societies was set up that would allow people of more modest means to contribute to the cause. While such a move was broadly in line with Wagner's idealistic intention to make his work available to the masses, there is, as Nicholas Vazsonyi points out in his timely study of the marketing of the Wagner 'brand', an inherent contradiction between Wagner's goal of 'a non-commercial venture where art was enjoyed for art's sake' and the 'relentless effort to attract attention and raise operating capital', which made the venture appear not so different from those of the commercial world he so despised.⁸ The popularity of these Wagner Societies was, and remains, unparalleled in the world of classical music, but it was not enough to secure the financial success of the enterprise. The generous subsidies Wagner had been receiving from Ludwig were no

225 A HOME FOR THE GODS

longer forthcoming, and in desperation he turned to the Reich, but his appeal was rejected before it even reached the Kaiser. But then Ludwig, in his self-appointed role as Parsifal, once again rode to the rescue:

No, no and again no! It must not end like this; help must be given! Our plans must not founder! Parcival knows his mission and will do everything that lies in his power.⁹

Ludwig chipped in with a loan of 100,000 thalers, enough to make the festival a reality, though of course the repayment of such a loan – as was the case with the patrons' certificates – necessitated the selling of admission tickets. It was a sad but unavoidable betrayal of the revolutionary idealism of the 1850s. This was not a time for ingratitude, however, especially since Ludwig made a further sum available for the completion of the villa next to the gardens of the 18th-century palace. The Wagners moved in on 28 April 1874 and christened their new home 'Wahnfried': 'peace from illusion'.

The first festival, announced for 1873, had to be deferred to 1875, then for a further year. In the meantime Wagner and Cosima set about recruiting the cast. 'Actors who were also singers' was his original desideratum, placing more emphasis on the drama than on the purely musical element of his work. Ultimately, however, he settled for the best voices he could get, developing their potential as singer-actors over the course of extended rehearsals.

Wahnfried today. Note the bust of Ludwig II, by Kaspar von Zumbusch, and the sgraffito by Robert Krausse representing aspects of the Wagnerian music drama.



226 A HOME FOR THE GODS



Josef Hoffmann, the set designer for the *Ring*, depicted satirically with palette and paintbrush as his shield and spear. Caricature from *Der Floh*, 18 March 1877.

Determined not to leave the creation of the stage scenery to 'routine theatrical scene painters', Wagner approached the artist Josef Hoffmann, a painter of historical subjects, who had only limited experience of theatrical work but had already made something of a reputation for himself. Hoffmann's sets for a *Zauberflöte* at the Vienna State Opera were acclaimed for their impeccably researched representation of ancient Egypt, while his horripilant Wolf Glen's Scene for *Der Freischütz* was the talk of Vienna. He undertook the commission for the *Ring* and produced a set of sketches that were widely admired. There were two problems, however. The first was that Hoffmann's precise, architectural treatment of interiors such as those of Hunding's hut or the Gibichung Hall was regarded by Wagner and Cosima as too 'historical'. The mythic world of the *Ring* did not require the historical accuracy that was Hoffmann's forte. The second problem was that, on account of his inexperience in stage matters, Hoffmann was obliged to work with other collaborators appointed by Wagner: the Brückner brothers (Gotthold and Max) for the construction and painting of the sets, Carl Brandt for the design and construction of the stage machinery, and Professor Carl Doepler for the design of the costumes. Hoffmann's inflexibility in dealing with these experienced stage professionals left Wagner with no alternative but to dispense with his services, entrusting the realization of the designs to the Brückners and to Brandt.

It is very difficult for us, more than a century later, to imagine the visual effect of those designs at the first performances. Until quite recently

227 A HOME FOR THE GODS



Gotthold Brückner, who with his brother Max constructed the sets for the first *Ring* in 1876 – a *mise-en-scène* that was to influence productions of the work for decades to come.

all we had to go on was a series of fourteen monochrome photographs taken by Victor Angerer at the artist's request and published in a portfolio as a memento. But two exciting discoveries were to bring us closer than ever to imagining what those sets might have looked like. In the early 1990s a set of five large paintings by Hoffmann came to light, appropriately enough in a castle on the Rhine at Worms, where King Gunther in the *Nibelungenlied* had his residence. These paintings, of scenes from the *Ring*, were made by Hoffmann after he had been dropped by Wagner and essentially represent his impression of what the sets would, and should, have looked like had he been permitted to realize them himself.

But that was not all. In 2005 a further set of fourteen of Hoffmann's oil sketches for the *Ring* was discovered by Max Oppel, a Munich dealer. These sketches, along with the five large canvases, were all acquired, after protracted negotiations, by the Richard Wagner Museum in Bayreuth and exhibited there, after restoration, in 2006. Yet more Hoffmanns surfaced in 2007 in the archive of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. These were two of an original set of three paintings, and proved to be impressionistic versions of the *Rheingold* finale and the opening of the third act of *Siegfried*.¹⁰

Granted that Hoffmann's sketches were not realized entirely in accordance with his intentions, these colour renderings of scenes from

the *Ring* evoke unmistakably the world of naturalistic representation within which Wagner and his creative team were operating. Three cycles of the *Ring* were mounted, beginning on 13 August 1876, and musicians, critics, admirers and luminaries descended on Bayreuth from all over the world. What they saw was a staging rooted in naturalism and struggling with inadequate means to create an illusionistic spectacle. But the sheer scale of Wagner's ambition, and the fact that against all the odds he had managed to pull it off, was acknowledged by friends and foes alike.

We get an amusing glimpse of the feverish atmosphere on the Green Hill (as the elevated site of the Festspielhaus came to be known) in August 1876 in a report by the young Edvard Grieg, masquerading as a journalist:

In the flat next to me there lives a composer of operas, across the corridor a famous singer, below me a celebrated music director and above me a well-known critic. Sitting here I can hear all around me Wagnerian themes being hummed, sung, yodelled and shouted up from the garden. Going to the window I can see Valkyries, Rhinemaidens, giants and dwarfs, gods and mortals, all disporting themselves under the shade of the trees. To get a bit of peace I shut the windows and draw the curtains but Erda's mighty contralto voice pierces the thick walls.¹¹

For Tchaikovsky, also visiting the 1876 festival, the main concern was getting enough to eat and drink:

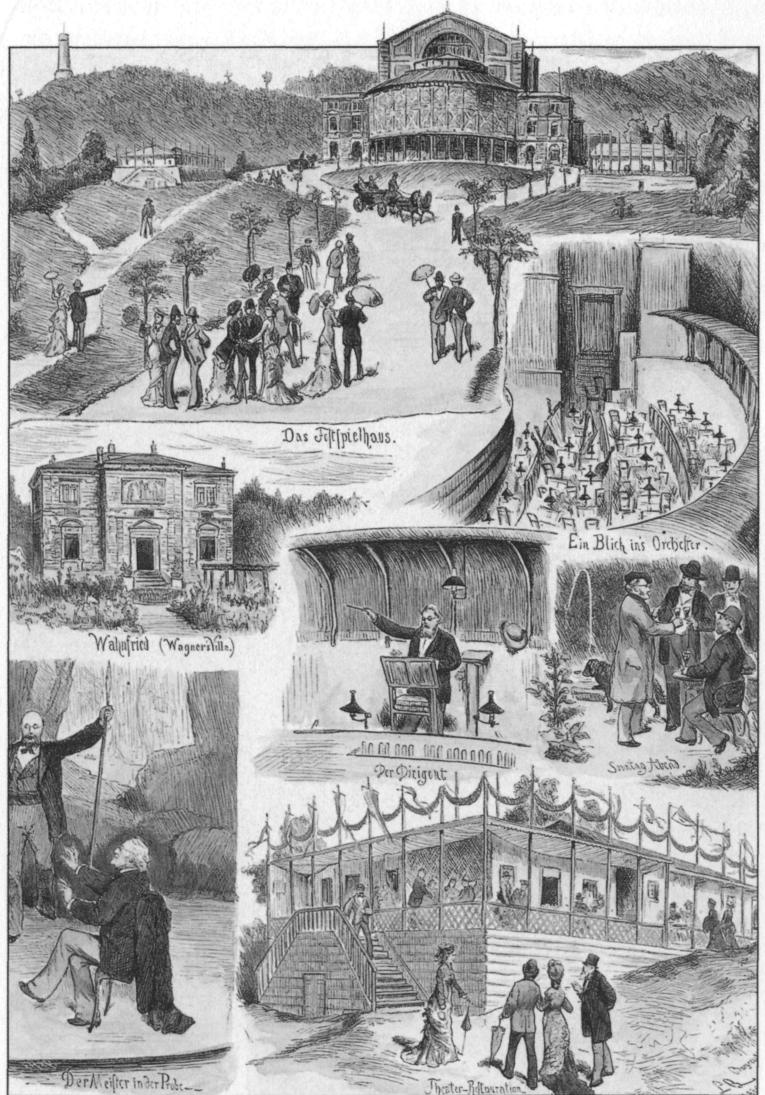




Carriages arriving at the Festspielhaus in 1890, illustrated by G. Láska.

The tables d'hôte prepared in the inns are not sufficient to satisfy all the hungry people; one can only obtain a piece of bread, or a glass of beer, with immense difficulty, by dire struggle, or cunning stratagem, or iron endurance. Even when a modest place at a table has been stormed, it is necessary to wait an eternity before the long-desired meal is served. Anarchy reigns at these meals; everyone is calling and shrieking, and the exhausted waiters pay no heed to the rightful claims of an individual. Only by the merest chance does one get a taste of any of the dishes . . . As a matter of fact, throughout the whole duration of the festival, food forms the chief interest of the public; the artistic representations take a secondary place. Cutlets, baked potatoes, omelettes – all are discussed much more eagerly than Wagner's music.¹²

Tchaikovsky would be glad to hear that the professionally organized catering operation at Bayreuth in the 21st century implicitly recognizes that



Scenes from Bayreuth (1876), drawn by Ludwig Bechstein.

the pilgrim needs bodily as well as spiritual refreshment. But the culinary privation seems to have addled his brain, for his initial judgment was of a 'truly marvellous staging of the work', even if 'musically, it is inconceivable nonsense'. It is true that relatively few attendees realized just how poorly the staging, for all that it was masterminded by Wagner himself, served his intentions. The more perceptive observers did notice, however; and even those unsympathetic to the 'artwork of the future' had to acknowledge that the artistic achievement was quite out of the ordinary. To be fair to Tchaikovsky, he did, hunger finally satisfied, end his report with an observation that more generously catches the mood of the moment: the *Ring* was, he reported, 'an event of the greatest importance to the world, an epoch-making work of art'.¹³



Wagner on the stage of the Festspielhaus during preliminary rehearsals. Drawing by Adolph von Menzel, 1875.

24 Wagner's Last Card: *Parsifal*

One of the finest monuments in sound ever to have been raised to the everlasting glory of music

Claude Debussy

The sorcerer Klingsor makes a dramatic appearance in 1930s cabaret costume during the narration of Gurnemanz (right) in Stefan Herheim's spectacular Bayreuth production of 2008.

At once Wagner's most sublime and his most problematic work, *Parsifal* ventures into territory remarkable even by Wagner's standards. A pair of monumental acts, each set in a location designated as sacred, frames a third act that features a magic garden peopled by flowermaids who inescapably evoke the luxuriant decadence of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. And it is this intertwining of the sacred and the sinful – elements not juxtaposed so sharply since *Tannhäuser* – that makes *Parsifal* the intoxicating brew it is. Described by Wagner himself as his 'last card', *Parsifal* seems to offer the composer's final thoughts on sex and religious faith, alienating many who misunderstand the content and purpose of the imagery. For those willing to investigate its ideological complexity and ambivalence, the opera provides profound insights into the human condition, expressed through transcendental music of unearthly beauty.

