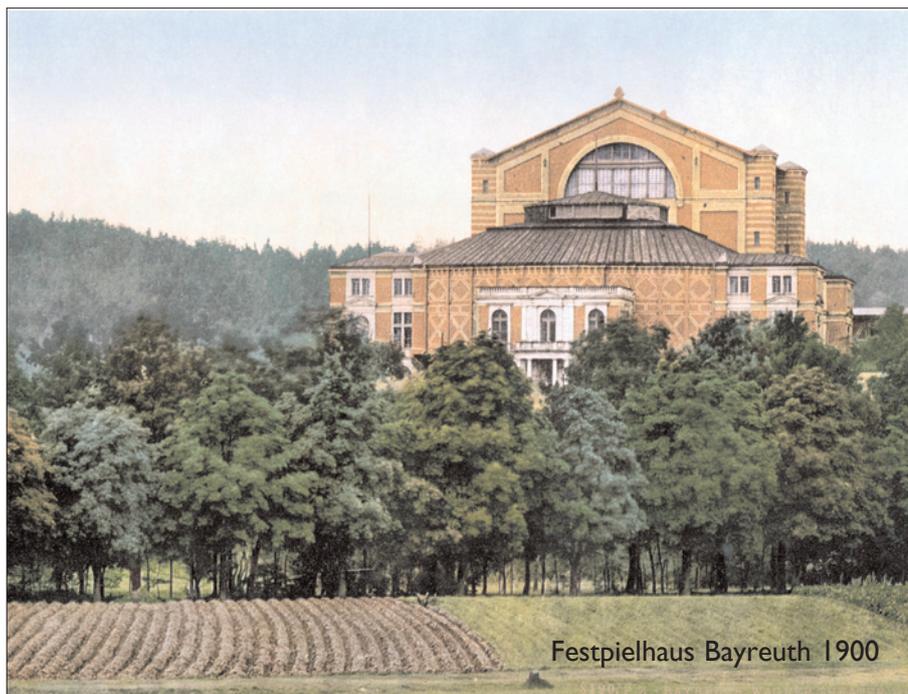


## BAYREUTH 2009: A MEMBER'S IMPRESSION



As a failed applicant to the 1976 Festival (I still have the original brochure), I finally achieved my ambition to see *The Ring* at Bayreuth this year, 33 years later.

But I really needed the stamina developed over those decades as the Festival programme, while exhilarating, was daunting: seven operas in nine days with *Götterdämmerung*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal* and *Tristan and Isolde* one after the other.

The brilliantly organised and undoubtedly well-endowed Wagner Society of New York arranged morning lectures for us by Emeritus Professor Hans Vaget before each opera. Professor Vaget was born near Bayreuth and was Professor of German Studies at Smith College, Massachusetts, between 1967 and 2004. With vast knowledge and a wise overview, he gave great insights into the creation of the music dramas, their political, philosophical and social contexts and influences, their productions at Bayreuth and in New York, and their impact on the world over the years.

The opening of *Das Rheingold* was astonishing in that I heard instrumental voicings and rhythms I had never heard before. The orchestral sound really made the hair stand up on the back of your neck. The Act I set was quite breathtaking, with projected images creating the sense of the

action happening underwater. It was quite poetic.

The rest of the sets were dystopic, designed to symbolise the notion that the world order was running down. Thus we had a decrepit street, a factory under a freeway and a derelict school house—each supporting the idea of the end of the world, but still distracting.

To add to a general sense of confusion about the cohesion of some of the productions, there was what we all saw as the idea of a parallel universe happening, in that odd groups of children would romp around the stage, lovers would stroll in and out, or a gas meter reader would appear checking a meter, and occasionally a cyclist would stop on stage and set up a picnic. It was odd and gave us a sense that some productions lacked a clear overview of what the production was meant to achieve.

While Linda Watson as Brünnhilde, Christian Franz as Siegfried and Albert Dohman as Wotan were all disappointing, some of the lesser roles were very good, particularly Edith Haller as Freia and Guttrune, Hans-Peter König as Hagen, Kwangchul Youn as Hunding and Christina Mayer as Waltraute and Erda.

We had heard that Katherina Wagner's production of *Die Meistersinger* was controversial, and it

certainly was; she seemed determined to drive a stake through the heart of this most German of operas.

The storyline of *Parsifal* seemed to vary from the one I was used to, although the sets were spectacular, the singing and acting, particularly Christopher Ventris as Parsifal, was excellent, and the chorus sublime.

For reasons that eluded us, *Tristan and Isolde* was set on a run-down ocean liner, which did not augur well. However, the singing and acting were so powerful, particularly in Act 2, that the music and drama transcended the surroundings. The performances of Robert Dean Smith as Tristan and Irene Theorin as Isolde were both incredibly moving.

It was an interesting stage in the Festival's history to be at Bayreuth with the next generation of Eva Wagner-Pasquier and Katharina Wagner taking over from their father, Wolfgang. Katharina is determined that the family and the Festival confront their Nazi past, but questions have to be asked as to the depth of her understanding about how this might be achieved. *Götterdämmerung*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* all had references to the Nazi regime but failed to link them persuasively to the operas.

From Professor Vaget, we learned of the Wagner family's close involvement with Hitler and the National Socialists from as early as 1923, which was both confronting and hugely distressing. When asked how Daniel Barenboim and Georg Solti, as Jews, could involve themselves with Wagner, Vaget replied that, when Solti was asked this some years ago, he said, 'I don't care. The genius is in the music.'

The 2009 Bayreuth Festival was an extraordinary experience, and certainly worth waiting 33 years for. I came away awed by Wagner's genius and drive.

The Melbourne group of Wagnerians were great company, led with aplomb by Richard Reed and Aubrey Schrader. In between operas, we all had a marvellous time laughing while drinking champagne and eating sausages.

—Garry Joslin