

Performance History

Overview

If we discount the unauthorized stagings in Munich of *Rheingold* (1869) and *Walküre* (1870), it all began in 1876 with the opening of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, when Wagner gave the first performance of the complete *Ring* cycle. Two years later Angelo Neumann presented the *Ring* in Leipzig, and in 1882 gave it in Her Majesty's Theatre in London. Gustav Mahler conducted the cycle at Covent Garden in 1892, and Cosima produced it at Bayreuth in 1896, thirteen years after Wagner's death. All these were, on the whole, homage stagings – they deferred to Wagner's original production of 1876.

Things changed with Siegfried Wagner's reign at Bayreuth, which lasted a quarter of a century, from 1906 to 1930. Wagner's son was a cautious reformer who made good use of electric instead of gas lighting and whose three-dimensional sets superseded the hitherto obligatory painted backdrops.

The first true innovator was Adolphe Appia, whose technique of creating space through lighting led to highly stylized stagings at Basle (1920–25). Twenty years later, in 1940, Sergey Eisenstein produced *Walküre* in Moscow. He pointed the way to realizations of Wagner's works which connected them to the contemporary social scene. With the re-opening, after the war years, of the Festspielhaus in 1951, the ever-changing principles that gave rise to stagings of great originality were symbolism, realism, anti-romanticism and surrealism. Wieland Wagner's stylized representations, buttressed by innovative lighting, revolutionized the practice of staging his grandfather's works. Significant contrasts to the avant-garde style were provided by Peter Hall (Bayreuth, 1985–6) and Otto Schenk (New York, 1990s). Both producers resurrected Wagner's original stage directions and offered unashamedly romantic interpretations. At the same time, German producers were favouring increasingly provocative stagings, which could be regarded as the operatic equivalent of the theatre of the absurd. Some representatives of this trend are Joachim Herz, Götz Friedrich, Nikolaus Lehnhoff, Richard Jones and the late Ruth Berghaus.

Bayreuth

Richard Wagner, 1876

There were no professional stage producers in Wagner's time. Composers or their assistants did much of the work. They instructed the singers where to enter and where to leave, and they advised on deportment and demeanour. But Wagner needed to make the plots, sub-plots and other complications of the *Ring* tetralogy intelligible to his audiences. To achieve this, he had first to make them intelligible to his singers. He held *Leseproben* (reading rehearsals) for his cast, and even for the chorus, to enable them to understand and grow into their roles. For subsequent *Bühnenproben* (stage rehearsals) he assembled a team of experts who, together with the composer, were the producers of the tetralogy.

Carl Brandt (1828–81), foremost stage technician of his time, was in charge of the lighting and the scenic equipment; he also devised multifarious stage tricks to represent swimming, flying, becoming invisible, changing appearance, a rainbow, fire and other effects. In addition he was responsible for realizing Wagner's principle of synchronization, which required both scenic effects and lighting to be co-ordinated precisely with the music. In the opening scene of *Rheingold*, for example, Wagner requested the gold to be lit with increasing luminosity, where his stage direction reads 'magical golden light streams through the water'. The light reaches its peak of brightness exactly on the last note of a rising horn-call.

Richard Fricke (1818–1905), master of the ballet at Dessau, was the third member of the production team. He helped to turn the singers into respectable actors and matched their deportment to the music. He also encouraged them on their aerial, aquatic and subterranean manoeuvres. Snatches from his Bayreuth diaries reveal the complexity of his task:

Studied swimming machinery. Anxious and apprehensive ... How will the singers find sufficient intrepidity to place themselves into such contraptions? They will be too scared to sing ... I said, 'Courage! You will positively enjoy the swim! The ladder is put in position. Brandt and I help her up. We fasten her to the cradle and begin to drive her gently about. Her face loses its terror. Now Lilli [Lehmann] wants to have her go. Soon all three laugh and frolic. And they do swim. Now Wagner turns up. They do the whole scene for him and they sing beautifully. When they got out of their machines, Wagner thanked them with tears of joy in his eyes, and kissed and cuddled them mightily ... Today Wagner put bunches of flowers into the Rhinemaidens' swimming cradles.