



## Jessica Duchen Sinfini Music | 11 August 2014 A Bayreuth Virgin **The Prelude**



Jessica Duchen has scored a pair of the hottest opera tickets in existence. In the first of two Bayreuth-themed blog posts, she explores why the festival dedicated to Wagnerian opera continues to both attract and repel music lovers...

If in doubt, blame Norman Lebrecht. When some tickets for the 2014 Bayreuth Festival were released for sale online – apparently the first time this has been done – he alerted readers of his website. An operatic e-scrum ensued. It took a while and nobody knew whether their applications had worked until they received an email of confirmation some hours later.

We were lucky. We got in. And we are going to Bayreuth for the very first time.

Why the mystique around this place? Bayreuth is Richard Wagner's own personal baby. Enjoying the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was obsessed with his operas, he was able to have a theatre built on a 'green hill' at Bayreuth, to his own specifications. The orchestra pit is deep and covered so that the singers can be heard without straining their voices – this is the acoustic for which he composed *Parsifal*. The theatre became the setting for a summer festival devoted to his own works that he initiated in 1876.

The festival's administration remains to this day in the hands of the Wagner family. Over the years the stories of Bayreuthian infighting, backbiting, disinheriting and some truly ghastly productions have rarely been out of the news. It's lurid stuff. The co-directors are now Eva Wagner-Pasquier and Katherina Wagner, daughters of Richard's grandson, Wolfgang Wagner.

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Richard Wagner's wife, Cosima, was Franz Liszt's daughter – and with the genes of these two great romantic composers there then mingled those of the English Winifred Wagner, who married Richard's only son, Siegfried. It was she who welcomed Adolf Hitler to Bayreuth with open arms (I recommend A.N. Wilson's masterful novel on the subject, *Winnie and Wolf*). The festival is said to have been a useful cover in which he could plan the invasion of Poland while everyone assumed he was off duty at the opera. It's a chilling background to contemplate.

Expectations of the operatic experience are not entirely comfortable either – in several senses. Rumour has it that the audience sits on hard wooden benches through these very long operas and that the doors are locked so that nobody can nip out in the middle (this may be apocryphal). Meanwhile, the productions have a tendency to be described as 'controversial' (this is not apocryphal at all).

As for surrounding matters – what to eat and what to wear – I'm a bit stumped. For instance, the traditional interval fare is beer and sausages, of which I can't partake (gluten allergy, genuine, sorry). And does one need to go glam? Elsewhere, Wagner audiences tend to dress for comfort, for obvious reasons; I'll probably take the risk and do likewise. If you spot a woman in a multipurpose black garment clutching a notebook and a packet of rice cakes, that'll be me. I just hope they let me in.

### **I don't doubt that there'll be fanatics aplenty worshipping at the Wagner shrine.**

I came late to this party, comparatively speaking. I attended my first complete *Ring* cycle aged 25, so I never participated in those studentish rites of passage – overnight sessions listening to the entire *Ring* cycle with your close fellow Wagnerites – and I haven't been round the world seeing every production of it on offer. Therefore I'm ready to be considered *persona non grata* in the Bayreuth crowd, even though I know the story and what the leitmotifs mean (some of them).

But what about Bayreuth's politically chequered history? I know people who to this day wouldn't set foot in it, or indeed listen to a note of Wagner. There's a certain fascination of horror about seeing a place that was so venerated by Hitler, but I have no trepidation about going there, beyond the hard seats and possibly-locked doors. It seems to me that today's Germany is the most grown-up country in Europe. It has looked its poisonous history full in the face and worked through its issues in the way that certain lands that were occupied during World War Two have never fully managed (let alone Britain, which still revels in a rather schoolboyish 'finest hour' complex).

Received opinion about Wagner and anti-Semitism stopped me from listening to his music for my first 25 years. Eventually I was dragged along to the *Ring* – and got the bug. Or rather, it got me. After that happens, there is no resisting it. Last year I went to *Parsifal* four times, plus three quarters of the *Ring* at the Proms, plus Longborough Festival Opera. No musical

experiences are more rewarding because nothing else can raise your consciousness in quite that way. Wagner's music has been likened to an addictive drug. Happily, it's legal.

We each have to face the unpalatable side of Wagner and decide for ourselves whether to partake of the man's music. It wasn't easy, but I did it, and now I'd like some more, please. Visiting Bayreuth is therefore the next step on the journey: this is the only place we can experience the sound that Wagner himself really wanted.

Incidentally, two tickets for *Tannhäuser* plus the Bayreuth hotel room cost more than the rest of our summer holiday put together - so it had better be good. I'll report back afterwards, when I know what it is really like.

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