De-Nazification and De-Wagnerization: Hitler’s Legacy at Wieland Wagner’s Bayreuth

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“I can’t listen to that much Wagner. I start getting the urge to conquer Poland.”

“But, of course, the real villain is Wagner. He has done more than any man in the nineteenth century towards the muddling of arts. I do feel that music is in a very serious state just now, though extraordinarily interesting. Every now and then in history there do come these terrible geniuses, like Wagner, who sit up all the wells of thought at once. For a moment it’s splendid. Such a splash as never was. But afterwards – such a lot of mud; and the wells – as it were, they communicate with each other too easily now, and not one of them will run quite clear. That’s what Wagner has done.”
Introduction

For the theatrical impresario and stage designer, Richard Wagner is probably the cruelest figure of the nineteenth century. During the course of his operatic career (which comprises ten major works, from 1843 to 1882), Wagner’s libretti call for an enormous galley to explode and plunge into a seething ocean; the Bacchanalian court of Venus and her copulating revelers to disintegrate and reappear within the space of a few musical bars; the entire populace of a medieval city to converge upon an outdoor plain; a group of deities to stroll across a rainbow toward a celestial fortress; a warrior to slay a fire-breathing dragon; a dwarf to disappear with the assistance of a magical helmet – but not before turning into a basilisk and then into a toad; a trio of mermaids to flit about the bottom of the Rhine River; and a lush, oriental Xanadu to transmogrify into the sterile nothingness of an arid desert.¹

Indeed, Wagner was an ombudsman between the world of Beethoven and the sphere of Barnum and Bailey. And it is not surprising that such a visionary (and egomaniac) would have required for his works a specially tailored theater: the Bayreuther Festspielhaus, an enormous but relatively Spartan retreat from the world of baroque court theatres and nineteenth-century aesthetic accoutrements.

The extravagances of Wagner’s dramas were only one collective problem faced by the composer’s grandson, Wieland Wagner, in the postwar world. And Wieland’s

¹ These ten major works consist of *Der fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman)* (1843); *Tannhäuser* (1845); *Lohengrin* (1850); *Tristan und Isolde* (1865); *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg)* (1868); the tetrad *Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Nibelung’s Ring)*, comprised of *Das Rheingold* (1869), *Die Walküre* (1870), *Siegfried* (1876), and *Götterdämmerung (The Twilight of the Gods)* (1876); and *Parsifal* (1882). Wagner’s first three operas, *Die Feen* (1833), *Das Liebesverbot* (1836), and *Rienzi* (1840), are generally considered minor works (particularly the former two, while *Rienzi*, much like Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, is considered almost too dramatically schizophrenic to stage coherently) and are, as a standard, not performed at Bayreuth.
solution was, if anything, pragmatic. After all, the Wagner family’s ancestral home, Wahnfried, had been bombed by the Americans in 1945, and, after de-Nazification trials, they were bereft of festival funds for lavish productions. Wieland Wagner stripped his grandfather’s operas of their narrative locales and naturalism: *Tristan und Isolde* was placed outside of Celtic yore; *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* were visualized beyond the scope of the Teutonic Middle Ages; and *Parsifal* was based outside of medieval Spain. Wieland situated the operas in voids of light and shadow, in a world of representative dreams and optic *trompes l’oeil*. After Wagner’s death in Venice in 1882, his widow, Cosima, had imprisoned his operas in a stylistic Purgatory, ordering that the productions which the Master had overseen at Bayreuth and elsewhere would remain permanently fixed at the Festival. The reaction of the Cosima regency was destroyed by Wieland’s radicalism. Wotan and Brünnhilde no longer wore feathered and horned helmets; Walther von Stolzing no longer arrayed himself as a fifteenth-century Junker. The costumes were reduced to the earthy, nondescript level of Classical stagecraft.

In the words of Wagner scholar Frederic Spotts, the “New Bayreuth” was home to a Wagner who was “neither nationalistic nor fairy-tale opera; it had no old Nordic deities or any other type of superhuman hero, providential savior, valiant knight, proto-Führer, Chosen One.” The “New Bayreuth” was didactic, intellectual, unemotional, uninvolved. Wieland himself claimed that the new productions were inspired by the works of Aeschylus and Shakespeare. The Bayreuther Festspielhaus might as well have been the Globe in London.

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However, the revolutionary stagecraft of Wieland Wagner’s 1951 *Parsifal* was not mere accommodation for his grandfather’s theatrical excesses. It was a radical solution to a political dilemma which had been plaguing the Wagner family for, at the very least, six years. The names of Hitler and Wagner had become almost inextricably linked in German public opinion and abroad, and Wagner’s operas, in a postwar world, were viewed (to an extent) as tantamount to an endorsement of a resurgence of National Socialist culture. Had not the scenes of Nuremberg at dawn, with its burgeoning populace and smoking chimneys, from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* been highlighted by the quintet “Selig, wie die Sonne” from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*?

Yet, an exploration of the historiography that surrounds the Bayreuth Festival reveals the almost total absence of an institutional National Socialist presence at the Festival. There was no need for Wieland’s reforms to occur as necessitated by an actual Nazi presence at Bayreuth. Regardless of public opinion, Winifred Wagner, Wieland’s mother and Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law, kept the stage at the Bayreuth Festival undefiled by the Nazi propaganda machine. The Festspielhaus was festooned with the vermillion banners of the National Socialists in celebration of the Führer’s fiftieth birthday in 1939, but the stage showed no trace of Nazi interference. The relationship that blossomed between Hitler and Winifred remains unusual in modern history, but Winifred was not a *de facto* ideologue among the Nazi elite. It was, if anything, a rather peculiar love affair. Why would Wieland seek to break completely with the recent Bayreuth past if his mother had kept the stage clear of Nazi influence? Perhaps more importantly, if the Nazi presence at Bayreuth had been minimal, why are the figures of
Richard Wagner and Adolf Hitler viewed as almost incontrovertibly related by some historians? What did Wieland have to do to address and to break this connection?

These were the questions which drew me to this project. My love for Wagner’s music had always led me to marvel at this parallel – how a composer of such Sublime talent should be reduced in popular opinion to the level of one of history’s most nefarious personae. Why is Mozart not equally criticized a racist for his portrayal of the Moor Monostatos in Die Zauberflöte? Why is Verdi not constantly lambasted as an Orientalist for his treatment of Egypt and Ethiopia in Aïda? And let us not even approach Puccini’s treatment of the grotesque courtiers Ping, Pang, and Pong in his chinoiserie opera Turandot.

In reducing the naturalism which had plagued his grandfather’s works, Wieland captured something of which his grandfather had conceived and yet had failed to achieve in the late nineteenth century. The Festspielhaus had been constructed in the 1870s for two principal reasons. The first was, specifically, to serve as a technologically superlative venue, visually and aurally, for Wagner’s final opera, Parsifal. The second, however, was more general; Wagner had sought, from his earliest years as a composer, to restore to the German gestalt the glory of Beethoven which he considered to be buried beneath the mire of “Jewish” mediocrity in the persons of Felix Mendelssohn and Giacomo Meyerbeer. The homely theatre on the Green Hill in Bavaria was meant to represent something of a Teutonic Dionysia – a retreat to a sphere of simplified, holistic, cosmic art, which Wagner defined as gesamtkunstwerk (“total artwork”). By stripping the staging, costumes, acting, and optical presentations of all their naturalism and frippery, Wieland fulfilled the Sophoclean designs of his grandfather. Oceans of ink
have been spilled on Hitler and Wagner separately; however, histories which link them or break down preceding links between them are much fewer in number. No historian has yet made this assertion – that it was, ironically, in the act of de-Wagnerization that Wieland Wagner actually accomplished what his grandfather had been unable to do.

Wieland Wagner’s Solution to the (Anti-)Jewish Question

Fans of Charlie Chaplin are undoubtedly familiar with the “globe scene” in the comic’s 1940 masterwork *The Great Dictator*, in which the Hitler-inspired fascist Adenoid Hynkel drifts about his palatial study (with his aptly named attendants Garbitsch and Herring, subbing for Goebbels and Göring), toying with a floating globe as the transcendent strings of the *Lohengrin* overture waft across the soundtrack. By the outbreak of the Second World War, American audiences and music-lovers would have easily made the connection between the totalitarian landscape of Hynkel’s anti-Semitic Tomania and the aural world of Richard Wagner. Despite this seemingly insurmountable obstacle, Wieland Wagner, in the years immediately following the end of the War, attempted to alleviate the cataclysmic wounds done to Wagner’s reputation and the renown of the Bayreuth Festival.

As the introduction suggests, Wagner had always been a showman. Friedrich Nietzsche records Wagner describing the stage of the Bayreuther Festspielhaus in these mythic terms:

> Between [the viewer] and the picture to be looked at there is nothing clearly discernible, instead, only a shimmering sense of

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3 It is a stroke of considerable cinematic genius that this celestial motif encompasses both the totalitarian madness of Hynkel (the world seems so endangered, so fragile, against such an achingly beautiful and frail musical backdrop) and the redemptive power of democracy (as the music returns in the film’s coda to signify the unnamed Jewish barber’s impassioned call for a return to liberalized, tolerant society).
distance...in which the remote picture takes on the mysterious quality of a dream-like apparition, while the phantasmal sounding music from the ‘mystic gulf’, like vapours rising from the holy womb of Gaia beneath the Pythia’s seat, transports him into that inspired state of clairvoyance in which the visible stage picture becomes the authentic facsimile of life itself.⁴

In understanding Wagner’s obsessive search for and acceptance of Bayreuth as the future seat of the festival tailored specifically for his works, the composer’s not uncharacteristically prolix oration does not seem unwarranted. The extent to which he viewed himself as a German Aeschylus is also captured in this description. Der Ring marked a new epoch in Western music. Wagner created a wholly prototypical theatrical universe, in which he, the artist, rather than the impresario, the patron, or the prima donna, was the reigning despot: “producer, stage manager, director, singing couch, orchestral advisor, final arbiter of sets and costumes – he was each of them.”⁵ New singers and new singing techniques, revitalized acting milieus, and a radical devotion to naturalistic, realistic staging – the encapsulation of a complete, aural universe in a rectangular prism – were a culmination of the success of 1876 he had been eagerly awaiting his entire life.

Audiences and critics were generally enthusiastic about the musical and dramatic success of Der Ring, but many were plagued by apparent deficiencies in the staging. The scenes were cluttered with flora and fauna, primordial and medieval weaponry and accoutrements, and a barrage of other props. Surprisingly, Edvard Grieg, the Norwegian master of the small scale, identified the problem more adroitly than most of his contemporaries; it would have been best for Wagner to let the audience “use its

⁴ Spotts Bayreuth, 53.
⁵ Ibid. 55.
imagination to create devils and demons within its own mind.” Congruently, Nietzsche called the first Ring production “fantasy in chains.” Wieland, half a century later, echoed these concerns: “What must [Wagner] have thought when he saw the airy rainbow [in the finale of Das Rheingold] of his imagination reduced to a rusty, rickety bridge? And what of those utterly inadequate creations of his inner vision? The demon Klingsor turned into a bourgeois magician; the arch-fiend Kundry corseted in a flowery evening gown with a train; Fafner the wild serpent, almost degraded to a comic figure.” These words were proudly uttered by a man now formally in charge of the artistic life of the same theatre – the same festival – with equally autocratic control, two generations later.

Cosima, Wagner’s second wife and the illegitimate daughter of composer Franz Liszt and Countess Marie d’Agoult, chose, after the Master’s death, to maintain everything as he had prescribed officially or unofficially with “pedantic literalism.” This insistence consigned these universal, cosmic dramas perennially to the level of nineteenth-century theatre, just beginning to shed its baroque excesses and preciousness. This falls squarely at odds with the fact that Wagner’s music is not entirely music at all but rather the synthesis of music, singing, drama, dance, and design into an evolving, organic whole – that aforementioned “total artwork.” The operas were just as much psychological dreamscapes as they were staged productions; one need only consider the musical-psychological universe, governed by suppressed, tortuous eroticism and orgasmic emotion, in which Tristan und Isolde resides for illustration of this quality.

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6 Ibid. 74.
7 Ibid. 75.
8 Ibid. 232.
9 Ibid. 94; See Appendix Figures 1-3.
Hans Tietjen and Emil Preetorius, hired in 1932 as artistic director and stage designer at Bayreuth by Winifred Wagner, combated Cosima’s militant realism and stylization to a degree in the 1930s: “Our efforts are aimed at detaching the production, the stage set and the costumes of Wagner’s works from the traditional sphere of historicism and naturalism, and at penetrating to its core substance, the musical drama.”

Thomas Mann, the consummate Wagnerite (with George Bernard Shaw) of the early twentieth century, captured this same holistic aspect of Wagner: “It is a language without tense, the language of times past and times to come; and the sheer density of mythological ambience…is quite matchless.”

The entire Ring cycle has a cosmic beginning and a cosmic end – a musical alpha and omega: “The tremendous thing about all this is a certain epic radicalism for which I shall never lose my enthusiasm. It is the radicalism of beginning, of going back to the first and original source of all things, the primeval cell, the first E-flat of the prelude of the overture.”

The Tietjen-Preetorius productions were nonetheless a mélange of successes and failures. Their 1938 Tristan und Isolde rejected entirely the courtyard setting of the Act II love duet and instead placed it in a wild, overgrown boscage of greenery surrounding a remote turret of King Marke’s castle; this thick foliage obscured (much to Hitler’s chagrin) the twinkling stars positioned, at Wagner’s command, over the lovers’ heads.

Conversely, their 1933 and 1936 productions of, respectively, Die Meistersinger and

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12 Thomas Mann, “To the Editor of Common Sense” in Pro and Contra Wagner (Chicago: 1989), 200; henceforward referenced as “Mann Common Sense.”
13 Spotts Bayreuth, 187.
Lohengrin featured monumentally expanded choruses – a bit of Riefenstahl on stage.\textsuperscript{14}

Preetorius’s 1933 *Die Walküre*, with its highly cubistic Act III rock and fir tree, was also met with derision by Wagner purists, who objected to the abstraction of accoutrements which had become almost bibliically fixed by the 1930s.\textsuperscript{15}

After the War, Wieland sought to capture some of the Classicism in Wagner’s works to which the Master himself referred:

> One may aver, without exaggeration, that the antique world, now universally known and understood, would have stayed unknown had the German spirit not recognized and expounded it. The Italians made as much of the antique their own as they could copy and remodel; the French, in turn, borrowed from this remodeling whatever appealed to their national feeling for elegance of form: the Germans were the first to apprehend its essentially human originality, to seize therein a meaning quite remote from usefulness, and therefore of use only for rendering the essentially human.\textsuperscript{16}

The aims of Wieland and Tietjen had been different, but both were extremely enterprising individuals. Tietjen took advantage of Winifred, an English-born woman in Bayreuth, the most German of German spheres, recently widowed and in need of extensive aesthetic and artistic counsel. Similarly, Wieland had the monumental, and generally unilateral, task of wiping the tarnish away from his grandfather’s reputation. In doing so, both had the opportunity and the imperative to deflate the reaction of the Cosima regency.

The critical reactions to the 30 July 1951 *Parsifal* reveal the major divides in Wagneriana. One of the finest Wagner scholars of the twentieth century, Ernest Newman remarked in the *Sunday Times*, “This was not only the best *Parsifal* I have ever seen and

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 182.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 181; See Appendix Figure 4.  
\textsuperscript{16} Richard Wagner, “What is German?” in *Stories and Essays* (New York: 1973), 44.
heard but one of the three or four most moving spiritual experiences of my life.” “What the Master’s grandson has conjured up for us,” proclaimed Hans Schnor in Westfalen Blatt, “is a symphony in darkness, a formless and – with its renunciation of individual dramatic relationships and its unremitting symbolism – ultimately a boring spectacle of shapes and shadows.” “Bayreuth has risen again: the mystique around Bayreuth is no illusion. Wagner still lives; his message has not died,” exalted Bernard Gavoty in Figaro. Conversely, Heinz Joachim, reporting in Die Welt, dissented, “We cannot disguise our fear that Wagner’s timelessness seems to be called into question when such of his works as Parsifal...[is] presented as nothing more than oratorio and optico-melodrama.”

Obviously, the wartime “Aryan citadel” of Bayreuth had been abolished in favor of something wholly prototypical. Wieland remarked that, during those “creative black years” between the bombing of Wahnfried and the reopening of the Festival in 1951, he had the opportunity to expand his understanding of mythological entities and standards outside of the Wagnerian realm in which he had been steeped since birth:

All of a sudden I became conscious of deep mythical relationships. In the Rhine Maidens I discovered foster-sisters of the ocean nymphs, and I recognized in the conflict between Wotan and Brünnhilde a repetition of the story of Creon and Antigone. Zeus and Semele must have been the mythical prototypes for Lohengrin, just as much as Perseus and Andromeda. Siegfried was Herakles. And what with all the other astonishing discoveries I made, I became a real Greek in those creative black years – a Homer fan, if you like.

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17 Spotts Bayreuth, 212.
18 Nike Wagner, 148.
19 Geoffrey Skelton, Wieland Wagner: The Positive Skeptic (New York: 1971), 89; It is useful to remember that, during Wieland’s childhood, his status in Wagneriana had denied him much of a traditional education. His exploration of Classical Greek and Latin literature did not truly blossom until his brief exile at Nussdorf with his wife and children during the era of de-Nazification trials and American and French occupation. The extent to which this affected his interpretation of the operas is inexpressible. An illustration suffices; Skelton remarks that Wieland suggested, for the 1962 Tristan und Isolde, that the
The 1951 festival revolved around three works: *Parsifal, Der Ring*, and *Die Meistersinger.*\(^{20}\) *Parsifal* was a clarion reveille for a new awakening in operatic stage production. The entire production revolved around the concept of the *Weltenscheibe*, a disc of light in which was based the principal drama of each scene.\(^{21}\) Gone were the lush, shady glen and picturesque lake beneath the castle of Monsalvat, the San Vitale-inspired cupola of the Temple of the Grail, and the kitschy flower garden attached to Klingsor’s Saracenic palace. Instead, the first scene occurred in a void of light meant to reflect the burgeoning dawn, the Temple of the Grail was reduced to vestiges of a dome and columns, and Klingsor’s lair was diminished into a sinister, electric web-work.\(^{22}\)

Newman went on to remark, in reference to the first scene in the forest, that “the eye was not outraged or amused by botanical curiosities of the customary stage kind; we felt the forest rather than saw it, a legendary forest that was of no time and no place, and one, moreover, over which mystery and sorrow and pain seemed to have brooded long. The result of it all was that we were conscious, for the first time, of the characters as Wagner must have seen them in his creative imagination….”\(^{23}\) Wieland’s first *Ring* was based on the same disc of light, though more concessions were made to the former naturalism of the Master’s productions; his second, more dramatically radical *Ring*, will be discussed below.\(^{24}\)

\(^{20}\) The *Meistersinger* production in 1951 was, by most accounts, a traditional, even prosaic one and was, thus, outweighed in critical evaluation by *Parsifal* and *Der Ring*.

\(^{21}\) Ibid. 109.

\(^{22}\) See Appendix Figures 5-8.


\(^{24}\) See Appendix Figure 9.
The 1952 festival included Wieland’s first production of *Tristan und Isolde*, and it was dominated by the same fascination with light and shadow. The Act II love duet, for example, occurred with the titular pair situated in a void of black and indigo; the scene was remarkably intimate, yet most spectators complained that the entire production was too dim. The *Weltenscheibe* was here manipulated as an elliptical, concave entity, meant variously to represent Tristan’s ship and the courtyards of Marke’s and Tristan’s castles. Wieland would return to *Tristan und Isolde* in 1962 for a second production, dominated by immense, totemic structures – inspired, Wieland’s biographer Geoffrey Skelton suggests, by the sculpture of Henry Moore.25 Rather than merely obscuring the settings in darkness and lighting effects, these glaring, phallic, overwhelming entities stressed the primordial, instinctively sexual nature of the narrative. Generally, as Wieland’s productions evolved, the focus became less directed toward the nature of the setting as universal, timeless, and formless and more on the symbolic value of personae.

His 1954 *Tannhäuser* was dominated by organized, symmetrical clusters of figures and characteristically sparse staging. The Venusberg scene emphasized the loveless, corporeal relationship between the titular minstrel and the goddess; the cavern was a cramped, curving, ominously organic entity, with the goddess at the far end and the hero downstage, emphasizing their inherent disconnection. Conversely, the scenes involving Elisabeth and the Landgraf’s palace were dominated by straight lines, emphasizing both Elisabeth’s piety and the intransigence of the Landgraf’s court; an immense cross served as Elisabeth’s altar in the third act. Wieland’s second *Tannhäuser* in 1961 was dominated in all three acts by the immense cross. In the first act, the

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25 Skelton, 160.
minstrel was shown as a supplicant beneath the feet of an enthroned, gilded, inhuman Venus.\textsuperscript{26}

Wieland’s 1956 \textit{Meistersinger} – colloquially identified as “Die Meistersinger ohne Nürnberg” (that is, “without Nuremberg”) – was one of his most controversial because, for the first time, the staging interfered with rather than emotionally or spiritually enhanced the musical drama.\textsuperscript{27} The church was missing from the first act, and the symmetrical clustering of the chorus was thus interpreted as somewhat nonsensical, as they did not represent a congregation. More drastically, in the second act, the medieval city was vacant, replaced by a small lake of cobblestone, on which sat Hans Sachs at his work table beneath the suggestion of the lime tree’s branches. Beckmesser had no window to serenade, and Walther von Stolzing and Eva Pogner had nowhere to rendezvous for their elopement.\textsuperscript{28} The final scene occurred with the chorus situated in a gigantic pyramid of identical costumes and unified sound (rather than clusters of representative clusters) with the singing contest occurring center-stage at the base of the pyramid. The controversy of this production was matched only by his 1963 interpretation of the opera; one could argue that Wieland’s polemic tendencies had become even more pronounced in light of his earlier successes. The entire opera was staged in a proto-Elizabethan setting obviously inspired by Shakespeare’s home venue. The Meistersingers were no longer sages and artists but rather intractable old fools; the pair of

\textsuperscript{26} This was the occasion of the notorious “Black Venus,” probably the most famous Bayreuth controversy on this side of the Atlantic. Wieland asked African-American mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry to sing the role; this brought about the expected disapprobation from the Nazi old guard and from Winifred who, according to her biographer Brigitte Hamann, called Bumbry’s presence “completely unnecessary.” While Bumbry’s vocal qualities should not be dismissed, this was, in the presence of a multitude of white mezzo-sopranos and dramatic sopranos capable of singing the role, one of Wieland’s most infamous and interesting bouts in anti-reactionary polemics.

\textsuperscript{27} Turing, 35.

\textsuperscript{28} See Appendix Figure 10.
lovers were conversely contemporary and seemingly transcendent of their vulgar surroundings. Hans Sachs’s final monologue belted to a medieval mob seemed to pass over the heads of most present. Most controversially, the Act II street fight ended not with the appearance of the night watchman and the dutiful scampering of the roustabouts but rather with a stage littered with dead bodies. This reveals the extent to which, even in 1963, Wieland still wished to enrage any sympathizers of the Nazi past haunting the audience at Bayreuth, particularly in light of the extent to which this opera had meant a great deal to Hitler’s aesthetic-viz.-nationalistic ideology as revealed by Riefenstahl.

His 1959 Der fliegende Holländer was one of his most successful, though it equally revolved around a desacralization of Wagner’s proceedings. Arrayed in red and white pinstriped pants, a top hat, and a white beard to simulate a maritime “Uncle Sam,” the traditionally sympathetic Daland was turned into a greedy, merciless capitalist, and the Norwegian seamstresses and villagers of the second and third acts were bawdy vulgarians. Furthermore, to deflate the belief that the title sailor was meant to represent the anti-Semitic paradigm of the “Wandering Jew” Ahasverus, Wieland depicted the Dutchman as a foolhardy, martyred figure, physically stylized and almost crucified during his great Act I monologue “Die frist ist um.”

By the 1965 Ring, Wieland described Alberich as a “bloody fascist and slave dealer,” Nibelheim as “the first concentration camp,” and Nothung as “an atomic bomb.” Kerstin Meyer, the Swedish mezzo-soprano playing Waltraute, remarked that Wieland told her to imagine that she, in leaving Valhalla to warn Brünnhilde in Götterdämmerung, had just escaped from Hitler’s bunker with information that could allow her to save the world from his tyranny: “She thinks, ‘I have the secret of saving the world,’ and steals

29 See Appendix Figure 11.
out of that Valhalla, where all are standing still just waiting for the moment when everything explodes.”

He depicted Wotan as the archetypal male in his lust for power; Brünnhilde as the archetypal female through her redemptive guiding love; Siegfried as an entity opposed to Wotan but not particularly heroic, barely more than a bystander; Siegmund as a hero for defying the gods, challenging the rotting order of Fricka; Anonymity (Tarnhelm) and Fear (Ring) as tools of Alberich’s totalitarian regime; Mime as a supreme liar and a miniature Goebbels with an affinity for poison; and Hagen as a figure of absolute evil and a miniature Himmler. Though all of this was one collective, theatrical diatribe aimed against a Nazi past, the figures nonetheless arose as newly universalized, almost cosmically symbolic figures. The staging revealed this symbolic fascination, generally in terms of the primordial; Valhalla was no longer a shining citadel but rather an immense, prison-like tower (a manifestation of masculine, militaristic vainglory), the forest in Siegfried was a bizarre web-work of stone, much like a honeycomb; and the Gibichung palace was a nest of primitives.

The extent to which this de-mythologizing crystallized during and after the Wieland Wagner era is bolstered by the comments of René Kollo, one of the excellent heldentenors of the 1970s and 80s: “Siegmond isn’t a hero. He’s on the run. Heroes don’t run away. Tristan, the ‘greatest hero of them all,’ is no hero, because he can’t say, ‘I love you.’ So none of these figures are heroes; they’re more like psychological studies of people at the end of their tether. […] I think we need to be a bit wary of heroes, and I

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31 Spotts *Bayreuth*, 241; See Appendix Figure 12.
don’t believe it’s true of Wagner anyway.”33 One need not read too far into the annals of postwar German guilt to find rationale behind this statement. It is also useful to remember that Kollo was a child of the Wieland generation, coming to prominence in Wagneriana under the Bayreuth governorship of Wolfgang Wagner, Wieland’s brother, and the baton of Herbert von Karajan.

What of Wieland’s relationship with Hitler himself? Had it not, after all, been a remarkably pleasant and even quasi-filial one, as most histories of Bayreuth are hesitant to directly illuminate?

Whether he had ever actually wanted “Uncle Wolf” for his father and his own father, Siegfried, for his uncle, Wieland’s relationship with Hitler, as the young Wagner matured, had been marked with friction. As Speer remarks in his Spandau Diaries, “[At] a meeting with Hitler [Wieland] expressed great concern about the Nazi denunciation of all modernist and Jewish art as ‘entartet’ or ‘degenerate’, and about the 1937 Entartete Kunst exhibition in Munich. Had not Goebbels himself put on a substantial exhibition of Edvard Munch, one of the pilloried artists, a few years earlier? Hitler, evasive, responded that ‘after a phase of self-discovery, art of that kind would be able to be shown in Germany once more.’”34 Wieland certainly made every attempt to compensate for any personal relationship he may have had with the Führer during his future productions, and his management of the Festival was often that of a retrospective gadfly. For example, the 1951 Festival was opened, not with any of the three operas, but with a performance of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, as the Festival had been inaugurated under Wagner himself. This performance was conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, one of the most

33 Eric Schulz and Claus Wischmann, Max Lorenz: Wagners Meistersänger, Hitlers Siegfried (Medici Arts, 2008).
34 Carnegy, 284.
notorious conductors of the Nazi era but nonetheless one of the finest interpreters of Romantic music. In 1953, the Festival opened with the same concert – conducted this time by Paul Hindemith, a “degenerate” composer who fled Nazi persecution.\(^{35}\)

However, as a younger man Wieland had been undeniably more intimate with Hitler. As early as 1933, Wieland, at the age of sixteen, had traveled to Dresden as a representative of his mother and the family at the dedication of a statue of his grandfather, attired fully as a Hitler Youth.\(^{36}\) His earliest concepts of theatrical aesthetics were actually as conservative as those hailed by Hitler. He had no substantial contact with Emil Preetorius, whose “Japanese tea-garden style” he loathed; he was self-consciously conservative and tolerated no amount of cubism or needless abstraction.\(^{37}\) When Alfred Roller came to Bayreuth in 1934 to design a new *Parsifal*, Wieland gained considerably more from their encounters; he taught Wieland, for instance, to design sets with models rather than with paintings or sketches, as had been his custom.\(^{38}\) His driving interests had always lain in the presentation and manipulation of color and light, nonetheless.

The 1934, 1936, and 1939 festival programs contained photographs of Hitler credited to Wieland.\(^{39}\) When Wieland began his mandatory labor as a young adult (*Arbeitsdienst*) in the military, he was originally stationed at a labor camp near Grossenhain; the conditions were so shoddy that Hitler had him moved to Kulmbach, just

\(^{35}\) Skelton, 115.
\(^{36}\) Ibid. 45.
\(^{37}\) Ibid. 52.
\(^{38}\) Ibid. 45; According to Winifred, Hitler was highly impressed with this new production, much to the relief of the Bayreuth powerhouse. Roller’s design, which chipped away only marginally at the premiere staging under Wagner himself, was further amended by Wieland in 1937, who restored, for example, the cupola within the Temple of the Grail in Act II. This, along with his rejection of Preetorius’s work, further suggests Wieland’s innate conservatism and the liberalized/polemical politicization of his actions after the War. See Appendix Figure 16.
\(^{39}\) Carnegy, 279.
south of Bayreuth, where he could work at the festival and commence with his theatrical-aesthetic studies uninterrupted. Furthermore, Hitler excused Wieland from military service after the onslaught of hostilities in Czechoslovakia – an offer he did not extend to Wolfgang, who served on the eastern front and was severely wounded in the hand. In the meantime, Wieland was appointed chief opera producer of the *Landestheater* in Altenburg, near Leipzig, by Goebbels. Kurt Overhoff, the artist under whom Wieland had studied in Munich in 1938 and whose friendship he had come to cherish, was appointed music director. In 1944, Wieland returned to Bayreuth from Altenburg and was stationed under Bobo Lafferentz, who had, until now, been running the “Strength Through Joy” (*Kraft durch Freude*) recreational movement for soldiers; he was also the husband of Wieland’s younger sister, Verena. Lafferentz had been placed in charge of a camp focused primarily on prompting scientists imprisoned in concentration camps to assist Germany in its greatest hour of need against the Americans. All past radicalism notwithstanding, this was the intellectual turning point in Wieland’s life. What he witnessed at the camp or what he may have heard from death camp prisoners has never been authoritatively recorded. Of course, all of this came to an end on 5 April 1945; Wahnfried was bombed, and the family fled to ancestral vacation spots on Lake

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40 Skelton, 49-50.  
41 Ibid. 58; While working at Altenburg, Wieland commenced with simultaneous work in Nuremberg, both of which involved staging *Der Ring*; the Nurembert cycle was completed in 1944, the Altenburg cycle a month later. While the productions at Nuremberg (as it was a more prominent venue) had been fairly traditional, the products at Altenburg had been remarkably sparse – previews of his eventual work in Bayreuth in the 1950s. His justification for this sparseness had been that insufficient funds were available to him for procuring materials for new scenery and props and that the outdated materials had simply been thrown out. The Altenburg manager, Ernest Lüsenhop, insisted to Geoffrey Skelton that sufficient funds were at hand, even after hiring new singers and technicians. Wieland, in the tradition of his grandfather, likely invented all this to increase the romanticism of his accomplishment.  
42 Ibid. 78.
Within weeks, the Festspielhaus was being used by the Americans as a venue for Bing Crosby and a staging of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*.  

Wieland obviously came to the conclusion that, in order for Bayreuth to be de-Nazified, Bayreuth must equally be de-Wagnerized. There was more at work between 1951 and Wieland’s death than mere anti-nationalistic compensation for the recent past. This was not a direct expression of his grandfather’s complicity in the rise of Nazism. It was a practical solution to a problem difficult for such an illustrious and notorious family to withstand. For example, in the program for the 1963 *Meistersinger*, Wieland included an abstract of Ludwig Marcuse’s *The Memorable Life of Richard Wagner*. Marcuse attacked the notion that Wagner had been an innocent musician unfairly manipulated during the “dark period,” and called him “[the] only German genius who was correctly claimed [by the Nazis] in 1933.” This passive expression of guilt was enough for Wieland; he countered this accusation with his own response: “Just as sun, moon and stars calmly run their courses, unconcerned whether this person or that may shake his fist at them or try to spit up at them, so the figure and work of Richard Wagner, in the one hundred and fiftieth year of his birth and the eightieth year of his death, stand on the firmament of cultural history in their old lustre, placidly shining down upon all efforts to

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43 Ibid. 80.  
44 Gerard Bourke, “Bayreuth since the War” in *Tempo* 37 (1955), 28.  
45 Nike Wagner, 115; Thomas Mann captured this mentality in a letter to Emil Preetorius of 6 December 1949: “There is, in Wagner’s bragging, his endless holding-forth, his passion for monologue, his insistence on having a say in everything, an unspeakable arrogance that prefigures Hitler – oh yes, there’s a good deal of ‘Hitler’ in Wagner….” Mann’s writings on Wagner (which have not in any way been the primary focus of this paper) seem to suggest a significant personal conflict between Mann’s apparently autochthonous adoration of Wagner and his unending detestation for Hitler. For such a Wagnerite to be torn between the two suggests prominently the commonly-associated tangents linking the two men.
diminish their radiance.” The operas still stand; the Nazi regime has fallen and, with it, some of old Wagneriana.

However, this seems too tidy a conclusion. Was Wieland simply reacting to his experiences in 1944, or was he taking advantage of a political situation ripe for the advancement of an individual with unique and unprecedented artistic vision? Even more importantly, beyond the generalities of public opinion linking Richard Wagner and Hitler, to what extent was the de-Nazification and parallel de-Wagnerization of Bayreuth necessary as per an actual former Nazi propagandistic presence at the Festival? To address these questions, one must examine the ideological parallels drawn between Wagner’s anti-Semitic writings and Hitler’s own racism and the extent to which Bayreuth, before Wieland’s lifetime, became a haven for anti-Semitic philosophy.

A Personal Hatred Spawns a Plague on the Green Hill

This is a strangely double-edged historical investigation. The connections between the memory of Richard Wagner and the autocracy of Adolf Hitler were not linked to an institutional Nazi presence at the Festival, but the Führer had undoubtedly loved Wagner’s music and praised the composer as a seminal German hero. The cult of anti-Semitism did not begin at Bayreuth with Hitler; however, it did not begin with Wagner either. One might posit that the “Nazification” (per se) of Bayreuth began between the lives of the two men.

The sine qua non of Wagnerian anti-Semitism is his essay “Jewishness in Music,” first published in 1850 in Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, a music journal in Leipzig founded

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46 Ibid. 115-16.
in 1834 by Robert Schumann. It is unsurprising that a composer whose works generally fill three or four compact discs in the modern recording era should have been an equally verbose and repetitive writer, and it is not necessary to dissect “Jewishness in Music” at length to grasp the extent of Wagner’s hatred.

Wagner suggests that the pseudo-egalitarian conceit of revolutionaries during the first half of the century had been unfounded: “All our liberalism was a somewhat confused intellectual game, in so far as we proposed freedom for the Jews with no knowledge of the race, indeed, with a distaste for any contact with them.” The failures of 1848 had diminished any revolutionary spirit still left in the composer, but Wagner had never been a particularly devoted radical and had used revolutionary movements to support his own Romantic worldview and reputation.

Principally, Wagner’s criticism of Jewish culture fell along aesthetic lines. He describes the Jews as “a race whose general appearance we cannot consider suitable for aesthetic purposes…by…any artistic presentation of its nature.” One is instantly reminded of the snorting, wheezing, and nasal histrionics of Alberich and Mime when one considers Wagner’s assessment of their speech, which he described as “nonsensical gurgling, yodeling, and cackling.” Their attempts to create vocal compositions in the style of the Germans resulted in “nothing but gabble whose painful accuracy and deceptive similarity was like that of parrots who repeat human speech.” Jews can create only a pastiche of European musical traditions and forms without actually creating

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47 L.J. Rather, Reading Wagner: A Study in the History of Ideas (Baton Rouge: 1990), 156.
50 Wagner “Jewishness,” 27.
51 Ibid. 29.
52 Ibid. 31.
anything passionate or alive. The only music natural to the Jewish psyche is the music of their religious worship, which Wagner depicts as creatively stagnant and moribund, retained in a “fixed form” like “everything connected with Judaism.” He posits the question, “Who has not been convinced that the musical divine service in a popular synagogue is a mere caricature” of ancient motifs?53

The two elements which Wagner most vociferously attacks as corruptive are Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and Giacomo Meyerbeer. Unlike Beethoven, who “strove with the deepest feeling and the most miraculous gifts to give clear and certain expression to the inexpressible by the sharply defined form of music,” Mendelssohn “reduces these achievements to fantastic, fleeting and shadowy forms, whose indefinite, shimmering colors excite our capricious powers of imagination but which hardly disturb our purely human inner feelings, and certainly cannot hope to fulfill them.”54 Cosima Wagner recorded in her diary on 7 December 1869 that Wagner remarked on Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture as the work of a “landscape painter, incapable of depicting a human being…so clear, so smooth, so melodious, as definite as crystal, but also just as cold; such an enormous talent as Mendelssohn’s is frightening; it has no place in the development of our music.”55 Mendelssohn reduced music to something aurally pleasing, not something challenging or even emotionally didactic in the tradition of Beethoven; his music specialized in mere technicalities, like the “changing colors and forms of a kaleidoscope.”56 This is music as entertainment, music as something to be

53 Ibid. 32.
54 Ibid. 36.
55 Rather, 168.
56 Wagner “Jewishness,” 34.
digested with trivial conversation and bourgeois banality. It disgraces the musical heritage of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven.

However, Wagner’s true artistic hatred was aimed not at Mendelssohn but at the bel canto world of the Paris Opera, epitomized by Meyerbeer. Paris, this haven of bubbly and conventional music is the place to achieve “artistic success without being an artist.”

Jews had no particular input on the development of Western Europe and, because of their autochthonous foreignness, they can create works that are only aesthetic without possessing any intellectual or emotional depth. This mentality was likely burnished by Wagner, failing to successfully stage his early works in Paris in the 1840s, feeling himself an alien in a world governed by “foreigners.” Wagner remarked, rather cynically, in a letter of 29 December 1849 to Robert Schumann that “if [he] were to try to sum up precisely what it is that [he finds] so offensive about the lack of inner concentration and the out effortfulness of the opera industry today, [he] would lump it all together under the heading ‘Meyerbeer.’” Meyerbeer represented, to Wagner, the bourgeois fixation with the opera as a scene for intimate tête-à-têtes, gossip, spying, and political and social intrigue rather than the collective worship of music. It is essential to remember his devotion to Bayreuth as a haven for true music-lovers (and, after his death, lovers of true German music).

Despite all of this, the most basic root of Wagner’s anti-Semitism was not his perceived rivalry with Meyerbeer; the latter composer had actually been a considerably proponent of Wagner’s early works and was genuinely befuddled as Wagner spewed his venom at him. Wagner’s personal failures at this point in his life are excellent guides for

57 Ibid. 37.
58 Paul Lawrence Rose, Wagner: Race and Revolution (New Haven: 1992), 47; henceforward referenced as “Rose Wagner.”
understanding the emergence of his anti-Semitic vitriol. The failure of Rienzi in Berlin, the aforementioned complications in staging Der fliegende Holländer and Tannhäuser in Paris, the compositional impasse he reached after composing Lohengrin, his turbulent and deteriorating relationship with his first wife, and his unending blockade of financial woes and debts which put him on the run from German authorities after the completion of Rienzi, along with the dwindling of revolutionary fervor in 1848 and the stinting of his personal German nationalism, all converged in one maelstrom of despair. Needing a convenient enemy – much like Hitler and the rest of Germany after the First World War – Wagner hailed down his fury upon his conception of Meyerbeer as the representative of everything wrong in the musical world – most notably its driving obsession with music for capital and composition as means for establishing an affluent, glamorous lifestyle.

Wagner proclaimed that Jews were incapable of making art because their main concern in painting, composing, sculpting, singing, etc. is based on “matters of particular egotistic interest to [their] vanity or to [their] sense of profit.”\[^{59}\] Mann captures this spirit in “The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner,” commissioned by the Goethe Society of Munich for the fiftieth anniversary (13 February 1933) of Wagner’s death, in which he remarks, “[Wagner] thought to apply [art’s] cleansing and sanctifying powers to the cleansing and sanctification of a corrupt society; cathartic and purgative by nature, seeking by means of aesthetic consecration to free society from luxury, plutocracy and lovelessness….\[^{60}\]

One is, then, left with the ominous finale of “Jewishness in Music,” in which Wagner calls upon the Jews to “remember that your redemption from the curse laid on

\[^{60}\] Mann “Richard Wagner,” 94.
you can be achieved by only one thing, and that is the redemption of [Ahasverus] –
decline and fall!”"\textsuperscript{61} Is this merely an assertion that Jews can only be redeemed by a total
renunciation of “Jewishness,” or is this a rallying cry for more corporeal destruction?
One cannot answer this question in totality. An examination of whether Wagner’s artistic
aims and his anti-Semitic ideology – that is, his personal, financially motivated prejudice
and jealousy – can be separated is the subject for another paper. Nevertheless, the seeds
of Auschwitz can only be implanted into his works after the fact – as they were done, to
some degree, by his own grandson.

It has never aided the general opinion of Wagner that Bayreuth has often been
associated with and populated by extreme neoconservatives with concepts of Aryan
supremacy. Leopold Schröder, an Orientalist and anthropological-philosopher obsessed
with Aryan supremacy, remarked, after the inauguration of the Festival, that “for the first
time since the scattering of the Aryan peoples they can, once again, gather at a
predetermined locality…in order to witness their primeval mysteries.”\textsuperscript{62} Wilhelm
Tappert remarked on the premiere of Wagner’s \textit{Parsifal} at Bayreuth in 1882 in the \textit{Neue
Zeitschrift für Musik} that “[this] is no longer theatre, it is divine service. […] One must
feel and think oneself German and Christian if one is to fully recognize the beauties of
\textit{Parsifal}.”\textsuperscript{63} Tappert’s comments reveal the extent to which Wagner’s works, even before
the end of his life and the regency of Cosima, were being placed at the altar of extreme
nationalism and Aryan racism. Music critic Josef Stolzing-Czerny remarked upon
Bayreuth that “[as] the Moslem sinks trembling to his knees at the sight of Mecca, so we

\textsuperscript{61} Wagner “Jewishness,” 39.
\textsuperscript{62} George L. Mosse, \textit{Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism} (Madison: 1985), 105.
\textsuperscript{63} Spotts \textit{Bayreuth}, 84.
Germans are moved when we behold the summit and end point of German cultural achievement.”

The Aryan extremist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an English expatriate (much like Winifred Wagner, his sister-in-law), who married Wagner’s daughter Eva, viewed Wagner as the ombudsman between Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Beethoven and the ultimate rapture of European society from polluting elements. This salvation could only come from cultural innovation and triumph. Cosima added fuel to the Aryan fire raging at Bayreuth by insisting, “If anything must be sacrificed, it is the music that is to be sacrificed to the text rather than the text to the music. This is a point of principle and on this principle the Bayreuth stage rests.” This edict marked the inception of the often-maligned Bayreuther Konsonanten-Spuckerei, the “Bayreuth Bark,” via a canonical adoration of the texts over the music, which gave Bayreuth the atmosphere of a fundamentalist cult. Out of mourning and ineffable respect for her husband’s work, Cosima attempted to make time stand still at Bayreuth.

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64 Ibid. 131.
65 Mosse, 107; In her Confessions, Winifred proudly digs through the Bayreuth vaults and reads a letter written by Chamberlain to Hitler after their first meeting on 7 October 1923, in which Chamberlain states: “My thoughts have been occupied with the question of why you, of all people, with your unusual capacity for arousing souls from sleep and torpor, recently made me a present of a long and invigorating sleep the like of which I have not experienced since that fateful day in August 1914, when this pernicious illness befell me. Now I think that this describes and, so to speak, encompasses your character. The true rouser is also a provider of peace. You are not, as you have been described to me, a fanatic: I would prefer to describe you as the opposite of a fanatic. The fanatic tries to persuade, you try to convince and only to convince. And in this you are successful. At any rate I would like to describe you as the opposite of a politician in the generally accepted sense of the term, for the linchpin of all politics is adherence to a party, whereas with you all parties disappear, consumed by a patriotic fervor. You have a tremendous task ahead of you, but in spite of your strength of will I do not regard you as violent. There is a force whose essence according to Goethe is to shape the cosmos, and Goethe says of it that it establishes its own set of rules. But even in greatness this is not violence. [Winifred explains that this is a paraphrased quote from Faust, Part II.] I mean it in the cosmos-building sense when I wish to count you among the builders and not as one of the violent. The calming effect you had on me was very much due to your eyes and your hand gestures. […] Such a man can give a poor, plagued spirit solace, particularly when he is pledged to the service of his fatherland. My belief in Germany has never wavered for an instant, although, I confess, my hopes had reached a low ebb. In one instant you have transformed my soul.”
66 Spotts Bayreuth, 99.
Walter Rathenau, the foreign minister of the Weimar Republic, remarked in 1918 (undoubtedly nostalgically), “It is scarcely possible to exaggerate how deeply the last generation was spellbound by the influence of Richard Wagner, not so decisively by his music as by the gestures of his characters, by his ideas… There is always someone – Lohengrin, Walther, Siegfried, Wotan – who can do everything and knock down everything, who can release suffering virtue, punish vice and bring general salvation, striking an exaggerated pose, with the sound of fanfares and with lighting effects and staging.”

The fin-de-siècle culture of Germany, the era of Bismarck when the perceived Jewish financial-political powerhouse was considered to have reached its epoch, produced the most consistent and fanatical support for Wagner the anti-Semite, equaling and likely overwhelming the adoration for Wagner the composer. Here was Wagner being employed as mythmaker and hero-forger beyond the scope of Teutonic lore; reactionary Germans were in need of specifically Aryan heroes. And, just as Wagner sought out Bayreuth as redemption from the musical establishment of his own era, so his devotees employed his works against perceived Jewish cultural supremacy. This need for Aryan mythology and nationalistic heritage only intensified as the National Socialist movement developed. Revealingly, a 1938 article by Fritz Merseberg entitled “Richard Wagner as Pioneer of National Socialism” posited the following question: “Which German boy, which German girl cannot find pleasure in Wagner’s epic heroes?”

Ironically, the extent of Wagner’s anti-Semitism was revealed by his choosing Jewish conductor Hermann Levi to conduct the premiere of Parsifal. Levi, not only a Jew but also the son of a rabbi, received endless verbal abuse from Wagner and even the

67 Ibid. 130.
declaration that he must consent to a Christian baptism before he could adequately
cconduct so powerful a mystery play.\textsuperscript{69} In the end, however, in the name of artistic
success, Wagner’s racism went on hiatus.

Upon his retirement from Bayreuth in 1894, Levi bitterly stated, “I am a Jew and
in and around Wahnfried it has become a dogma that a Jew appears a certain way, thinks
and acts in a certain way and above all that a Jew is incapable of selfless devotion to
 anything; as a result everything I do and say is judged from this point of view and
therefore everything I do and say is considered indecent or at least alien.”\textsuperscript{70} His
retirement was largely brought about, however, by his treatment during the regency of
Cosima rather than by his treatment under the Master himself.

It is true that there are no Jewish characters in Wagner’s operas, as his defenders
have noted. However, one can also argue that adding characters with specifically Jewish
names to his operas would have made them too overtly political, something to which
Wagner was, as it has been established, wholly averse by the latter half of his life.\textsuperscript{71} That
the miscreants Alberich, Mime, Sixtus Beckmesser, and Klingsor were implicitly
“Jewish” was something that Wagner seemed sure a German audience would
automatically understand. This “passive racism” makes Wagner’s personal motivations
remarkably difficult to dissect. A century after the publication of “Jewishness in Music,”
Wieland Wagner would have to contend with the fruits of a much more “active” variety
of racism and its effects on German collective memory and guilt. Much less difficult to
understand is how, as Bayreuth was slowly transformed into an anti-Semitic Valhalla –
holy ground for Aryan masturbation – the second Wagner generation could have so easily

\textsuperscript{69} Spotts \textit{Bayreuth}, 80.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. 115.
\textsuperscript{71} Rose \textit{Wagner}, 172.
Adolf Hitler adored Wagner’s music. This is absolutely incontrovertible. His childhood friend and schoolmate August Kubizek captures in his hagiographic memoirs, *The Young Hitler I Knew* (1954), an overripe but nonetheless representative event concerning the birth of the Hitler-Wagner one-directional love affair. He describes Hitler’s reaction to a performance of *Rienzi* in Linz in January 1905:

Hitherto I had been convinced that my friend wanted to become an artist, a painter, or perhaps an architect. Now this was no longer the case. Now he aspired to something higher, which I could not yet fully grasp. It rather surprised me, as I thought that the vocation of the artist was for him the highest, most desirable goal. But now he was talking of a mandate which, one day, he would receive from the people, to lead them out of servitude to the heights of freedom.\footnote{August Kubizek, *The Young Hitler I Knew* (Boston: 1955), 100.}

Kubizek, writing after the end of the Second World War, may have wanted to retroactively aggrandize his foresight, but he remarks to the benefit of modern historians that “[listening] to Wagner meant to [Hitler], not a simple visit to the theatre, but the opportunity of being transported into the extraordinary state which Wagner’s music produced in him, that trance, that escape into a mystical dream world which he needed in order to endure the tensions of his turbulent nature.”\footnote{Ibid. 188.} The mythic quality of Wagner’s works provided the young Hitler with an escape from the chaos of his family life and his continued failure as a professional artist. Kubizek goes on to say that Hitler possessed the conceit that he was as perplexing an ideologue and artist to those around him as Walther von Stolzing had been when he sang his controversial song “Fanget an!” before

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\footnote{August Kubizek, *The Young Hitler I Knew* (Boston: 1955), 100.}
\footnote{Ibid. 188.}
the artistically puritanical Meistersingers. The young Hitler was obsessed with the notion that Wagner somehow catapulted his intellect and aesthetic understanding and that he, like Wagner himself, was simply underestimated and misjudged by a “Jewish”-Modernist cultural and critical establishment.

Regardless of Kubizek’s romanticized adaptation of Hitler’s youth, Hitler commanded that the overture to *Rienzi* be played as a clarion call for his National Socialist revolution and his own assumption of a Romanesque empery at the Nuremberg Rallies, several decades after that fateful night on the Freinberg Hill in Linz. It was not merely a love for the mythic and the grandiose that intoxicated Hitler, however. What is also inarguable is his understanding of Wagnerian music and the technical performance of Wagnerian opera. Baldur von Schirach, the magnate of the Hitler Youth, recounts in his diaries while imprisoned in Spandau an event which occurred in Weimar in 1925. Hitler had attended a performance of *Die Walküre*, over which Schirach’s father presided as the director of the opera house. After being introduced to Schirach’s father, Hitler discussed aspects of the production in comparison to those he had seen in Vienna in his youth, named singers and conductors, etc. The elder Schirach remarked, “In all my life I never met a layman who understood so much about music, Wagner’s in particular.”

Despite his love for Wagner’s music, any direct mention of the Master as a remarkable composer or as a High German nationalist is a rare occurrence in Hitler’s writings and speeches. Even in his 1920 speech “Why are We Anti-Semites?,” which marked the first occasion upon which Hitler expounded on his hatred of Jews, he made

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74 Ibid. 188-89.
75 Rose Wagner, 26.
no mention of Wagner or “Jewishness in Music.” Indeed, in Mein Kampf, Wagner is referred to only in personally formative and grandiose-historical terms. Hitler remarks near the beginning of the text that his first encounter with Lohengrin at the Vienna Opera altered his perceptions of art: “I was captivated at once. My youthful enthusiasm for the master of Bayreuth knew no bounds. Again and again I was drawn to his works and today I consider it particularly fortunate that the modesty of that provincial performance reserved for me the opportunity to seeing increasingly better productions.”77 Elsewhere, Hitler links Frederick the Great, Martin Luther, and Richard Wagner as seminal Germans whose “life and work is followed in touchingly grateful admiration, and especially in gloomy days, it will be able to uplift broken hearts and despairing souls.”78

Hitler rarely mentioned Wagner in his speeches. The most substantial paean to the Master occurred on 6 March 1934, during a commemorative memorial service for the composer in Leipzig:

The greatness of nations has always been the sum of the total worth of its great men.

We Germans can be happy that many great sons have not only established and raised the value of our own Volk, but moreover have also made an everlasting contribution to the immortal work of the spiritual and cultural life of the whole world.

One of these men who, personifying the essence of what is best in our Volk, rose from national German greatness to international renown is Richard Wagner.

The greatest son of this city, the most tremendous master of our Volk’s tones….

Mr. Mayor, you have asked me to ceremoniously lay the cornerstone of the Richard Wagner National Monument in Leipzig. In complying with your request, I am not acting as an individual, a man whom Fate has so deeply honored with this rare mission, but on behalf of countless of the best German men

77 Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf: Complete and Unabridged, Fully Annotated (New York: 1940), 23.
78 Ibid. 287.
and women who perceive in me their spokesman and leader and whose deep sentiments I will attempt to express at this moment.

For today’s German generation is trying, after having been purified by decades of confusion and raised in boundless misery, to find the way back to its own great master. It no longer wishes to have anything in common with that thankless age when the desire and the will of one of the greatest sons of our Volk was ignored not only in a symbolic sense, but in reality, too, and business was carried on as usual. This generation is drawing from the everlasting power of our Volk in that it is making its way back to the best of our minds.

Thus as early as the second year of the national uprising, it has found its way to this city to place anew at the feet of this immortal genius of its great son the deeply-felt gratitude of the nation through me, the Chancellor of the Reich, on this day, the day upon which the cornerstone for this monument is laid….

The Völkischer Beobachter commented that “the Führer was visibly moved at these words” as he honored the “tremendous poet of sound.”

Hitler also used Wagner as ammunition against “modern” or “degenerate” art. To mark the opening of the House of German Art in Munich on 18 July 1937, Hitler stated:

Before the critics did justice to the genius of Richard Wagner he had the people on his side, while the people has had nothing to do with so-called ‘modern art’. The people regarded this art as the outcome of an impudent and unashamed arrogance or of a simply shocking lack of skill; it felt that this art-stammer – these achievements which might have been produced by untalented children of from eight to ten years old – could never be valued as an expression of our own times or of the German future. […] It is… in the highest degree ‘archaic’, far older probably than the Stone Age. The people when it passes through these galleries will recognize in me its own spokesman and counsellor: it will draw a sigh of relief and express its glad agreement with this purification of art.

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80 Ibid. 439.
Apart from his announcement concerning the foundation of the Richard Wagner Research Institute in Bayreuth on 2 August 1938, these two excerpts signify the most substantial references Hitler made to Wagner and his music.82

Thus, the question must be addressed: in spite of postwar public opinion, did Wagner have a powerful influence on Hitler’s political and racial beliefs? In a 1922 conversation with Josef Heller, Hitler is reported to have said, “[In] no case has revolution succeeded without the presence of a lighting rod that could conduct and channel the odium of the general masses. With this very thing in mind I scanned the revolutionary events of history and put the question to myself: against which racial element in Germany can I unleash my propaganda of hate with the greatest prospects of success?”83 This rather methodical assessment suggests that Hitler’s extreme anti-Semitism was not a product solely of his adoration for Wagner but rather the result of careful consideration regarding how he should ascend the heights of German power.

Conversely, in 1934, Hitler remarked on Wagner’s Parsifal that “[behind] the absurd externals of the story…something altogether different is revealed as the true content of this most profound drama. It is not the Christian religion of compassion that is acclaimed, but pure, noble blood.” Hitler interpreted the character of Kundry as a non-Aryan who polluted the noble Amfortas, the king of the Grail, with her sexual wiles; similarly, the pure (Aryan) Parsifal is tempted in Klingsor’s garden of decidedly non-Aryan/Oriental delights and flower-maidens. “If we strip Parsifal of every poetic element, we learn from it that selection and renewal are possible only amid the

82 Domarus, 1106.
83 Paul Lawrence Rose, Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany: From Kant to Wagner (Princeton: 1990), 379.
continuous tension of a lasting struggle.”

Hitler may have been inspired by *Parsifal* as a metaphor for his own political struggle against what he saw as the Jewish/non-Aryan powerhouse which dominated Germany after the First World War; his having never mentioned this personal connection publicly does not necessarily indicate that Wagner was *not* a powerful force over his psyche.

Even the adamant Wagner-defender Mann remarked, “Hitler, in all his wretchedness, is no accident. He could never have become possible but for certain psychological prerequisites that must be sought deeper down than in inflation, unemployment, capitalist speculation and political intrigue.”

Mann, however, also quickly defends Wagner, remarking that, had the composer lived during the era of Hitler’s ascent to power, it is likely that he would have been treated with the same scorn as Paul Hindemith: “This creative mind…vehemently progressive for all its melancholia and attachment to death; this glorifier of the world-destroyer who was born of the most sensual union; this audacious musical innovator, who in *Tristan* already stands with one foot on atonal soil, and whose like would assuredly be branded a Kultur-Bolshevist today….”

Mann seems unable, in his writings on Wagner, to reconcile his adoration for

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84 Rose Wagner, 182.
85 Mann *Common Sense*, 202; These are the same reasons given for Hitler’s rise to power in Winifred’s Confessions.
86 Mann “Richard Wagner,” 148; It is commonly known that Hitler despised the musical works of such twentieth-century *enfants terribles* as Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. Spotts, in *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, describes an event in which Hitler’s distaste for Peter Tchaikovsky was revealed; when Heinrich Hoffmann’s daughter, Henriette von Schirach, presented Hitler with a recording of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 6*, he refused to listen to it. Speer, in his *Spandau Diaries*, suggested that Hitler’s theatrical tastes were rooted in a Romantic adoration of effects and wizardry; he was “a genius of dilettantism,” lacking any sense “of the dualistic nature of romanticism, its inner conflicts and decadence. Nor did he understand its serenity. He knew only its dark side, its destructive urge and its popularized debased forms....” Hitler obviously liked his music to be melodic and easily accessible (the irony here of the notorious “Tristan Chord” which opens the overture to *Tristan und Isolde* is a topic, perhaps, for another paper), and it is also clear how Wagner’s works provided ample ammunition for showmanship with which to highlight the Nuremberg Rallies and displays of National Socialist hegemony.
Wagner’s music with his hatred of “Brüder Hitler.” He speaks only of Wagner’s potentiality for abuse rather than his implicit endorsement of Nazism.

Hitler’s adoration for Wagner was best publicly demonstrated by his collaboration with opera designer Benno von Arent for the 1935 Nuremberg Rally, for which Hitler commissioned a new production of Die Meistersinger and for which he drew the preliminary sketches. According to Speer, their venture specialized in “smashing effects,” and their masterwork was a Meistersinger which culminated in a “third-act meadow scene staged in the manner of a Nuremberg party rally, with massed banners and martial choruses.” The extent to which this production influenced the aforementioned 1936 Tietjen-Preetorius Lohengrin at Bayreuth is, likely, indeterminate. The production was later sent from Nuremberg to the German Opera in Berlin in 1935, Munich in 1936, Danzig in 1938, Weimar in 1939, and Linz in 1941; some of the costumes were later donated to Bayreuth, but the production was never installed at the Bayreuth Festival.

These artistic endorsements, however, were the extent of Hitler’s public worship before the memory of Richard Wagner and his music. His secretary, Christa Schroeder, records in her memoirs several instances in which music, particularly the Bayreuth Master’s, dominated the social evenings at the Führer Head-Quarters, either in Obersalzberg or abroad. In a letter from Wolfsschanze dated 6 January 1942, Schroeder reports, “…a gramophone was introduced into the Führer-bunker a fortnight ago and now

87 Carnegy, 276.
88 Spotts Hitler, 239-40; Ironically, the accoutrements of the Hitler-von Arent production (mainly costumes) were not used until Wieland’s 1951 Parsifal when the Festival was too pauperized to afford materials for new costumes.
almost every evening we hear the songs of Strauss, Hugo Wolf and primarily Wagner of course.”

It was essential that this adoration be private. Hans Tietjen asserts that

in reality leading party officials throughout the Reich were hostile to Wagner…. Top party officials came to Bayreuth only when ordered and then only a few of them and no more than once…. Once a year though they all pretended to be Wagner fanatics but, even so, not at Bayreuth but after the Festival at the party rally in Nuremberg were they all pretended to like *Die Meistersinger*. I never attended but I understood that every year after each act more and more of the audience vanished and men in brown and black uniforms had to be rounded up from streets to fill the auditorium. But the propaganda was always about Bayreuth. Germany believed and still believes in a ‘Hitler Bayreuth’ that never was. The party tolerated Hitler’s Wagner enthusiasm, but fought against those who, like me, were devoted to his works – the people around Rosenberg openly, those around Goebbels covertly…. 

In *Inside the Third Reich*, Speer remarks similarly:

I…never missed the first event of the Party Rally, a performance of *Die Meistersinger* with the ensemble of the Berlin State Opera under Furtwängler. One might have expected that such a gala night, which could be matched only by the performances in Bayreuth, would have been jammed. Over a thousand leaders of the party received invitations and tickets, but they apparently preferred to investigate the quality of Nuremberg beer or Franconian wine. […] In fact the leading men in the party were on the whole diamonds in the rough who had as little bent for classical music as for art and literature in general. Even the few representatives of the intelligentsia in Hitler’s leadership, such as Goebbels, did not bother with such functions as the regular concerts of the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler. Of all the prominent personalities of the Third Reich, only Minister of the Interior [Wilhelm] Frick could be met at these concerts. Hitler, too, who seemed partial to music, went to the Berlin Philharmonic concerts only on rare official occasions after 1933.

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90 Spotts *Hitler*, 256-57.
Revealingly, Schroeder quoted Hitler, saying, “Whenever I visit the opera I have to take care that my officers do not snore.”92 For practical purposes, it is useful to remember that most of Wagner’s operas run well beyond three hours, even with brisk tempi, and his brand of opera with no specified arias or recitatives was undoubtedly daunting to many in the Nazi elite – who may have preferred the frivolity of Donizetti to Gurnemanz’s half-hour homilies in Parsifal.93

Thus, it is no surprise, considering the Nazi intelligentsia’s opinion of the Bayreuth Master, that Parsifal was condemned as “ideologically unacceptable” while the Ring was deprecated by the party ideologist Alfred Rosenberg as neither heroic nor Germanic.94 As the philosopher-general of the party, Rosenberg insisted that it was Beethoven who “took fate by the throat and acknowledged force as the highest morality of man.” Wagner, conversely, “frequently gets in his own way,” with the dramatic action on stage and the tension of the music generally obscuring the more pervading musical and philosophical themes.95 Rosenberg nonetheless admitted that Wagner captured the essence of the “Nordic soul.”96 Goebbels was generally fond of Brahms, Wolff, and Schubert, and rarely mentioned Wagner in his writings.97 Reichsleiter Martin Bormann was not enamored of Wagner or of the Wagner family, and he often attempted to block

92 Schroeder, 166.
93 In her Confessions, Winifred Wagner fondly recounts a conversation between Hitler and Göring, in which the Führer asked the Luftwaffe magnate if he could be turned off hunting by the unnecessary slaying of the swan in Act I of Parsifal. Göring’s emotional investment in the dead bird remains, of course, a mystery.
94 Spotts Bayreuth, 166.
95 Jonathan Carr, The Wagner Clan: The Saga of Germany’s Most Illustrious and Infamous Family (New York: 2007), 183; Rosenberg is first quoted from the Völkischer Beobachter on 26 March 1927 and then from his Aryan tome The Myth of the Twentieth Century.
appeals from Winifred to Hitler for assistance with the festival or as clemency for Jewish musicians, singers, or festival technicians. His de facto title at Wahnfried was “that pig Bormann.” Winifred Wagner’s secretary, Liselotte Schmidt in a letter to her parents of May 1933 on the musical persecution exhibited by the Nazi powerhouse, remarked that “the powers of darkness are unremittingly at work and unfortunately with success.”

This hardly suggests a major Nazi endorsement of the Bayreuth Festival and discounts, considerably, the belief that Hitler’s presence was a guiding ideological factor.

Beyond the fact that Wagnerian themes and Prussian marches had long since been woven together to create battle songs for German soldiers, Schroeder best illuminates the root of the National Socialist connection to the Festival. Hitler’s former secretary remarked, “In first place for him was Tristan und Isolde, a work of which he once said that he would like to listen to it in the hour of his death. Hitler considered Wagner to be the ‘man who re-awoke German culture from the spirit of music’. Wagner’s musical language was to Hitler’s ears ‘like a divine manifestation’. […] He sponsored Bayreuth financially, and was planning to make visits available to all sections of German society, a national pilgrimage, so to speak.”

It cannot be determined whether Hitler shot himself in 1945 with Isolde’s “Liebestod” playing in the bunker. What is inarguable is his love for the Bayreuth Master and the extent to which he aggrandized and even apotheosized him on the public proscenium of National Socialism on the few occasions in which Wagner was mentioned. Aggrandizement is not tantamount to an admission of political

98 Carr, 234.  
100 Spotts Bayreuth, 166; This is all the more remarkable because Schmidt herself was a devoted Nazi and nonetheless reviled the input of Bormann and Rosenberg.  
101 Moller, 43.  
102 Ibid.165.
or ideological influence, however, and Wagner seems to have been, to Hitler, decidedly Wagner the composer rather than Wagner the philosopher. Hitler’s entrance to Bayreuth, the seat of such a nefarious history of Aryan racism, was actually garnished with the acceptance of a different member of the Wagner family – and her acceptance of Hitler and his funding was the root of Wieland’s future frustration and deconstruction.

The Hitler She Knew: Winifred Wagner’s Regency and the Hitler-Wagner Tangent

If not the most famous, the most notorious depiction of Winifred Wagner exists in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s documentary Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914-1975 (The Confessions of Winifred Wagner), filmed crudely and telecast in 1976. While not commercially available in the United States and difficult to locate outside of a German film archive, the film holds a seminal place in the annals of controversial Wagneriana. Filmed in black and white, with the screen occasionally lapsing into unintelligible swatches as Syberberg changes reels, and possessed of a pervading “claustrophobia of the visual frame,” Winifred Wagner strolls through Haus Wahnfried, occasionally reminiscing over the bric-a-brac and library of rare manuscripts, wistfully recalling her intimate sessions with Hitler and the political elite of Nazi Germany.103 Much like a Teutonic Norma Desmond, the granddame of the Bayreuth Festival defends her bizarre past, both in terms of her devotion to the Master and her effortless acceptance of the Nazi regime. “We didn’t need words; we had faces” finds a certain parallel with Winifred’s claim that

103 Marcia Landy, “Politics, Aesthetics, and Patriarchy in the Confessions of Winifred Wagner” in New German Critique 18 (1979), 152.
what Wagner had ordered was done. Today a work of art is dissected. We took the work of art as it was and didn’t try to read into it socio-political problems and the like. […] It is only after the Second World War that people have made an intellectual approach to things. One tries to read this into it and another that. We didn’t have these problems.  

Winifred’s comments on the ethics of stage production belie the radical taint which pervaded her regency, from Siegfried Wagner’s death in 1930 to the German collapse in 1945. Tietjen and Preetorius flourished under her management, and, while their productions smacked of none of the extremism and deconstruction woven throughout Wieland’s theatrical worldview, they certainly did a great deal to help her combat the dusty remains of the Cosima regency. More importantly, her comments are directed not only at the perceived theatrical excellence of the past but also at the disorder and needless intellectualism of the present; it was with the downfall of Hitler and the National Socialists that Winifred’s world unraveled.

Winifred Wagner (née Williams), an English orphan raised by Karl and Henriette Klindworth, close friends of both Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, met Siegfried, her future husband, in 1914; they married in July 1915. Her four children (Wieland, Friedelind, Wolfgang, and Verena) were born in quick succession, beginning in 1917.

With a penchant for her grandfather’s rhetorical melodrama, Nike Wagner (the daughter of Wieland Wagner) remarks that “Adolf Hitler burst like a comet into [the] narrow world [of the Bayreuth Festival] in October 1923: disheveled, haggard and preoccupied, rather like a Flying Dutchman walking respectfully through Wahnfried’s sacred halls.” Nike suggests that Winifred, steeped most of her adult life in the operatic

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105 Spotts *Bayreuth*, 137-8.
mythology of Wagner with its emphasis on the redeeming power of woman and love, found fulfillment in her love for Hitler, like Sieglinde finding her destined mate in the drenched, beguiling Siegmund. This may seem like a rather Romantic assessment, but it is an accurate interpretation of Winifred and Hitler’s relationship. Hitler had come to Haus Wahnfried to pay his respects before the graves of Richard and Cosima Wagner; like Siegfried brandishing his Nothung, Hitler left Bayreuth with a friendship forged which would last until his demise in 1945.

Winifred pledged support to Hitler as early as his rise to political prominence in 1923 in an open letter published on 14 November, calling him a German man who, filled with the most ardent love of his Fatherland, sacrifices his life for his ideal of a purified, united national Greater Germany, who has taken upon himself the dangerous task of opening the eyes of the working class to the internal enemy and the danger of Marxism and its consequences, who has managed as no one else to bring people together as brothers, who has learned how to overcome implacable class hatred and who has given thousands upon thousands of confused people the welcome hope and firm belief in a revived, worthy Fatherland.

This brief venture into the political landscape was aimed at currying financial and increased political support for her new friend and Wagner devotee. The prominence of Bayreuth in German culture should not be forgotten; nonetheless, it should also be remembered that 1923 was quite some time from the Nuremberg Rallies in 1935.

Their subsequent correspondence was informal and intimate, in which Hitler had no qualms in expressing political frustrations or personal doubts, as indicated by a letter of 8 January 1933: “Today I understand why in my youth it was Wagner and his destiny that spoke to me more than many other great Germans. It was the same ordeal, the

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106 Nike Wagner, 206.
107 Spotts Bayreuth, 141-42.
eternal struggle against hatred, envy and incomprehension. The worries are the same. Perhaps destiny will yet permit me to contribute something.”

Rather ironically, Winifred’s husband Siegfried did not react negatively to this relationship out of jealousy. As a man who frequently dallied in homosexual affairs and largely disconnected himself from Winifred and their children, the proximity of Hitler and his retinue to Wahnfried and his wife was not his deepest concern. His disapproval stemmed rather from the fact that he had always striven to ensure that Bayreuth and Wahnfried would never become havens for political upheaval or discord as homage to his father who, despite his perpetual forays into politics until 1850, rhetorically loathed and lambasted political debacles in his own age. Siegfried Wagner would die disillusioned in this respect; the closer Germany inched towards the invasion of Poland, the more closely connected Hitler and Winifred became. More controversially, in 1936, Hitler would move into the Siegfried-Wagner-Haus, the annex attached to Wahnfried, for the duration of the festival. To the Wagner children, this must have seemed like Siegmund rightfully breaking up housekeeping in Hunding’s lair in the first act of Die Walküre.

On 12 February 1933, Hitler attended a memorial service in Leipzig commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner’s death; he did not make any remarks or speeches at the event. However, Hitler returned around mid-July and stayed until the end of the month for the completion of the Festival. The following account of this

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108 Spotts Hitler, 253.
109 Nike Wagner, 208.
110 Skelton, 51.
111 Domarus, 252.
112 Domarus insists that Hitler spent as much free time at the Festival as possible, leaving Bayreuth only when his presence was urgently required elsewhere, such as on 26 July, when he delivered an address to 470 members of the Italian Fascist Youth Organization in Munich at 9:00 AM and then attended the funeral of Admiral von Schroeder (the “Lion of Flanders”) at 2:00 PM. By 5:00 PM, he was back in Bayreuth.
visit was published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* on 31 July 1933: “On Sunday morning, the Reich Chancellor and his staff visited the graves of Richard and Cosima Wagner in the park grounds of Haus Wahnfried and the grave of Siegfried Wagner in the municipal cemetery. Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler laid impressive flower arrangements on the graves in memory of the master, his wife and his deceased son which were decorated with black-white-red silk ribbons with the name of the Reich Chancellor embroidered in gold lettering.”  

Just a month earlier, Winifred had made a hasty trip to Berlin in support of Hitler; the Reich’s cultural fund subsequently provided about 55,000 marks per annum to subsidize new productions. This was a trivial sum and certainly not enough to warrant the postwar allegations that Hitler had essentially funded everything at Bayreuth.  

Nike Wagner asserts this explanation, as did Winifred Wagner in her interview with Syberberg: “[After the War,] I was accused of being a beneficiary of the Third Reich. It was said that I had received large sums of money from Hitler. The fact is that for every new production, he had 50,000 marks transferred to me from his private accounts. Any expert knows that even at this time you could not put on any production for 50,000 marks. That was only a contribution – an aid.”

However, Speer suggests that “[without] Hitler’s financial aid, the festival could scarcely have been kept going. Every year Bormann produced hundreds of thousands of marks from his funds in order to make the festival production the glory of the German

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113 Ibid. 348.
114 Nike Wagner, 156.
115 Syberberg *Confessions*. 
opera season.” It is possible that Speer could have been mistaken, and Nike Wagner certainly makes no attempt to downsize the influence of the Nazis at Bayreuth in her account of the affair. She maintains her rather Romantic view of the Winifred-Hitler relationship: “It was like a fairy tale: just as she had stood by him in his time of need, persecuted as the leader of an illegal part, so he now looked after her as her Lohengrin and Chancellor. He saved the festival by bringing money and prestige, and he loved Wahnfried and her children unreservedly.” Speer asserts likewise that “[on] these festival days Hitler seemed more relaxed than usual. [He felt] free from the compulsion to represent power… He was gay, paternal to the children, friendly and solicitous toward Winifred Wagner… As a patron of the festival and as the friend of the Wagner family, Hitler was no doubt realizing a dream which even in his youth he perhaps never quite dared to dream.”

Though essentially all major theatres in the National Socialist state were subsidized by and governed beneath Goebbels’s Theatre Board, Bayreuth obviously meant something extraordinarily special to Hitler.

Hitler’s official support and interference remained financial, regardless of the particular sum. Siegfried had forbidden the singing of German Nationalist songs in and around the Festspielhaus as early as 1924, and there were no swastikas inside the Festspielhaus as there were in other theatres, and all proposals to incorporate Nazi

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116 Speer, 150; see also Moller.
117 Nike Wagner, 164.
118 Spotts Bayreuth, 168.
119 Brigitte Hamann points out an instance in which Hitler’s adoration for the Festival obviously had its practical limits. During the 1940 Festival, the Wagner clan was denied extra petrol rations; these would have allowed them to stage the productions at night during the regular blackouts (p. 336). Hamann does not remark upon whether this was owe to Hitler’s negative response or to Bormann’s possible interference. Nonetheless, the Führer’s favoritism, even for the “tremendous poet of sound” and his Festival, obviously had its limits.
insignia into the sets of Der Ring were rejected, both by Tietjen and Winifred.\textsuperscript{120} Winifred’s only substantial political action after the rise of the Third Reich involved her attempt to establish cordial relations between Hitler and the British Prime Minister Sir Neville Henderson in July 1939 at the Festspielhaus, but Hitler was unmoved and spoke only of “Wagner, casting problems, relations between artists, and stagecraft.”\textsuperscript{121} The accusation has been made that this possible alliance between Britain and Germany, facilitated by an expatriate Englishwoman supposedly devoted to the ideals of the regime, was the entire root of their friendship, at least in terms of Hitler’s aims; the intimacy of their discourse and correspondence seems to negate this possibility as the sole reason for their acquaintance.

Their relationship, in the end, was entirely personal; he never honored her with the golden party badge, the highest social accolade of the National Socialist party.\textsuperscript{122} Schroeder describes an extremely beautiful set of porcelain and some hand-painted crockery from Winifred which was placed on permanent display at the Berghof in Obersalzberg.\textsuperscript{123} Hitler’s gifts to the Wagner family were similarly insubstantial; they included an ivory sewing-case, a small pendant in the shape of a triple swastika, a leather vanity case which Wieland later sold, and a new Mercedes as a Christmas present to Wieland in 1938 (though some sources suggest 1935).\textsuperscript{124} However, the presence of Hitler at Wahnfried is best represented by six-year-old Wieland’s aforementioned remark

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 155; Spotts Bayreuth, 188; When questioned by Syberberg about the presence of the Nazi intelligentsia and elite at Bayreuth, Winifred fervently denied any artistic input, on their parts, in terms of the developed productions. She jokingly remarked that the closest Goebbels or Göring ever came to having any impact on the Bayreuth stage were two doppelgangers playfully inserted into the Gibichung chorus in one of the Götterdämmerung productions.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 157.
\textsuperscript{122} Spotts Hitler, 252.
\textsuperscript{123} Schroeder, 156.
\textsuperscript{124} Nike Wagner, 157; Skelton, 46.
that he would rather have “Uncle Wolf” as his father and his father as his uncle. True, Siegfried had been a wayward father; but the presence of Hitler, with his weaponry, his tales of adventure and warfare, and his cortege of shadowy ministers and bodyguards suggests the extent to which the Wagner children grew up fascinated with the Nazi leadership.

Bayreuth was firmly placed within the web of the National Socialist powerhouse; high-ranking officers lunched with the family, the children played with officers and statesmen, and the exterior of the Festspielhaus was bedecked with swastikas and celebratory banners to mark Hitler’s fiftieth birthday. As Nike Wagner asks, “Can one swim in the water and claim that one did not get wet?” In the program for the 1934 Meistersinger, Hitler had the following note inserted: “The Führer wishes to see an end to the singing of ‘Deutschland über Alles’ or the ‘Horst Wessel Lied’ and similar demonstrations at the close of the performances. There is no finer expression of the German spirit than the immortal works of the Master himself.” However, in 1936, Karl Hermann’s article “Bayreuth und Deutschlands junge Generations” was published in the Bayreuther Festspielführer, urging Germany’s “Young Siegfrieds” to “Be alert…be aware of deeds undone, be on your guard against the Hagen in your soul!” The atmosphere was undoubtedly nationalized. Even the keepers of the Wagner brood were disseminators of Hitler’s creed; the children’s nanny, Emma, was a fanatical party member; Liselotte Schmidt, Winifred’s secretary, was equally fanatic; Otto Strobel, the commandant of the Wagner archive who tried to guide Wieland, was a devoted Nazi; and

125 Ibid. 209.
126 Ibid. 161.
127 Carnegy, 278.
128 Ibid. 279.
Kurt Overhoff, Wieland’s musical mentor in Munich, was an idealistic follower as well.\textsuperscript{129}

Winifred remarked in an interview with the Associated Press in 1947 that she “often said to [Hitler] in a reproachful tone that his bachelor existence was not the right thing for him. If he’d had a home and a sensible wife there would have been no war.”\textsuperscript{130}

Nike suggests that her grandmother believed she would have been an appropriate candidate for that position. If she had been so struck by Hitler’s presence – particularly his piercing, blue eyes, upon which she remarked after their first encounter – that she recalled its essence in 1976, perhaps her relationship with the Führer had been one of sexual fascination. That is a question she refused to definitively answer for Syberberg.

What does appear to stand is her assertion, also made in 1947, that she had “done nothing wrong in [her] life. [She] more or less remained faithful until the bitter end, only because [she] knew [Hitler] to be kind, noble and helpful. It was the man and not the Party that held [her].”\textsuperscript{131}

In Syberberg’s grainy, uncomfortable documentary, the director asks Winifred the essential question:

\textsc{Syberberg: Did you feel that in the question of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question, the Germans were acting in the spirit of Wagner?}

\textsc{Winifred:} No, that’s nonsense. Wagner’s idea was at the most a neutralization of the intellectual influence of the Jews on political and cultural life but never a personal extermination of the Jews.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{129} Nike Wagner, 216.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid. 226.
\textsuperscript{131} Spotts Bayreuth, 203.
\textsuperscript{132} Syberberg, Confessions.
This is not inaccurate. The coda to Wagner’s “Jewishness in Music” certainly does not bode well for the future of Jewish culture in Germany, but, equally, it does not call for a holocaust. Later, Syberberg redirects his question:

**SYBERBERG:** Don’t you feel today, now that you know so much more, that Hitler was really a curse for Germany or for the house of Wagner?  
**WINIFRED:** …I will always think of him with gratitude, because here in Bayreuth he helped me in every possible way. All these later attacks against him, and against us, I consider to be completely unjustified.  
**SYBERBERG:** But surely, today, you’d admit that Hitler and National Socialism took very drastic measures against the Jews?  
**WINIFRED:** Yes, naturally, but he was not the initiator. The main motivating force was [Julius] Streicher [editor of Der Stürmer, one of the most viciously anti-Semitic National Socialist newspapers] in Nuremberg. He was quite impossible; we all disapproved of him.133

Rather than to impart any blame on a man who had obviously meant so much to her personally, Winifred remained content to blame those around him – his ministers, counselors and advisors, his generals, his physicians – for all the faults illuminated after the downfall of the Nazi establishment in 1945. Much like Kubizek, it was the “Hitler she knew” that she cherished: “I can separate the Hitler I knew completely from what he is accused of now. […] If Hitler came in through the door today, I would be just as happy to see him as always. All that dark side of things – I know it is there, but not for me, because I don’t know that side of him. When I have a relationship with someone, only personal experience counts.”134

The association so commonly made between Hitler and the Wagner family must be addressed in these terms. The greatest irony of this investigation is that Winifred Wagner, who so honored the Master’s works and attempted to maintain artistic purity and political nonpartisanship during her control of the Festival, receives most of the blame for

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133 Ibid.; The Wagner clan’s hatred of Streicher, as a vulgar ideologue, was as pronounced as their distaste for and distrust of Martin Bormann.  
134 Ibid.
facilitating the established fiction of a National Socialist presence at the Festival. The error with most historians falls upon their definition of the National Socialist presence; the only major presence at the Festival was Hitler himself, but this was surely in itself tantamount to some level of pan-Nazi endorsement. Hitler’s connection to the Festival will never be as cleanly established as official subjugation through Goebbels’s machinations or support through ideological proclamations. His dreams of establishing some sort of intimate connection with Wagner and his music must have come to fruition, in part, with his relationship with Winifred. He gained a family and an inviting atmosphere amidst the bleakness of his personal past and the endless complications of political power. In spite of the fact that he possibly owed his very existence after the War to Hitler’s intervention, Wieland was never able to accept this, particularly when one considers his mysterious experiences in 1944. Winifred revealed only distaste for her son’s radical productions in the 1950s and 60s, not only because he broke entirely with Hitler and his youth but also because he, in doing so, de-Wagnerized the Master’s canon.

Conclusion

When Wieland Wagner died of lung cancer on 17 October 1966, he left behind seventeen operatic productions which revolutionized the art of musical theatre, not only at Bayreuth but around the world. The art of visually capturing opera as manifestations of light and darkness, of void and geometrical form, as symbolism did not begin with Wieland, but he was, considering his total lack of formal theatrical training and limited practical experience before assuming control at his grandfather’s theatre on the Green Hill, a true wunderkind, an extremely rare “natural” talent. His productions were never
mummified, nor would he have wanted them to be. He never wanted to fall prey to the
snare set by Cosima’s regency. His productions were altered yearly during his lifetime.

The opera was, to him, always an organic entity, constantly in need of evolution and
transformation. The music was constant, holistically complete, perfect; the staging of the
opera, which visually captures the human elements and emotions of the narrative, must
sway in relation to humanity’s development.

All of this, of course, was not merely a lifelong exercise in the theory of theatrical
production. Wieland was motivated, beyond the immediate necessity of reestablishing
the Festival and ensuring that his grandfather’s works were restored to their rightful
venue, by the stigma applied to Richard Wagner’s musical reputation by Hitler and the
Nazi regime, unimpeded (if not endorsed) by his mother, Winifred Wagner.

Richard Wagner and Hitler were both fervent anti-Semites. Hitler’s anti-
Semitism is too complex to describe here in detail, but it was, nevertheless, not wholly
personal. Hitler viewed the German hatred of Jews as a political entity which he could
easily exploit after the cataclysm of the First World War and the economic and social
upheavals of the Weimar Republic. Wagner’s anti-Semitism was personal, linked to his
own jealousy, his own self-inflated sense of artistic merit; for one who considered
himself the heir to Beethoven, the financial and critical success of a man such as
Giacomo Meyerbeer, a technically talented but emotionally vapid composer, would
undoubtedly have been infuriating.

Historian Paul Lawrence Rose suggests that Wagner should nonetheless be held
accountable for his public applications under the Nazi regime: “It may seem unjust to
blame a work of art for the uses to which later generations put it. But it is intellectually
naïve to rule out *a priori* the probability that certain works possess an inherent capacity for such abuse." Rose goes on to remark that the music of the forging scene in *Siegfried* and the *Götterdämmerung* funeral music retain an uneasy capacity to disturb which is lacking in Verdi’s anvil scene or the funeral march of Beethoven’s *Eroica*. The fact that this is largely a matter of personal taste is not addressed. Regardless, Rose notes that, while traveling through the recaptured Rhineland in 1936, Hitler was overcome with ecstasy at his political and martial triumph; he called for a gramophone, and listened, enraptured, to the overture to *Parsifal*. Rose accepts this as a justification for his assessment and, indeed, it is remarkable that Hitler would, at such a time, seek out a recording of an immense, four-hour opera unknown to most unfamiliar with Romantic music; even more remarkable is the fact that the overture to *Parsifal*, unlike the forging of Nothung by Siegfried and Mime or Siegfried’s death march after his slaughter by Hagen and Gunther, is not a violent or militaristic piece of music at all, but rather the depiction of celestial redemption and the ineffable majesty of Salvation. Does this music provide *a priori* capability for violent manipulation? I am not attempting to mold or illuminate some sort of transcendent beauty in Hitler’s adoration for Wagner. I do, however, contest Rose’s assertions of Wagner’s culpability for his music being used for violent ends when one of Rose’s major pieces of evidence involves a remarkably nonviolent piece of music.

Edward Said, the agitator and author of *Orientalism*, remarked as recently as 2001 that it should be possible for

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\text{a mature mind…to hold together in one’s mind two contradictory facts: that Wagner was a great artist, and second,}
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135 Rose Wagner, 26.
136 Ibid.182; Rose is referencing Hans Frank’s autobiography *Im Angesicht des Galgens* (1953).
that Wagner was a disgusting human being. Unfortunately, one cannot have one fact without the other. This is not to say that artists shouldn’t be morally judged for their immorality or evil practices; it is to say that an artist’s work cannot be judged solely on those grounds and banned accordingly.  

One can always make arbitrary parallels between Hitler’s writings and Wagner’s anti-Semitic declarations. One might consider a speech given by Hitler on 28 July 1922, in which he remarks upon the apparent Jewish domination of the Russian state: “[The Jew] is all rapacity, never satisfied. He knows no ordered economy, he knows no ordered body of administrators. Over there in Russia he is laying his hands on everything. They take the noble’s diamonds to help ‘the People’…. He seizes to himself the treasures of the churches, but not to feed the people: oh no! Everything wanders away and leaves not a trace behind. In his greed he has become quite senseless: he can keep hold of nothing: he has only within him the instinct for destruction, and so he himself collapses with the treasure that he has destroyed.”

Anyone familiar with Das Rheingold can read parallels with the perfidious Alberich into this assessment of Jewish greed. The rhetoric of anti-Semitism could only be so multifarious.

More fascinating connections are to be found between Hitler and Wieland Wagner. Both men adapted Wagner for new aesthetic prosceniums. Hitler used him as a herald for National Socialism at the Nuremberg Rallies, and he ascribed to Wagner a position of primacy in the Nazi pantheon of Teutonic heroes, a man beloved by the “Volk” even when he was rejected by the critics – or, more precisely, as he saw it, the

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137 Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said, Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society (New York: 2002), 182; Interestingly, Said’s comments on Wagner were prompted by outcries against the Argentina-born Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim, one of the foremost Wagnerians of recent musical history, who attempted as recently as the turn of the millennium to conduct some of Wagner’s orchestral works in Israel. Said remarks upon the irony (as he sees it) of the Knesset condemning the musical oeuvre of a Romantic German composer manipulated long after his death by an anti-Semitic dictator while they, daily, unfairly and illegally occupy the West Bank.

138 Baynes, 31.
“Jewish” critics. Wieland adapted his grandfather’s work for the revolutionized Bayreuther Festspielhaus. However, rather than using Richard Wagner’s operas to encapsulate nationality and “Germanness” (as Hitler did), Wieland used him to deflate those constructs. He obstructed the tangent between Wagner and the Teutonic world and paved a new boulevard for Wagner as a universal, cosmic artist – a man more in line with Sophocles and Shakespeare than with Martin Luther and Frederick the Great.

Thus, the Ring cycle of Richard Wagner’s life and legacy came full-circle through Wieland’s artistic and theatrical prowess. Just as Wagner’s Ring begins with the theft (by Alberich) and rape (by Wotan) of the Rheingold and ends with its restoration through the redemption of Siegfried and sacrifice of Brünnhilde (the new generation destroying the old order through Eros Thanatos), this history comes to a remarkably similar finale. The forces that conspired to (unintentionally) mar the wonder of Wagner’s art (Wagner’s own pronounced anti-Semitic writings, the cotillion of Aryan reactionaries that gathered on the Green Hill to bow before the shrine of their messiah, Cosima Wagner’s intransigent reverence of her late husband’s productions and designs, and Winifred Wagner’s enthusiastic endorsement of the young roustabout Adolf Hitler in 1923) were amended by the “New Bayreuth” generation (Wieland Wagner the aesthetic mastermind, Wolfgang Wagner the fiscal director and consummate businessman, Wilhelm Pitz the chorus master, Hans Knappertsbusch the conductor, and the greatest generation of Wagnerian singers, including Birgit Nilsson, Astrid Varnay, Martha Mödl, Anja Silja, Wolfgang Windgassen, Gerhard Stolze, Paul Kuën, Gustav Neidlinger, Eberhard Wächter, Hermann Uhde, Hans Hotter, Ludwig Weber, and Josef Greindl).
As Ernest Newman remarked upon the final bars of *Götterdämmerung*, “Flames seize upon Walhall and hide the Gods from our sight as the motive of the Downfall of the Gods…comes crashing down in the orchestra. Then comes one of Wagner’s most magical strokes: after all this racking turmoil the last word is given to the great theme of Redemption by Love…which seems to spread consoling wings over not merely the present but the whole stupendous drama….”

After the conflagration of Nazism (in which the Valhalla of Wagneriana – the Festspielhaus – was barely spared total destruction and Wagner’s home, Wahnfried, its very name signifying “Freedom from Delusion,” was all but obliterated), Wagner’s masterworks were redeemed, controversially, even uncomfortably, by his grandson. The patriarch’s desire to create “total art” was realized over half a century after his death.

Where does, one might finally ask, all of this fit into a general scheme on the relationship between politics and art? I argue that this entire saga, from the foundation of the Bayreuther Festspielhaus to Wieland Wagner’s final productions in the mid-1960s, is one immense, revolving example of the extent to which art has been subsidized, manipulated, and, in rare instances, truly enhanced for the sake of political ends.

Wieland was, himself, an extremely pronounced cultural politician, manipulating his grandfather’s works for the sake of his own revenge against his mother, against the political establishment that had soiled his youth. In fairness, he should not be viewed purely as a Michelangelo of optics, well-intentioned and focused solely on setting Richard Wagner’s musical world in the Classical frame which the Master had so longed to achieve; several historians, including his biographer Skelton, have taken this rather naïve view of his endeavors. Wieland’s claim that “young people have a legitimate right

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to beat down old men’s spears” – a reference to the upstart Siegfried crushing Wotan’s waning power – should be taken to its fullest extent.\textsuperscript{140}

And yet, even after Wieland’s wondrous efforts, the power of that Wagner-Hitler parallel has never truly dissipated. In Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 film and Conrad adaptation \textit{Apocalypse Now}, in which the Congo of \textit{Heart of Darkness} is transformed into the Cambodian offensive of the Vietnam War, the aptly named Lieutenant-Colonel Killgore descends, with his flock of helicopters, upon a virtually defenseless Vietnamese village with his loudspeakers blaring Sir Georg Solti’s 1965 recording of the Walkürenritt. While “Charlie hates Wagner,” possibly, because of the composer’s histrionics and the sanguinary eroticism of the piece, it is a testament to the extent to which Wagner still suffuses popular culture’s mentality with scenes of rabid militarism and cultural domination and subjugation. Perhaps the ultimate dichotomy lies in viewing Wagner’s works as halved between the sphere of the Walkürenritt, the forging scene in \textit{Siegfried}, and the funeral march in \textit{Götterdämmerung} and the overtures to \textit{Lohengrin} and \textit{Parsifal} – between the violent and the celestial – between the infernal philosopher and the sublime composer.

\textsuperscript{140} Skelton, 183.
Appendix: Illustrations

Figure 1: Hermann Winkelmann as Parsifal with Klingsor’s Flower Maidens from the 1882 premiere of Parsifal.\textsuperscript{141}

Figure 2: Act III from Die Walküre. This is actually a photograph of an 1878 production in Leipzig. Though no photographs were made at the premiere of Der Ring in Bayreuth, the production was not altered when it was transferred to Leipzig and, thus, provides an excellent illustration of the original design to which Cosima stringently adhered.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{141} Spotts Bayreuth, 81.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. 59.
Figure 3: Act III from 1896 production of *Die Walküre* at Bayreuth. This photograph, particularly when compared with the preceding image, truly reveals the extent to which the productions did not evolve after the Master’s death.\textsuperscript{143} 

Figure 4: The notorious 1933 “Walküre Rock” of Emil Preetorius.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. 117. 
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid. 181.
Figure 5: The Temple of the Grail from the 1882 *Parsifal* premiere.\(^{145}\)

Figure 6: The Temple of the Grail from Wieland’s 1951 *Parisfal*.\(^{146}\)

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\(^{145}\) Ibid. 82.

\(^{146}\) Turing, plate 6.
Figure 7: Klingsor’s magical fortress from the 1882 *Parsifal* premiere.\textsuperscript{147}

Figure 8: Klingsor’s magical fortress (with Kundry in the foreground) from Wieland’s 1951 *Parsifal*.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{147} Spotts *Bayreuth*, 82.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. 214.
Figure 9: “Brünnhilde’s Awakening” from Act III of Wieland’s 1953 Siegfried.  

Figure 10: Act II from Wieland’s 1956 Meisterinsger “ohne Nürnberg.”

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149 Ibid. 215.
150 Ibid. 219.
Figure 11: Josef Greindl as Daland the capitalist in Wieland’s 1959 Holländer.\textsuperscript{151}

Figure 12: Erwin Wohlfahrt as a horrible, rodentine Mime, more subhuman than a pastiche of stereotypical Jewish characteristics, in Wieland’s 1965 Siegfried.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{151} Turing, plate 38.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. plate 68.
Figure 13: Scene 4 of Wieland’s 1965 *Das Rheingold*. The title hoard, when stacked to prevent the ravishing of Freia, revealed a Postmodern Venus of Willendorf, a symbol of femininity and rejuvenation before the backdrop of a starkly totemic, sterile Valhalla.\(^{153}\)

\(^{153}\) Ibid. plate 63.
Figure 14: Wotan and Brünnhilde in Act II from Wieland’s 1965 *Die Walküre*.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid. plate 64.
Figure 15: Act II from Wieland’s 1965 *Siegfried*, a set which he described as “something between roots, honeycombs, caves – a set which can be anything and nothing.”

Figure 16: The Temple of the Grail from Alfred Roller’s 1934 *Parsifal*. Wieland’s conservative response to Roller’s deconstruction of some of the temple motifs (including the cupola and the color of the columns and costumes) suggests that his polemical worldview was not truly born until after the end of the Second World War. The radicalism of 1951 was not something autochthonous in his personality.

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155 Spotts *Bayreuth*, 227.
156 Ibid. 185.
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