

WAGNER, THE WANDERER

(A paper given to a meeting of the Richard Wagner Society of South Australia)

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In Act I of *Siegfried*, Wotan says to Mime: '*Wanderer the world calls me, for I have roamed far and wide over the surface of the earth.*' The same description could easily have applied to Richard Wagner. Family photographs of the 1870s and '80s convey the impression of a sober patriarch surrounded by wife, children, stepdaughters, servants and friends, content with his lot and settled in his ways. Nothing could be further from the truth. His period of greatest stability, in Bayreuth, amounted to less than a decade out of a lifetime of upheaval and uncertainty. The family did not move into *Haus Wahnfried* until May 1874, just six months before the *Ring* was completed and barely nine years before Wagner's death. One aspect of his complex character yearned like the Flying Dutchman and Kundry to be released from seemingly endless wandering, something that is reflected in the name of the only house he ever owned: *Wahnfried*, (Peace from Delusion). However, even during that last decade, his peace was regularly disturbed by the need to search for performers for the first festival, then to raise money to meet its huge deficit and, finally - in Italy's sunnier climes - to deal with nervous strain and declining health.

Wagner was a restless spirit whose restlessness manifested itself in many ways. We know he was dissatisfied with the state of opera in the early nineteenth century and set about changing it. But he was also restless in terms of his personal behaviour and mannerisms. He drew attention to himself by the liveliness of his speech and gestures, his colourful clothing, spontaneous reactions and readiness to read, sing and play his works in impromptu drawing room performances. Thousands of his letters and dozens of his essays reveal the same lack of inhibitions.

He had a child-like exuberance. It was reported that during rehearsals in Munich for the first production of *Tristan und Isolde* he became so excited when difficult passages went well that he sometimes stood on his head on a sofa or rushed outside and climbed a tree!

He seems to have been physically fearless. As a boy in the care of his twice widowed mother and then a succession of relatives and strangers, he got into all kinds of scrapes. On one occasion in Leipzig he was challenged to a sword fight which, fortunately, didn't eventuate. At another time he climbed, partially dressed, along the window ledges of a Prague hotel bellowing the Marseillaise and attracting the attention of the police. He went on mountain hikes with friends, terrifying them by choosing the most precarious paths. Even as late as the 1870s he was still showing off by occasionally climbing trees and scaling the facade of his house.

Wagner entered the world to the sound of gunfire

It is said that Vivaldi's birth had been heralded by an earthquake. Wagner entered this world to the sound of gunfire. Early in 1813 Napoleon marched his armies across Europe towards Berlin. The King of Prussia and the Tsar of Russia decided to confront him in Saxony, which was then part of the French Confederation of the Rhine. The

Saxon King, whose sympathies were with the French, abandoned Dresden and withdrew with his armies to Prague. By 21 May, the day before Wagner's birth, the French had been victorious on two fronts and were advancing on Dresden. They occupied the capital in August before eventually being defeated in October at the Battle of the Nations just outside Leipzig. The siege of Leipzig caused great misery including a typhoid epidemic that claimed the boy's father Carl Friedrich Wagner when Wilhelm Richard was just six months old.

Six moves and six schools before the age of seventeen

When he was four-and-a-half, Richard was sent to a school in Dresden and, three years later, was placed in the care of a Lutheran Pastor at Possendorf outside Dresden. When his stepfather Ludwig Geyer died in 1821, the eight-year old boy (now bearing the surname Geyer) moved to the house of Karl Geyer, Ludwig's brother, who was a goldsmith in Eisleben, the birthplace of Luther. The boy went to school there for a while before being packed off a year later to Leipzig to his scholarly bachelor uncle Adolf Wagner, who encouraged his interest in books generally and the classics in particular. Then the boy was enrolled in yet another school, the Dresden Kreuzschule and, when his family moved to Prague, he stayed behind at a private boarding house. He was now thirteen. He returned to Leipzig the following year and enrolled in the Nicolaischule. Two-and-a-half years later he transferred to the Thomasschule.

So, Wagner endured six moves and six schools before the age of seventeen, going without the care and affection of his mother for long periods and having no lasting masculine role model. No wonder he sought refuge in the world of his imagination and in attention-seeking escapades. He quickly learnt to set his own course and follow his own star.

It was during these teenage years that he became obsessed with music and drama and even waggled school for half a year to pursue his secret passion – to the astonishment of his family who thought he had been going dutifully to the classroom each day. He began to study composition, firstly with the help of a borrowed textbook (on which he ran up a fine so large that he had no hope of paying it), then with a player in the Leipzig orchestra and finally with Theodor Weinlig, who occupied Bach's former position at St Thomas's. The experiences of those formative years explain much about the adult: his obsessions, foibles and complexes and, above all, his belief in himself.

He managed to enter the University of Leipzig without matriculating on the understanding that he wouldn't sit the examinations. That restriction didn't worry him in the least, since it was really student camaraderie (substituting perhaps for family life) that attracted him. After a short but tempestuous brush with academia, he set out like the young Siegfried to confront his own wall of fire and reach a mountain top that few are blessed to see.

The daily grind was never seriously contemplated

The daily grind of earning a professional living was never seriously contemplated. He wished only to be an artist who was both a poet and a musician. At the age of nineteen he wrote a (somewhat Schubertian) Symphony and started – and then abandoned – a gloomy opera called *Die Hochzeit* (The Wedding) to his own text. In the following year he took up his first post as choirmaster at Würzburg under his elder brother Albert who

had progressed from being a tenor in light opera to an actor and then to a producer. The theatre, by the way, was very much in the Wagner family blood. Carl Friedrich had had an over-riding passion for it, named four daughters after theatrical and literary characters, entertained his guests by mimicking contemporary actors (surely the source of Richard's drawing-room antics) and was rather partial to certain actresses about town (also a trait inherited by his son). It was through this involvement with the theatre that Ludwig Geyer had entered Wagner family life. Richard's sisters Rosalie and Luise became actresses. Another sister Clara was a singer, and Johanna, Albert's adopted daughter, became a well-known opera singer.

At the age of twenty, Richard wrote his first opera *Die Feen* (The Fairies) after a play by Gozzi (whose stories also provided the inspiration for Puccini's *Turandot*). Again, he wrote his own libretto and he finished the music in ten months, which was not a bad effort for a twenty-year-old. In the music we hear echoes of Rossini, Mendelssohn, Weber, Marschner and Beethoven and - now and then - the first indications of an original voice.

'It is better to be a cab horse in Berlin than a theatrical director in Magdeburg!'

Unfortunately, attempts to have *Die Feen* produced came to nothing, and its first staging did not take place until five years after Wagner's death. The composer soon got over his disappointment and, within a few months, began work on his next opera *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love) based very loosely on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The story of the first performance of *Das Liebesverbot*, as recounted by Wagner himself, is so delicious that it is worth repeating. The location was Magdeburg, a sleepy provincial town not renowned for its cultural life. Better to be a cab horse in Berlin, it was once remarked, than a theatrical director in Magdeburg! Wagner persuaded the company there to finish its season with a benefit performance of his latest work (he would be the beneficiary). The time was Holy Week and the police objected to the title 'The Ban on Love', so the opera was renamed 'The Novice of Palermo'. The public had no idea what it was about. Nor, it seems, did the cast. Ten days of rehearsals proved woefully inadequate.

A Fiasco

When the first night arrived, the singers were still relying heavily on the prompter. In his autobiography *Mein Leben*, Wagner describes the hilarious events in the following terms.

'The special ability I possessed to help singers and to make things seem to flow smoothly despite great uncertainty on their part was amply demonstrated in the few rehearsals, in which, by dint of continual prompting, loud singing along, and shouting drastic directions concerning the necessary movements, I held the whole thing together well enough, so that it appeared quite possible that the performance would turn out acceptably after all. Unfortunately, we did not bear in mind that during the public performance, all these drastic methods of moving the musico-dramatic machinery would be reduced to the wavings of my baton and the workings of my facial muscles. As a matter of fact, the singers, especially the men, were so exceptionally unsure of themselves that from beginning to end their embarrassment crippled the effect of every one of their roles. The tenor Freimueller, equipped with the feeblest memory, tried to supplement the lively

and engaging character of his role as the madcap Luzio by resorting to routines adapted from *Fra Diavolo* and *Zampa*, and especially by the aid of an enormously thick, brightly coloured and fluttering plume of feathers'.

The result was a fiasco. But worse was to come.

When the second evening arrived, Wagner peeped out into the auditorium a quarter of an hour before curtain time and saw just three people sitting there. Then a riot broke out backstage. The leading lady had been having an affair with the second tenor. Her husband lost his temper and punched his wife's lover on the nose. The wounded lover retreated to his dressing room with blood running down his face, while the husband turned on his wife with such vehemence that she fell into hysterics. The rest of the cast then felt obliged to join in the fight. Finally, the manager appeared before the curtain and informed the tiny audience that due to 'unforeseen circumstances', the performance would not take place that evening. So that was the end of *Das Liebesverbot*, at least in Wagner's lifetime.

Wagner's position at Magdeburg was one of several attachments to dreary provincial theatres that invariably went bankrupt soon after he started work. A lesser man might have become discouraged, but Wagner used these experiences to learn his craft, to get to know the operatic repertoire and to discover just what orchestral instruments and singers could do. In Würzburg he rehearsed or conducted sixteen different operas; in Magdeburg twenty-five operas, and in his brief period as musical director in Königsberg he witnessed preparations for another three. These were his 'galley years' (to use Verdi's term) and he became thoroughly familiar with the tools of his trade.

In November 1836 in Königsberg, Wagner married his first wife, Minna Planer. Within six months he discovered that she was having an affair with one of the theatre patrons. He threatened divorce. Minna ran away with her lover. Wagner accepted the post of music director in Riga, which was then part of Russia, and wrote to Minna urging her to go with him. He travelled four hundred miles from Königsberg to Dresden to collect her, but she refused to leave. And so he continued on alone. Finally, Minna did join him and they remained in Riga for two incident-filled years. Wagner performed his usual trick of drawing attention to himself. He startled the neighbours by appearing regularly in his window wearing a flamboyant dressing gown and a Turkish fez! He also arranged a season of subscription concerts that were regarded by others as an exercise in self-promotion. But behind the frippery he worked very hard in Riga, rehearsing and conducting fifteen operas during his first year and twenty-four during his second.

On the Wagnerian scale of improbability, fact beats fiction every time

The story of the flight from Riga in 1839 is another of those wonderfully colourful episodes in Wagner's life that reinforce the view that, on the Wagnerian scale of improbability, fact beats fiction every time. An anti-Wagner movement developed in Riga, spurred on by those who thought that the music director was chiefly concerned with self-advertisement. They eventually succeeded in having him dismissed. Although he was furious at this turn of events, it helped him to set his sights on even higher goals, and he conjured up visions of a triumphant production of his latest enterprise, *Rienzi*, in one of the great cities of Europe, preferably Paris.

In those days, travellers intending to leave Russian territories were obliged to publicise their intention three times in the press, so that anyone with financial claims would have time to present them. Of course, this was the last thing that Wagner wanted. So, with the help of a friend from Königsberg, a plan of escape was hatched. The two Wagners and their friend, along with their giant Newfoundland dog, Robber, set off in a coach on a hot July day for the Prussian border. Robber had to gallop alongside, and soon began to suffer from the heat. Wagner, who sympathised extravagantly with animals all his life, stopped the coach and insisted that the huge creature be brought inside. On the evening of the second day they reached the Prussian frontier with its border-guards. Humans and dog sneaked out of the coach at a discrete distance and, while the guards were distracted, made a rush for a ditch beside the road and lay down in it. Another coach was waiting on the other side of the border, and after a suitable interval, the escapees made a dash for that and scrambled inside. A bit further on they transferred to an open cart which at one point tipped over, injuring Minna and compounding her misgivings about the whole enterprise.

Instead of going on to Königsberg, where more creditors were waiting, they headed for the Gulf of Danzig where they eventually joined a cargo boat, the *Thetis*, and sailed for freedom. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner recounts the story of the storm at sea and then how they sheltered in one of the Norwegian fjords. Robber got fed up with the whole business and starting nipping the sailors.

Wagner attributed his ideas for the Norwegian sailor's chorus in *Der fliegender Holländer* to the impression created by the songs of the crew of the *Thetis* in the fjord. However, what is not generally known is that the opera was originally set, not in Norway but in Scotland. It might also come as a surprise to discover that the characters Eric and Darland were originally called Georg and Donald. Senta was originally Anna. In fact, the change of location was made just a few weeks before the opera's premiere performance. The origin of the Scottish setting is to be found in Heinrich Heine's version of the legend, which was Wagner's primary source.

Robber chooses Liberty, Equality and Fraternity

The *Thetis* eventually arrived in London in August 1839 for the first of Wagner's three visits to England. He observed a debate on the slave trade in the House of Lords and complained about the horrors of an English Sunday. The next destination was Paris. Wagner's adventures (or rather miseries) in the French capital could be the subject of an entire paper. However, we mustn't close this chapter without a note on the fate of Robber, the Newfoundland. He lived cooped up with Wagner and Minna in a tiny Paris flat. His gargantuan appetite proved a problem, given the family's straightened circumstances, and he also terrified visitors. Eventually he ran away. On one occasion, when out walking, Wagner thought he recognised him in the distance and set off in hot pursuit, chasing him through remote and unfamiliar parts of Paris only to lose him again, this time for good. One can hardly blame Robber for preferring Liberty, Equality and Fraternity with canine Parisians to a supporting role in the lunatic household of Richard Wagner.

From Paris, the next move in 1842 was four hundred miles back to Dresden where *Rienzi* was performed with tremendous success, followed by *Der fliegender Holländer* with rather less success. Wagner was not too impressed by his fellow Saxons, whom he

described with his usual frankness as 'greasy, crude, boring, lazy and coarse'. But he soon threw himself into his work.

Lohengrin was written and the first sketches of what would eventually become *Der Ring des Nibelungen* were drafted. The story of Wagner's involvement in the revolutionary activities of 1848-49 is well known, as are the details of the warrant for his arrest and his flight to Switzerland with the help of Franz Liszt. Once again he was on the run, but out of this exhilarating and perilous chain of events soon emerged the tremendous enterprises of the *Ring*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. His travels now took him to Zürich, Munich, Luzern, back to France, into other parts of Germany and finally - when granted a full pardon in 1862 - back to Saxony. He visited Italy on numerous occasions, especially in later life whenever he found the Bavarian storm clouds - 'those damn potato sacks' he called them - depressing.

Dreams of America and death in Venice

The Germans have always had a love affair with Italy and, in this respect Wagner was typical of his countrymen. He set two early operas in Italy - *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi* - before discovering his own distinctive musical voice and moving away from historical subjects. In his last years, as the heart spasms became more frequent and he succumbed to emotional and physical exhaustion, he spoke of handing over the Bayreuth Festival and the performances of *Parsifal* to Angelo Neumann and settling down in Italy. But when he was in Italy he spoke of moving to America and giving the Americans exclusive performing rights for *Parsifal*. He imagined setting up in Minnesota a special school in which to train singers for his works. But the whole project would have involved an endowment of one million US dollars, a colossal sum in the 1870's, and this failed to materialise. Some parts of the American dream might have become a reality if he had been younger or lived longer. How different the world's perception of him might have been. He had a deep interest in Asian cultures and religions and, at one point, spoke admiringly of New Zealand.

To the very end, Wagner the Wanderer was still roaming the earth in his dreams as much as in reality. His restless spirit was stilled only by death (and who can be certain of that?) on an afternoon in 1883 in Venice, far from Bayreuth, Leipzig, Dresden and Riga, Paris, London, Munich, Palermo, Prague, Moscow, St Petersburg, Vienna, the Norwegian fjords, Zürich, Luzern and the German theatres to which he had devoted those early, precarious years. His restlessness was at once a source of torment and a stimulus to greater things. We should not underestimate its role in shaping and defining the unique phenomenon that is the art of Richard Wagner.