

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THE RICHARD WAGNER VERBAND

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No – things could not have continued in this way. The Bayreuth Festival already has a 33-year history under the dynamic leadership of Cosima Wagner. And the last will of our master, Richard Wagner, an idea brought to life by himself and Friedrich von Schoen, is wasting away, threatened by financial depletion: the Bayreuth Bursary Fund, which should at least enable poor young artists to experience Bayreuth for free. Would that not be a wonderful task for us women, could we not thus become Senta?

Such thoughts must have been going through the mind of Anna Held, the young teacher from Leipzig. Being a woman, she followed up her thoughts with action. This resulted in the founding of the 'Richard Wagner Verband deutscher Frauen' (RWVdF) (Richard Wagner Association of German Women) on 13th February 1909 in Leipzig's "Palm Garden", which was under the very highest patronage of Her Imperial and Royal Highness, the Crown Princess Cecilie of Prussia and the German Reich from 1910.

The first chairwoman was Margarete Strauss, née Hauswaldt, from Magdeburg – Anna Held became the secretary. By the hundredth year since Richard Wagner's birth in 1913, the assets of the foundation, the interest from which was used to fund the annually awarded Bayreuth Bursaries, were intended to grow to one million reichsmarks. Then, in August 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II called his "shimmering army" to the battle field, which three years later would be nothing more than a mass of field grey uniforms in the trenches near Verdun. November of 1918 signalled the end of the German empire and the Festival's trumpet horns fell silent. They remained so until 1924, when, thanks to the "national thanks of the German people" and the generous waiving of fees on the part of the international singers, Siegfried Wagner was once again able to issue invitations to Bayreuth. He did this with cautious innovations moving towards stylised theatre, through Alfred Roller with "Tristan" and "Tannhäuser" – with Arturo Toscanini holding the baton in the orchestra pit.

Marianne Lange, née Petschke, had taken over the Reich Chair of the RWVdF, Margarete Strauß moved to the Bursary Fund. Money was collected again, the number of regional associations, including Vienna and Linz, grew and the foundation's assets, which had been lost in the inflation of 1923, once again reached the million mark. In 1939 the signs were already pointing back to war. Winifred Wagner had taken over leadership of the Festival following the deaths of her husband, Siegfried, and mother-in-law, Cosima, in 1930. She engaged two outstanding artists as director and stage designer in the shape of Heinz Tietjen and Emil Preetorius. Wilhelm Furtwängler also came with them. But in 1943 and 1944, only "Die Meistersinger" ("The Master Singers") were left in the Festival programme until full-blown war put a stop to all theatre. In February of 1945, bombs fell on Haus Wahnfried.

The newly founded empire of 1871 had found its myth in "The Ring of the Nibelung", even though Richard Wagner had increasingly stood in opposition to Bismarck's foundation of the Reich – holding on to the romantic ideal of a democratically founded Reich in the spirit of 1848. Following the dictate of Versailles in 1919, German nationals again started to rally around the idea of Bayreuth, and at the re-opening in 1924, the audience sang the German National Anthem after Hans Sachs's closing address. Adolf Hitler initiated lauding from the audience, but prevented

himself from giving the Nazi Salute and singing the national anthem. Winifred Wagner was given a free rein in artistic matters beyond the Reichsmusikkammer (Reich Chamber of Music). But after 1945 the simple re-establishment of the Festival had become unthinkable. Thomas Mann refused to take up the Festival leadership that was offered to him once it became clear that the brothers Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner would take over the family inheritance. Eventually, it was the American occupying forces that favoured the reopening of the Festival.

Wolfgang Wagner tried to recover all that could be salvaged from the Festival Theatre whilst Wieland performed an analytical study of Wagner's works at Lake Constance. In 1951, he staged "Parsifal" seen from a perspective of psychology and depth psychology. He took the "Ring" to Epidauros, the Greek Theatre, with Hans Hotter as Zeus-Wotan and Astrid Varnay in the role of Athena-Brünnhilde.

At the re-founding on 9th October 1947, in the English occupied zone in Hannover, Lotte Albrecht-Potonié became the first Federal Chairwoman of the Richard Wagner Verband. The adjunct "of German Women" fell from the name in a new statute on 12th June 1949. In Wieland Wagner and Lotte Albrecht-Potonié, Bayreuth and the RWV had two remarkable, intellectual individuals at the helm. The tall, slim figure of Ms Albrecht became a symbol of the post-war years.

She had a regal manner, was unchallengeable and would receive people, tolerate them, and send them away again – always with the right remark. I was able to meet her in 1952, and then in 1959, when I represented the RWV Freiburg for the first time at the Richard Wagner Verband's 50th anniversary during the national conference in Mannheim.

With her dark glasses and severe centre parting, Mercedes Bahlsen, née Tischbein, or "Mami Bahlsen" as she was respectfully and affectionately known, took over the reins as association director in 1968.

By 1966, Wolfgang Wagner had become the sole director of the Bayreuth Festival [following the death of Wieland Wagner in 1966]. During the seventies he summoned the most important musical directors to Bayreuth; among them Götz Friedrich, Harry Kupfer and August Everding. Mercedes Bahlsen died in 1980, and now the Richard Wagner Verband could bring emancipation from the other side: Helmut Goldmann became the first man to lead the association. He had returned to Germany from South America, to where his parents had emigrated: A professor, conductor by trade and working as director of the "E-Musik" branch of the Bavarian Broadcasting Service in Nuremberg, he was an individual who seemed made to become the first man to direct the association. I became his deputy.

In the meantime, Richard Wagner associations had been founded in Paris (thanks to the friendship between Pierre Devraigne and Bayreuth's mayor, Hans Walter Wild) and London, which saw the German national association as their umbrella organisation. However, they had no voting rights at our national conferences and were not able to obtain any Bayreuth bursaries. The internationalisation of the hitherto German association became a top priority – this was actively driven forward in France by Jacques Grilliat in Nantes and Henri Perrier in Lyon and by Frank Paul Sauerlaender and Wilhelm Staudinger in Frankfurt, Germany. Helmut Goldmann left us all-too early. But he said to me that "internationalisation must come, but you will never be able to persuade the big German associations to abandon the majority vote system."

Nonetheless, such a thing would never be allowed at UNESCO or in the EU. Efforts at persuasion started to bear fruit and unanimity was declared at an extraordinary general meeting in Wiesbaden in January of 1991. In consequence of this, in May of the same year I was able to announce the existence of the International Association of Richard Wagner Societies at the congress in Lyon.

The constitutions, which remained separate for the national and international associations due to a lack of legal similarities, were drafted by Paul Götz in Bayreuth.

In the period that followed, our French friends (especially Chantal Perrier in Lyon) introduced the idea of an International Singing Competition for Wagnerian Voices, which took place twice in Strasbourg, then in Saarbrücken, in Bayreuth, Venice and Karlsruhe. Those in Austria, Heinrich Weyringer and his Wagner forum, initiated the International Competition for Directing and Stage Design, which has found a permanent home in Graz. Italian colleagues, with Prof. Giuseppe and Alessandra Pugliese, have created the Richard Wagner European Study and Research Centre at Palazzo Vendramin Calergi in Venice.

In 1989/90 came the Wende, the reunification of Germany. With it, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the lowering of the Iron Curtain. The founding of RWV associations in East Germany and Central and Eastern Europe quickly followed. Moscow and Budapest gained theirs before the East German states, and then more came: from St. Petersburg and the Baltic States to Sofia and Zagreb. Southern Europe was represented with Athens and the principal cities of Italy and Spain. Then came associations in the Far and Middle East: There was a presentation at the Peking Conservatoire with insistent questions from the post-Mao generation on "Tannhäuser." HRH Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan issued a generous invitation for seventy participants to the association founding in Abu Dhabi with Zaki Nusseibeh.

In 1991, the differences in the various European legal systems, which still exist today, made it necessary to have two constitutions. These were pushed into the background in the living reality of the RWVI, but legal alignments occurring in the meantime finally allowed a fusion of the two constitutions to come into view.

Influential forces continued to come out of France and Dr Louis Oster from Strasbourg drafted the new, standardised constitution. A new identity for the association was developed in the second century of its existence by Dr Hans-Günter Lanfer in Trier and Prof. Eva Märtson in Hannover and presented at the 2006 IRWC in Tallinn. In May of 2008, Ms Märtson took over direction of the association at the IRWC in Geneva. From the 2009 delegates' meeting in Dresden onwards, the new constitution of the RWVI will replace that adopted in 1991 in Lyon. The stage is therefore set for an optimistic and promising second century: un deuxième siècle gros de l'avenir, as our French colleagues would say.

Richard Wagner embodied this very spirit in his works and reminds us of this with words he gave to Daland at the age of twenty-eight in his "Flying Dutchman": "Mir ist nicht bang!", "I am not afraid!"

There can be no future without the past:
the traditionalist looks back into a past distorted by nostalgia
and to good old days that never were;
the utopian looks forward to a golden, imaginary future that will never be.
Both miss out on the present with the hic et nunc of questions to be answered
and tasks to be completed. Let us take care of those!

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