

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction



The great days of 1876, when performances of *The Ring of the Nibelung* took place that had been prepared under the direct supervision of the man who created it, belong to history; they form a milestone in the efforts of the German spirit to achieve an authentic culture bearing the stamp of truth. But when we ask ourselves what the direct consequences of this unique artistic event have been, we can point to only two: the formation of the Society of Bayreuth Patrons and the performances of the *Ring* that have been given in so many theatres. These two phenomena represent two fundamentally different attitudes to art. The Society of Bayreuth Patrons is the product of a conviction shared by an increasing number of individuals that in the public life of our time art does not occupy the position which is its due. But the majority of the so-called public are quite unaware of this: most of those who flock to our theatres are driven by the greed for sensation: mere search for pleasure, stimulating or sedative as the case may be, is the strongest motive. Such an attitude to art is indecent – there is no other word for it. Nobody can deny that this is the case nowadays, and it is for this reason that the remarkable fact of the *Ring* having been performed in so many theatres and enthusiastically received in the course of the last three years affords no grounds for optimism. All the same, we must not underrate its significance: it eloquently testifies to the fact that, for all the many signs of spiritual degradation, the feeling amongst the people for what is great and noble has not been lost: it is instantly aroused when the right voice appeals to it. A response such as this provoked by a new work of art is similar to the effect created by a natural phenomenon: the forces which come into play stem from the purely sensory sphere of perception. These are certainly fundamental to all the higher manifestations of the mind, but if elemental forces are left to themselves nothing permanent can ever be created; only when seized upon by an intellect possessing

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the highest ideals can they become the basis of great and enduring achievements. It is the aim of the Society of Bayreuth Patrons to bring this about, namely, 'the creation of a *permanent institution for the cultivation of a classic tradition of performance in authentic style of original German musical and music-dramatic works*'. Not until this goal is achieved can we claim that the 1876 production of the *Ring* has really borne fruit. For it was not just a matter of producing a new work, but of endeavouring to present it in its proper form, so providing an example of the only true music-dramatic style, virtually unknown in our modern theatres. The erection of the Festival Theatre at Bayreuth and the performances there of the *Ring* have demonstrated that in at least a portion of the community the desire to create such an ideal drama has been active and effective. For the first time, members of the public approached art in the right spirit – they did not, like the usual audiences, passively await whatever was offered, but themselves took active steps to bring it to life. Directly representative of the community is, of course, the company of artists striving to create a work of art. Such a company can be formed only when a number of artists share the conviction that a divine creative power has found paramount expression in one single individual, and accordingly regard it as their mission to give material form to the ideal images which this genius had hitherto conceived of only as possibilities. Furthermore this individual artist, divinely inspired, should feel compelled to communicate to his colleagues and through them to the whole world what in solitude filled him with ecstasy. For his work can only be achieved if he expresses himself totally through it.

This strange process was apparent throughout the rehearsals of the first German stage festival, rehearsals which had such importance for the development of the new music-dramatic art. But before describing as faithfully as I can the course of those rehearsals I must give the reader a general idea of the remarkable nature of the personal intervention by the creator of the work. His aim was to imbue the company of artists as one organic entity with that complete freedom of expression which as a rule is exercised only by a single personality. In order to achieve this artistic freedom the performers must from the outset subordinate themselves without reservation to the creator of the work, and thereby acquire that gift of self-abandonment (*Selbstentäusserung*) which, in his penetrating

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

essay 'On Actors and Singers',* Wagner singled out as the basis of all dramatic talent. He himself possessed an amazing gift for transformation into any conceivable shape or form – like Proteus, he could, as if by magic, assume at a stroke any role in any situation – indeed, in the rehearsals of the *Ring* he demonstrated these powers so fully that it was as though he himself were the 'total actor' (*Gesamtschauspieler*) of the entire drama. This power to influence and vitalize directly by example bears witness to Wagner's affinity with Shakespeare. What is especially important, though, is that the principles governing his style of dramatic presentation were essentially in accord with Shakespeare's. All the directions that he gave pertaining to the action – to the gestures, the positioning, the articulation of the sung words – were governed by what he himself has described as the basic principle of Shakespearean drama, namely, 'mimic-dramatic naturalness' (*mimisch-dramatisch Natürlichkeit*). But it would be a mistake to suppose that the dramatic-musical style aimed at involved no more than this. As I have already pointed out in my study of *The Ring of the Nibelung*,† the distinctive characteristic of the work is the combination it achieves of a highly stylized art, striving for the concrete realization of an ideal, with an art rooted in fidelity to nature (*Naturwahrheit*). Though everything Wagner did at the rehearsals – every movement, every expression, every intonation – bore out this principle of fidelity to nature, one must not forget that he was simultaneously handling the whole vast music-dramatic apparatus and endeavouring to convert it into a living breathing organism. He needed such a vast apparatus because his purpose was to create realistic images within the sphere of art. Only by bringing into play all the artistic powers at our disposal is such a total effect possible: an effect at once idealistic and realistic. But this goal will only be achieved when the resources of art are so well co-ordinated that we cease to be aware of them as such and are conscious solely of the dramatic action unfolding before our eyes. There could be no question then of a coldly objective, elegant, formal art – nor on the other hand of a mere over-stimulation and stupefaction of the senses. The achieve-

* 'Über Schauspieler und Sänger', *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 2nd edn, 10 vols., Leipzig 1897 (rpt. Hildesheim 1976), Vol. IX, p. 230. (Trans.)

† *Das Bühnenfestspiel in Bayreuth*, 2nd edn, Munich, C. Mehrhoff, 1877.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ment would be a triumph of the spirit, indeed the highest triumph; that of being able to master all the tumultuous workings of the sensual and daemonic forces of life and emerge victorious from the encounter.

And indeed it has been Wagner's decisive achievement to liberate us from the witches' brew of modern opera by creating a genuinely German dramatic-musical art. The essential feature of this art – the feature we think of as the German style – is that in articulation and in characterization everything must appear authentic and natural. There must never be any suggestion of false pathos or mannerism; even the most violent outbursts of passion must possess what Schiller so aptly termed a *forceful* beauty (*energischen Schönheit*). This heroic element, this character of powerful masculinity, was present in all the many instructions Wagner gave in order to secure a correct and vital performance. To witness his style of dramatic-musical performance was to feel infused by an invigorating force. What struck one above all was the sheer strength of his vitality and, bound up with this, that wonderful capacity for flexible accurate representation (*plastisch bestimmtester Gestaltung*) which is evident in all his creations and the ruling principle of their performance, affecting equally the mimetic action, the articulation of the words, the musical expression of the emotions and the execution of the symphonic passages. Yet all the extraordinary things Wagner did at the rehearsals created the impression of having been *improvised*: it was as though everything he demanded and himself so eloquently demonstrated occurred to him in a flash with complete lucidity just at that very moment. The compulsion to communicate with the utmost clarity and definiteness took creative shape in the act of expression. Fully to understand his achievement, though, one must realize that what he was striving to convey was the essence of the nature of the world, the essence underlying external realities perceived by the senses. The characteristic which stamps the style of *The Ring of the Nibelung* is that here an undreamt-of super-reality (*Überwirklichkeit*) is given life and shape, and this characterized everything the composer did when his work was being rehearsed. Thus we can conclude these general considerations by affirming that through the performance of the *Ring* the goal was achieved of combining the realistic style of Shakespeare with the idealistic style of antique tragedy; of bringing about an organic union between a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

highly stylized art, striving for a direct embodiment of the ideal, with an art rooted in fidelity to nature (*Naturwahrheit*). An ideal naturalness and an ideality made wholly true to nature – this is the direction in which Wagner was endeavouring to guide his performers.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)



Josef Hoffmann, Vienna: designs for *Rheingold*, 1876

Above: Scene 1, At the bottom of the Rhine

Below: Scene 4, Valhalla transformation

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Das Rheingold



Scene 1

Nowhere in the *Ring* is the demand for an ideal art rooted in fidelity to nature more pressing and yet more difficult to meet than in *Das Rheingold* – indeed its production can be regarded as a test case for a proper understanding of Richard Wagner's music-dramatic style. The main reason for apparent failure in a performance of this work is that it must be governed by a vital and wilful determination, which is, nevertheless, discreetly controlled. This is the essence of artistic style and must be operative; its absence cannot be made good by warmth of expression or outbursts of passion. An instruction given by Wagner for the performance of the main theme illustrates this difference between mere display of feeling and a truly artistic delivery:



He wanted the high notes of the horns, especially the climactic G of the widely arched melody, to be played 'very tenderly and with sustained softness', and this to apply to every subsequent repetition. The players must consciously counteract here the natural tendency to make a crescendo on a rising progression; only then will the figure have the desired quality of ideal freedom. Furthermore, sustained softness will serve to clarify the overlapping deliveries of the theme in the complicated passage for eight horns. Regarding the orchestral prelude as a whole, built on a single E flat major triad, Wagner insisted that its huge crescendo should throughout create the impression of a phenomenon of nature developing quite of its own accord – so to say, an impersonal impression. Nothing must be forced; there must be no sense of a conscious purpose imposing itself. Thus the goal will be achieved. It will be as though we were experiencing the magical effects of an ideal presence; as though, no

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Das Rheingold*

longer conscious of the music, we had become immersed in the primal feelings of all living things and were peering directly into the inner workings of natural forces.*

Wagner had comparatively few remarks to make about the first scene. The Rhinemaidens had been so thoroughly rehearsed at the piano that they sang their roles with virtuosic ease and confidence – and how superbly the Alberich† brought out the daemonic nature of this character has often been remarked upon in the *Bayreuther Blätter*. Wagner gave especial attention to the harmonic figurations of the strings' accompaniment to Woglinde's joyous song just after the rise of the curtain. They should be as pianissimo as possible. The unexpected conversion of a powerful crescendo into a piano‡ created the effect of a transformation of the waves of water into a single human figure, 'slender and light as though created out of nothing',* moving freely and gracefully before us.

I will now make some general remarks about the principal features of the performance of this opening scene. Everything combined to produce a totally unified effect. The swift, impetuous movements of the Rhinemaidens and the corresponding orchestral passages were co-ordinated with hair's-breadth precision. It also seemed to me particularly noteworthy that in the songs of the Rhinemaidens, even when the flow of lyrical feeling predominated, the sense of an ongoing dramatic dialogue was strictly maintained. Only when it is performed in this way does the closed unity of the musical structure of this scene reveal itself. Here Wagner solved the

* For the creation of this absolutely magical effect it was necessary for the orchestra to be invisible. In this context I must take the opportunity to repeat my conviction that this invisibility, made possible by the amphitheatrical structure of the auditorium, is the essential precondition for an ideal performance of the *Ring*. I am speaking from experience when I say that many who when they went to the Festival were out of sympathy with Wagner's ideas were painfully disillusioned the first time they visited an ordinary theatre again; they found themselves longing for that space where the simplicity left the mind free to attune itself to the mood of devotion necessary for the reception of artistic works of deep import. Another feature of the Bayreuth theatre that deserves mention is the handling of the curtain. There it is not raised as in other theatres; instead two curtains hanging side by side are swung back. This has the advantage that the stage picture, instead of appearing bit by bit, is revealed to our astonished eyes in a single instant.

† Karl Hill. (Trans.)

‡ The device, frequently used by Beethoven, of a sudden pianissimo after a crescendo is of the utmost stylistic significance in that it can be regarded – so it seems to me – as a direct expression of that control of form over matter which Schiller held to be the supreme function of art. A particularly memorable example of the device is the blood-curdling effect of the rising and falling scales in the overture to *Don Giovanni*.

• Schiller. (Trans.)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Scene 1

problem of how to create a continuous flow out of a succession of simple periodic forms. The magical charm, touched with irony, which makes one feel that some of these melodies have an affinity with Mozart's is spoilt if they are delivered sentimentally or with a deliberate self-conscious coquetry. The sensibilities tread a fine borderline here between semblance and truth and there must be no slipping in either direction. All the Rhinemaidens' utterances must be infused with a naive gaiety – in glaring contrast to Alberich. A successful presentation of this role is one of the most difficult tasks of music-dramatic art, the main reason for this being that only through his own creative intuition can the singer find the quality of voice that exactly reflects the ebb and flow of Alberich's emotions. In this opening scene, in which he performs the terrible deed that launches the whole drama of the *Ring*, we must become involved with Alberich, we must be made to see straight into the dark core of his inner being. This can only be done through the voice. His voice must vibrate with the fire that is consuming him, the fire which in this scene is the ruling element of his nature just as the soothing water is that of the Rhinemaidens. I have already indicated that at the Festival it was precisely this character that was so convincingly performed; especially skilful was the psychologically truthful rendering of Alberich's mounting greed. The opening words: 'He, He! Ihr Nicker...' were delivered with a certain rough dryness of tone, the voice growing warmer and more impassioned as he is swept by lust compounded by hatred and fury at the climax of:



I quote this passage because it provides such a striking example of Wagner's power to pinpoint every emotional nuance. The singer must not let his voice drop and must above all be careful not to throw away the vital second note, D; vital because this is the note* which especially characterizes the dwarf's desperate state of mind.

The passage indicating most clearly how Alberich should be characterized is his lament after Flosshilde has deceived him so humiliatingly:

* Forming the word 'eine'. (Trans.)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10718-1 - Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival

Heinrich Porges

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Das Rheingold*

The genuineness of the outburst could easily lead the singer to endow it with a quality of noble pathos; but here, and in every other such passage revealing the core of Alberich's mentality, the revelation should be that of an uncontrollable yet base and common greed. This is the fundamental trait of this child of the night, half animal, half sprite.

But the scene as a whole reaches its climax when the sunlight penetrates the dark water causing the Rhinegold to glow. At this point the Rhinemaidens' movements should match the smooth even motion of the violins' accompanying figure:



As the glowing gold brightens to its full splendour, the trumpet delivers the Rhinegold theme in C major, radiating a sublime Apollonian joy:



Wagner insisted that the Rhinemaidens, throughout the dithyrambic jubilant song in which their childlike pleasure is expressed with such charm, should make their graceful swaying movements in *front* of the gold. Every detail of the musical rendering expressed the spirit of the composition as a whole, a spirit (so one felt) akin to that of the supreme masterpieces of Greek sculpture. There was nothing cold about the performance and at the same time no exaggerated expressiveness that would have disturbed the pure flow of the melodic line and the harmonic structure. Even when Woglinde is delivering the solemn passage, touched with tragedy:

