

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'

---



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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Heinrich Porges

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'

*An Eye-Witness Account of  
the Stage Rehearsals of  
the First Bayreuth Festival*

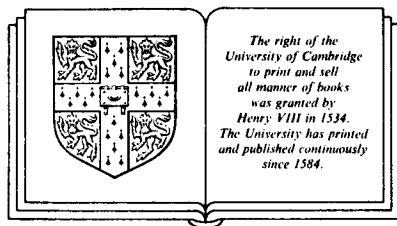
---



Heinrich Porges

*translated by*

Robert L. Jacobs



Cambridge University Press

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521107181](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521107181)

Originally published in German as *Die Bühnenproben zu den Bayreuther Festspielen des Jahres 1876*, appearing first in instalments in the *Bayreuther Blätter* between 1881 and 1896. Publication in book form:  
*Das Rheingold*, Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner, Chemnitz, 1881  
*Die Walküre*, Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner, Chemnitz, 1882  
*Siegfried*, Verlag von Siegmund & Volkening, Leipzig, 1896  
*Götterdämmerung*, Verlag von Siegmund & Volkening, Leipzig, 1896

First published in English by Cambridge University Press 1983  
as *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival*

© Cambridge University Press 1983

Reprinted 1985

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

This digitally printed version 2009

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 82-12787*

ISBN 978-0-521-23722-2 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10718-1 paperback

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# Contents

---



Translator's preface	Page	vii
Introduction		1
<i>Das Rheingold</i>		7
<i>Die Walküre</i>		41
<i>Siegfried</i>		79
<i>Götterdämmerung</i>		117

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)


---

## Translator's Preface

---



A witty producer of operas, noted for his enterprise, recently dismissed his critics with the remark that each wrote 'as though he had a private line to Parnassus'. Such a 'private line' is provided by this authoritative record of what Wagner said and did during the stage rehearsals of the first Bayreuth festival and of how he regarded the *Ring*.

On 6 November 1872 Wagner wrote the following letter to Heinrich Porges:

I have you in mind for a task which will be of the greatest importance to the future of my enterprise. I want you to follow all my rehearsals very closely . . . and to note down everything I say, even the smallest details, about the interpretation and performance of our work, so that a tradition goes down in writing.

The late Curt von Westernhagen, in his recently translated *Wagner: A Biography*, after quoting this letter, paid a glowing tribute to the book which resulted, *Die Bühnenproben zu den Bayreuther Festspielen des Jahres 1876*:

Porges devoted himself to the task conscientiously and with amazing insight and perception. He was not only thoroughly familiar with the score . . . but also, thanks to his education and culture, fully able to appreciate its literary and philosophical content. We sense the fresh air of first-hand experience in his description of how Wagner transformed himself into each character . . . The distinguishing characteristic . . . is his ability always to locate the endless detail of Wagner's individual instructions . . . in an over-all intellectual context.<sup>1</sup>

We all know that in many respects the actual performances themselves fell short, that Richter's tempos were faulty, that the Siegfried was a disappointment, that only the Alberich (Karl Hill) was outstanding, that scene changes were bungled, that the dragon's neck was missing. In the 'fresh air' of Porges' record we experience Wagner's vision of the ideal, a vision of both the microcosm and the macrocosm. Woglinde's delivery of the Renunciation

1. Cambridge 1978, pp. 489-90.

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Translator's preface

of Love motive must be utterly impersonal, the melody 'must have the chiselled quality of a piece of sculpture'; the accents must fall upon the upper notes of the Donner motive when it is thundered out in the prelude to the first act of *Die Walküre* ("Play it with greater awareness!" [Wagner] kept calling) and the staccato of the strings' crotchets as they die away 'should be weighty, not pointed'; the tempo of the Magic Fire music at the close of Wotan's Farewell should be dictated by the need to make each semiquaver of the harps' figure 'clearly perceptible'. And so on and so on, accompanied throughout by music examples – 411 of them – and accompanied by, or rather one should say accompanying, general directives of vital importance. The audibility of the words was 'a problem that constantly cropped up during the rehearsals'. It was not only that when Sieglinde, whom Brünnhilde has rescued, wishes to know who it was that bade Brünnhilde do so ('Wer hiess dich Maid, dem Harst mich entführen?') every word must be clearly articulated, 'otherwise all was lost'; every word of the assembling Valkyries' exchanges must also be audible: 'to ensure this it should be the rule to deliver all passages of dialogue . . . weightily in a restrained tempo and return to the original faster tempo for the elemental, exultant outbursts'. In another context Porges writes: 'Wagner declared that the orchestra should support the singer as the sea does a boat, rocking but never upsetting or swamping – over and over again he employed that image.' Equally significant, bringing home yet again that in Wagner's mind the drama, always the drama, was the 'commanding form' (to borrow Suzanne Langer's expression), is the directive that when motives are repeated the manner of the repetition should depend upon the dramatic context: 'A particular remark of Wagner's I must not pass over: when the (Valhalla) motive is depicting an actual happening it should be delivered in a grand style, slowly and broadly, but when serving as a reminiscence – as for example in Sieglinde's narrative – slightly faster and with accents less pointed . . . A fine line must always be drawn between the degree of expression demanded by a present event and a recollected one.' And since drama is the 'commanding form' it must be 'a matter of principle never, except in very rare cases, to transform scenic effects into purely pictorial ones'. For 'drama is a medium through which life is conveyed in the form of life and life is in a perpetual state of flux'.

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Translator's preface

Scenic design as such only comes into its own when the action comes to a standstill (as in *Das Rheingold* after the giants have borne Freia away and the gods feel their youth slipping from them); then 'it is as much the scenic designer's function to aid the dramatist by providing a significant and gripping spectacle as it is the composer's to reveal the situation's inner meaning'. As if all this were not enough, Porges, in his introduction and as he takes us through the drama scene by scene describing the manner and the whys and wherefores of Wagner's directions, gives us more than a glimpse of what Wagner conceived to be the drama's inner meaning. What the *Ring* represents, we come to realize, is man's Laocoon-like struggle with his 'daemonic' nature, with his unfathomable, elemental passions and greeds and lusts. The supreme manifestation of this 'daemonic' nature is the betrayed Brünnhilde's demand for an avenger, 'delivered in a voice of steel: "Wer bietet mir nun das Schwert, mit dem ich die Bande zerschnitt?"', which . . . drew from Wagner – as though he himself were carried away by its elemental power – the exclamation: "This is the most terrible moment!"' It is because Wagner was capable of creating a situation such as this and then by the power of his music in the Immolation scene transcending it, that Porges' definition of Wagner's achievement in the *Ring* as 'a triumph of the spirit', in that he 'was able to master the tumultuous workings of all the sensuous and daemonic forces of life and emerge victorious from the encounter', rings true. More clearly than ever we see what so many have refused to acknowledge: that the greatness of Wagner's music is part of a still greater whole.

As Wagner well knew when he gave him that commission, Porges was a man of exceptional parts. The following entry from Riemann's *Musiklexikon* speaks for itself:

Porges, Heinrich, born 25 November 1837 in Prague, died 17 November 1900 in Munich; German writer on music, studied music and philosophy, in 1863 became co-editor with Brendel of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in Leipzig. In 1867 went to Munich as editor of the *Süddeutsche Presse*, from 1880 onwards functioned there as music critic of the *Neueste Nachrichten* and in 1886 founded the Porges Choral Society which besides works by Bach and Palestrina devoted itself especially to those of Berlioz, Liszt, Cornelius and Bruckner. He was also for some time a piano teacher at the Royal Music School . . .<sup>2</sup>

Porges' first contact with Wagner was in 1863, the year of his vain

<sup>2</sup> Riemann's *Musiklexikon*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus, London 1975, p. 401.



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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Translator's preface

struggle to re-establish his career with a production of *Tristan* in Vienna. It was Carl Tausig, it seems, who having given a highly successful concert with Liszt in Prague in 1861, put into Wagner's head the idea of a concert there; Liszt, Cornelius and Bülow were on intimate visiting terms with the Porges family in Prague – a Jewish family, but in this context that did not matter – one of whom, Heinrich's younger brother Fritz, a doctor, was living in Vienna.<sup>3</sup> Fritz enthusiastically supported the idea. He passed it on to Heinrich, an ardent adherent of the 'New Music' and man of the musical world who knew the ropes: which hall to book, from whom to raise a guarantee, where to publicize. So effective were his efforts that Wagner enjoyed the memorable experience of a concert which was not only artistically but also financially successful.<sup>4</sup>

In 1864 the relationship between the two developed rapidly. Porges was one of the friends who arranged the sale of Wagner's effects after he fled from his creditors in Vienna; later that year, when his fortunes were changed overnight by King Ludwig of Bavaria, Wagner invited Porges not only to come to Munich as his private secretary, but to *live* there with him: 'How important for me and how beautiful always to have your understanding, friendly companionship!'<sup>5</sup> But Porges preferred to devote his pen to Wagner's cause – to co-edit the Wagner-orientated *Süddeutsche Press*, write a piece on *Lohengrin*, performed in Munich in 1867, and an essay on *Tristan* (published posthumously in 1906). In 1869, when *Das Rheingold* was produced in Munich against Wagner's wishes and critics praised the performance and damned the work, Porges wrote, so Cosima told Nietzsche, 'some beautiful, profound words of great congeniality'.<sup>6</sup> In 1872 an article on Wagner's ceremonial performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* at the laying of the foundation-stone of the Festival Theatre gave Wagner the idea of commissioning him to record the rehearsals of the *Ring*.

3 Not Heinrich, as Westernhagen says (*Wagner* Vol. I, p. 296). See below, n. 4.

4 'Wagner was a damned difficult man to deal with', Fritz told Heinrich. Heinrich was nevertheless bowled over by his personality when he came to Prague. Ranking him with Liszt, his other idol (he had at one time contemplated the career of a piano virtuoso), he told his fiancée that throughout his life he intended to serve those two: 'I shall not rest until I have done all in my power to reveal to the world these wonderful men and their creations.' (See the Prague musical monthly *Deutsche Arbeit*, VIII and IX, 1909.)

5 *Richard Wagner an Freunde und Zeitgenossen*, ed. Erich Kloss, Leipzig, 1912, p. 404.

6 Cit. Westernhagen, *Wagner*, Vol. II, p. 416.

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Translator's preface

After the festival the relationship appears to have been soured for a while by an article of Porges in the *Bayreuther Blätter* in 1880 on art and religion bringing in Schelling, who was not Wagner's philosopher. But it was soured only for a while. Porges not only recorded the rehearsals of *Parsifal* but trained the chorus of Flower-maidens, earning from Wagner the nickname 'Blumenvater'. After Wagner's death Porges continued to do this. When he died in 1900 – of a heart-attack whilst conducting Liszt's *Christus* – Siegfried Wagner delivered a funeral oration, reprinted in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, which makes clear how much his support meant to Cosima: 'As he stood by my father's side, so, like a faithful Eckhart, he stood by my mother's . . . when visibility was poor and some vessels sailed blindly hither and thither, friend Porges put his trust in the compass of his convictions.'

The *Bühnenproben* was originally published in instalments in the monthly *Bayreuther Blätter* edited by Hans von Wolzogen. The section on *Das Rheingold* was brought out in three issues in 1880, that on *Die Walküre* in four issues in 1881, that on *Siegfried* in four issues in 1884, 1886, 1890 and 1893, and that on *Götterdämmerung* in a single issue in 1896. Its publication in book form was equally protracted: it was commenced by a Chemnitz firm, which printed the *Rheingold* and *Walküre* sections in 1881 and 1882, and when that firm got into difficulties it was completed by a Leipzig firm in 1896. The fact that it was in 1896 that the *Ring* was first performed again at Bayreuth has an obvious bearing on why the *Bayreuther Blätter* brought out the section on *Götterdämmerung* and why the publication of the book was completed in that year. Why a book of such obvious musicological and aesthetic importance – required reading for anyone actively concerned with a performance of the *Ring* and anyone concerned to think seriously about the work – has not been reissued and not been translated before is an interesting question. When I asked Dr Westernhagen why it had not been reissued he wrote: 'Cosima relied on her memory and Wieland had the self-confidence of a grandson.' He might have added that during the intervening years of the Nazi regime the reissue of a book by a Jew, let alone a book upon Wagner, was unthinkable, and that it is only in the latter half of this century that the shadow of Wagner's influence on Hitler has lifted from

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Translator's preface

German musical scholarship. In this country the influence of Ernest Newman is no doubt one of the reasons why the book has not been hitherto translated. For all his range and penetration Newman's attitude towards Wagner was never steady and consistent; he never fully accepted what Porges makes crystal clear, and what is nowadays becoming more and more widely acknowledged: that Wagner's music, as I said above, 'is part of a still greater whole'. Neither his *Wagner as Man and Artist* nor his *Life* makes any mention, not even a bibliographical one, of the *Bühnenproben*. It was left to Westernhagen, whose stance towards Wagner is the reverential one of Porges – the stance Newman derided – to plant the idea of its translation.

This all said, it remains to consider a simple and to my mind overriding answer to our question. One has but to put another question, namely, why nearly a hundred years after Wagner's death has the wheel come full circle, why in many quarters – heaven knows how many – is he now revered as once he was? Obviously because the function of the piano as a means of getting to know the masterpieces of opera has been replaced by hi-fi recording, making them accessible to the countless people who are neither pianists nor opera-goers. This translation therefore can be regarded as a sign of the times, a spin-off from the mid-twentieth-century technological revolution. Wagner in his black moods longed for an 'invisible theatre'. Bernard Shaw (in his preface to the 1922 edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite*) confessed that, with due respect to the scenic achievements of Bayreuth, his 'favourite way of enjoying the *Ring* was to sit at the back of a box, comfortably on two chairs, feet up and listen without looking', and went on to assert that 'a man whose imagination cannot serve him better than the most costly devices of the scene painter should not go to the theatre'. What Shaw did not foresee, still less Wagner, was a time when countless people could sit at home, feet up, hi-fi recording equipment at their elbows, translation on their laps, steeping themselves in the fusion of Wagner's music and dramatic poetry.

How inferior this solitary pleasure would be to the *real thing* though – i.e. a production of the *Ring* totally effective because totally faithful to the spirit of Wagner's intentions – this book makes clear.

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

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

### Translator's preface

In this translation I have endeavoured to reproduce the tone as well as the sense of the original, the excitement of one recording for posterity the stage rehearsals of a stupendous masterpiece under the direction of its creator. Somehow a balance had to be struck between the need to provide a readable English version and fidelity to the author's out-of-date high-flown literary style. It was not always easy. I have been greatly helped by Elaine Robson-Scott's scrupulous and stimulating revision and by my publisher's suggestions. I must also express my thanks to Duncan Chisholm for the light his researches threw upon Porges' background, his first contacts with Wagner and the circumstances of the book's publication. Finally I must acknowledge my debt to Dr Westernhagen for further information for this Preface and, above all, for the tribute to the *Bühnenproben* in his *Wagner - A Biography* which put into my head the idea of translating it.

Apart from the correction of obvious typographical errors in the original German edition, the extracts from the libretto and reduced score of the *Ring* are as given by Porges. A few additional extracts are provided by the translator.

The illustrations are reproduced by permission of the Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung/Richard-Wagner-Gedenkstätte, Bayreuth.