

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28254-3 - Wagner: A Biography
Curt von Westernhagen
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Part I: The Early Years (1813–1840)

1

The Wagner Family¹

Germany was only beginning to recover from the horrors of the Thirty Years' War in 1651 when Martin Wagner, a schoolmaster and son of a silver-miner, Moritz Wagner, left Freiberg in Saxony, where he had been born in 1603. His destination was the village of Hohburg, seventeen miles east of Leipzig, and his journey took him past Wurzen, which the Swedes had razed to the ground in spite of its defences. Hohburg, too, had been devastated, the inhabitants had fled and the benefice had been vacant for years. Now, as the villagers gradually returned, their first move was to appoint a schoolmaster to make good their children's neglected education, to work diligently and in the fear of God at instructing them in the true Christian religion and in all Christian doctrines and virtues. It was another four years before a pastor arrived, and then Martin had additionally to assume the duties of sexton, hearing catechisms, singing in the church and playing the organ.

The Wagners remained in the district of the Hohburg hills for the next hundred years, working as village schoolmasters and cantors. In 1666 Martin's son Samuel 'satisfied the examiners' in Thammenhain. In those years there was little enough cause for satisfaction in life or work in those poverty-stricken villages. The plague stalked the land; warning placards were erected on the roads. An appeal was made to the monastery of Meissen to help the 'poor schoolmaster' of Thammenhain. In 1703 his son Emanuel was appointed schoolmaster and organist in Kühren, after having been 'heard by several in singing and in reading and well liked'. 'May God prosper and bless his appointment,' the scribe continues, 'because he has played the clavier for several years too.'

Emanuel's eldest son, Samuel, Richard Wagner's great-

grandfather, was the last of the composer's ancestors to follow this career. After contact with a loftier educational sphere as servant–pupil to the Evangelical Superintendent in Borna, he went to Müglenz, at first as deputy to the old teacher there – who had to pay him from his own meagre salary – and eventually, after qualifying, as schoolmaster, cantor and organist ‘with singing, reading and organ-playing, likewise bellringing and winding the church clock’.

When Samuel died in 1750, the same year as Bach, his eldest son Gottlob Friedrich was fourteen. He is next heard of in Leipzig in 1755 as a Thomaner, a pupil at the Thomasschule. ‘The *subjectum* is not bad *in litteris*,’ a friendly cleric wrote in a letter of recommendation to the pastor of Müglenz, ‘and since he is young you ought to be able to mould him yet. I think the best thing he could do would be to leave Leipzig, because otherwise the all too great licence of the other Thomaner may lead his as yet innocent nature astray!’ This advice was not followed, however, and in 1759 Gottlob Friedrich enrolled at Leipzig University to read theology.

Saxony was doing badly in the war with Prussia at that time and Frederick the Great made his winter quarters in what was then known as the Königshaus (later the Thomäches Haus) in the market square in Leipzig. Napoleon stayed in the same house before the Battle of the Nations in 1813 and later, as a child, Richard Wagner spent the night there when he visited his father's sister, his aunt Friederike. The portraits of fine ladies in hooped skirts, with youthful faces and powdered hair, that still hung on the walls of its abandoned state apartments, filled his imagination with terrifying visions of ghosts.

His friend's fears about the harm that might be done to Gottlob Friedrich's innocent nature were not unfounded: in the thirteenth semester of his university studies he appears in the register of the Thomaskirche, on 23 March 1765, as the father of a child born to Johanna Sophie Eichelin, spinster, the daughter of the respected schoolmaster Gottlob Friedrich Eichel. That was the end of his career as a theologian, and he was lucky to get the job of excise officer at the Ranstadt gate of the city. When young Goethe arrived from Frankfurt to study in Leipzig that October, he must have paid his gate dues to Richard Wagner's grandfather. Unlike Goethe, who assiduously suppressed the information that his grandfather was a tailor, Wagner was not the least ashamed of his forebear. When a caller at Wahnfried mentioned that his father had been

musical director (a municipal appointment) in his home town, Wagner interrupted him with ‘*Stadtmusikus*, you say? You do us an honour then. My grandfather was a tollgate-keeper in Leipzig.’

It was four years before Gottlob Friedrich was able to marry Johanna Sophie. He wanted their two sons (the first child had died) to succeed where he had failed. The elder, Karl Friedrich (born 18 June 1770) – Richard’s father – studied law, the younger theology. Friedrich Wagner became registrar at the police headquarters in Leipzig. In 1798 he married Johanna Rosine Pätz, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of a master baker from Weissenfels. They had nine children in fourteen years of marriage, the youngest, Richard, born only six months before his father’s death, so that he had no memory of him at all; and as though Friedrich Wagner was destined to remain completely unknown to posterity, no portrait of him survives.

Among what is known of him, the outstanding characteristic was a passion for the theatre, not unmixed with a gallant enthusiasm for some of the actresses, as Richard gathered from his mother’s recollections. As well as other lawyers and tradesmen and their families, the regular visitors to their home included the members of the *Seconda* troupe. The plays of Lessing and Schiller were in the company’s repertory and the first performance ever of *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* was a red-letter day for the Wagner family; as the crowd pressed around the theatre exit, all heads were bared as Schiller’s tall figure appeared, and mothers lifted their children up to see: ‘Look, here he comes, that’s him!’

Friedrich Wagner himself acted, in Goethe’s *Die Mitschuldigen* for instance, in amateur performances in a room in the Thomäisches Haus. When E. T. A. Hoffmann came to Leipzig in 1813, as musical director of the *Seconda* company, the first thing he did was visit the inn the actors always patronized. ‘Evening in the Grüne Linde’, he wrote in his diary. ‘Registrar Wagner, an exotic character who imitates Opitz, Iffland etc., really rather well – he seems to be an adherent of the better school, *un poco exaltato* after imbibing a lot of rum.’

They were stirring times when Richard Wagner first glimpsed the light of day on 22 May 1813, between the allied defeat at Bautzen and the Battle of the Nations outside Leipzig. He was born in the house of the Red and White Lion in a street called Der Brühl, and the majestic lion crouching over the porch of the house sends

one's thoughts forward over seven decades to that other house, on the Grand Canal, adorned with a frieze of eagles, where his life ended. The birth of a genius is enveloped in a kind of mystery. And in Wagner's case there are in addition two genealogical mysteries.

The truce agreed on 4 June gave his parents the chance to take a holiday with their new baby in the pretty village of Stötteritz just outside the city, where Friedrich celebrated his forty-third birthday. He was recalled to Leipzig in July, when Napoleon arrived to review his troops, and he was appointed interpreter and acting chief of police by Marshal Davoust. Then at last, on 16 August, the child's christening, delayed by the events of the war, was able to take place in the Thomaskirche, where he received the names Wilhelm Richard.

The truce expired and on 16 October the thunder of cannon announced the start of the battle of Leipzig. The fighting reached the suburbs of the city by 19 October. The tocsin was rung in Der Brühl and when Johanna Wagner leant out of the window she saw the emperor galloping past bareheaded, having lost his hat in his haste. The following days and weeks demanded every ounce of strength Friedrich Wagner possessed, as he worked to restore order. The bodies of men and horses littered the streets in the suburbs, the dead and wounded lay together in the great hall of the Gewandhaus, and an epidemic of typhus broke out, eventually claiming Friedrich himself as one of its victims. His wife published an announcement in the local newspaper:

A victim of his duties, my husband Carl Friedrich Wilhelm Wagner, chief registrar at the Royal Police Headquarters, died on 23 November, in his forty-fourth year, far too early for me and my eight growing children. His worth as man and as friend has been proved to me especially by the exceptionally delicate concern his friends have shown for the well-being of me and my children at this time, but this has also made me all the more sensible of the magnitude of my loss.

There was one friend in particular who at once took the family into his care: Ludwig Geyer. Ludwig Heinrich Christian Geyer was born on 21 January 1779 in Eisleben, in the district of Halle, the son of the clerk to the justices, Christian Gottlieb Geyer. He enrolled at

Leipzig University in 1798 to study law, but had to give up his studies when his father died. Portrait-painting had been a hobby of his, and he now started to attend classes at Oeser's (later Tischbein's) 'Academy of Drawing, Painting and Architecture', where he painted 'old men and young girls'. He became friendly with Friedrich Wagner in 1800, and it was Friedrich who discovered his acting talent, invited him to take part in amateur performances and so set him on the professional career that led Geyer eventually to the Saxon court theatre.

In the summer of 1813 he was playing in Teplitz (now Teplice) in Bohemia with the *Seconda* company. 'I would have loved to come to Leipzig,' he wrote to Friedrich in Stötteritz on 6 June; 'Teplitz arouses my indifference, not to say dislike.' He invited his friends to visit him in Teplitz, and as her husband was recalled to Leipzig in July Johanna went without him, and was inscribed in the register of visitors on 21 July 1813. Ernest Newman's argument (NLRW, II, pp. 608ff.) that the only explanation for this journey of Johanna's in wartime was that she was anxious to show her two-month-old son to his alleged natural father – so indirectly supporting the hypothesis of Geyer's paternity – does not stand up to close scrutiny. Johanna used to take the warm baths at Teplitz every year, and the spa was more secure against war and war's alarms at that particular time than Leipzig, the centre of military activity. Goethe was in Teplitz at the same time, and his diary confirms that the town was quiet, with its descriptions of the comings and goings of other visitors, of his own mineralogical expeditions, of parties and visits to the theatre. A performance of Schiller's *Don Carlos* that he mentions will have given him the opportunity to see Geyer as King Philip, one of his best parts. There is only one reference to the war, a 'gloomy military-political conversation' on 25 July. The idyllic calm ended with the expiry of the truce on 10 August. All visitors had to leave Teplitz, and Johanna too returned to Leipzig.

Geyer hurried to Leipzig to offer help and comfort immediately after Friedrich's death, but had to return to Dresden, where the *Seconda* company was playing. When his daughter Cäcilie, in 1870, sent her half-brother Richard the letters Geyer had written to their mother at that period, he told her that he had been not just touched, but profoundly moved by them. 'It is seldom in civil life that we see so plain an example of complete self-sacrifice for a noble purpose as we find in this case . . . I think I now understand this relationship

completely, although I find it extremely difficult to express my view of it. It seems to me as if our father Geyer believed he was expiating some guilt in sacrificing himself for the whole family.' (14 January 1870)

And yet the whole tone and content of the letters contradict the suspicion Wagner was voicing. 'Over the bier of 1813 you allow the ties of friendship to be fastened yet more tightly,' Geyer wrote to Johanna at the end of the year; 'the invitation to do so is great and noble.' It is only very gradually that the note of love and longing enters what he writes. 'Heaven is very well disposed towards us, it has given me the gratifying vocation of being your friend,' he wrote on 28 January 1814. 'I have a great deal to talk to you about, and I can barely wait until the time when I shall be able to have a heart-to-heart talk with you on the dear old sofa.' Johanna was of one mind with him, and they were married on 28 August 1814.

If Wagner's suspicion was well founded, why should Geyer have expressed himself with such restraint in these letters? (He even uses the formal 'Sie' in addressing her.) Indeed, Wagner himself later changed his mind. The entry in Cosima's diary for 26 November 1878 includes the following: 'I ask Richard: "I suppose Father Geyer was your father?" Richard replies: "I don't think so – my mother loved him – 'elective affinities'."'

But in 1870, still under the impression Geyer's letters had first made on him, he must have said something to Friedrich Nietzsche about his initial suspicion, for in 1888 the latter inserted a footnote in *The Wagner Case*: 'Was Wagner German at all? There is some reason to ask . . . His father was an actor called Geyer. A vulture [Geyer] is almost the same as an eagle [Adler].' Readers at once seized upon what he was hinting – that Wagner was a Jew. They assumed that his one-time friend, who had read the first proofs of Wagner's autobiography, which was still not generally available, must have more, and more reliable, information about the matter. But the inference was Nietzsche's own invention. Geyer is an old German surname, the most famous bearer of it being Florian Geyer, a nobleman who sided with the peasants in the Peasants' War in the early sixteenth century, and there is no onomastic justification for linking it with Adler, which is almost exclusively Jewish. Otto Bournot's research into the family background of Wagner's step-father, published in 1913, revealed that Geyer's ancestors had been organists and cantors at the Evangelical church in Eisleben (where

Luther was born and died) since the seventeenth century. The earliest known, Benjamin Geyer (died 1720), was the municipal director of music; the fact that he lived in the so-called ‘church house’ in Watzdorf from 1686 to 1693 shows that he held a post at the Andreaskirche there.

The other genealogical ‘mystery’ concerns Johanna Wagner. In *Mein Leben* Wagner says that she never gave any of her children a full account, or many details, of her own origins. ‘She came from Weissenfels and acknowledged that her parents had been bakers there . . . A remarkable circumstance was that she was sent to a select educational establishment in Leipzig and enjoyed there the care of one she called a “high-ranking fatherly friend”, whom she later identified as a prince of Weimar, to whom her family in Weissenfels was greatly obliged. Her education at the establishment seems to have ended abruptly on the sudden death of that fatherly friend.’

It was to this that Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Wagner’s son-in-law, was alluding when he wrote to a teacher, one Hellmundt, on 12 December 1913: ‘There is not a single missing link in his mother’s descent, and the little secret it contains is no secret to initiates, and allows her family tree to be traced back to the twelfth century.’² In other words, it was assumed that Wagner’s mother was the natural daughter of Prince Friedrich Ferdinand Constantin of Weimar (1758–93), the younger brother of Goethe’s patron, Grand Duke Karl August. Prince Constantin is known to have been musical and a libertine. His military tutor, Karl von Knebel, wrote: ‘The prince passed his time in reading, writing and, above all, music. This was his favourite occupation, and he possessed no small talent in it. He found nearly every instrument easy; indeed, he cured himself of an indisposition by prolonged music-making.’ His youthful amours did not always lack consequences: he once returned to Weimar from Paris with a Madame Darsaincourt, who bore him a son who was raised in a forester’s family.³

The Prince Constantin hypothesis was accepted not only in the inner circle at Wahnfried but – more important – even by so dispassionate an enquirer as Newman. Why, he argued, would a prince of Weimar have sent the daughter of a Weissenfels baker to receive an education above the average for her class in Leipzig, ‘unless for very good reasons of his own’? He met the objection that Constantin was only sixteen when Johanna was born by

referring to his, and his brother's, known precocity. (NLRW, II, pp. 613ff.)

The one curious thing is that Mrs Burrell, the founder of the famous collection of Wagner documents now in the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, never heard of the hypothesis. She began her researches in the 1890s, when there must still have been memories in a small town like Weissenfels of the mother of so famous a person as Wagner. And what did she learn there? She heard 'from more than one source', 'with variations', that Johanna Rosine Pätz was selected by Karl August and Goethe for the theatre in Weimar, and that Friedrich Wagner had made her acquaintance through Goethe. (NLRW, II, pp. 617ff.)

After the accretions of legend have been removed, the most likely facts are these: after the death of her mother in 1789 and her father's remarriage, Johanna was selected for a career as an actress, not by Karl August but by Constantin; her education for the stage was then ended four years later when the prince died.

But it is almost symptomatic of the extraordinary impression Wagner made, especially on his contemporaries, that even his parentage was a matter to be surrounded by mystery and legend.

No less remarkable is the prophecy made over his cradle. Jean Paul wrote in his preface to E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Fantasiestücke*: 'Until now Apollo has always cast the gift of poetry with his right hand and the gift of music with his left to two people so far apart from each other that to this day we still await the man who will write both the text and the music of a true opera.' That preface, dated 24 November 1813, was written in Jean Paul's home town, Bayreuth.

2

Wagner's Mother

In the autumn of 1814 the family moved to Dresden, where Geyer was well known as a portrait-painter, actor at the court theatre and playwright. His play *Der Bethlehemitische Kindermord* – in spite of its title, ‘The Massacre of the Innocents’, it is a comedy about the ups and downs of an artist’s life – even earned him a certain posthumous reputation when it was published many years later in the cheap and comprehensive series of popular classics, Reclams Universalbibliothek.

Johanna reigned in the hospitable house in the Moritzstrasse, amidst her flock of children, which was increased in the following year by a black-haired daughter, Cäcilie. Geyer’s portrait of his wife shows her as still youthful, apparently on the point of going out in her bonnet and shawl, then suddenly turning back, perhaps in response to a call from the artist, and catching at her shawl, as it slides from her shoulder, with her left hand; her full oval face is turned towards the spectator, smiling and with some surprise in her large eyes.

Wagner described her as ‘a woman remarkable in the eyes of all who knew her’. Certainly in his own case the memory of her is a thread running through his whole life and work. Only a few days before his death he dreamed of her, ‘young and graceful, a radiant vision’.

Her chief attributes were a good temper and a sense of humour, according to *Mein Leben*, but the strain of caring for her large family stifled the expression of maternal tenderness. Wagner could hardly remember ever having been caressed by her, and so was the more strongly affected by one occasion when, as he was being borne sleepily off to bed and raised tearful eyes to her,