

# WAGNER AND THE LITTLE BALLET MASTER THAT COULD

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*When the other big engines refuse, the Little Blue Engine tries to pull a stranded train full of toys and food over the mountain. It's a big job and daunting for the little engine. But the Little Blue Engine persists, saying to himself, as he slowly moves up the mountain; "I think I can, I think I can, I-think-I-can . . ." He reaches the top and rushes triumphantly down the other side: "I thought I could, I thought I could . . ."*

THE MUCH LOVED STORY of the "Little Engine That Could" is intended to teach children the value of persistence and optimism, especially in the face of a daunting and seemingly impossible task. This classic tale sprang often to mind as I began researching the genesis of the premiere of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle* in Bayreuth in 1876.<sup>1</sup> The idea of the small, inadequately equipped engine hauling the loaded, stranded train over the huge mountain and safe to the other side seemed a rather appropriate metaphor for the almost Quixotic endeavour of rehearsing and staging this first *Ring* cycle—and the sense of how narrowly the whole thing avoided becoming a train wreck also plays into this metaphor. The diminutive size of the engine which was the driving force also resonated with my impressions of Wagner's "little balletmaster", Richard Fricke, who was instrumental in getting the *Ring* on. I describe him in this way because this was how Wagner and his wife, Cosima, referred to Fricke—he was for them their "little balletmaster".<sup>2</sup> This is a reference, obviously, to his physical stature, but there is also more at work here: for readers of Fricke's diary accounts of those rehearsals today, there's also an implicit comparison with the towering greatness that was Richard Wagner. Wagner himself was actually also a small man, a fact Fricke refers to several times in his diaries,<sup>3</sup> but in his lifetime, certainly, and cultivated even more carefully and assiduously posthumously, is the image of Wagner as larger than life—a Titan, indeed, as one of his biographers would have it (Köhler 2004).

Certainly Fricke's constant designation as "the little balletmaster" would appear to circumscribe and quite specifically define his role within the larger rehearsal process, but as I'll demonstrate this is hardly an accurate reflection of the significance of his contribution to the staging of the *Ring*. Wagner clearly held Fricke in high esteem—"how much I value you and how much I enjoyed your collaboration in Bayreuth!" (Fricke 1998, 103)—and it is true that Fricke is credited on the official Bayreuther Festspiele site as being responsible, along with Wagner, for production and stage direction, but he remains nonetheless "one of the least appreciated of the important contributors to the 1876 premiere of the *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth" (Fricke 1998, vii).<sup>4</sup> Though the original German text of Fricke's diaries (first published in 1906) was re-issued in 1983 and there are several translations into English of Fricke's diaries (Fricke 1998; 1990 and 1991)<sup>5</sup> there is little else written on Fricke—a single

article, in fact (Baker 1996).

If, as I believe, Fricke's role was a great deal more than simply that of "balletmaster", why haven't we heard more about his participation in, and contribution to, this historically very significant event? I think this is at least in part because contemporary accounts of the modern director, and indeed the 'birth' of the modern director, concentrate on single 'great' individuals of apparently incomparable genius, rather than examining practices which were developing more generally and simultaneously in more than one place at this time, through a number of different practitioners. So, for example, theatre history accounts of the nineteenth century always throw up the names of two 'geniuses' of the German theatre who made significant reforms to the theatre of their day: Richard Wagner and the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Georg II. Wagner fully intended to revolutionise the theatre with his new form of music drama, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), drawing together all artforms. Duke Georg, for his part, formed a resident troupe at his court theatre shortly after his accession in 1866, directing plays, and designing costumes and scenery. His development of ensemble acting, and his use of experimental staging and lighting and choreographed stage action were acclaimed throughout Europe with the company touring widely between 1874 and 1890. Wagner and Duke Georg knew one another and were familiar with one another's work—indeed, Duke Georg lent Wagner his orchestra for the premiere season at Bayreuth, and they shared designers and, at different points, conductors. While, for example the early reception of Duke Georg's work indicates that some at the time considered his role was "to renovate rather than inaugurate a tradition" (Williams 1983, 120), and this is confirmed by the work of other scholars (see, for example, Terfloth 1976), the continuing dominant and dominating narrative is that of the 'birth' of the director, fully formed—and representing a decisive break with past practices—in Wagner and/or the Duke. Both have separately been described as the 'first' modern director (see for example Braun 1982, 21; Koller 2004, vii; and Spotts 1994, 62).

Further, the director superseding the playwright as the supreme and lone "author" is a very particular narrative which was generated at this time (and subsequently perpetuated throughout the 20th century), and is one which needs to be problematised, especially in the light of our more recent acknowledgement of the fact that performance-making is a highly collaborative enterprise. This is significant in the particular case of Wagner where the deification of the individual is even more profound and pervasive. One of his biographers, for example, could claim in all seriousness that Wagner was

a far better conductor than any of his conductors, a far better actor than any of his actors, a far better singer than any of his singers [. . .]. Such a combination had never existed in a single individual before; it has never happened since, and in all probability it will never happen again (Newman 1947, 471).

Wagner was an extraordinary artist—but his work, and how it came to be, can certainly stand some re-contextualising. Fricke himself, for example, admired Wagner profoundly—but also found him profoundly frustrating in rehearsal and quite unsuited to be a "stage director":

[w]orking with Wagner is extremely difficult, as he does not stick to one thing for long. He jumps from one subject to another, and you cannot pin him down for one subject, which could find an immediate solution. He wants to be his own stage director, but for this detailed work, I may say he lacks all it takes, for his mind is always focused on the entirety, losing sight of the details and forgetting how he had wanted things done the day before. So what can we do? I am unable to help here. If two cooks are preparing the meal, it is sure to be indigestible (Fricke 1998, 32-3).<sup>6</sup>

Revisiting this remarkably persistent and constantly reiterated 'few great men of history' narrative

and identifying and describing other under-acknowledged practitioners and their practices allows new light to be cast on early developments in the evolution of the modern director. Doing this through the lens of rehearsal and performance preparation—an area which has been hitherto almost entirely neglected in the study of theatre history, but which is critical to an understanding of how the resulting performance is actually realised—also gives us new insight into what might otherwise seem to be very familiar territory. In the following paper, then, I would like to look at 19th century German rehearsal to speculate how and why what happened at Bayreuth might actually have been typical of contemporary practices, rather than representing a definitive break with the past and a new direction in theatre-making. I'll also examine what we know of Fricke's contributions and how looking carefully to these might inflect the conventional 'story' of nineteenth century German theatre practice which fetes a few particular individuals.

The rehearsals for the *Ring* began in Summer 1875 when all the artists who were to be involved in the *Ring* cycle gathered in Bayreuth for two months. They then dispersed, to come together the following year for what Wagner was optimistically calling the “dress rehearsals” which took place over two months before the *Ring* opened on August 13, 1876. This was the first and only time that it was performed there during his lifetime: he died in 1883.

From accounts like Fricke's and that of Lilli Lehmann, one of the sopranos in the first *Ring* cycle,<sup>7</sup> Bayreuth seems to have been an extraordinary place to be during these preparatory phases. The artists—and there were many of them—made for themselves a world-within-a-world in Bayreuth and this quiet, provincial town didn't know what had hit it. The whole town became “their” rehearsal and creative space, with the artists oscillating between the new, still to be completed theatre, Wahnfried (Wagner's home right by the theatre, where both rehearsals and many social gatherings took place), and various inns in town late into the evening. Both Lehmann and Fricke, among others, make reference to the strait-laced citizens of Bayreuth being bemused by this invasion of artists—and moreover, not really approving of them either. As Lilli Lehmann recalled, for example:

[t]he inns were beginning to fill up with many other artists and suddenly an unusual degree of life began to animate the dead little town. Bayreuth was taken over by the artists in 1875, they had it to themselves and they turned it upside down; they used it as their playground and the narrow-minded Bayreuthers knew not what to make of it. After our work was over, in the evenings, it became very lively at the 'Sonne' (in Hartford 1980, 47; the 'Sonne' was one of the inns in Bayreuth).

Fricke tells us similar stories.

In another passage from her memoirs Lehmann describes a party that was held during this time, and it's instructive for what it tells us about this world they had made for themselves. This party/performance flowed on from the day's rehearsals (and was, in fact, the second part of a party which had begun the previous day at Wagner's home). Lehmann says:

I danced with the ballet-master Fricke from Dessau, a 'Pas de bouquet' which caused a sensation despite my becoming inhibited by the presence of the audience—we had a thousand times more fun when we were rehearsing it! More than forty turned up but Wagner was too tired to attend. How right he was when he said that artists like us were an unruly lot—such an evening would never be understood by others, outsiders would only get the wrong impression. So it was best to keep to ourselves. And this is what we did (in Hartford 1980, 50).<sup>8</sup>

What we might note in particular here is that, for them, life was perceived as a continuum of rehearsing and performing; there was no sharp break between “work” and “play”, or even rehearsing and performing—but even so: rehearsal was ‘private’ (and more fun). Further, their modes of behaviour—including making rehearsal-like behaviour public through uninhibited performance, like for these celebrations—wouldn’t be understood by outsiders.

Both Lehmann and Fricke noted how the atmosphere in Bayreuth changed when “outsiders” arrived:

[w]hen Bayreuth opened its gates to the public in 1876 there were many calls on Wagner’s attention and all intimate contact with him was over. Much against his will, his house became the gathering place for the aristocratic and influential. This was Frau Cosima’s world and she made the most of it, but Wagner, as an artist, felt as little at ease as the rest of us did in such unsympathetic surroundings (Hartford 1980, 48).

‘Opening the gates’: we get here a strong sense of a cloistered or barricaded intimacy generated by and among artists during this period of creation, including their perception that they had during this time kept themselves apart from ‘the public’ and also their strong sense of being ‘different from’ this public.

We begin to get the outlines of a picture of what rehearsal was and meant to the artists involved—and it is, in fact, not unlike our common contemporary understanding of it: it is a private place—in Susan Letzler Cole’s words, a “hidden world” (1992)—somewhere separate from “the public” in both its senses of ‘the general public’ and also public versus private spaces. Indeed, Wagner and his primary collaborators had already decided in 1875 that blocking rehearsals would be closed. Fricke notes that this “is the practice in other theaters” (1998, 77), but further justifies this decision on the basis both of Wagner’s “unpredictable character, which knows no pity when he is excited” (it would be thus be unfair to expose the artists in such situations “to the eyes of laymen and curious visitors” (Fricke 1998, 77)) and also fear of the way this might be reported in the press—“it could also be possible that some of his outburst would be reported in the difficult newspapers” (Fricke 1998, 77). There were, it seems, many requests from outsiders keen to observe rehearsals but the wisdom of this ban became more apparent as the opening night approached and rehearsals became more fraught. At one point barely a month out from the opening night in 1876, Fricke frets that a particularly difficult rehearsal has been observed by many. He writes:

[a]nd at these rehearsals we generally have as spectators many of those musicians not immediately needed, many with their wives (letting them in is already a big mistake), and many other observers as well. I wonder what they must think, getting an inside view into our private lives and times (Fricke 1998, 83).

His characterisation of this as “an *inside* view into our *private* lives and times”, confirms for us how necessary they felt it was to make for themselves a “safe haven” to realise their artistic work especially when we consider that the observers he names here are musicians, or the wives thereof—so not even strictly ‘outsider outsiders’.

What’s also interesting though, is that this sense of rehearsal as necessarily being such a formal, separate and private activity certainly hadn’t been the case a hundred years beforehand in the German-speaking countries. As Terfloth (1976) reminds us, codified theatre laws had been introduced at various theatres from the mid-18th century to regulate the conduct of actors on stage and off, in rehearsal and performance—and in the wider world (“All actors and actresses are obliged to defend their honour and

maintain a good reputation. They shall never be sullied by excessive pride, nor unsavoury action which may be damaging to name and profession . . .” (Terfloth 1976, 68, quoting Conrad Ekhof’s 1754 theatre laws)). These were put in place with the aim of improving general artistic standards and, eventually, with the specific goal of creating a unified work of art in the final production outcome. When we look at provisions specifically related to rehearsal it becomes clear from what is mandated that until that point rehearsal must have often been very different indeed from our later understandings of it. Some of the common stipulations for performers were to: turn up on time for rehearsal; not miss rehearsals; know their lines by the time of the dress rehearsal; not improvise lines; not engage in “unnecessary chatting or noise” in rehearsal; not bring strangers to the theatre and/or on stage for rehearsals—or indeed performances. Infractions often incurred substantial fines for offenders—a quarter of a monthly salary for not knowing your lines, for example, or for missing a rehearsal.

That is, there had clearly been a long-standing tradition of these things *not* being standard practice. However, this had begun to change over the previous 80 years or so in many of the German-speaking theatres. We see a trace of this still as yet incomplete shift in the circular Wagner sent out to all participants in April 1876 before the second *Ring* rehearsal period. His final note to his artists is this:

[a]ll will be good and successful if we produce this immense work in the right spirit from the very first. We shall certainly reach this goal through the most punctual execution of my plan for the rehearsals, none of which may be cancelled and from which no participant may be absent (Fricke 1998, 23).<sup>9</sup>

Evidently he still had to explicitly stipulate that everyone had to turn up to all rehearsals, but perhaps enough of the this codified practice had been generally absorbed into artists’ regular practices that by the time of Bayreuth there was an instinctive, automatic creation of these conditions of privacy and professionalism in rehearsal around them: and, indeed, an active guarding of this space from “outside” eyes.

That these were becoming accepted—though not yet universal—practices across German-speaking theatres may also give us insight into the way in which the ‘lone genius’ or ‘great man of history’ narratives have caused us to undervalue the broader context and continuum of practices within which they operated and to look more closely at what these actually were. That is, while the work of Wagner and the Duke of Meiningen has been feted as a major breakthrough, with significant changes in rehearsal and performance practice leading to new, unified stage works, their contributions were actually part of a larger work-in-progress which had been developing and spreading over nearly a century across a number of countries and principalities.

It is here that I’d like to turn to Fricke’s background and work in particular and ask: how does Fricke’s account of rehearsals fit with what we *know* of mid-late nineteenth century theatre practice in Germany—and in particular the role of the director?

Before the Meininger troupe had formed, in another small town in Eastern Germany, Dessau, Richard Fricke had been putting together notable productions, with singers who could also act, and apparently drawing on a system of movement training which he had developed. He had been a dancer in his youth and had gone on to choreographing and directing productions. And he had been doing this for over twenty years before Wagner happened along in 1872.

It was in 1872 that the foundation stone for the Bayreuther Festspielhaus had been laid and Wagner was travelling about the countryside, looking for potential soloists for his proposed *Ring* cycle. He stopped off in Dessau, and while there saw a performance of Gluck’s *Orfeo*. He was amazed and thrilled at

what he saw:

I publicly avow I have never witnessed a more noble and more perfect theatre performance than this production [. . .] [A]lthough by no means gifted singers these two artists [singing Orpheus and Eurydice] were inspired by such a noble spirit and sense of artistic sympathy with the roles, as I had never expected to discover in such a unified and beautiful performance of Gluck's lovely creation. In this performance, everything was in such perfect harmony that I can state without fear of contradiction that the perfection of this performance was brought about by the graceful beauty of that whole stage presentation. Here, the theatre scenery became a fundamental element of the whole in its continuously animating contribution. Every fact of stage life, the grouping, the artful scenery, the lighting, every action, even that of walking across the stage, helped create this ideal mystification, which envelops us in a dawning imagination, in a prophetic dreaming of that which we have never experienced [. . .] And all this in the little town of Dessau! (Fricke 1998, 4).

What is particularly notable in relation to this production is who assumed artistic responsibility for it. Officially, the musical and stage direction of the production was by Ferdinand Diedicke, a conductor and later director at the theatre, and Fricke, a modest man, was always keen to give Diedicke full credit for the direction of the piece. Others, however, felt that Fricke's contribution had been more substantial. The anonymous editor of the first edition of Fricke's diaries attributes the "rich choreographic concept" (Fricke 1998, 3)<sup>10</sup> of the production to Fricke.<sup>11</sup> Moritz von Proske, author of a history of the Dessau theatre, claimed that

Diedicke had produced and directed the opera quite alone, except for the help of the ballet master, who made the ideas indicated to him come alive (Fricke 1998, 4).<sup>11</sup>

This would suggest, at the very least, Fricke's skill in realising abstract ideas in a practical and impressive fashion for the stage—an ability that would stand him in extremely good stead when he came to work with Wagner in Bayreuth—but also, I think, gestures towards a more creative contribution than Fricke himself would acknowledge. Wagner himself certainly believed this to be the case. Fricke reports in his diary how Wagner recounted his experience of seeing *Orfeo* to a third party in Bayreuth in 1876:

[h]is subsequent comments about the performance of *Orfeo* are already well known. He added that he was astounded, the presentation was so exceptionally thoughtful and beautiful. He finally asked the intendant, "Who is the stage director and choreographer?" The response was that it had all been done by "my little balletmaster" (Fricke 1998, 35).

That is, the intendant of the theatre, Rudolf von Normann, apparently also believed that Fricke had played an important role in the realisation of the production. Fricke is quick to interject.

Here I interrupted Wagner: "Master, I told you last year that the whole heart and soul of that performance was Diedicke. This man, ever since his early youth and during his whole career in music had one ambition—to perform *Orfeo* in Dessau [. . .] When we began the study, we found that Diedicke had already long ago completed the choreography and production. He chose me to be his assistant stage director. My suggestions, mainly in the field of the ballet, were first made to him in order to hear his critique, but he was, I repeat, the soul of the production (Fricke 1998, 35).

Wagner does not appear to be convinced by this:

Wagner replied, “Of course! Of course! However, with all due respect for Diedicke, don’t tell me that you did not set the tempo for him. The directors, the musicians, the singers, all the participants have to help set the tempo for the Kapellmeister, provided they are gifted artists (Fricke 1998, 35).

We can read several significant things from Wagner’s assessment of Fricke and Diedicke’s respective roles in the creation of *Orfeo*; that Diedicke’s role was primarily that of Kapellmeister (that is, director of music); that the creation of an opera production is in fact a collaborative process and that the other participants have a role to play in determining the musical director’s contribution, rather than it being supreme; and, of course, Wagner’s firm belief that Fricke had a decisive role to play in this particular process and is obviously one of the “gifted artists” he holds in esteem.

And, after all, it was Fricke and not Diedicke who was invited to come to Bayreuth to work with Wagner: the day after the famous performance of *Orfeo* Wagner met the company of the Dessau theatre. He was introduced to Fricke and announced that “You will all have to help me” to realise the Bayreuth project. Wagner promptly booked Fricke up, requesting his assistance and presence in Bayreuth, both in Summer 1875 and in 1876. Initially, Wagner was calling on Fricke the balletmaster. He wrote to Fricke, saying:

I do not need a “stage director”, but rather a true “plastic” choreographer who is able to communicate my special wishes to the performers through the example of performance (Fricke 1998, 14).

However, this soon developed further: in addition to “tak[ing] advantage of your talent for staging” (14), he then charged Fricke with recommending suitable singers, remembering from several years before “the most capable characterisation and experienced bearing of your people” (15). Wagner wrote to Fricke that: “their voices are not so important. More important is secure stage presence and dignified action in exciting scenes” (15). He could rely on Fricke to have trained such singers, or indeed to train them in Bayreuth itself.

The following year, as the second period of rehearsal drew nearer, Fricke’s potential role expanded, and Wagner now exhorted him to come to Bayreuth in early May:

[n]ow the time approaches when I must have someone just like you by my side [. . .] I have no stage director, no senior or deputy superintendant, no—God knows what. You will have to be everything for me! Soon now all the stage apparatus will be installed; good, the important details of this will be handled by Brandt [the technical director]. I need, however, someone on the spot to coordinate it [. . .] I now have twenty five gymnasts signed up as Nibelungs, “warthogs”—they must be taught to walk, creep, etc—In short, how soon can you come? (Fricke 1998, 24).

And then, less than two weeks later, another letter from Wagner:

I hope you can organize your affairs [. . .] and soon be at my side. There are problems demanding that a man experienced in staging and costuming be here with me (Fricke 1998, 24-5).

When we then pick up Fricke’s actual account of this rehearsal period, we realise that his role was much greater than that of a simple “balletmaster”. From his descriptions of what went on, here are some of his activities during the rehearsal periods: recommending suitable singers; coaching singers—both in singing and movement; coaching gymnasts to perform as *Nibelungs*; allocating dressing rooms;

undertaking ing to prepare a full scenario and production book of these performances for posterity;<sup>12</sup> assisting the costume designer with his expertise; hiring staff; dealing with the deluge of enquiries from people wanting prized tickets, admission to rehearsals et cetera; co-ordinating the use of the stage machinery; co-ordinating not only the singers in their use of the stage machinery but also choreographing the three music directors who were pushing this machinery around; intervening on behalf of singers with Wagner—and vice versa; choreographing scenes; choreographing and directing party performances; sourcing props; advising on lighting effects; and even performing—Fricke performed several small roles and also relieved the singer performing Alberich who would sing part of his role off-stage while Fricke performed it on stage. All of these things arguably go some way to modifying our perception of Wagner as the sole creative realiser of the *Ring* cycle in whom all power and artistic ability was vested.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to this Fricke was, it seems, a champion soother of ruffled feathers (see, for example, Fricke 1998, 83)—much needed in the charged atmosphere of rehearsal—and he was teaching Wagner’s children ballet in the mornings before rehearsal. In fact, he accompanied the children himself on the violin; he was a talented musician, playing both the violin and viola, and also composing music, including spontaneous improvisation. And, incidentally, Wagner also even turned to him on occasion in relation to matters of music!<sup>14</sup> Wagner’s own assessment of Fricke (to his father-in-law, the esteemed composer Franz Liszt) was that “this Fricke is a man of many trades—he can do anything, dance, play the violin and compose music” (Fricke 1998, 20).

So, from Wagner’s “I do not need a stage director” to being that and a great deal more—this was Fricke’s trajectory and role in the first *Ring* cycle. And while he is deeply admiring of Wagner and his achievements, he had reservations about him—particularly in relation to the way Wagner dealt with performers in rehearsal. As mentioned earlier Fricke had reservations about Wagner’s skills as a stage director and this was something of a repeated refrain as rehearsals went on—which may give the lie to, or at least somewhat modify, some of the other excessively adulatory accounts we commonly read of Wagner and his abilities as supposed master of all trades (for example, Spotts 1994, 62-4).

The esteem in which Wagner held Fricke and his work is apparent not only from the warm correspondence between the two, but also in the fact that later that year Wagner was asked to recommend a director for a production of *Lohengrin* at the Royal Opera in Turin. He immediately proposed Fricke.

From the fact that I knew of no one better than you to recommend, you can see how much I value you and how much I enjoyed your collaboration in Bayreuth! Consider now what you will do! (Fricke 1998, 103).

That is, Wagner himself did consider their work to be collaborative and, further, he did not perceive Fricke’s role as just being to carry out someone else’s directions or concept: Fricke is being offered free rein here realise this production.

What is also particularly intriguing in Fricke’s account of the *Ring* rehearsals are the glimpses we gain into the “system” he has developed for training actors and singers, particularly in relation to their movement on stage, and especially in ensemble work. He’s quite eloquent and detailed on the role of the director (for example, 47-8) and the things he stresses recall the kinds of things the Duke of Meiningen was seeking to develop in his own troupe—but Fricke, who had been working in theatre for over 40 years by this stage, had been doing this long before Duke Georg began his work. There is more to be discovered here.

There is, in fact, much work to be done in the wide open field of historical rehearsal studies: this

contribution is just a beginning, gesturing towards what I believe is rich and as yet unexplored territory. Richard Wagner's work is particularly ripe for the attention of performance studies scholars who can bring to bear on his work an understanding of the processes and practices which result in performance. Such a focus is timely, especially given the concentration in Wagner studies in the 20th century on his music to the detriment of an understanding of opera as theatrical performance. Further, the institution of the Bayreuther Festspiele offers a unique opportunity for crossover research in contemporary and historical rehearsal studies. Not only has opera as a form tended to preserve working practices which are no longer current within the theatre more generally (for example, star singers turning up late in rehearsal to be "dropped in" at the last moment) but Bayreuth is a special case. Research into contemporary rehearsal practice at the *Festspiele* may prove especially valuable for the retrospective light it can cast on historical practice at the theatre. Bayreuth is still under the direct control of the Wagner family—his grandson, Wolfgang, has run the festival for the last 57 years—and it is a matter of pride that its traditions are rigidly maintained: as Spotts notes, "the extent to which Bayreuth has been able to preserve its original character is extraordinary" (1994, 7).

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## Notes

1. In fact *Das Rheingold* (1869) and *Die Walküre* (1870), the first two operas in the *Ring Cycle*, had each premiered earlier in Munich at the insistence of King Ludwig, Wagner's patron, but this was the first time all four were done as a cycle as Wagner had intended.
2. Deaville, for example, quotes an entry from Cosima Wagner's diary where she notes "In the evening the departure of the little balletmaster, who is now setting out on his journey to Italy" and he follows this up with the remark that "Fricke's diminutive size [. . .] seemed to be his defining physical characteristic to the Wagners" (Fricke 1998, 103).
3. Fricke relates how an old friend of Wagner's remembers him as having been constantly teased by the other boys as a student because he was "quite small and insignificant looking" (1998, 39). Fricke also describes Wagner in rehearsal, taking the part of one of the female singers in *Ring* rehearsals, to demonstrate how she should properly throw herself on Siegmund's (played by Niemann) neck:
 

Wagner demonstrated, the small composer suddenly hanging on the neck of the huge Niemann, staggering him. Wagner's feet hardly reached the ground at this moment" (1998, 73).
- Frederick Spotts translates "small" as "tiny" here, a perhaps even more decisive characterisation of Wagner's stature (Spotts 1994, 65).
4. See: <http://www.bayreuther-festspiele.de>
5. In this paper all references to Fricke's diaries are to the 1998 George R. Fricke translation.
6. We see from this quote that Fricke himself clearly considered himself to be a "cook" on par with Wagner in terms of stage direction, no matter how reverentially he might otherwise have admired "the Master".
7. Lehmann sang the roles of Woglinde and Helmwig.
8. Fricke gives a similar account of Wagner's comment on the evening:
 

Wagner is right when he claims, "We artists are an explosive group. An evening, a gathering like this would be completely incomprehensible to the rest of the world, and could be misinterpreted. That's why we prefer to stay off by ourselves" (Fricke 1998, 85).
9. Wagner certainly became infuriated if musicians were late to rehearsal. Fricke describes his response to being kept waiting on one occasion in the following terms: "[h]e became angry, threw down the conductor's baton, and strode out of the pit [. . .]. He was terribly upset, spoke of 'disrespect', even used the absolutely unjustified word 'intrigue'" (1998, 81). Fricke relates this incident in detail in his diary as this "incident

show[s] just what Wagner is like and give[s] a firm idea of how unusual his figure is cut” (80). That is, we might assume from what Fricke perceives as a clearly disproportionate response that Wagner’s insistence on punctuality in rehearsal was, still, not the norm in theatre practice. We might note here that a similar punctiliousness was exercised in the Duke of Meiningen’s troupe and during their tour to Moscow in 1890, Stanislavsky describes his admiration for Kronek’s (the Duke’s stage director: also spelled ‘Chronegk’) highly disciplined rehearsals. This “despotism” as he described it appealed to Stanislavsky and it was a practice he himself adopted and was then, he claims, imitated by “the majority of Russian stage directors”, though he later retreated from such an approach (see Stanislavsky 1924, 199-201).

10. The editors of the English edition used here (Fricke 1998) claim that internal references within the text suggest that the publisher, Hans Bertling, was also its editor (see, for example, 1998, x). They note that Bertling was also a relative of Fricke’s, and this may, of course, also have disposed him kindly towards Fricke.

11. Fricke here is quoting von Prosky’s *Das Herzoglich Theater zu Dessau* (1894, 141). It was, perhaps, exactly this quality that Wagner was seeking in those he gathered together to create the *Ring*. As Spotts notes:

[b]eyond the intent of mesmerizing his audience, however, [Wagner] had little or no idea of how to translate his fantastic inner vision into flesh and blood staging within a proscenium frame. He hoped to solve the problem by finding assistants who would intuitively understand what he had in mind and be able to realise it in practice (1994, 56-7).

12. Fricke relates that he has run out of time for this (1998, 78)—all the more shame as there were apparently no photographs taken of the productions either (see Spotts 1994, 59).

13. We might compare this, for example, with Spotts’ account of the task before Wagner:

The *Ring* endeavour marked an important stage in operatic history, the moment when an entirely new approach to operatic production was initiated. [. . .] Except for purely technical matters, the entire burden fell on Wagner’s shoulders. Producer, stage manager, director, singing coach, orchestral adviser, final arbiter on sets and costumes—he was each of them (1994, 55).

14. At the end of his first day rehearsing with Wagner, Wagner demanded that some Beethoven be played, immediately stopping the pianist with “‘No, ask our balletmaster how it should be done.’ I told them. He said ‘In this way is it correct!’” (Fricke 1998, 36).

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