

# Hitler's Wagner of Wagner's Hitler ?

## De perfecte Wagneriaan. Deel 1

door Frederic Spotts

The most momentous non-event of the century occurred in February of 1908. And it occurred in Vienna to Alfred Roller. Today Roller is not so much underestimated as unknown, at least outside a small circle of opera devotees. Yet in 1908 he was one of the most important figures on the Viennese artistic scene. He was a painter who, along with Gustav Klimt, organized the Vienna Secession. He was also professor of fine arts and soon to be appointed director of the School of Applied Arts. But above all he was a stage designer of great distinction. In 1903, on the twentieth anniversary of Wagner's death, he and Gustav Mahler initiated a cycle of the composer's works in fresh musical and visual interpretations. The Tristan and Isolde of that year marked the first break with the Bayreuth tradition. That production and those that followed - in particular the premiere of Der Rosenkavalier in 1911 - made him the world's most talked-about operatic producer.

In that first week of February, Roller received a letter from a friend declaring that a young man of her acquaintance was a great admirer of his. The lad was an aspiring painter and loved opera; he would give anything, she wrote, to meet Roller to discuss his professional prospects, either in painting or in stage design. Despite his heavy commitments, Roller generously agreed to meet him, take a look at some of his work and advise him on a career. The young man was overjoyed and a short time later, with Roller's reply and a portfolio of his works in hand, went to the opera house. On reaching the entrance, so he later said, he got cold feet and left. A short time later he summoned up his courage, returned and this time made it as far as the grand staircase, when he again took fright. On a third occasion he was well on his way to Roller's office when an opera house attendant asked his business. At that, he turned on his heels and fled for good. But he never forgot the gesture and when he finally met Roller in 1934, he told him the story. The young man was now chancellor of Germany.

If only, history sighs, Roller and Hitler had met in 1908 and Hitler had been taken on as an assistant at the opera or enrolled at the School of Applied Arts! As Hitler himself remarked to his personal staff in 1942:

*Without a recommendation it was impossible to get anywhere in Austria. When I came to Vienna I had a recommendation to Roller. But I never made use of it. If I had gone to him with it, he would have taken me right off. But I do not know whether that would have been better for me. Certainly everything would have been much easier.*

And much different. In any event Hitler never lost his admiration of Roller. When Winifred Wagner decided in 1933 to stage a new production of Parsifal at Bayreuth - the first since the original of 1882 - Hitler proposed Roller to do it and she agreed.

Hitler's love affair with Wagnerian opera had begun in Linz in 1901 when at the age of twelve he attended his first opera. The performance was of Lohengrin and, as he later wrote in Mein Kampf, 'I was captivated at once. My youthful enthusiasm for the Master of Bayreuth knew no bounds. Again and again I was drawn to his works . . . .' From that moment the lad found himself addicted, literally so, to Wagner's operas. The composer's musical and intellectual influence in Central Europe was then at its zenith, and Hitler embraced the cult as devoutly as anyone. During the years following the ecstasy of that first Lohengrin performance, Hitler returned to the Linz opera house night after night. It was there that he eventually met another opera enthusiast, August Kubizek. The slightly older August, although training to follow in the footsteps of his father as an upholsterer, was a serious amateur musician, able to play several stringed and brass instruments. In a short time he became the sole friend of Hitler's youth. It was not simply the mutual interest in opera that drew them together but the compliant Kubizek's willingness - an absolute requisite for everyone else later as well - to listen in tacit agreement or at least silence as the domineering Adolf expatiated on whatever caught his fancy.

According to Hitler's comments to Speer, the two young men spent hours wandering through the streets of Linz as he rambled on about music, architecture and the importance of the arts. On visiting Vienna for the first time in 1906, it was to Kubizek that he wrote. 'Tomorrow I am going to the opera, Tristan, and the day after Flying Dutchman, etc.,' he reported soon after arriving. Later the same day he dispatched a second postcard of the opera house on which he had written grandiloquently:

*The interior of the edifice is not exciting. If the exterior is mighty majesty, lending the building the seriousness of an artistic monument, one feels in the interior admiration rather than dignity. Only when the mighty sound waves flow through the auditorium and when the whisperings of the wind give way to the terrible roaring of the sound waves does one feel the grandeur and forget the surfeit of gold and velvet covering the interior.*

On settling in Vienna the following year, he persuaded Kubizek, who had been admitted to the Music Conservatory, to join him there. The two lived together until 1908 when Hitler, following the humiliation of his second rejection by the Academy of Fine Arts, suddenly vanished from his companion's life. Beyond his Wagnermania next to nothing is known for certain about Hitler's youthful activities. He sang in a church choir but found that he had a bad voice and gave it up. On leaving school, he joined a music club and took piano lessons from October 1906 until the end of the following January from a man named Josef Prawratsky. He soon quit, whether out of boredom with the routine of exercises or

for lack of money as a result of the expense of his mother's cancer treatments. However, his sister Paula recalled him 'sitting for hours at the beautiful Heitzmann grand piano my mother had given him'. In later years he occasionally played - according to Winifred Wagner fairly well - but what he played remains a mystery.

Kubizek's 1954 book, *Young Hitler*, and the recycling of its stories by later writers has produced an impression of Hitler's musical background that is widely accepted but almost completely false. The claim that Hitler was devoted to the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as well as Bruckner, Weber, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Grieg, that he was especially fond of Mozart and of Beethoven's violin and piano concertos along with Mendelssohn's violin concerto and above all Schumann's piano concerto, lacks any basis in fact and is contrary to everything that is known or that his entourage ever said about his musical taste. Even the account of Hitler's Wagnerism is laughable. That the two of them attended Parsifal cannot be true since the opera was not performed in Vienna until 1914, long after they had parted. The assertion that Hitler read Wagner's prose writings and everything else he could get his hands on by or about Wagner is contradicted by Kubizek's own 'Reminiscences' as well as his statement to Franz Jetzinger, librarian at the Linz archive, that Hitler did no serious reading at all at the time. And while the young Hitler was undoubtedly enthralled by Wagner's music, the flamboyantly purple prose of the book claiming that Hitler was

*. . . transported into that extraordinary state which Wagner's music produced in him, that trance, that escape into a mystical dream-world . . . . . a changed man; his violence left him, he became quiet, yielding and tractable . . . . . intoxicated and bewitched . . . . . willing to let himself be carried away into a mystical universe . . . . . from the stale, musty prison of his back room, transported into the blissful regions of Germanic antiquity . . .*

is the pure whimsy of a ghost-writer rather than anything that could have come from Kubizek's pen.

According to another oft-repeated legend, Hitler wrote an opera, based on a prose sketch which Wagner had developed but abandoned, entitled Wieland der Schmied (Wieland the Blacksmith). An entire chapter is devoted to the story and tells how the young Hitler worked out leitmotifs, a cast of characters, a plot, a dramatic structure and a rough score. Even after the passage of forty-five years, Kubizek claimed to be able to recall the specific names, all old-Teutonic, of the characters. None of this appeared in the 'Reminiscences'. There he said that within three days of conceiving the idea of the opera, Hitler had already composed an overture - in Wagnerian style - which he played for his friend on the piano in their completely darkened room. 'Eventually there was produced a very serious sketch for a music drama with Adolf Hitler as its composer.' But even this account was contradicted by a still earlier version, given in December 1938 to a party official. At that time Kubizek said that Hitler had written not an opera but a play called Wieland der Schmied. Another of Kubizek's yarns claimed that Hitler dreamed up the idea of a 'Mobile Reichs Orchestra' - called in the 'Reminiscences' a Reich Symphony Orchestra - which was to tour German provinces and perform without charge. In 1928 an orchestra dedicated to promoting

Nazi ideals was organized and in 1931 it became, with Hitler's approval, a travelling National Socialist Symphony Orchestra. In a history of the orchestra published in 1940 there was no suggestion that Hitler had so much as heard of the band before becoming its patron.

By far the best known of Kubizek's stories was a political parable. Following a performance at the Linz Opera of Wagner's *Rienzi*, so it went, Hitler ascended to a high place - the Freinberg hill overlooking the city - where he experienced an ideological epiphany. Inspired by the hero of the opera, a simple man driven by a sense of mission to restore greatness to Rome, Hitler fell into a state of 'complete ecstasy and rapture' and declared that he too was destined to lead his people to greatness. Kubizek went on to say that he mentioned the episode to Hitler when they met in Bayreuth in 1939 and found that he recalled it. 'In that hour it began,' the Führer supposedly commented. Provocative in itself, Kubizek's account offered the added titillation of willy-nilly associating Wagner with the launching of Hitler's political career - a link strengthened by the fact that the Nuremberg party rally opened with themes from the prelude to the opera.

Even biographers relatively credulous of Kubizek's memoirs have found the *Rienzi* story too much to swallow. Yet, paradoxically, it is one story - albeit minus the book's overwrought verbiage - that is anchored in fact. One fact is that the opera was actually performed at the local opera house beginning in January 1905. Another is that this is a rare case where the book and the 'Reminiscences' are consistent, although the latter refers merely to 'that memorable night after the *Rienzi* performance at the Linz Opera in the dark, cold and foggy streets of Linz'. When a sceptical Jetzinger read that passage and challenged it, Kubizek responded in evident dudgeon, 'The experience after *Rienzi* really happened.' But most telling is Hitler's own testimony to Speer in 1938, a full year before Kubizek raised the topic at Bayreuth. Explaining why the party rallies opened with the overture to the opera, he said it was not simply because of the impressiveness of the music but also because it had great personal significance. 'Listening to this blessed music as a young man in the opera at Linz, I had the vision that I too must some day succeed in uniting the German empire and making it great once more.' Upon the annexation of Austria, Hitler publicly expressed identical sentiments, without the personal reference to *Rienzi*, telling an audience in Vienna, 'I believe it was God's will to send a youth from here into the Reich, to let him grow up, to raise him to be the leader of the nation so as to enable him to lead his homeland back into the Reich'. In some sense, then, the *Rienzi* experience marked the primal scene of his political career.

Hitler's love of music was intense, fanatical even. But as in painting, his taste was limited to a specific type. Wilhelm Furtwängler learned this to his shock at a long meeting with the Führer in August 1933. Music, Hitler left him in no doubt, meant opera, and opera meant Wagner and Puccini. Symphonies held little interest and chamber music none at all. There is no record of his ever having attended a chamber concert or a lieder recital. His attendance at symphony concerts was increasingly rare as time passed and, when chancellor, he seldom appeared except on ceremonial occasions. He wanted music to be readily available, however, and after

1933 built up a large collection of phonograph recordings at the chancellery in Berlin, at the Berghof, on his train and, later on, at his military headquarters on the Eastern front. According to all accounts, these were outstanding in quality and quantity, and the playing equipment was excellent. In the evenings he enjoyed hearing short excerpts and dramatic highlights of favourite pieces. *'He would then sit back,'* according to Christa Schroeder,

*and listen with his eyes closed. It was always the same recordings that were played and usually the guests knew the number of the record by heart. When Hitler said, for example, 'Aida, last act: The fatal stone upon me now is closing', then one of the guests would shout the catalogue number to a member of the household staff. 'Record number one-hundred-whatever.'*

'Before long,' according to Speer, 'the order of the records became virtually fixed. First he wanted a few bravura selections from Wagnerian operas, to be followed promptly with operettas.' All the while he would try to guess the names of the singers and, as Speer remarked, 'was pleased when he guessed right, as he frequently did'.

Hitler was not genuinely fond of Beethoven and, as time passed, his attendance at performances of his symphonies was usually confined to official events. This was awkward. Traditionally Germans looked upon Beethoven along with Goethe, Rembrandt and Shakespeare as the supreme figures of modern Western culture. Unlike the others, however, Beethoven was never just a cultural figure but also an ideological symbol, invoked by every political movement. Nazi fanatics, Rosenberg in particular, claimed the composer as an Aryan hero - an 'artistic Führer' - and his music as an elixir that would contribute to the nation's renewal. In his speeches Hitler consequently felt obliged to give the composer his due, but his praise rarely rose above the perfunctory. So if Hitler had his Wagner, the party had its Beethoven. When Hitler 'entertained' on state occasions, Wagner was performed; when the party 'entertained' on party occasions Beethoven was played. And played he was, more often than any other symphonic composer. His works, above all the Ninth Symphony, were the pre-eminent musical set pieces for important occasions. When Hitler wanted to impress state visitors, he hauled them off to a gala performance of a Wagnerian opera. In 1938, anxious to gain Hungarian support for his impending dismemberment of Czechoslovakia; he invited the Prince Regent, Admiral Horthy, to make a state visit. The social high point of the occasion was a stunning performance of Lohengrin - a rather tactless choice considering the opera opens with a call to arms to defend Germany from the Hungarian invader. The following year Prince Paul, Prince Regent of Yugoslavia, was invited to Berlin for similar reasons, in this case the imminent invasion of Poland. He was treated to the happier Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Hitler apparently believed that outstanding musical performances - like his magnificent works of architecture - would leave foreign leaders in awe of the greatness of the Third Reich and incline them to support his policies.

Brahms he did not like. Hitler's admirers, such as Hans Severus Ziegler and Furtwängler, traced his antipathy to the old rivalry between the Brahms and Bruckner camps in Vienna. In an attempt to have him

overlook history and concentrate on the music, they persuaded him to attend a concert of the Berlin Philharmonic, which included the composer's Fourth Symphony. But when he blithely commented afterwards, 'Well, Furtwängler is such a good conductor that under such a baton even Brahms is impressive,' they admitted defeat.

Unfortunately the record is silent on what Hitler thought of Strauss's operas or even which ones he knew. The story that Hitler begged money from relatives to attend the Austrian premiere of Salome in Graz in May 1906, an event that also drew most of the eminent composers of the day, is apocryphal. Not until after the Anschluss in 1938 did he even visit the city. Hitler liked the best-known operas of Verdi and Puccini. In fact, a performance of Madama Butterfly at the Berlin Volkstheater in 1937 left him so delighted that he decided then and there to donate 100,000 marks a year to the opera company. Even so, when once attending a performance of La Bohème, what he talked about during the intermissions was Wagner and Bayreuth. Otherwise there were few if any non-German composers whose works he could abide. According to Heinrich Hoffmann, he especially disliked Stravinsky and Prokofiev, and when Hoffmann's daughter, Henriette von Schirach, presented him with a recording of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, he brusquely refused to listen to it. In music, as in painting, his taste never developed beyond late German Romanticism. He liked his music to be melodic, euphonious and accessible.

Hitler's taste underwent several significant changes, however. During most of his life, Bruckner held little appeal. Hoffmann did not so much as mention the composer's name when once identifying Hitler's favourites. Even after becoming chancellor, Speer noted, his interest 'never seemed very marked'. The composer had, however, symbolic importance to him, both as a 'home town boy' and as a rival to Brahms, so beloved in Vienna. It was a fixed part of the Nuremberg rallies for the cultural session to open with a movement of one of his symphonies. In June 1937 he was famously photographed paying his respects to the composer, standing in mute homage before a monument at 'Valhalla hall of fame' near Regensburg as Siegmund von Hausegger and the Munich Philharmonic played the adagio of the Seventh Symphony. The ceremony was a graphic example of the painstaking artifice of totalitarian theatrics - comparable with Mussolini's grotesque reburial of Garibaldi or Lenin's being pickled and displayed on Red Square - in which a national figure is used as a symbol for some ulterior purpose. The hypocrisy of the event was epitomized in the fact that the main address was given by Goebbels, who was anything but an admirer of the composer. 'I do not really like Bruckner,' he later confided to his diary, 'he cannot be considered among the great symphonic composers.' And his only comment on the ceremony itself was a cynical: 'We should promote him more.' Even then he did not take his own advice and Bruckner's symphonies were performed less frequently in the Third Reich than they had been in the Weimar period.

Why Hitler staged that event is not known. Speculation has ranged from the theory that it was intended as a cultural precursor of the annexation of Austria the following year to the notion that it was out of nostalgia for

his 'beautiful time as a choirboy' with its Bruckner associations. Undoubtedly the dictator felt a personal kinship. Both had come from small Austrian towns, grew up in modest circumstances, had fathers who died at an early age, were autodidacts and made their way in life despite great obstacles. On a number of occasions he contrasted the Austrian Catholic Bruckner, whom the Viennese shunned, to the north German Protestant Brahms, whom they idolized. But suddenly in 1940 he developed a passion for Bruckner's symphonies. He even began mentioning him in the same breath with Wagner. 'He told me,' Goebbels noted in his diary, '... that it was only now during the war, that he had learned to like him at all.' The enthusiasm steadily grew. By 1942 he placed Bruckner on a level with Beethoven and categorized the former's Seventh Symphony as 'one of the most splendid manifestations of German musical creativity, the equivalent of Beethoven's Ninth'. His feelings about Bruckner, man and composer, are best conveyed by remarks he made after listening to a recording of the first movement of the Seventh at his military headquarters in January 1942:

*[Those are] pure popular melodies from Upper Austria, nothing taken over literally but piece for piece ländler and so on that I know from my youth. What the man made out of this primitive material! In this case it was a priest who deserves well for having supported a great master. The bishop of Linz sat for hours alone in the cathedral when Bruckner, the greatest organist of his time, played the organ. One can imagine how difficult it was for a small peasant lad when he went to Vienna, that urbanized, debauched society. A remark by him about Brahms, which a newspaper recently carried, brought him closer to me: Brahms's music is quite lovely, but he preferred his own. That is the healthy self-confidence of a peasant who is modest but when it came down to it knew how to promote a cause when it was his own. That critic Hanslick made his life in Vienna hell. But when he could no longer be ignored, he was given honours and awards. But what could he do with those? It was his creative activity that should have been made easier.*

*Brahms was praised to the heavens by Jewry, a creature of salons, a theatrical figure with his flowing beard and hair and his hands raised above the keyboard. Bruckner on the other hand, a shrunken little man, would perhaps have been too shy even to play in such society.*

From then on Hitler did everything possible to promote Bruckner and to enlist him in his vendetta against Vienna. St Florian, where the composer's career had begun, was to be turned into a pilgrimage site in the manner of Bayreuth. 'He wants to establish a new cultural centre here,' Goebbels noted. 'Simply as a counterweight to Vienna, which must gradually be shoved aside . . . . He intends to renovate St Florian at his own expense.' Accordingly, Hitler financed a centre of Bruckner studies there, had the famous organ repaired and augmented the composer's library. He even designed a monument in his honour to stand in Linz and endowed a Bruckner Orchestra which he was determined to make one of the world's best. The publication of the Haas edi-

tion of the composer's original scores was subsidized from his own funds. And he dreamed of constructing a bell tower in Linz with a carillon that would play a theme from the Fourth Symphony.

An even more startling transformation in Hitler's musical taste was a growing passion for operetta, in particular Franz Lehar's *The Merry Widow*. There was a remarkable irony in this. Although Hitler almost always avoided mentioning the names of contemporary composers and their works, in speeches in 1920 and 1922 he singled out *The Merry Widow* as a pre-eminent example of artistic kitsch. There is no way of knowing when he changed his mind. But some time in the 1930s that very opera became one of his favourites. He never missed a new production of either that or Johann Strauss's *Fledermaus* and drew large sums from his private account for lavish new stagings. Speer even claimed that he considered these works, as well as Carl Zeller's *Der Vogelhändler* and Strauss's *Der Zigeunerbaron*, as sacred parts of the German cultural heritage and the equal of Wagner's.

Eventually Hitler came to revere Lehar as one of the greatest of composers, despite his Jewish wife and his various librettists, all of whom were Jewish. So thrilled was he upon meeting the composer in 1936 at a session of the Reich Culture Chamber that he talked about the experience for days afterwards. The importance of Lehar's music in the last years of his life was evident when he celebrated his birthday in 1943 by treating himself and his guests to a recording of *The Merry Widow*. Making a tremendous to-do over whether it should be a Munich performance or a Berlin performance which Lehar had conducted for him, he launched into a flood of memories and comparisons, finally concluding that the Munich version was, after all, ten per cent better.

Clearly Hitler had a keen ear, but how much did he actually know about music? He possessed a powerful memory, and in fields that interested him battle fleets and military ordnance, architecture and automobiles - he often befuddled specialists with his detailed, even expert, knowledge. In fact, confounding professionals and showing off to his entourage gave him wicked pleasure, and those around him occasionally suspected that he boned up on a topic only to bring the conversation round to it so that he could exhibit his 'extraordinary knowledge'. After the Viennese premiere of Richard Strauss's *Friedenstag*, Hitler gave a reception for the artists at which, according to one account, 'He showed an astonishing array of musical knowledge, and was able, for example, to remind Hans Hotter of what he had been singing ten years previously: "Isn't Scarpia too high for you? That G-flat in Act II?"' While confirming the story, Hotter commented that it was difficult to draw much of a conclusion from it. 'Hitler had an exceptionally good memory. According to the nature of an event - in this case music - he would prepare himself by reading relevant literature and surprise everybody by his insider's knowledge.'

Most accounts of his musical expertise relate to his knowledge of Wagnerian opera. Typical was a comment of Winifred Wagner who, as her secretary recorded, 'could not stop raving about what an attentive listener he is and how well he knows the works, above all musically'. In the same vein, Heinz Tietjen remarked that he was 'amazed' at how well the Führer knew Wagner's scores, citing as an example Hitler's comment

after a performance that the oboe had not played quite in tune. 'And I had to acknowledge he was right,' the impresario said. More convincing are the comments of Baldur von Schirach. Writing after he had served twenty years in Spandau, he cannot be suspected of gilding the lily. He recalled a performance of *Die Walküre*, which Hitler had attended in Weimar in 1925. Schirach's father was managing director of the opera house and, after the performance, Hitler was introduced to him and went on at great length about what he had seen and heard in a way that demonstrated he really knew his Wagner. He compared the production with those he had attended in Vienna as a young man, naming singers and conductors, and so impressed the elder Schirach that he was invited home to tea. After he left, Schirach père was said to have commented: *'In all my life I never met a layman who understood so much about music, Wagner's in particular.'* To this account, Speer added that at his fiftieth birthday celebration in 1939 Hitler had been particularly excited by a gift of some of Wagner's original scores and, as he leafed through that of *Götterdämmerung*, *'showed sheet after sheet to the assembled guests, making knowledgeable comments'*.

Which were his favourite operas? Despite the poverty of his Vienna years, he managed to attend *Tristan and Isolde* alone thirty or forty times, and in the course of his life heard it and *Die Meistersinger* probably a hundred times. According to his press chief, Otto Dietrich, he knew *Die Meistersinger* by heart and could hum or whistle all its themes. *Lohengrin* no doubt held a special place in his heart. According to Fest, Hitler considered the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* to be 'the summit of all opera'. He further cites Speer as having told him, 'In Bayreuth, whenever the citadel of the gods collapsed in flames amid the musical uproar, in the darkness of the loge he would take the hand of Frau Wagner, sitting next to him, and in deep emotion bestow a kiss upon it.'

Be that as it may, it was *Tristan and Isolde* that meant most to him. After listening one evening in 1942 to a recording of the *Prelude and Liebestod*, he commented, 'Well, *Tristan* was his greatest work.' According to Christa Schroeder, the *Liebestod* moved him so deeply that he said he wished to hear it at the time of his death. And in a letter from Landsberg prison in 1924 he wrote that he often 'dreamed of *Tristan*'. At a 1938 Bayreuth performance Winifred observed, 'He is overjoyed at each beautiful passage that he especially loves; then his face just shines.' There is no way of knowing whether it was the eroticism, the sense of longing, the triumph of sensuality over reason that - in contrast to his own repressed and unfulfilled sexual instincts - appealed to him. Possibly it was the cult of the night or the tragic end. Maybe just the music.

*Tannhäuser* engaged him less, and he was long familiar only with the composer's earliest score, the so-called Dresden version. At some point in the 1930s he heard the later Paris version and was so taken with it that he ordered Goebbels and Goring to permit only that score to be performed. *Parsifal* aroused grave misgivings. Whatever he thought of the music, he could not have liked the story. His anti-clericalism and active detestation of priests and monks - to say nothing of such notions as penitence, redemption and compassion - made it intolerable. Since the plot could not be altered, however, he wanted the opera at least to be performed in a way that secularized it. This was the reason he

wanted Roller to restage it at Bayreuth. And this elucidates Hans Frank's story that, while riding on his train through the Rhineland in 1936, Hitler asked to have played for him a recording of Karl Muck's performance of the *Prelude* to the opera. Afterwards, in a deeply contemplative mood, he purportedly remarked, 'Out of *Parsifal* I shall make for myself a religion, religious service in solemn form without theological disputation.' He went on to say that it - presumably both the opera and his new religion - was to be stripped of all its sacred aspects. Once the war began permission to stage the opera was, except in Vienna, rarely given.

The religious symbolism in the opera continued to nag at Hitler even during the war. Returning briefly to Berlin from the Russian front in November 1941, he raised the subject during a meeting with Goebbels. After the war, he declared, he would see to it either that religion was banished from *Parsifal* or that *Parsifal* was banished from the stage. He recalled that the Vienna opera archive held sketches of Roller's 1914 production and he commended these as models for producers. Not waiting for the final victory, Goebbels passed on the word to his ministerial officials with instructions to have photographs of the Roller sketches circulated to every opera house. Managers were informed that any future staging of the work was to follow the Roller model and 'was no longer to be done in the Byzantine-sacred style that was common up to then'.

It has sometimes been assumed that Hitler was attracted to Wagner's works because of the plots, with their classic conflict between the outsider and a rigid social order, their lonely heroes and dark villains, their Nordic myths and Germanic legends. However, there is no record of any comment on how he interpreted the works or whether he saw in them any ideological message - much less whether he envisaged himself as *Lohengrin*, *Siegfried*, *Siegfried*, *Wotan* or any other Wagnerian character. It was the music that moved him. 'When I hear Wagner it seems to me like the rhythms of the primeval world,' he said. 'And I could imagine that science will one day find measures of creation in the proportions of the physically perceptible vibrations of the Rheingold music.' Perhaps he was trying to say what Thomas Mann wrote in *Dr Faustus* - that the elements of music are the first and simplest materials of the world and make music one with the world, that 'the beginning of all things had its music'. Through Wagner's works Hitler probably came to experience a bliss that was as close to spirituality as he ever reached. Christa Schroeder recalled his saying that 'Wagner's musical language sounded in his ear like a revelation of the divine'. The vocabulary suggests that the feelings conjured by the operas may have filled the void left by the religious belief he lost or never really had. In one of his earliest speeches he made the revealing comment that in their way Wagner's works were holy, that they offered 'exaltation and liberation from all the wretchedness and misery as well as all the decadence that prevails' and that they lift one 'up into the pure air'. If escape and purification were part of the appeal, the operas also responded to that proclivity for the overwhelming, the oceanic, the romantic, the orgasmic that was evident in his public rallies, parades and spectacles.

Like Wagner himself, Hitler believed that music fully realized itself only when it fused with other arts in visible form on stage. And, like Wagner, his interest extended to virtually every aspect of operatic production,

down to the fabric and design of the theatre itself. He was fascinated by backstage operations, including the functioning of stage machinery. During his visit to Weimar in 1925, he asked to go behind the stage at the National Theatre. Schirach was with him at the time and later remarked, 'He was familiar with all sorts of lighting systems and could discourse in detail on the proper illumination for certain scenes.' Hans Severus Ziegler recalled taking a walk with Hitler one night at the Berghof when the moon suddenly appeared from behind a cloud and lit the surrounding meadow. Hitler stopped in his tracks and launched into a discussion of the colour of light necessary to achieve verisimilitude for moonlight on a stage, as in the concluding scene of the second act of *Die Meistersinger*. He was insistent that it should be white; but 'it is often greenish or blueish and that is wrong', he complained. 'That is just Romantic kitsch.'

Already in his youth Hitler had made sketches of Wagnerian stage sets that he imagined or actually saw. Although a drawing of Siegfried holding a raised sword is a Kujau forgery, several authentic sketches survive. Among them is one of the second act of *Lohengrin*; others include his rendering of the second and third acts of the famous 1903 Mahler-Roller production of *Tristan and Isolde*, which he had attended in Vienna. This interest in stage design increased after he became chancellor and reached such an eccentric level that it was common knowledge that the best way to get an appointment with him, which otherwise might take months, was to let him know that you had photos of a new staging of an operetta or opera, particularly Wagnerian. An invitation was almost certain to follow, and then Hitler would spend countless hours studying the pictures. Most of all he relished working with Benno von Arent, and together they designed several productions that he commissioned and paid for with his private funds - among them, *Lohengrin* in 1935 at the German Opera in Berlin, *Rienzi* in 1939 at the Dietrich Eckart Open Air Theatre in Berlin and *Die Meistersinger* in 1934 and later years at the Nuremberg opera in connection with the party rally. Speer recalled:

*At the chancellery Hitler once sent up to his bedroom for neatly executed stage designs, coloured with crayons, for all the acts of Tristan and Isolde; these were to be given to Arent to serve as an inspiration. Another time he gave Arent a series of sketches for all the scenes of Der Ring des Nibelungen. At lunch he told us with great satisfaction that for three weeks he had sat up over these, night after night. This surprised me the more because at this particular time Hitler's daily schedule was unusually heavy with visitors, speeches, sightseeing and other public activities.*

Undoubtedly, Arent's work reflected Hitler's taste. His setting for the second act of *Tristan*, for example, was a vulgar pastiche of Roller's Vienna staging that Hitler adored. The main trait of the Hitler-Arent style was, as Speer phrased it, 'smashing effects', and Arent's productions were smashing. Gigantic choruses and parades, huge casts of extras and glitzy costumes characterized *Lohengrin* and *Rienzi*. But the Hitler-Arent chef-d'oeuvre was their 1934 joint production of *Die Meistersinger*. This culminated in a third-act meadow scene staged in the manner of a Nuremberg party rally, with massed banners and martial chorus. No detail of the production escaped Hitler's eye. He fretted over the

moonlight scene in the second act and went into ecstasies over the brilliant colours he wanted for the final scene on the mastersingers' meadow and over the romantic look of the little gabled houses opposite Hans Sachs's cobbler's shop. In any case what Hitler imposed on the opera was more his personal taste than his ideology, with the result that the production was memorable more for its vulgarity than its politics. So proud of it was he that he sent it on tour - from Nuremberg to the German Opera in Berlin in 1935, then to Munich in 1936, Danzig in 1938, Weimar in 1939 and Linz in 1941. It even enjoyed a measure of resurrection after the war when the costumes were used in 1951 at the Bayreuth Festival, then too impoverished to afford to make its own.

Hitler's adulation of Wagner-the-composer probably developed into veneration of Wagner-the-man rather quickly. Except for Frederick the Great and Bismarck, on no other person did he lavish such repeated and fulsome praise. 'I must be frank to say that Richard Wagner's personality meant more to me than Goethe's,' he remarked on one occasion. 'The Führer talks to me of Richard Wagner, he reveres him and knows of no one like him,' Goebbels once recorded. He even managed to drag Wagner's name into his 1923 putsch attempt, telling the court at his trial that he had been partly inspired by the composer's example of preferring deeds to words.

*When I stood at Wagner's grave for the first time my heart just overflowed with pride that here rested a man who would not permit the inscription on his tombstone: 'Here lies Privy Counsellor, Music Director, His Excellency Baron Richard von Wagner'. I was proud that this man, like many men in German history, was content to leave his name to posterity not a title.*

From these crumbs some writers have cooked a banquet. Already in the early 1930s it was being argued that Wagner did not simply enchant Hitler with his music and inspire his anti-Semitism, stagecraft and political ideas but also that he helped to create the very ideological atmosphere that put him in power. 'Of all German creative figures, Wagner has been the most dangerous, having contributed more than anyone else to the confusion of the present time. He is the real father of the current German state of mind,' wrote Emil Ludwig. It was not by chance, he went on, that Hitler was a Wagnerian. The two men were personally alike - 'genuine fanatics and at the same time consummate actors'. Moreover, they worked the same material. The composer took the German sagas just as they were. 'In them there was no freedom or loyalty but only power, betrayal and sex.' Such were the ideals that Wagner proffered the German people. But it was not just the stories and the 'impenetrable fog of musical sound' that created a mood of 'mystical rapture' but also his twisting of the German language. 'Only Hitler's prose could compete with his,' the historian complained.

Dangerous morals, dangerous music, dangerous language. These were themes developed in later years by Thomas Mann. The novelist was scarcely less smitten by Wagner than was Hitler himself. He too as a youth had haunted his local opera house and *Lohengrin* had also been the first of the Master's operas he had attended. Mann spoke of the composer as his 'stark-

stes, bestimmendes Erlebnis', his strongest and most formative experience. From the beginning to the end of his life he was enthralled by the music and bewitched by the man. Wagner was the subject or important theme of nearly a dozen essays, any number of letters and countless diary entries. But while Hitler uncritically admired everything he knew about the composer's life, character, ideology and musical creation, Mann was ambivalent about them all. 'Questionable' and 'dubious' were adjectives he used over and over. At one point he insisted that a choice had to be made between Goethe and Wagner, at another that the spirit of both was embedded in the German mind. Not only was Mann's attitude ambivalent and contradictory, it constantly changed. 'I can write about him today like this and tomorrow like that,' he confessed late in life.

Mann's most important commentary on Wagner was an address to the Goethe Society of Munich in February 1933 on the fiftieth anniversary of the composer's death. Entitled *The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner*, it was a deeply searching and astute treatment of Wagner's place in European culture. The fruit of years of thought, it placed the composer among the greatest of artistic figures without overlooking his weaknesses of character. The talk concluded with a warning - inserted after Hitler's rise to power some days earlier - that Wagner's works would be traduced were they turned to chauvinist effect. 'It is thoroughly inadmissible to ascribe a contemporary meaning to Wagner's nationalist gestures and speeches. To do so is to falsify and abuse them, to sully their Romantic purity.'

Despite its praise and its silence about Wagner's anti-Semitism, omitted as inappropriate to the occasion, Mann's speech occasioned a furious reaction on the part of Hans Knappertsbusch. The arch-conservative and nationalistic conductor circulated an open letter, signed by Richard Strauss and Hans Pfitzner among others, condemning Mann for his 'aestheticizing snobbery' and for having 'insulted' the composer for his 'dilettantism'. Knappertsbusch was a great hater, and this gratuitous attack may have offered a way of indirectly settling accounts with Bruno Walter via his friend, Thomas Mann. Or it may have been an effort to ingratiate himself with the new Führer who by then had already made Wagner the cultural hero of the new Reich. Whether Hitler himself was aware of the episode is not known, though the letter was signed by his close friend and the publisher of *Mein Kampf*, Max Amann. In any event the letter created a climate so vicious that Mann was forced into exile.

In the course of the 1930s, as he witnessed Europe in a trance-like state succumbing to the evil arts of a political magician, Mann examined Hitler's character and the more he looked the more he saw Wagner. By 1938 this prompted him to remark in his first out-and-out anti-Nazi essay, *Bruder Hitler* (Brother Hitler), that the 'Hitler phenomenon' was 'Wagnerian, albeit in a perverted way. One had long noticed it and recognizes the reasonable though somewhat illicit adoration which the political miracle-worker devotes to that artistic enchanter of Europe whom Gottfried Keller once called "hairdresser and charlatan".'

Yet it was less the composer than the compositions that increasingly troubled him. The music he had always found deeply unsettling. In 1901, at the very time Hitler was making his first acquaintance with Lohengrin, Mann was drafting a passage in *Buddenbrooks* about

the reaction of Herr Pfühl, an organist and Buddenbrook family friend, upon first hearing a few bars of Tristan on the piano: 'This is demagogy, blasphemy, insanity, madness! It is a perfumed fog, shot through with lightning. It is the end of all honesty in art.' It would, he claimed, utterly corrupt a person's soul. Eventually, however, Pfühl succumbed and 'with an expression of shamefaced pleasure, he would glide into the weaving harmonies of the leitmotiv'. This passage was, in fact, autobiographical and Herr Pfühl's comments illustrate how Mann himself had been converted but never lost the feeling that the operas were intoxicating but dangerous - indeed, dangerous because they were intoxicating - and appealed to the irrational side of the mind. On the same day in October 1937 Mann noted in his diary on the one hand that he found 'elements of a frighteningly Hitleresque quality' in a poem Wagner had written for Cosima and on the other that he had listened to a recording of *Die Walküre* 'with admiration'. A month earlier he had heard a broadcast of a performance of his much loved Lohengrin, and this had provoked another diary comment, 'furchtbare Hitlerei' - dreadful Hitlerism.

Not until 1940 did he confess his confusions publicly. In a letter to a New York monthly publication, *Common Sense*, he wrote:

*I find an element of Nazism not only in Wagner's questionable literature; I find it also in his 'music', in his work . . . . This work, created and directed 'against civilization', against the entire culture and society dominant since the Renaissance, emerges from the bourgeois-humanist epoch in the same manner as does Hitlerism. With its Wagalaweia and its alliteration, its mixture of roots-in-the-soil and eyes-towards-the-future, its appeal for a classless society, its mythical-reactionary revolutionism with all these, it is the exact spiritual forerunner of the 'metapolitical' movement today terrorizing the world.*

Here was Mann at his most emotional and opaque, Mann indulging in the tortured philosophical musings of the civilized German of his day in the desperate search for some explanation of what Germany had come to. But even looking back from the relative tranquillity of 1949, he still saw similarities in the character of the two men. 'There is, in Wagner's bragging, endless ranting, domineering monologue, and above all having a say about everything, an unspeakable arrogance that prefigures Hitler - certainly there is much "Hitler" in Wagner . . . .'

Those were trivial traits to lead to such an awesome conclusion. But in his final comment on the subject, in 1951, he returned to where he had started. Despite Hitler's defilement of it, he praised *Die Meistersinger* as 'a splendid work, a festival drama if ever there was one, a poetic work in which wisdom and daring, the worthy and revolutionary, tradition and the future are wedded together in a gloriously serene manner that arouses a deep-seated enthusiasm for life and for art'.

The case for the prosecution received fresh impetus with the publication both of Theodor Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner* (*In Search of Wagner*), which deprecated the composer from a musicologist's point of view, and of Joachim Fest's searching biography, which was more broadly accusatory. According to Fest, the youthful Hitler

*succumbed to the music of Richard Wagner . . . . The charged emotionality of this music seemed to have served him as a means for selfhypnosis, while he found in its lush air of bourgeois luxury the necessary ingredients for escapist fantasy . . . .*

*Hitler himself in fact later declared that with the exception of Richard Wagner he had 'no forerunners', and by Wagner he meant not only the composer but Wagner the personality, 'the greatest prophetic figure the German people has had' . . . . The points of contact between the two temperaments - all the more marked because the young postcard painter consciously modelled himself after his hero - produce a curious sense of family resemblance . . . .*

*The style of public ceremonies in the Third Reich is inconceivable without [Wagner's] operatic tradition, without the essentially demagogical art of Richard Wagner . . . . [Hitler and Wagner] were masters of the art of brilliant fraudulence, of inspired swindling . . . .*

*For the Master of Bayreuth was not only Hitler's great exemplar, he was also the young man's ideological mentor. Wagner's political writings were Hitler's favourite reading, and the sprawling pomposity of his style unmistakably influenced Hitler's own grammar and syntax. Those political writings, together with the operas, form the entire framework for Hitler's ideology . . . . Here he found the 'granite foundations' for his view of the world.*

Nothing could have symbolized the association more provocatively than the opening scene of Hans Jürgen Syberberg's 1977 film, *Hitler*, in which the dictator rises ectoplasmically out of Wagner's Bayreuth grave. As attacks on the composer's anti-Semitism became an obsession in some circles in the 1980s and 1990s, Hitler almost became a mere accessory after the fact to the point that the dictator was eventually portrayed as a passive creature of the wicked composer. It was 'Wagner's Hitler', as one writer entitled his book, rather than 'Hitler's Wagner'.

Such are the allegations. What are the facts? One is that what Hitler admired in the composer was what he admired in his other heroes, courage. In a speech in 1923 he defined the vital quality of human greatness as 'the heroic' and attributed it to three men: Luther, Frederick the Great and Wagner - the reformer because he possessed the courage to stand alone against the world, the king because he never lost courage when his lot appeared hopeless and the composer because he had the courage to struggle in solitude. Each had fought, had fought alone and had fought 'like a titan'. As a desperately lonely and friendless figure in his early days, Hitler must have seen his own situation mirrored in such struggles. Wagner was thus a symbol or, better, a model of someone who believed in his destiny and let nothing deter him from it. It was no doubt in this sense that he considered the composer, in the oft-cited phrase, his only forebear. Once he had started his wars, however, it was Frederick the Great's example to which he turned and it was the king's portrait, not Wagner's, that he carried with him to his military headquarters and into the Berlin bunker at the end.

Another is that Hitler never ascribed any of his views to Wagner, not in *Mein Kampf*, his speeches, articles or recorded private conversations. He made occasional references to him - as to other artists, such as Schiller, Goethe and Beethoven - but none were of a

substantive nature. It is easy to read *Mein Kampf* and the speeches, and then search Wagner's writings to find coincidences. But this is a game that can be played with countless other figures. True, there are certain obvious parallels in outlook - a demented anti-Semitism, Hellenism, the belief that culture was the summum bonum of a civilization, the notion that the arts should never be hostage to commerce and the like. But these ideas might just as easily have been picked up from others. Certainly Wagner's pamphlet *Judentum in der Musik* (*Jewishness in Music*) resonates in Hitler's claim that Jews lack artistic creativity. But it is remarkable that at no time did he ever trace his anti-Semitism to the composer, not even in his 1920 speech 'Warum sind wir Antisemiten?' (Why are We Anti-Semites?), in which he expounded his views for the first time in public.

Indeed, there is no evidence that Hitler ever read Wagner's collected writings, much less that they were 'his favourite reading'. The origin of the myth is probably Kubizek's book, where the youthful Hitler was said to have read every biography, letter, essay, diary and other scrap by and about his hero that he could lay his hands on. But Kubizek himself contradicted that story in his 'Reminiscences'. In any case, Hitler himself never made such a claim. A large hall would be necessary to accommodate all the persons from whom Hitler picked up his ideas. To single out in the crowd the short man with a large nose and prominent chin as the one and only or even the most important one betrays a lack of knowledge of intellectual history. In short, to hold Wagner responsible for Hitler is as far-fetched as to make Marx responsible for Lenin and Stalin, the starvation of the kulaks and the great purges. Wagner's Hitler does not exist. 'Hitler's Wagner' was an opera composer, not a political mentor.

© HITLER AND THE POWER OF AESTHETICS  
Hutchinson 2002