



## Gottfried Wagner He who does not howl with the Wolf

by Edward W. Said

Gottfried Wagner is Richard Wagner's great-grandson, and an extraordinarily unhappy fellow. So unhappy in fact that his book is an unrelieved jeremiad against his family, especially his father Wolfgang, now the head of the Wagner establishment in Bayreuth, as well as his great-grandfather the composer, a loathsome anti-semitic; Gottfried's English grandmother Winifred, an arch-reactionary pro-Nazi admirer of Hitler, and pretty much everyone who has had anything to do with the performance of Wagner's operas in the twentieth century.

No one seems to sympathise with or understand poor Gottfried, whose wish somehow to atone for his family's ghastly history leads him from one disastrous excess of groveling or aggressive assertion to another, most of them the result of his uncertain talent as *regisseur*, musician, and intellectual historian. He, of course, blames his unsuccessful career as opera director, polemicist, and public scold on his father's malign influence and the man's apparent omnipotence. Every production of Gottfried's that fails (and most of them do), every nasty critique of his work, every personal misfortune, is blamed on Wolfgang's baleful reach, his amazing power as the head of Germany's most important cultural institution, the Wagner festival at Bayreuth from which he has banished his son, and blighted his future. *He Who Does Not Howl* is unsparing both in its messy details and in the aggrieved tone with which they are remorselessly delivered. It makes for decidedly unpleasurable reading.

It cannot have been easy to have been the neglected youngest son of a driven, unpleasant man who seemed to have carried the weight of the Wagner legacy, including his affinity for fascism, on his shoulders. First there was Wolfgang's competition with his gifted brother, Wieland, who almost single-handedly scrubbed the great music-dramas clean of their dreadful past in symbolic, spare, modernist productions in Bayreuth after the war. At first Gottfried admired his uncle, but when he discovers a box of films, papers, and photographs that show how close the Wagner family was to Hitler, and how willingly its members participated in that unholy mix of Nazi anti-semitism and German xenophobia which characterized the Thirties and the Forties, he realizes that neither Wieland nor Wolfgang is worthy of his regard.

Then, after Wieland's untimely death in 1966, the Festival is directed by Wolfgang who, according to his aggrieved son, undid Wieland's achievements and returned Bayreuth to a basically reactionary state, its conventional designs and productions essentially appealing to the German establishment for whom the Festspielhaus, with Arno Breker's outlandish quasi-Nazi bust of Richard decorating the entrance, would remain an unreconstructed temple of racist ideology.

Very few people associated with the performance of Wagner's operas come off well, according to Gottfried. He accuses most of them either of concealed pro-Nazi sentiments or of unalloyed sycophancy and opportunism. When his father hires two distinguished Jewish conductors for Bayreuth -Daniel Barenboim and James Levine- they earn the young man's excoriation as 'alibi-Jews', imported into the Wagner shrine as a token of appeasement for an unsavory past. None of the great Bayreuth *Ring* productions meets with young Gottfried's approval and because he is so stingy in his accounts of their work we are not given an opportunity to understand why. On one occasion, for instance, he enjoys listening to *Tristan* in the Festspielhaus 'although' Barenboim was conducting. This is neither criticism nor analysis: it is slanderous insult. And so for page after page.

One wishes that his domestic life were more interesting, but it isn't. He goes from one marriage to another, he adopts a disadvantaged Rumanian boy, he makes new friends and, of course, many many new enemies, and works fitfully as a shoe salesman, bank employee, assistant director, itinerant lecturer. He is accorded a period of redemption when, sanctimoniously but entirely predictably, he travels to Israel to lecture and atone in public for his family's manifold sins. He gives lectures on his great-grandfather's anti-semitism, on Nietzsche and Liszt (who is his great-grandmother Cosima's father) and endlessly pursues his research on Kurt Weill whom he elevates to the status of Wagner's great aesthetic antagonist.

Trapped between his famous name and the need to do something original with it, he oscillates between self-pity and insult, hurling generalizations -most of them unexamined and unacceptably vast- in all directions. 'Richard Wagner himself', he says grandiosely

at one point' had already contributed his part to the indissoluble link between Bayreuth, Theresien-stadt, and Auschwitz'. Jammed together here are the Nazi, and specifically Hitlerian infatuation with Wagner, Wagner's own anti-semitism, and the Holocaust, with scarcely a thought given, say, to the music, to Wagner's extraordinary genius, or to the many anti-Nazi Wagnerians who have kept the works alive by re-interpreting them, and so on.

The real problem with this dreadfully translated book is not only its unrelieved stridency and complaint, its catalogue of woes and often trivial anecdotes, its insults and tiresomely long maudlin recitations of Gottfried's misadventures, but the fact that young Wagner himself has so little of substance to say about Richard Wagner, his works and their relevance for our time. I searched in vain for some alternative account of what the *Ring*, or *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, and *Meistersinger* really mean to Gottfried, but kept coming up with unaffecting one-liners. The *Ring*, he tells us at one point, leads to apocalyptic nuclear disaster. And how would one translate this searing insight into an actual production of the colossal tetralogy? We are never informed. Even if we accept that Wolfgang Wagner's Bayreuth productions are not works of genius, we need to have them analysed more carefully, and substitute accounts provided, before we can be intellectually satisfied with Gottfried's across-the-board denunciations. Complaint and dismissal do not carry one very

far, and so the fiftyish, no longer so young Turk is high and dry.

I cannot resist saying that as an instance of Gottfried Wagner's inadequate view of things his attitude towards Israel is particularly telling. For while it is certainly fair to connect the country's establishment with anti-semitism and genocide, it is also true that in the process of its creation Israel caused the destruction of another society. And the dispossession and denial of Palestinians as a nation continues to the present moment. Gottfried makes no mention of any of this, as if his mission is just to connect some things with others, but to simply leave out or ignore equally impressive connections.

There is a great deal to be said about the consequences of Wagner's music and vision, but why arbitrarily curtail one's understanding of them? So intent is the plaintive Gottfried with exposing his difficulties and sorrows that he is incapable of seeing beyond his warm tears. This is a book to be flipped through, perhaps, but not for a moment taken seriously as a contribution to understanding Richard Wagner, his work, or even his almost wantonly unattractive family.

*The review of Gottfried Wagner's "He Who Does not Howl with the Wolf: The Wagner Legacy – An Autobiography" first appeared in The Observer, May 24, 1998*