Cosima Wagner, née de Flavigny was the illegitimate daughter of Countess Marie d'Agoult (née de Flavigny) and the composer and pianist Franz Liszt. She grew up in Paris, living with Liszt’s mother. After a period of residence in Weimar, Liszt sent her to Franziska von Bülow, the mother of his student the pianist, composer and conductor Hans von Bülow. Hans and Cosima married and lived in Berlin until the composer Richard Wagner invited them to join him in Munich and assist him in performances of his works. It was in Munich that Cosima von Bülow left her husband, joining Richard Wagner in Tribschen near Lucerne in Switzerland in 1868. They subsequently married and in 1872 they moved with their children to Bayreuth where Richard Wagner was planning his festival theatre. This opened in 1876 and since then has been devoted exclusively to Richard Wagner’s works. Cosima Wagner remained resident in Bayreuth until her death.

**Biography**

The background and biography of the “Mistress of Bayreuth”, the “Keeper of the Grail” or “Meisterin”, as Cosima Wagner was variously called, were sensational. Her birth was the result of a love affair between the Countess Marie d’Agoult and the famous pianist and composer Franz Liszt. She herself rushed into an ill-considered marriage with the conductor Hans von Bülow in 1857 (“how it came about that we married is something I still don’t know … the wedding happened without any mood, motion or consideration on my part”). She wrote articles for a French newspaper, played the piano (although an excellent pianist, she never performed in public), attended concerts, operas and plays, and was not merely highly gifted artistically, but also very interested in cultural matters. Then the composer Richard Wagner fell in love with Cosima – 24 years his junior – and she reciprocated. The ensuing years were agonizing, as she was still officially von Bülow’s wife and was the mother of his two children (Daniela and Blandine). Whereas Peter Wapnewski claims that “This nun shunned sensuality as the devil would avoid holy water”, Robert Gutman invented the myth of her “highly strung sexuality”. She presumably never rid herself of her feelings of guilt for her betrayal of Hans von Bülow. During this time she gave birth to a daughter, Isolde, and although Wagner was the father she was named von Bülow for reasons of decorum. Cosima had to mediate for Wagner in Munich in his dealings with King Ludwig II (who was financing him), and she essentially ran two households. Wagner was renting a house in Tribschen near Lucerne, where she joined him permanently in 1868 and where their daughter Eva and son Siegfried were born. The latter was only baptized after Cosima had officially divorced in 1870, so that he might bear the name “Wagner”. In that same year, Cosima and Richard married. In 1872 the family moved from Tribschen to Bayreuth, where Wagner founded his festival
in a total of 220 performances that enabled her to turn
Over the space of 23 years, Cosima’s hard work resulted
merely to copying old productions, but was open to new
Kern, the sources reveal that she indeed dared to venture
new version of her Tristan staging. According to Fabian
tructive ideas to the production. In 1906, Cosima produced a
its performance. Instead, she applied her own interpreta-
production of 1864 as her model – for the preparations
(internal aspects of the action on the other. In 1906, ill he-
alsed out the timeless, symbolic aspects of the works, and
in the process occasionally went beyond Wagner’s own
production instructions. We can hear this in Hans Knapp-
ertsbusch’s early recording of The flying Dutchman; he
had been an assistant in Bayreuth from 1909 to 1912,
and was therefore well acquainted with Cosima Wagner’s
ideas. At the end of the duet in the second act, Wagner
makes a kind of “cut” in which he has Daland appear, dis-
turbing the couple. Knappertsbusch ignores this, howe-
er, instead using the first measures of the allegro vivace
as a continuation of the duet. He would surely not have
dared to do this without Cosima Wagner’s example. And
with her cuts to Rienzi, which she directed in Berlin, Cosi-
ma succeeded in turning “the historical, colossal tableau
into a timeless symbol”. It was her overall endeavour to
maintain Wagner’s staging ideas as much as possible on
the one hand, while emphasizing the symbolic, cultic, uni-
universal aspects of the action on the other. In 1906, ill he-
alth prompted her to pass on the directorship of the Festi-
val to her son Siegfried. Her tireless advocacy of Richard
Wagner’s oeuvre led Berlin University to award her an
honorary doctorate in 1910. Isolde, her first child by Wag-
ner, began legal proceedings in 1913 in order to ensure
the position of her own son Franz Wilhelm Beidler as a
possible heir to Bayreuth. But Cosima denied that Wag-
ner was her father, and refused to receive Isolde. Cosima
made Siegfried the sole heir to the Wagner dynasty, and
was able to do so because Wagner himself had left no
will. She also went about collecting all possible docu-
ments, letters and other materials on Richard Wagner,
though she purged these by committing unwelcome docu-
ments to the flames (including her own correspondence
with Richard, his correspondence with Mathilde Wesen-
donck and with his first wife Minna). Her collection for-
med the basis of the archives in the Villa Wahnfried,
most of which were later transferred to the Richard Wag-
ner National Archive through the creation of a foundati-
on. Cosima and her son Siegfried died within several
weeks of each other in 1930.

Appreciation

Cosima’s great cultural achievement lay in drawing up a
five-year plan for the Festival as early as 1884 – i.e. just
one year after Richard Wagner’s death – and her own sta-
ging of operas there from 1886 onwards. She displayed
unprecedented energies in her task, achieved perform-
ances of high quality and thereby ensured the survival of
the Festival as an institution.

Reception

The image of Cosima Wagner is still characterized to an equal degree by hagiography on the one hand and hateful tirades on the other. Thus we find her both placed on a pedestal, idealized and venerated, as in du Moulin-Eckart, in Mollenkovitch-Morold and in the right-wing, conservative adherents of the Bayreuther Blätter and their cohorts; but we also find her stylized as a hard, power-conscious woman possessed of a "masochistic personality disorder". In other words, she has been pathologized, as for example in Oliver Hilmes’s biography of her (Hilmes 2007, p. 160). Hilmes barely pays attention to Cosima Wagner’s real achievement – the continuation of the Bayreuth Festival. According to him, she afforded her widowhood a “theatrical” intensification (Hilmes 2007, S. 280). Her almost slavish readiness to give herself to Wagner and to follow him is a reflection of her having internalized the role of woman as was accepted at the time. But her desire to maintain Wagner’s heritage was also a source of inspiration to her, for as a talented musician herself she had recognized the extraordinary potential of this artist, who holds a unique position in music history.

Research

The most important research site is currently the Richard Wagner National Archive in Bayreuth, which holds letters, writings, pictures, autographs and other material from the possession of the Wagner family, along with appropriate documentation. The Bavarian State Library in Munich however, also holds important material, including the Gravina archives and archives from figures in Wagner’s circle. In 1935, Cosima Wagner’s daughter Eva Chamberlain gave her mother’s comprehensive diaries to the city of Bayreuth as a “gift to the Richard Wagner memorial institution”, though with rigorous restrictions pertaining to access. The period of embargo ran out in 1972, and the diaries were published in 1976. They are among the most important sources for Wagner research.

Need for Research

It would be desirable for future biographical work on Cosima to pay closer attention to her achievements as an opera director. From a gender perspective, there is a lack of a new biography that would link and contextualize Cosima Wagner’s restorative philosophy with her concurrent readiness to abandon societal conventions. Only a small portion of her correspondence has been published. Hundreds of unpublished letters are held primarily by the Richard Wagner National Archive in Bayreuth, but are also scattered across numerous other libraries and archives. Whereas, for example, research into Robert and Clara Schumann has made progress with the regular publication of volumes of their letters, research has stagnated in Bayreuth, despite the sources held there. An edition of Cosima’s letters to her friend, the Countess Marie von Schleinitz, for example, would undoubtedly be of interest to research.

Cosima Wagner’s anti-Semitism finds extreme expression in her private letters, though it remains a matter of debate whether it was intensified by Richard Wagner or whether it was present from her own childhood and youth onwards. It will take a long time for the unhappy polarization of Cosima – veneration on the one hand, contempt on the other – to lead to a less one-sided depiction. The original feminist impulse according to which women are always victims is, however, obsolete, and must make way for further research.

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):

- http://viaf.org/viaf/39385271

Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):

- http://d-nb.info/gnd/118628232

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mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de
Forschungsprojekt an der
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg