

[*Cosima Wagner: The Lady of Bayreuth*, Oliver Hilmes, Yale University Press, 354 pages]

Wagner's Valkyrie

By R. J. Stove

IMAGINE IF BILLIONS of words had been published about Albert the Prince Consort but nothing of consequence about Queen Victoria. Such is the situation with Wagner historiography: the composer has been analyzed in stupefying depth, but the literature in any language—let alone English—dealing specifically with his relict Cosima is as slender as it has been largely fallacious. Part of the trouble lies in the sheer length of Cosima's lifespan. Born in 1837, she lived till 1930, and throughout her 47-year widowhood she wielded a veto over commentary about either her husband or herself. She could never altogether suppress stray voices of incisive disparagement, but Cosima exerted far more control over her husband's reputation than most artists' spouses ever attain.

For Wagner there had been certain musical precedents; for Cosima as estate-manager there were none. Earlier wives of great composers, even when avoiding poverty, had been content to die in obscurity. Bach's widow escaped outright hunger solely thanks to welfare payments, most of them from Leipzig's city council. Only Mozart's widow Constanze managed to make her relationship to genius a profitable one, and her reward was to be despised by her husband's biographers as little better than a greedy airhead.

Despising the imperious Cosima was not an option. She saw herself not just as custodian of Richard's legacy—above all in the festival town of Bayreuth—but as chief mourner at a never-ending funeral. She fired off commands to family members, friends, and foes alike with a diligence exceptional even by the

pre-telephone era's graphomaniac standards. To Bavaria's King Ludwig II she sent 127 letters and telegrams; to one of her daughters, Daniela, she wrote no fewer than 2,346 epistles. No detail of her husband's art was too trivial to attract her—usually censorious—concern. And no admirer of this art was so sycophantic that she could not cut him off at the kneecaps if he suddenly displeased her.

One persistently hostile journalist named Maximilian Harden concluded, in a reluctant tribute to her strong-arm tactics, "Bayreuth is the creation of her [Cosima's] own brain, and she alone is its destiny." That about sums it up. So overachieving a woman should have been a godsend for numerous scholarly biographers, surely; but no. Before the present study appeared, much of Bayreuth's archival material by or about Cosima had scarcely been looked at by researchers. Most previous books about her have been either novels—including one from 1939 entitled *The Young Cosima* by Australia's Henry Handel Richardson, to which for some reason Oliver Hilmes nowhere alludes—or hagiographies. At first, Cosima-related literature consisted largely of family-authorized exercises in pan-German

his mistress, Marie d'Agoult, than his itinerant impulses became irrepressible. Not once did he condescend to visit Cosima between her seventh and her 16th years. After being more or less dumped upon Liszt's patient mother, who gave her whatever family affection she had, Cosima was subjected to the remote-control tyranny of Liszt's new innamorata: Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein, whose 24-volume theological *magnum opus* ended up on the Vatican's Index, and whose notions of child care consisted of inflicting on the child a governess fully comparable in ferocity to her counterparts in Victorian England.

Repeated reading of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* helped keep Cosima sane, both in youth and later. (In her 39th year she confided to her diary her taste for "this strange ecstasy of suffering.") Eventually she paid back her father and stepmother with interest. When Liszt fell fatally sick, she refused to let him be given the last rites. She also helped to ensure that at the obsequies, as Hilmes writes, "not a note of Liszt's own music was heard," and no flag at Bayreuth would fly at half-mast. Carolyne had hoped that Liszt would be buried in Hungary, but Cosima would have none of that either. Within

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humbug. Later efforts included *Cosima La Sublime* by the late French women's magazine editor Françoise Giroud, better known, ungallant critics maintained, for sporting Resistance medals well in excess of those which her actual Resistance record justified than for any feats of academic investigation.

"More or less everything about Cosima Wagner," as Hilmes notes, "seems extraordinary." She never recovered from the stigma of her, and her two siblings', birth out of wedlock. Scarcely had Franz Liszt fathered this brood upon

seven months of being thus vanquished, the once domineering Carolyne breathed her last. "I genuinely think," Cosima mewed sweetly to her daughter Daniela, "that the defeat that she suffered over the transfer of Grandpapa's remains dealt her a blow from which she was unable to recover. She had to submit, and with that she died."

Cosima's relations with her first husband, the brilliant and neurotic pianist-conductor Hans von Bülow, are best described in Lord Tennyson's words about Thomas and Jane Carlyle: "had he

Cosima
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not married her, then *four* people would have been made unhappy." What an abortive suicide pact with an equally miserable male friend of Bülow's could not manage by way of marital destruction, Wagner's arrival effected. After Wagner's seduction of Cosima became a public scandal, both guilty parties "browbeat the king [Ludwig] into committing an act of perjury" by signing a Wagner-drafted press release "to declare the Bülows' honor inviolate." Hilmes understandably asks of Bülow: "Why did he put up with it all? Why did he not take Wagner to task? Why did he not simply announce that their friendship was over?" Reverence for Wagner's genius played a part in Bülow's refusal to take punitive action against the composer, but for sheer intensity Bülow's general masochism came near to matching Cosima's.

Within Cosima's soul, as Hilmes shrewdly observes, masochism and Jew-hatred "were two sides of the same coin." Wagner's own Jew-hatred, expounded at near-interminable length in theory, had limited connection with his practice. Should Wagner happen to like individuals their ancestry mattered little or nothing to him. But Cosima regarded all Jews as enemies, or rather, as The Enemy. As late as 1919 she gloated over the shooting of Munich's socialist boss Kurt Eisner, whom she called "the Galician Semite. ... In my eyes Count Arco [Eisner's assassin] is a martyr." Cosima's Judeophobia remained entirely instinctive and paranoid, and sprang not from religion but from a visceral craving for a group—any group—whom even she could despise.

Raised Catholic, she converted to Lutheranism in 1872 at Wagner's behest and received communion according to the Lutheran liturgy; but she retained a fondness for Catholicism's devotions. In a Germany that still attached vast significance to confessional differences the mixed doctrinal messages of Cosima's belief system can have done nothing to improve her mental well-being.

Wagner's sudden death in 1883 enabled Cosima to assume her domineering role. Already she had discov-

ered that she could get practically every desire provided she gave the impression that her demands derived from Wagner himself. This channeling of her husband's wishes prompted another outstanding pianist, Carl Tausig, to call her "the Delphic oracle." With Wagner gone, nobody could challenge her interpretations of *Der Meister's* wants. Certainly not their hapless son, Siegfried, timid

**EVEN KAISER WILHELM II THOUGHT TWICE BEFORE DOING ANYTHING TO TRIGGER COSIMA'S ANNOYANCE. HINDENBURG ALONE AMONG GERMAN RULERS WON HER WHOLEHEARTED APPROVAL.**

and blustering by turns, who enraged his mother by his homosexual affairs and whose family status can be epitomized by William Faulkner's gibe at his daughter: "Who the f--k ever heard of Shakespeare's daughter?" (Siegfried, abhorring Richard Strauss's enthusiasm for the profit motive, once sarcastically asked him if business had gone well. Strauss's retort: "Yes, and it's my business, not my father's.")

Even Kaiser Wilhelm II thought twice before doing anything to trigger Cosima's annoyance. Hindenburg alone among German rulers won her wholehearted approval. She never forgave President Friedrich Ebert or Chancellor Wilhelm Marx for cold-shouldering Bayreuth in the 1920s. The young Hitler charmed her greatly—when all else failed they could always exchange anti-Semitic anecdotes—but one suspects that had she lived to witness the Third Reich, *Der Führer*, quite as much as any Weimar Republic politician, would have found her unmanageable.

She was a woman of frequently horrifying fascination whose majestic deportment lost nothing through her lapse, near the very end, into intermittent dementia. (Siegfried, with that ill-luck which never left him, survived Cosima by a mere four months.) Naturally she insisted on being buried beside Wagner, and in the gardens of "Wahnfried," the Bayreuth family home, they repose. She

still presided in spirit over Bayreuth's stagings, although Siegfried's English-born widow Winifred (*née* Williams) controlled the festival's actual administration from 1930 till 1945. Only after the war, when a de-Nazification tribunal banned Winifred Wagner from further festival management, did Cosima's influence fade. Her scrupulously naturalistic productions—following virtually every

stage direction her husband had written into his scores—were junked in favor of symbolist and Jung-saturated designs by Winifred's elder son, Wieland.

Hilmes's achievement is as remarkable as that of Cosima herself, if not more so. He has disclosed so many unfamiliar primary sources relevant to her thinking, has so shrewdly assessed all documentation (new or old), and has conveyed his discoveries in such a translucent account—flawlessly translated, as far as a mere reviewer can judge, from the original German—that no future authors should attempt to tackle the subject at book length. He has furnished us with one of the very best musical biographies to have enriched the English language in decades. ■

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