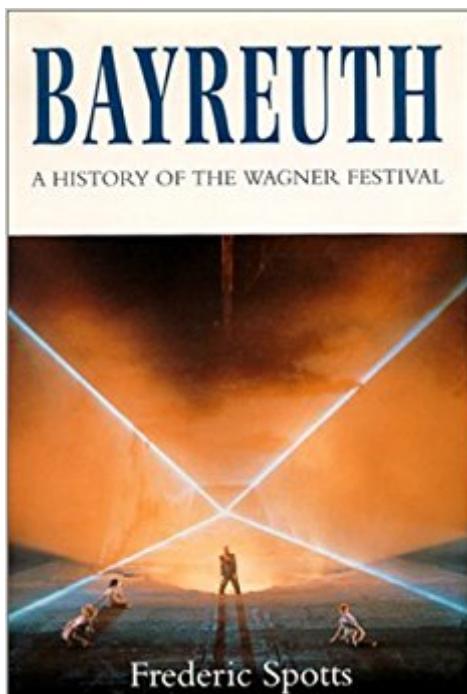


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Bayreuth: A History Of The Wagner Festival



Synopsis

The operatic festival Richard Wagner founded at Bayreuth in 1876 is the oldest, most famous and most influential in the world. Its productions and musical standards have been a model for opera houses everywhere, and Bayreuth has become a place of pilgrimage for music lovers, and the ultimate objective for singers and conductors. The story of the festival is however not just about an opera house but about a family, a society and an art form. The creation of a fervent German chauvinist, Bayreuth came to epitomize the tortured development of the German nation after unification in 1871. The festival became a citadel of racism and reaction, and the cultural showpiece of the Third Reich and Hitler's artistic centre. Here for the first time is a full-scale, serious, narrative account of the festival, based on wide-ranging research and interviews, which explains the political, managerial, social and artistic context of the Festival. It provides candid, sharply-etched portraits of the members of the Wagner family, their friends, enemies and critics, and of the controversy that has characterised it for over a century.

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Customer Reviews

Stressing that "Bayreuth demands seriousness" of attendees--the author himself has attended every year since 1955--Spotts, who had the cooperation of the Richard Wagner-Gedenkstatte at Bayreuth, here presents a study of due seriousness, a knowing, engrossing, opinionated overview of the shrine that Wagner established to himself in 1876. The material on the founding of the Festival, and on Cosima Wagner's management of Bayreuth from 1883--following her husband

Richard's death--to 1906 is familiar, although no less involving for that, as is the contemporary information. But Spotts's research into the Nazification of the Festival and the Winifred Wagner-Hitler friendship makes this a seminal study for a new generation. Because, as the author notes, Wagnerian opera was perceived among Germans as an extension of nationalism, the composer became Messiah and Bayreuth the last bulwark of true German values. Spotts reviews Winifred Wagner's administration of the Festival after the death in 1930 of her husband Siegfried (Cosima died that year as well), the composer's son, who, in 1915 at age 45, married the 17-year-old German-bred British orphan out of fear that his homosexuality would be exposed. Hitler and his devoted Winifred kept Bayreuth functioning throughout WW II, with the Führer underwriting expenses for his War Festivals; annually he rewarded up to 30,000 of his troops and war workers with free attendance to Bayreuth. Spotts, a former member of the American Foreign Service, also tracks the uncertain fate of Bayreuth under the Allies, until the Festival reverted to the Wagner family in 1950, dual control passing to Winifred and Siegfried's sons Wieland and Wolfgang. It took Wieland's genius to de-Nazify Bayreuth and make it a vital Festival, shows Spotts, who is critical of Wolfgang's management after his brother's death in 1966. If Bayreuth is, as the author argues, a simulacrum of the German nation, it is no less so for devotees of Wagner. The Nazi connection is known at least in outline to younger Wagnerites but is little discussed. Spotts does the music world a service by confronting that legacy. Photos not seen by PW . Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This comprehensive history of opera's oldest summer music festival is directed to the general, music-loving public. Regular attendee Spotts supplements his own perceptions and collection of programs with numerous published sources in German and English. He presents Bayreuth, perpetual showplace for only seven of Richard Wagner's operas, as a cultural icon whose history represents not just the composer's art and his family's functions and dysfunctions but wider German artistic and political ideologies and influence from the late 19th century until today. When the repertory is unchanging, new interpretations such as this keep critics talking and writing. For large music collections.Bonnie Jo Dopp, formerly with District of Columbia P.L.Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I am posting this review in three places because these are three 5-star books that I believe should all be read in conjunction: Bayreuth - A History of the Wagner Festival, by Frederic Spotts; Wagner and the Art of the Theater, by Patrick Carnegy; and The Wagner Clan, by Jonathan Carr. All three

tell a story about the same time period, each from a different point of view, so that having read all three you have a multi-dimensional view of essentially the same topic. What makes each book outstanding in its own right and even more worthwhile when read together is the historical, political and social perspective that the authors incorporate in each book. Since no one comes to the subject of Wagner without preconceived notions I cannot say that each book isn't without its biases, however regardless of your point of view before you read these books they will provide insight and perspective.

I heartily agree with all the positive reviews written so far. This book gives a good background to Wagner's long-cherished dream of a festival of German music-dramas (his own), the struggle to get the festival going, and the very checkered legacy it has left. The author is especially good in his treatment of the Nazi era in Germany and the partnership between Hitler and Bayreuth. But what I would like to single out is the author's writing: clear, colorful, and trenchant. Here is an excerpt to give you an idea of his style. He is describing the situation after WWII, when Wagner's grandson Wieland had departed from the old Bayreuth style of production in favor of more modern, an evolution that has the old guard up in arms, especially Wagner's daughter-in-law Winifred: "But there was always plenty of opposition and some of it was as fanatical as it can be only in Bayreuth. The opponents made the same embittered complaints--indeed were some of the same people--as in the Parsifal fracas of 1934, the only novelty being that epithets like 'Jewish-influenced' and 'cultural Bolshevism' were no longer used, at least publicly. The hostility also demonstrated that even now no less than in prewar Germany every artistic act was a political act and that artistic conservatism and political conservatism still went together, indeed remained different sides of the same coin. It was symptomatic that when Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau--in Bayreuth to sing Wolfram in the 1954 *Tannhäuser*--was invited to tea with Winifred Wagner, he listened in appalled silence as she condemned her son [Wieland] and Picasso, while praising Adolf Hitler. For the Bayreuth old guard a portrait should have an eye, a nose and a mouth as God created them, just as a production of *Die Meistersinger* should have a Nuremberg as Wagner conceived it--and just as Hitler should be properly appreciated. In the mechanics of their little grey cells, art and ideology were inseparable. Here at least they were right."

The content of the book is full of good information about Wagner and his opera makings. It gives the background and stories behind his compositions as well as the history of his famous opera house. Since Bayreuth is hard to get to and very expensive when you are there, this is a good armchair

travel book for use curious types. Book came in fine shape, even though it is a used book.

This will answer almost any question you might like to ask regarding Richard Wagner's decision to make the world come to him if they want to understand his operas. Great photos and analysis of almost every aspect of the great man's music.

Great book. A very important book for anyone interested in Wagner, The Bayreuth Festival and yes even the very unattractive Wagner Family.

Great seller. Book as described. Great packing. Thank you!

ok

This is a well-written and hard to put down history of the Bayreuth Festival. Thanks are due to Mr. Spotts for sifting through many works in German that are hard to find. However, there are a couple of curious statements that make me wonder about the veracity of the book as a whole. In his discussion of the 1951 reopening, he refers to Karajan as an up and coming young conductor from Aachen. Well, in 1942 Karajan left Aachen to assume directorship of the Berlin State Opera, and by 1951 his associations with the Vienna Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra had made him an internationally known recording artist. Hardly a young upstart from the sticks! In the same chapter, he refers to a society that was organized around Hans Pfitzner to protest the radicalism of Wieland Wagner's productions. However, Pfitzner died in 1949, presumably without seeing the first of Wieland's stagings in 1951. No explanation is given for this statement. In general, this is a book written by a well-informed and insightful fan, but perhaps one without a strong musical background.

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