



## Wagner, Siegfried (1869-1930)

by Nikolai Endres

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Siegfried Wagner, the son of composer Richard Wagner, was himself a prolific composer and conductor. His homosexuality (or, more accurately, bisexuality) was the source of both scandal and also of elaborate attempts to erase it from histories of the Wagner family.



Siegfried Wagner with wife Winifred in 1916.

The homosexual associations of Richard Wagner--especially his friendships with Friedrich Nietzsche and King Ludwig II of Bavaria, as well as the homoerotic appeal of his work--are well known. In contrast, Siegfried Wagner's sexuality has received little attention.

In middle age, Siegfried consented to a marriage of convenience in order to produce an heir for the Wagner dynasty. However, throughout his life his most meaningful relationships were with men.

Understanding Siegfried and his sexuality helps elucidate the homosexual culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His connections with Oscar Wilde and his circle and the players of the Eulenburg Affair place him at the periphery of important events in glbtq history. The homoerotic appeal of the Bayreuth Festival and his widow's connections with Adolf Hitler and the Nazis are also important aspects of Siegfried Wagner's significance for glbtq culture.

### Early Life

Siegfried Wagner was born June 6, 1869, the son of Richard Wagner and Cosima von Bülow. (Cosima, the daughter of Franz Liszt, was still officially married to piano virtuoso and conductor Hans von Bülow.) With Nietzsche present at his birth, with King Ludwig as his godfather, and with a famous father and equally celebrated grandfather, Siegfried seemed destined for greatness.

After high school, Siegfried received musical training from his father's pupil Engelbert Humperdinck in Frankfurt, then studied architecture in Berlin and Karlsruhe, and, bowing to pressure from his parents, eventually settled on a career in music. His most prominent instructors were the Wagner conductor Felix Mottl and the choirmaster Julius Kniese.

### Operas

Siegfried Wagner composed eighteen operas, whose subjects were often drawn from the German fairy-tales of the Brothers Grimm. Unfortunately, his works were judged by his father's standards and, not surprisingly, found wanting. For this reason, even though the operas were immensely popular during his life, they were rarely performed after his death. (Moreover, Siegfried's widow wanted to discourage any competition with Richard's music dramas.)

In his operas, Siegfried Wagner frequently alludes to forbidden desire and indicts misguided justice. His characters include outcasts--such as witches burned at the stake or suicides denied burial--who possess

dark secrets, show fear of exposure, and make pacts with the devil.

As a conductor, Siegfried Wagner debuted in 1893 at the Bayreuth Markgräfliches Opernhaus (the city's smaller opera venue) with excerpts from his father's *Rienzi* and Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*. Beginning in 1896, he conducted at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, starting with his father's *magnum opus*, *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

From 1908 to 1930, Wagner was the sole artistic director of the Festival, which was regarded as a family fiefdom. His greatest accomplishments include installing improved lighting and acoustic technology in the building, modernizing his mother's antiquated sets with the help of stage designer Kurt Söhnlein, and hiring the Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini.

## **Sexuality**

Wagner was raised by a number of domineering women: his mother, his half-sisters Daniela and Blandine, and his sisters Isolde and Eva. His friends and relatives remember him as soft-spoken, gentle, rather feminine, and greatly attached to his mother, with whom he would take a daily stroll through the city.

As a student in Frankfurt, Wagner sometimes dressed up as a prima ballerina. And as late as 1926, when he was in his fifties, the 28-year-old Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's future propaganda minister, recorded: "Siegfried is so feeble. Ugh! The Master should make him ashamed of himself. . . . Feminine. Good natured. A bit decadent. Something of a cowardly artist."

One of the first crushes the teenaged Wagner had was on the sturdy Theodor Reichmann (1849-1903), who sang Amfortas at the world premiere of *Parsifal*. In college in Karlsruhe, Wagner had an affair with a fellow student, Graf von Goetzen (little else is known about him), which caused some friction with another lover of Siegfried's: Clement Harris (1871-1897).

Clement Harris, Wagner's closest male friend when he was in his twenties, was the painter of one of the finest portraits of young Siegfried and a literary protégé of Oscar Wilde. (Harris entertained and instructed Wilde by performing Richard Wagner's works on the piano).

When he and Siegfried Wagner set off for a trip around the world via London in 1892, Harris introduced Wagner to Wilde. Wagner then invited Wilde and Pierre Louÿs to Bayreuth, but their plans never materialized.

Three years later, Wagner returned to London in order to conduct his first concert just days after Wilde's last trial and observed the writer's public humiliation after he was convicted of "gross indecency."

In his autobiography, published in 1923, Wagner joyfully recalls his travels with his "Clementchen" (a diminutive used as a term of endearment) and even drops erotic hints, such as their sharing a bed like "Orestes and Pylades," one of the mythological gay couples. He recounts that in Singapore, they found an edenic spot, which he describes as a paradise for bathing in the nude like "two Adams."

A passage in Wagner's privately printed travel diary, but excised in the memoirs, records their goodbye: outwardly they parted like friends, but inwardly they had come to love each other. At age twenty-six, Harris died a Byronic death fighting for Greek independence. Wagner kept a portrait of Harris on his desk for the rest of his life.

In his memoirs, Wagner also remembers particularly fondly one of his father's gay disciples: Paul von Joukovsky (alternatively Zhukovski, 1845-1912), painter and close friend of Henry James, who "entertain

[ed] a most tender affection" for him. "He is much to my taste," James records, adding, "we have sworn eternal friendship."

Later Wagner became involved with the art nouveau painter Franz Stassen (1869-1949), who served as the best man at his wedding and to whom he dedicated one of his operas. Stassen illustrated Richard Wagner's works, such as "Parsifal Revealing the Holy Grail," and published homoerotic drawings that anticipate the work of Paul Cadmus. Stassen, who, like Wagner, was married, wrote recollections of his "soul mate" and publicly revealed his sexual orientation in 1941.

Wagner's homosexuality may also be subtly expressed in his work, both in his operas and in his staging of his father's work. For example, when he staged his father's *Tannhäuser* in 1930 soon before he died, he took up an idea from Aubrey Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (1895). When Tannhäuser returns to the Venusberg, he is not only greeted by Venus and her female attendants, but--in a decidedly homoerotic touch--also by scantily clad male teenagers (*Jünglinge*).

### **Scandal**

Siegfried Wagner led an active homosexual life and enjoyed all-male gatherings where he and his friends would quote Plato's *Symposium* in Greek. These exploits gave rise to scandals, which were usually hushed up. In 1914, however, the whistleblower Maximilian Harden threatened to expose Siegfried.

In the history of sexuality, Harden is better known for instigating another gay scandal, the Eulenburg Affair (1907-1909). Following the Morocco Crisis of 1906 and a humiliating diplomatic defeat for Germany, Harden alleged that Kaiser Wilhelm II was surrounded by a group of homosexuals led by Prince Philipp Eulenburg.

When it became obvious that Harden's exposé was true, the Emperor immediately distanced himself from several of his homosexual friends and sought the company of hyper-masculine military types who encouraged Wilhelm's chauvinism and may have contributed to his disastrous decision to go to war in 1914.

The Eulenburg Affair had crucial consequences. Several moral crusaders appeared on the scene and lamented the "decadence" of the German nation. The military cracked down on lax discipline and prostitution in the army. The police began enforcing anti-gay legislation with a new fervency.

Harden's article "Tutte le corde: Siegfried und Isolde" in the weekly *Die Zukunft* of June 27, 1914 was triggered by a paternity suit brought by Siegfried's sister Isolde against his father's estate. Although it was widely recognized that Richard Wagner was her father, her birth certificate listed Hans von Bülow as her father.

The suit was of some consequence because, unlike Cosima's other children, Isolde had produced a male heir: Franz Wilhelm Beidler (1901-1981). When Isolde lost the suit as a result of Cosima's refusal to affirm that Richard Wagner was her father (absent DNA testing, the birth certificate was legally binding), Harden began investigating the family's hypocrisy.

Wagner, forty-five years old and still a bachelor, was the perfect target for Harden's insinuations. The journalist never makes specific charges. Rather, he drops innuendo about "a savior of a different ilk" or "an ass of a different color" ("Heiland aus andersfarbiger Kiste") and wonders why there are so many rumors about Wagner.

When confronted with insinuations of his sexuality by Isolde, Siegfried replied coolly: "There was ugly gossip about Frederick the Great, too, the greatest king of all time, and he made Prussia great and strong! So don't worry. I won't defile the House of the Festival."

In the midst of the growing scandal, however, Wagner's mother insisted that he marry as a means of dispelling the rumors.

### **Marriage and Beyond**

In 1914, at the Bayreuth Festival, Wagner was introduced to a seventeen-year-old English-born young lady, Winifred Klindworth, who had been adopted by a friend of the Wagner family.

The unlikely couple married in 1915 and quickly produced four children: Wieland (1917-1966), Friedelind (1918-1991), Wolfgang (b. 1919), and Verena (b. 1920).

Wagner died August 4, 1930, just a few months after his mother's death in her mid-nineties. Winifred, his widow, took over management of the Festival until the end of World War II.

Winifred Wagner had met Adolf Hitler in 1923 when he first visited their home, Wahnfried, and quickly became a supporter. When Hitler was in jail for the Munich Beer Hall Putsch in 1924, she sent him stationery on which--as legend has it--he wrote *Mein Kampf*. In 1933, there were even rumors of their impending marriage.

After achieving power, Hitler frequently visited the Wagner family and financially supported the Festival, which became a highlight of the Nazi calendar. Winifred Wagner served as Hitler's personal translator during his negotiations with the British in the late 1930s.

Winifred Wagner's role in the Third Reich remains controversial. What is clear is that Siegfried Wagner was repelled by his wife's anti-Semitism, and his daughter Friedelind remembers him as "a champion of tolerance and compassion."

To her credit, Winifred Wagner intervened on behalf of several of Siegfried's gay friends and saved them from concentration camps. The testimony from two gay opera singers, Max Lorenz and Herbert Janssen, helped reduce Winifred's sentence at her de-Nazification trials after World War II, which banned her from further involvement in the Festival.

Later she supported the impecunious Hans Severus Ziegler, former director of the Deutsches Nationaltheater in Weimar, which earned her the nickname "mother hen of all gays."

Winifred Wagner died in 1980 at age 82, utterly unrepentant of her involvement with Hitler.

### **Erasure**

Why has Siegfried Wagner's sexuality been kept a secret?

In part, it is little known because the evidence is scarce and not readily available. As Jonathan Carr observes, assessing Wagner's life is difficult: "A couple of biographies of him have appeared in German, but his own memoirs are thin, his letters in part still not disclosed, his true feelings often masked by irony and bonhomie."

Unlike his scores, Wagner's private papers are not located in the Bayreuth Archives. When the family papers were bequeathed to the Richard Wagner Foundation in 1973, Winifred Wagner withheld her husband's correspondence. When she died, the manuscripts went to Verena Lafferentz-Wagner's oldest daughter Amélie with strict instructions for their non-disclosure.

One wonders about this secrecy, especially by a family notorious for stalling and purging revelations that

would taint the legacy of the *Meister*.

Another complication is academic reticence, even in German scholarship, long associated with an open-minded approach toward homosexuality. Zdenko von Kraft's biography *Der Sohn*, a piece of hopelessly uncritical hagiography published in 1969, has not one word to say about Wagner's homosexuality. One also looks in vain for a reference to Maximilian Harden. Since Winifred Wagner contributed a preface to the book, this silence is hardly surprising.

Moreover, the erasure of Wagner's homosexuality may have been an incidental byproduct of an attempt to hide his extramarital affair with the wife of a Bayreuth pastor, who gave birth to a son, Walter Aign (1901-1977). Had Aign been able to prove that he was the son of Siegfried Wagner, he would have been the first-born heir to the Wagner estate.

Since Cosima Wagner--always keen on keeping up appearances--wanted the Wagner line to continue legitimately through her son, she (and, later, Winifred Wagner) had incentives to discourage investigation into the sex life of Siegfried Wagner, in both its homosexual and heterosexual manifestations.

Although Wagner's paternity of Aign has not been accepted by all Wagner scholars, pictures of Walter Aign show a striking resemblance to Siegfried Wagner.

Aign, who worked with Wagner as a musical assistant, never married and may have been gay himself.

### **Rediscovery**

Peter Pachl's recent, frank biography, *Siegfried Wagner: Genie im Schatten* (1988), contains a striking dedication: "To Wolfgang Wagner, without whose opposition I would not have been put on the right track." This dedication perfectly sums up the Wagner family's continuing resistance to research into Siegfried Wagner's personal life.

However, despite this opposition, Wagner's complicated sexuality is gradually coming to the fore. In addition to Pachl's book, other works also highlight Wagner's homosexuality. For example, Edmund Gleede's musical *Cosima Notte, or Notre Dame de Bayreuth* (1986) shows Siegfried *en travestie*. A puppet play by Uwe Hoppe (2006) elaborates on King Ludwig's infatuation with Richard Wagner and uses it to justify Siegfried Wagner's love-life, showing a continued tradition of Wagnerian homoeroticism.

Jonathan Carr's *The Wagner Clan* (2007) presents the first account in English to touch on Wagner's bisexuality.

The Internationale Siegfried-Wagner-Gesellschaft is devoted to promoting Wagner's legacy as a composer by reviving his operas on the world stage and publishing critical literature about him. It has lobbied for the full disclosure of all his papers.

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### **About the Author**

**Nikolai Endres** received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.