

# FÜHRER VAN DE REPUBLIEK BAYREUTH

## De perfecte Wagneriaan. Deel 2.

door Frederic Spotts

Wagner-the-composer and Wagner-the-man both inevitably drew Hitler to Bayreuth. To attend the Festival, he once wrote to the composer's son Siegfried, was a dream that had possessed him since the age of thirteen when he went to his first Wagnerian opera. However, it was neither opera nor homage to the composer that first took him there on 30 September 1923 but an engagement to speak at a National Socialist rally. After his speech, Hitler took the occasion to call upon Houston Stewart Chamberlain, author of the bestselling racist book *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* and a man whom Hitler admired. Chamberlain, an Englishman who had taken up German citizenship in 1914, was also a devotee of Wagner and had married his younger daughter Eva. Although crippled and able to communicate only through his wife, Chamberlain was convinced by the end of their meeting that he was in the presence of Germany's saviour. A short time later he said as much in a widely publicized letter, a pronouncement that gave Hitler his first endorsement by a noted national figure. Issued at a time when the party and its leader seemed headed nowhere, Chamberlain's words came, Fest has written, 'as the answer to his doubts, as a benediction from the Bayreuth Master himself.

Following his meeting with Chamberlain, Hitler attended a reception at the Anker Hotel hosted by Edwin Bechstein, the piano manufacturer, and his wife Helene. Winifred Wagner was also present and, impressed by the young man's devotion to Wagner, invited him to come the next day to visit Wahnfried, the villa that the composer constructed for himself in 1874. On his arrival the Wagners found him nervous, pale and badly dressed. As they conducted him through the house, he was silent and thoughtful. Nothing escaped his awed attention. This was holy ground and so moved was he that twenty years later he was still reminiscing about it. Eventually they directed him to the Master's grave, where he stood alone for a long time in silent homage. On leaving, he remarked that since first hearing Lohengrin as a boy, he had regarded the composer as one of the greatest figures in German history. He promised that if he ever, as he put it, 'came to exert influence on Germany's destiny', he would honour Wagner's wish that Parsifal -out of copyright since 1913 - should be performed only in Bayreuth.

The visit inaugurated a personal relationship between Hitler and the Wagner family, above all with Winifred, that lasted for the rest of his life. Dramatic proof of the friendship came five weeks later in connection with the Beer Hall Putsch. The day after the coup attempt, Siegfried was in Innsbruck for a concert engagement and, learning that the wounded Hermann Göring had fled there, visited him in the hospital to pay his respects and, according to rumour, his medical bills as well. In Bayreuth, Winifred issued an open letter to the press giving the family's full endorsement to Hitler, who was now

in prison. According to a story invented years later by her daughter Friedelind, she also sent him a gift package which included writing paper - and this was the very paper on which Hitler wrote Mein Kampf ! In fact Hitler did not scribble out the text of his book, he dictated it to Rudolf Hess and others, and it is not known what they wrote on. The claim is irrelevant in any case, since the only point the story can have is the foolish one that Hitler would never have written Mein Kampf had Winifred not sent him paper.

What genuinely meant something to Hitler was Winifred's having actively campaigned on behalf of his party in the local election in April of the following year. Afterwards a deeply gratified Hitler sent Siegfried an effusive letter highlighting Bayreuth's significance for his political movement. Nothing could have given him greater satisfaction, he wrote, than the election success in Bayreuth, the very place 'where first the Master and then Chamberlain forged the spiritual sword with which we fight today'. The town, he continued, lay on the 'march route to Berlin'. He had wanted to thank Chamberlain for his 'wonderfully gracious letter', but the failure of his political action had made that impossible. He went on to express his deepest thanks for the way he and especially Winifred had identified themselves with his movement and 'the love that you have shown me in the face of all the hatred and calumny heaped on me'.

From this point on the Wagners became increasingly identified with the hard right in German politics. Siegfried was never a Nazi, but he was a naive, arch-conservative who idolized General Ludendorff and feted him as guest of honour at the 1924 Festival. Later he and Winifred lent their names to various Nazi-front organizations. Hitler never forgot their loyalty. 'It was not just the others but Siegfried Wagner as well who stood by me at the time when things were at their worst for me,' he remarked years later. But when he proposed to visit Wahnfried on leaving prison, Siegfried realized it would be embarrassing to have an ex-jailbird hanging around the house and turned him down. To allay hurt feelings, Winifred travelled to Munich to see Hitler and happened to find herself at the very meeting at which the Nazi party was refounded following the disastrous coup attempt. She persuaded her friend to accompany her to a performance of one of her husband's operas being held at Plauen in Saxony. En route they stopped in Bayreuth and Hitler spent his first night at Wahnfried. With this, the friendship between the two was sealed.

The following summer the Bechsteins invited Hitler to be their guest and to attend the Festival. 'I did not really want to go,' he later said, 'thinking to myself that the difficulties would be even greater for Siegfried - he was somewhat in the hands of the Jews.' But he went and was overjoyed. 'During the day I wore lederhosen, but to the Festival a dinner jacket or morning coat. The

free days between performances were always wonderful .... When I went to the Eule [restaurant], I had no difficulty meeting singers. On the other hand I was not so famous that I did not have peace.' The Ring performances shocked him, however, to the point where he was still raving about it years later. 'That the Jew [Friedrich] Schorr sang Wotan just infuriated me - for me that was a racial outrage.' But that was the only cloud. 'It was a sunny time .... I was in seventh heaven,' he later said. He once told Schirach that he liked Bayreuth so much he could imagine, spending the last years of his life in that 'culturally preeminent little town so impregnated with the spirit of Richard Wagner'.

But a man who had mounted a putsch, been convicted of treason, was banned from public speaking in Bavaria and had a reputation as an anti-Semitic rabble-rouser was not an adornment to the Festival and Hitler realized that his presence was an embarrassment. As he later remarked,

*Then for years I did not attend, which made me very sad. Frau Wagner was terribly upset, wrote to me a dozen times, telephoned me two dozen times. I very often went through Bayreuth, however, and then I stayed with them. Frau Wagner - and that is her historic service - linked Bayreuth to National Socialism. Although Siegfried was personally a friend, he was politically passive. The Jews would have wrung his neck; he could not do anything else.*

In fact Jews, far from wringing Siegfried's neck, attended the Festival in goodly numbers and some - such as Thomas Mann's in-laws, the Pringsheims - were important patrons. What had actually nearly destroyed Siegfried was Siegfried himself. His homosexual affairs, as Hitler well knew, had so risked scandal that his marriage to Winifred in 1915 had to be hastily arranged to forestall disaster for the institution. Hitler was entirely untroubled by the Wagner dynasty's sexual foibles and sometimes gossiped about them, once discussing the rumour that the noted Bayreuth conductor, Karl Muck, was the composer's son.

In the years before becoming chancellor Hitler often stopped in Bayreuth on his travels between Munich and Berlin, and stayed with Winifred and the children in clandestine nocturnal visits. He loved Wahnfried - it 'radiates life', he said - and preferred it to the Goethe-Haus which gave 'the impression of an absolute and utter deadness'. Both before and after 1933 it was a place of refuge for him. He was never taken to see Cosima, who was by then blind and lived, as her first biographer wrote, 'between dreaming and waking'. But the children Wieland, Friedelind, Wolfgang and Verena - were his great pleasure. 'Sometimes Hitler's car crept up the drive after midnight and he would steal secretly into the house,' Friedelind recalled. 'Late as it was he never failed to come into the nursery and tell us gruesome tales of his adventures. We all sat up among the pillows in the half-light and listened while he made our flesh creep . . . . They were among the very few permitted to use his nickname 'Wolf'. He called her 'Wini' and the children by their nicknames.

Winifred and her four children were as much of a family as he ever had, and the warm, familial atmosphere must have been of enormous emotional importance. Wahnfried was the home he had not known since childhood, Winifred was the woman he never married and the children were the offspring he lacked. That they were Wagners may have been the key to their allure, but they brought out a side of his character as no one else could do. In January 1942 while in his headquarters on the Russian front he could still rhapsodize about them. 'We used the familiar "du" in speaking to one another. I love these people and Wahnfried.' If the man had a heart, it was here, if anywhere, that it was touched.

There was nothing else in his life like this. At Wahnfried more than at the Berghof he could put aside the burdens of office and escape the thuggish party hacks who surrounded him. Everyone in his entourage noticed that Hitler was a changed person during his days at Wahnfried. 'With no other family did he maintain such a deep friendship,' Below recalled. After Siegfried's death in 1930 Hitler revelled in his role as paterfamilias and, when in Bayreuth, could not bear to have a meal unless at least one family member was present. Speer described his mood: *On these Festival days Hitler seemed more relaxed than usual. He obviously felt at ease in the Wagner family and free of the compulsion to represent power, which he sometimes thought himself obliged to do even with the evening group in the chancellery. He was gay, paternal to the children, friendly and solicitous towards Winifred Wagner . . . . As patron of the Festival and as the friend of the Wagner family, Hitler was no doubt realizing a dream which even in his youth he perhaps never quite dared to dream.*

'The ten Bayreuth days were always my pleasantest time,' Hitler himself said, 'and how happy I was every time we arrived there again.' And when the Festival came to an end, he went on, 'it is something so sad, just as when the decorations are taken off the Christmas tree'.

One of the Führer's great pleasures were the annual receptions held at Wahnfried for performers. These generally went on through the night. He would expatiate almost nonstop on whatever caught his fancy at the moment and everyone else listened enthralled without daring to interject a comment or ask a question. A minor singer who attended the 1937 levee wrote down a reverential record of the event, which typically dwelt more on Hitler's mode of speaking and the famous laser-beam effect of his eyes than on the content of his remarks. 'He did not so much speak as words simply flowed from him,' the soloist rhapsodized. 'His gaze seemed to come not from his body but from his entire being, without any physical limit.' Friedelind Wagner gave a similar though less venerative account. Hitler, she said, could never endure a normal exchange for more than five minutes. Instead, he would turn any conversation into a two-hour oration on world or artistic affairs. The effect, she went on, left his listeners 'purple in the face as though they were under the effect of a drug'. But when asked what he had said, 'they couldn't tell us; they . . . had been carried away by their emotions'.

The relationship between Hitler and Winifred was personal, not political. She held no party position and he never awarded her the highest party honour, the golden party badge. Though Hitler rarely corresponded, seven letters and notes to Winifred are known to survive. They convey a cordiality that was quite exceptional in his relationships. The earliest, of 30 December 1927, reads:

*My dear Wini,  
You simply cannot imagine what a great surprise your Christmas gift was to me. You really have outdone yourself. I have no idea how I can ever thank you.  
I now look to the future. And as the end of this year arrives, I think happily of you. I remain convinced that destiny will take me where four years ago I hoped it would. Then the moment will come when your pride in your friend will be the thanks that I cannot today provide.  
So heartiest greetings, and accept my best wishes for the coming year.  
from your Wolf*

Another, on a black-edged correspondence card dated 30 December 1931, thanked her for a Christmas gift and continued in a bleak vein: *These have been very sad days. I must overcome this sense of loneliness. On Christmas day I drove to Berneck and wanted to go on the next day to Berlin. But ice forced me to return to Munich. I passed through Bayreuth but could not bring myself to look you up. Why should one deprive others of their joy just because one is personally so sad? . . .*

The most remarkable, written on 8 January 1933, just three weeks before he was appointed chancellor, stated,

*For weeks I have been bogged down by difficult and hard work. One worry after another! I do not know whether you will even understand me any longer .... For the past two years Christmas for me has been nothing more than a festival of sorrow. I can no longer manage to be what I was before .... I believe the time will certainly come when I can demonstrate my grateful devotion not with words but with deeds. Unfortunately there are always new mountains to be conquered. Today I understand why in my youth it was Wagner and his destiny that spoke to me more than many other great Germans. It was the same ordeal, the eternal struggle against hatred, envy and incomprehension. The worries are the same. Perhaps destiny will yet permit me to contribute something.*

Hitler's friendship with Winifred aroused gossip, even rumours of romance and possible marriage. Whatever her feelings, Hitler had no intention of marrying anyone and occasionally had a good laugh at the notion that they might wed. The relationship cooled following a dreadful scandal provoked by Friedelind in 1940. Independent-minded, a bit of a rebel and troublemaker, she adored the anti-fascist Toscanini and was close to the soprano Frida Leider, herself married to a Jew. Through such friendships she had come to find Bayreuth and Germany intolerable and in 1938 went to Paris and on to Switzerland. She later claimed that Hitler sent Winifred there to warn that she would be 'destroyed and exterminated'

unless she returned, though notations in her diary and correspondence with her mother at the time leave a different impression. In any event, she fled to London in March of 1940, just missing the Wehrmacht's sweep through Western Europe. There, beginning in early May, she published in the Daily Sketch a series of twelve articles mocking Hitler and the Nazi leadership. These were immediately picked up by German authorities and passed on to Goebbels and Hitler himself. 'The fat, little Wagner girl divulges revelations about the Führer in London. What a little beast! This could possibly be somewhat embarrassing,' Goebbels confided to his diary when the series was advertised with such headlines as 'The Real Hitler', 'The Truth about this Man' and 'The Young Girl Who Declared War Against the Gods of Berchtesgaden'. Short on facts but long on purported quotes of the Führer and revelations about the atmosphere of his court, the articles portrayed Hitler as a bumbling fool who easily worked himself up into hysterics, 'rolling his eyes like some demented fanatic' and referred in other passages to 'his blue eyes now unmistakably those of a madman' and as someone who 'looked as though he were possessed by a demon'. He was, she assured her British readers, 'the greatest liar who ever lived'.

Even though no breath of this expose ever reached the German public, Hitler, a man almost insanely concerned about his image, was devastated. What hostile articles and books had appeared up to then were all by outspoken anti-Nazis and dealt with Hitler's policies, not his personal life. Here were revelations from a social insider, one of only five persons in Germany - the others being her mother, brothers and sister - on whom he had lavished the most remarkable attention and, in his way, affection. That she should at a time of war go over to the enemy and betray and seek to hurt and humiliate him was a staggering blow. And that some of the factual titbits must originally have come from Winifred, intimating that she considered him socially awkward, doubtless undermined his relations with her.

It was of little importance that the contents were mostly harmless gossip and hearsay. What mattered was that they came from a friend. As one article followed another, the Propaganda Minister became increasingly concerned and even accused her of high treason. 'The Führer has told Wieland Wagner about his sweet little sister. It is really a terrible scandal that this stupid bumpkin is causing.' Now, at the very moment of his greatest military triumph, he was being made fun of before the British public by a young woman with whom he had been so uncharacteristically close. 'He is deeply shaken by Friedelind Wagner's mean-spiritedness,' Goebbels noted. 'A traitor to her country.'

Despite his mortification, Hitler retained his interest in the family and the Festival to the end. Wieland, the eldest of the children and heir presumptive to the Festival, was the one on whom Hitler had always doted. He revered the boy as the corporeal descendant of the composer and spoiled him as a son. He showered him with favours, even inviting him to Munich to present him with a Mercedes as a reward for successfully completing secondary school. He gave Wieland sole permission to take

and market photographs of himself in Bayreuth, an arrangement the lad turned to a handy profit. In 1936, when Wieland found life in compulsory labour service physically too demanding, Hitler moved him to an easier camp and ordered that he should be left free to work at the Festival. Once the war began, Hitler did him the greatest kindness by exempting him from military service. While other men his age were off fighting, Wieland spent the war years largely in Munich studying music and painting. Hitler continued to follow his career with interest and had Goebbels put him in charge of production at the opera company in the Saxon town of Altenburg, where he remained until all theatres in Germany were closed in August 1944.

From the moment of his appointment as chancellor, Hitler claimed for himself the Wagnerian legacy. 'After coming to power, my first thought was to erect a grandiose monument in memory of Richard Wagner . . . a monument that would symbolize the immense importance of this genius for German music,' he told Arno Breker. The project occasioned the first artistic competition tendered by the new government. Two weeks later he took advantage of the fiftieth anniversary of the composer's death on 13 February to stage a glittering memorial ceremony. To Leipzig, the composer's birthplace, he summoned the entire cabinet, the diplomatic corps, leading cultural figures as well as Winifred and Wieland. That evening he went on to Weimar and attended a gala performance of *Tristan and Isolde*. A month later, the ceremony in Potsdam formally inaugurating the Third Reich concluded with a performance at the Berlin State Opera of *Die Meistersinger*, a work from then on performed for official state visitors, at the annual party rally and at other important events. In March of 1934 he laid the cornerstone for the 'Richard Wagner National Monument of the German People', a vast sculpture park in the composer's honour in Leipzig. On the occasion of Wagner's 125th birthday in May 1938 he founded the Richard Wagner Memorial Centre in Bayreuth, a research institute devoted to the composer's life and work. Hitler placed the institution under his own aegis rather than the authority of the Propaganda Ministry and instructed that its first order of business should be to investigate the controversial question of whether the composer and his wife had Jewish antecedents.

Few, if any, personal possessions were so prized as his collection of the original scores of Wagner's operas that the composer had given Ludwig II - the autograph scores of *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*, the clean copies of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, the original duplicate of the orchestral sketch of the third act of *Siegfried* and a copy of the orchestral sketch of *Götterdämmerung*. At Winifred Wagner's instigation the House of Wittelsbach was persuaded, under some duress, to sell the manuscripts for 800,000 marks to the Reich Economic Chamber, which presented them to the Führer on his fiftieth birthday in 1939. The gesture had a disastrous consequence. As aerial bombing of Berlin intensified and Russian troops neared the capital, Winifred repeatedly appealed to Hitler to send the scores to Bayreuth for safekeeping. Hitler adamantly refused to

give them up, insisting they were secure. Whether they were deliberately incinerated in the bonfires that Hitler later ordered of the contents of his safes in Berlin and at the Berghof in his last days or whether they were destroyed by bombs or were carried off with other of his personal effects by the Russians is not known.

Hitler's passion for Wagner aroused great anguish inside the party where it was considered, as Winifred said, 'downright batty'. 'Most leading National Socialist figures were hostile to R[ichard] W[agner] and his art,' Winifred insisted in her memorandum to the denazification tribunal in 1946. Members of Hitler's inner circle, such as Speer, Hoffmann and Dietrich, confirmed this. The point has been so misunderstood and misrepresented since 1945 that a memorandum by Heinz Tietjen merits quotation:

*In reality leading party officials throughout the Reich were hostile to Wagner .... Top party officials came to Bayreuth only when ordered and then only a few of them and no more than once .... Once a year though they all pretended to be Wagner fanatics but, even so, not at Bayreuth but after the Festival at the party rally in Nuremberg where they all pretended to like Die Meistersinger. I never attended but I understand that every year after each act more and more of the audience vanished and men in brown and black uniforms had to be rounded up from the streets to fill the auditorium. But the propaganda was always about Bayreuth. Germany believed and still believes in a 'Hitler Bayreuth' that never was. The party tolerated Hitler's Wagner enthusiasm, but fought against those who, like me, were devoted to his works - the people around Rosenberg openly, those around Goebbels covertly . . . .*

Tietjen had put his finger on the problem. What most ostentatiously linked Hitler and Wagner in the public mind was the dictator's attendance at the Bayreuth Festival every summer from 1933 to 1940. Even before coming to power, he had several times intervened on the Festival's behalf. In 1930 he had offered his support in surmounting the artistic difficulties facing Bayreuth following Siegfried's death that summer. Two years later, when Wilhelm Furtwängler had a falling-out with Winifred and resigned, he tried to mediate. But it was when he became chancellor that his help was crucial. Ironically, the problem was the very result of his coming to power. Within weeks Winifred found to her horror that Nazi officials were cultural barbarians who deprecated Bayreuth as a musical playground for an international elite. The local party chief let it be known that he intended to 'smoke out that international crowd at Wahnfried'.

A frightened Winifred appealed to Hitler, who invited her to lunch at the chancellery two months after taking office. As cordial as ever, he acknowledged the animus against Wagner and Bayreuth within his party and promised that as long as he was alive the Festival could count on his protection. He said he could best counter the party's hostility by showing up there every summer. While his assurances removed her political worries, it did not solve her financial problems. Because of the international economic crisis and the domestic politi-

cal situation, ticket sales that year were so meagre that the Festival faced bankruptcy. She returned to Berlin to plead for help, which Hitler promised without hesitation. He instructed party officials from then on to book large blocks of seats - sometimes entire performances - and further authorized a significant grant to fund new productions. He had once maintained he could imagine nothing finer than to be a cultural philanthropist. This was his first act of philanthropy and he relished it to the full. At a memorial event for Wagner held that summer at Ludwig II's castle at Neuschwanstein, he declared that he saw it as his mission to complete what the monarch, Wagner's great patron, had begun. By guaranteeing the Festival's finances for the first time in its history, Hitler did in fact give reality to the composer's dream of a Bayreuth recognized by the state as an 'obligation of the nation'.

Hitler's involvement with Bayreuth also had disadvantages. Foreigners and Jews, naturally enough, lost their taste for the Festival, and some singers declined to perform there. Most dramatically, Toscanini refused to conduct in 1933. Appalled at the treatment of a number of German conductors such as Bruno Walter, who had been prevented from conducting in Leipzig and Berlin that spring, Toscanini cancelled his engagement. It was a sensational public affront to the new chancellor and a great blow to the Festival where the conductor was popular with audiences and admired by critics. Toscanini joined Walter at the Salzburg Festival and their presence turned the long artistic rivalry between Bayreuth and Salzburg into open political confrontation. Hitler responded by requesting artists, such as Furtwängler and Strauss, to withdraw from Salzburg - they compliantly obeyed - and levied an exit tax at the German border so large as to make it impossible for the German public to attend.

The paradoxical effect of Hitler's patronage was to make the Festival the only cultural institution in the Third Reich independent of Nazi control. Since no party official dared interfere, Winifred and her team went on with their work, neither hiring nor firing anyone for political reasons. She retained Heinz Tietjen as her general manager and Emil Preetorius as her stage designer, even though neither was personally, politically or artistically in good odour with Hitler. Efforts by Rosenberg, whom she considered implacably hostile to Wagnerian opera, to merge all Wagner Societies into one organization under himself she scotched. She even managed to fend off the biggest predator of all, Goebbels. Tormented by the Festival's independence of his ministry and Hitler's closeness to the Wagner family, he tried again and again to get his hands on the institution or at least to force Winifred to join his Reich Theatre Chamber. He came to detest Winifred and Wieland, and disparaged the Festival as a 'family and clique affair' that should be taken out of their hands. But his efforts to poison Hitler's mind - by portraying the Festival as a hotbed of homosexuality, for example - all failed. The propaganda wizard had to content himself with venting his frustration to his diary: 'With a woman in charge, poor Bayreuth! The Führer is her greatest protector.'

*' . . . You know that nothing happens in Bayreuth that is not at the Führer's initiative or in keeping with his explicit*

*approval. . . .'* Thus Winifred in a letter to Strauss in June 1935. 'Hitler never interfered with any artistic questions concerning the Festival but on the opposite backed any of my decisions which might not agree with the party programme.' Thus Winifred in a memorandum she wrote in English for American military authorities shortly after the war. Which statement is correct? Until all of Winifred's correspondence is made public - in any case many of their exchanges were by phone - there can be no conclusive answer.

Given his devotion to Wagner and fascination with operatic staging, Hitler must have been tempted to exert some influence on what went on. His request, soon after becoming chancellor, to have Roller do an entirely new production of Parsifal was evidence enough. Not long thereafter, as Richard Strauss's son wrote to a member of the Wagner family, 'The Führer told my dad that he has a lot of projects in mind for Bayreuth, but they are still up in the air.' Winifred herself mentioned in her 1975 television interview that after a performance she and Hitler returned to Wahnfried and discussed it long into the night. The Führer is said to have expressed strong opinions on these occasions, though it is unclear whether about the singing, conducting or staging. According to Friedelind Wagner, he made occasional suggestions about staging and would have liked a second act of Tristan similar to Roller's 1903 version in Vienna with a romantic moon and countless stars - a drawing of which he had made in his 1925 sketchbook. Other ideas, if Friedelind is to be believed, were to have the Flower Maidens dance around Parsifal naked and the Norns sit on the top of a globe representing the world.

Both out of personal friendship and financial dependence - to say nothing of political realities - Winifred had little option but to take Hitler's views seriously. Judging by her later correspondence, she discussed with him the selection of conductors and major soloists - matters on which he had strong opinions. But while he more or less imposed Furtwängler on her in 1936, he allowed her to sack him the next year. All in all, Winifred ran the Festival as she saw fit. She protected gay singers - Max Lorenz and Herbert Janssen - and engaged Franz von Hößlin to conduct when, because of his Jewish wife, he was unwelcome at other German opera houses. There is no evidence, the Roller case apart, that Hitler interfered with staging or directing. To be sure, with his love of 'smashing effects', he found Bayreuth productions staid and pressed Winifred to bring in the dazzling Benno von Arent. Winifred stood firm, however, and, according to Speer, whenever the subject arose, 'she pretended not to know what Hitler was driving at'. After the war Heinz Tietjen declared flatly that 'Hitler himself never expressed any demands or wishes'.

He did interfere massively, however, by proposing to replace the composer's great opera theatre with a vast new edifice. His idea of impressive opera houses was Charles Garnier's ornate edifice in Paris and Gottfried Semper's imposing one in Dresden. Although eventually persuaded to retain Wagner's original auditorium because of its outstanding acoustics, he wanted it to be encased in a rambling building of typically neoclassical architecture designed by Rudolf Emil Mewis. The

monstrous pile was to be inaugurated at a gala 'Peace Festival' celebrating Hitler's final military victory. Construction was initiated in 1939 but stopped after the war got under way.

For all the ideological agnosticism of what took place on stage, the Festival itself was almost as big a Nazi cultural jamboree as the Great German Art Exhibitions. With the town swathed in swastika banners, the cafes and restaurants filled with Hitler's retainers and party workers and shops selling not Richard Wagner but Adolf Hitler mementoes, what had been a Wagner festival became a Hitler festival. In the manner of a medieval monarch Hitler was followed to Bayreuth by a vast entourage of officials, attendants, courtiers, hangers-on and just about anybody who was anybody. Occasionally he invited several top party leaders to accompany him in the hope that the experience would be civilizing. But most of them hated it. After enduring one act in the oven heat of the Festspielhaus - where they had to be nudged in the ribs by their neighbours to stop snoring as they dozed - they would steal away and flee to the nearby countryside.

The association between Hitler and the Festival was so intimate and symbolic as to prompt Thomas Mann to style Bayreuth 'Hitler's court theatre' and a more lighthearted Bertolt Brecht to refer to Hitler as 'Führer of the Bayreuth Republic'. Hitler spent ten days there every summer, living in the small house where Siegfried had retreated during the day to work on his operas. Seated in the very loge where Wagner and King Ludwig had witnessed the original Ring production in 1876, he attended every performance of the first cycle of operas and later returned for another dose of *Götterdämmerung* and sometimes several other works as well. Even in the summer of 1939, while engrossed in final plans for the invasion of Poland and the negotiation of a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union, he did not miss a performance. On returning from France in 1940, following his military success in the West, Hitler ordered his train to be diverted to Bayreuth so that he could take in a performance of *Götterdämmerung*. It was the last musical event he ever attended.

The outbreak of the war, far from causing a suspension in the Festival as had occurred in 1914, gave Hitler, ever the Wagnerian evangelist, an opportunity to use the institution for his own purposes. Unable himself to think of anything more wonderful than attending a Wagner opera at Bayreuth, he decided to 'reward' military personnel and workers in war industries by giving them a day at the opera, free of charge. Beginning in 1940 and going on through the summer of 1944, he instituted a 'War Festival' to which the deserving were taken, willingly or not. In the course of the five War Festivals there were a total of seventy-four performances attended by no fewer than 142,000 'guests of the Führer', as attendees were known. Hitler was terribly proud, saying to his staff in January 1942, 'I consider it a particular joy to have been able to keep Bayreuth going at a time when it faced economic collapse. And now, during the war, I have been able to realize what Wagner had wished: to enable selected persons from the general population,

soldiers and workers to attend the Festival without charge.'

In the mood of the time, Bayreuth was even promoted as having miraculous curative powers for burned-out warriors. One of the popular films of those years, Stukas, told the story of a squadron of the eponymous German divebombers. In the first half, the handsome hero had the time of his life divebombing everything and everyone he could find in Poland and France. But with the defeat of France and the hiatus in active hostilities, he lost all interest in life and lay nearly comatose in a clinic. When no medical or psychological treatment could revive him, a nurse took him as a last resort to Bayreuth for a performance of *Götterdämmerung*. To the music of Siegfried's 'Rhine journey', the thrill and pleasure of bombing and killing was restored. Reborn, he enthusiastically returned to his unit just in time to join the first wave of planes to blitz London.

Despite the crushing burden of his military campaigns, Hitler took a keen interest in these War Festivals. From Winifred's correspondence it is clear that she consulted him on every major artistic decision of what was now in effect a wartime enterprise. The main problem was deciding on a suitable repertory. As the war turned against Germany, it seemed wise to replace *Götterdämmerung* with something more appropriate. As she wrote to Hitler, Tristan and Isolde had to be ruled out because of the long third act narrative of the wounded and dying Tristan about his suffering, loneliness and impending death. She feared that this would be, as she put it, 'too much of a burden' for wounded soldiers to handle. Hitler went along with her alternate suggestion of *Die Meistersinger*, even though he planned to have it performed following his final military victory at a triumphant 'Peace Festival'. That opera alone was then performed in the final two years of the War Festivals.

So enamoured was Hitler with his War Festivals that he decided he would continue this 'people's Bayreuth' after the war. The old Festival was to be done away with and replaced by a Volksfest, a popular festival for loyal party workers and other favoured groups. Thus would Bayreuth become a National Socialist pilgrimage site, and thus would the Nazi party and German public be 'Wagnerized'.

The final and most curious aspect of Hitler's Wagnermania was that after the German army's disaster at Stalingrad, he could no longer bear to listen to the operas. Before then he would still sometimes hold 'recording evenings', as he had in the good old days. But as the military situation worsened, hope vanished, memories were melancholy and dreams faded. Now an odd thing happened. After Stalingrad all he wanted to hear was Lehar. His valet, Heinz Linge, noted an occasion when Hitler was left deeply depressed by a military briefing. Afterwards he turned to him and asked, 'Linge, what music recordings do you have there?' The valet, who evidently never travelled anywhere without them, -replied, 'Wagner and several operettas.' The choice fell immediately on Lehar. Marlene Exner, his cook at the military headquarters, recalled that *The Merry Widow* was all she ever heard him listen to from then on. So, in the course of his life, there were Wagner, Bruckner and

Lehar, these three; but at the end, the greatest of these was Lehar.

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