

*Richard Wagner*  
(1813-1883)

1813-1832 – Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig on 22 May 1813 of uncertain parentage. At the time of his birth, his mother Johanna was married to the police actuary Carl Friedrich Wagner, but he may actually have been the son of the actor and painter Ludwig Geyer, who took responsibility for raising the child after Carl Friedrich died in November 1813. Speculation that Geyer was of Jewish origins has been demonstrated to be groundless. Wagner’s formal education was spotty. He interested himself mainly in music and theater as a teenager, but received surprisingly meager musical training as a youngster in Leipzig and was never a virtuoso performer on any instrument. His study of music theory and harmony did lead to impressive results in the early 1830s, including compositions for keyboard and orchestra on the model of Beethoven. Attempts at operatic composition before 1833 never resulted in any completed works.

1833-1834 – After obtaining an appointment as chorus master at a theater in Würzburg through family connections, Wagner came into contact with the operatic style of the principal German and Italian masters of the day. His first completed opera, *Die Feen* (1833-34), was written in German Romantic style. Wagner himself wrote the libretto for this opera and all of his subsequent operas, a distinction unique among all major composers of operas.

1834-1839 – Upon his return to Leipzig in 1834, Wagner became associated with groups of radical intellectuals who embraced hedonism and sensuality. Under the temporary influence of Italian *bel canto* style, he produced his second opera, *Das Liebesverbot* (1835-36), composed in a style similar to that of Bellini. Between 1834 and 1836, Wagner was a part of the travelling theater company of Heinrich Bethmann. His time with Bethmann made possible valuable experience as a conductor and the chance to meet his first wife, Christine Wilhelmine Planer, generally known as “Minna,” who was one of the leading ladies of the company. They were married on 24 November 1834 in Magdeburg. The marriage was involuntarily childless and always strained. Travels took the pair to Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia) and Riga, at that time outposts of German culture in eastern Europe. As music director of the theater in Riga, Wagner began work on his opera *Rienzi* and had the idea of trying his luck getting it produced in Paris.

1839-1842 – Wagner and his wife were forced to leave Riga under cover of night in order to escape creditors. After a perilous sea journey, they reached Paris in September 1839. In Paris, the established opera composer Giacomo Meyerbeer tried diligently to assist Wagner in getting *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi* produced in Paris, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Wagner and his wife lived in poverty while Richard tried to eke out a living as a music arranger and music journalist. At one point, Wagner was threatened with imprisonment for debt. The Wagners

left Paris in 1842 after *Rienzi* was accepted for presentation in Dresden due to the influence of Meyerbeer. In Dresden, it was an immediate success. While still in Paris, Wagner began work on *Der fliegende Holländer*.

1843-1847 – The court theater at Dresden mounted the first production of *Der fliegende Holländer* early in 1843; it was only a moderate success, but the court appointed Wagner director of the court theater in January 1843, a post that offered the composer a degree of financial security and the chance to supervise productions of his own operas; the opera *Tannhäuser* was first performed in 1845; in this period his first marriage was at its most stable.

1848-1849 – Revolution and civil disturbances that rocked France and the German lands in 1848 penetrated to Dresden; Wagner put himself firmly on the side of the radical political movements of his day, and he joined insurrectionists opposed to the rule of the king of Saxony; when Prussian troops arrived to gain control of Dresden in May of 1849 Wagner had to flee for his life to Weimar, where he was sheltered by the composer Franz Liszt; a warrant for Wagner's arrest was issued in Saxony; he was able to make his way to Switzerland with the aid of a false passport; before his departure from Dresden, he was able to complete the opera *Lohengrin* and a draft for what would later become the basis for the librettos of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

1849-1851 – As an exile in Zürich, Switzerland, Wagner completed three notable essays, *The Artwork of the Future* (1849), *Judaism in Music* (1850), and *Opera and Drama* (1851); in 1850, the opera *Lohengrin* was performed for the first time due to the intervention of Liszt, who arranged for a production in Weimar.

1851-1859 – A period marked by extramarital affairs and continued expansion of Wagner's reputation due to his activities as an essayist and the enormous popularity in Germany of the operas *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*; the Wagner family mainly lived on generous gifts of money provided by admirers and Richard's lovers; his extravagance still left him deeply in debt at many times, and he was forced to sell the performance rights to all the operas he had completed up to that time; Wagner came into contact with many intellectual figures at this time, most importantly the philosopher Schopenhauer; in this period Wagner began, but abandoned, work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; the opera *Tristan und Isolde* was written between 1857 and 1859; although centered in Switzerland, he traveled extensively.

1860-1863 – A political amnesty was declared in Germany that permitted Wagner to return in August 1860; the same year he tried again to establish himself in Paris, a move that led to a disastrous production of *Tannhäuser* in March of 1861; in 1862, while resident in Mainz, Wagner began work on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*; after years of constant bickering and extramarital affairs, Wagner sent Minna away to live in Dresden with an allowance; after November 1862 he never

saw her again before her death in 1866; in 1863 Wagner moved to Vienna in order to see *Tristan und Isolde* performed there; the opera was rejected as too difficult to perform without an unacceptable number of rehearsals.

1864-1870 – By March of 1864 Wagner was forced to flee Vienna on threat of arrest for debt; his financial problems had reached an apparently hopeless state, but were solved for the remainder of his life due to the accession of King Ludwig II of Bavaria the same year; Ludwig was an enthusiastic admirer of Wagner's music who paid Wagner a large annual stipend, provided him with a lavish residence in Munich, and sponsored performances of his operas; the first performance of *Tristan und Isolde* took place in Munich, capital of Bavaria, in 1865, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* followed in 1868, then *Das Rheingold* in 1869 and *Die Walküre* in 1870; in 1864, Wagner came into close contact with Cosima von Bülow, a daughter of Franz Liszt and wife of the conductor Hans von Bülow; they became lovers almost immediately and had three children together before Cosima divorced Bülow in 1869; Wagner married Cosima in August 1870 and was devoted to her in his own way until his death; for her part, Cosima idolized her second husband and helped preserve the legacy of his musical works and ideas about music until her death in 1930; King Ludwig's extravagant generosity towards Wagner was bitterly resented by the Bavarian populace, so he was sent away from Munich; he acquired a villa overlooking Lake Lucerne which he called Tribschen.

1871-1877 - Wagner and Cosima moved to the town of Bayreuth in Upper Franconia in 1871 in preparation for the construction of a new theater (the *Festspielhaus*) in which the complete *Ring* cycle would be performed as part of a grand operatic festival; the foundation for the theater was laid in May of 1872; in 1874, the Wagner family moved into a beautiful new villa provided by Ludwig known as Wahnfried; the last of the *Ring* operas, *Götterdämmerung*, was completed in 1874; rehearsals for the first Bayreuth festival began the following year; in 1876, with considerable financial support from Ludwig, the first Bayreuth festival took place with attendees from all over Europe; the reaction was mixed, although there was universal admiration at the completion of such an extraordinary undertaking; a trip to London shortly after the conclusion of the first Bayreuth festival was intended to recoup the financial losses incurred from concerts of operatic excerpts

1878-1883 – In artistic terms, Wagner's last few years were dominated by the composition of the opera *Parsifal* and its first performance as the principal event of the second Bayreuth festival in July and August of 1882; Wagner suffered from heart disease in the early 1880s and experienced a major heart attack in March of 1882; shortly after the second Bayreuth festival, Wagner and his family moved to Venice to take up residence in the Palazzo Vendramin on the Grand Canal; on 13 February 1883, after a rare bitter argument with Cosima, Wagner suffered a final fatal heart attack and died; his body was transported from Venice to Bayreuth for a private funeral on the grounds of Wahnfried.