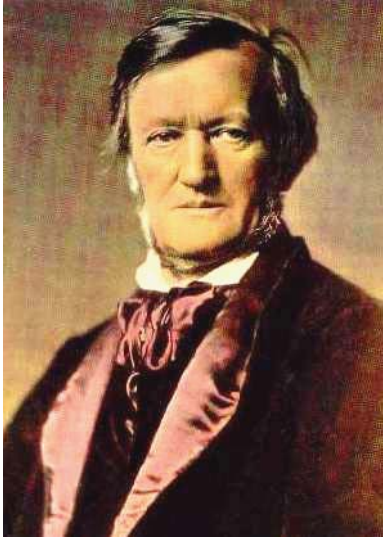


Richard Wagner

Born: May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany; died February 13, 1883 in Venice, Italy



Richard Wagner was the ninth child of his father, Carl Friedrich Wagner, who was a clerk in the Leipzig police service. Wagner's father died of typhus six months after Richard's birth, by which time Wagner's mother, Johanna Rosine Wagner, was living with the actor and playwright, Ludwig Geyer, who was rumored to have been the boy's biological father. In August 1814 Johanna married Geyer and moved with her family to his residence in Dresden.

For the first 14 years of his life, Wagner was known as Wilhelm Richard Geyer. In his later years, Wagner may have suspected that Geyer was in fact his biological father, and furthermore speculated (wrongly) that Geyer was Jewish.

Young Richard entertained ambitions to be a playwright, and first became interested in music as a means of enhancing the dramas that he wanted to write and stage. He soon turned toward studying music, for which he enrolled at the University of Leipzig in 1831. One of his early musical influences was Ludwig van Beethoven.

In 1833, at the age of 20, Wagner finished composing his first complete opera, *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*). This opera, which clearly imitated the style of von Weber, would go unproduced until half a century later. Meanwhile, Wagner held brief appointments as musical director at opera houses in Magdeburg and Königsberg, during which he wrote *Das Liebesverbot*, based on William Shakespeare's play, *Measure for Measure*. This second attempt was actually staged at Magdeburg in 1836, but met with little acclaim.

Later in 1836, Wagner married one of the troupe's actresses, Minna Planer. They moved to the town of Riga, then in the Russian Empire, where he became the music director at the local opera house. A few weeks afterward, Minna ran off with an army officer, who then abandoned her, leaving her penniless. Wagner took her back, but it was the start of a troubled marriage that would end in misery three decades later.

By 1839, the couple had amassed such a large amount of debt that they were forced to flee Riga to escape their creditors. (The recurring problem of debt would plague Wagner for the rest of his life.) During their flight, they took a stormy sea passage to London, from which Wagner got the inspiration for *Der Fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*). The Wagners lived in Paris for several years, where Wagner made a living writing articles and writing arrangements of operas by other composers.

Dresden, Germany

Wagner completed writing his third opera, *Rienzi*, in 1840. By chance, it was accepted for performance by the Dresden Court Theatre in the German state of Saxony. In 1842, the couple moved to Dresden, where *Rienzi* was staged to considerable success. The Wagners lived in Dresden for the next six years, eventually being appointed the Royal Saxon Court Conductor. During this period, Wagner wrote and staged *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*.

Their stay in Dresden was brought to an end by Wagner's involvement in left-wing politics. A nationalist movement was gaining force in the independent German kingdoms, calling for increased freedoms and the unification of the weak states into a single nation. Wagner played an enthusiastic role in this movement, receiving guests at his house that included his colleague August Röckel, who was editing the radical left-wing paper, *Volksblätter*, and the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin.

Widespread discontent against the Saxon king came to a boil in April 1849, when King Frederick Augustus II of Saxony dissolved his Parliament and rejected a new constitution pressed upon him by the people. In May, an uprising broke out, in which Wagner played a minor supporting role. The incipient revolution was quickly crushed by an allied force of Saxon and Prussian troops, and warrants were issued for the arrest of the revolutionaries. Wagner escaped, first to Paris, and then to Zürich. His compatriots Röckel and Bakunin were forced to endure long years of imprisonment.

Exile, Schopenhauer, and Mathilde Wesendonck

Wagner spent the next twelve years in exile from Saxony and Prussia. He had completed *Lohengrin* before the Dresden uprising, and he now wrote desperately to his friend, Franz Liszt, to have it staged in his absence. Liszt, proving to be a friend in need, eventually conducted the premiere in Weimar in August 1850.

Nevertheless, Wagner found himself in grim personal straits — he was isolated from the German musical world, and without any income to speak of. The musical sketches he was penning, which would grow into *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, seemed to have no prospects of ever being performed. His wife, Minna, who had disliked the operas he had written after *Rienzi*, was falling into a deepening depression. Finally, Wagner fell victim to erysipelas, a superficial bacterial skin infection, which made it difficult for him to continue writing.

Wagner's primary output during his first years in Zürich was a set of notable essays: *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849), describing a vision of opera as Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total artwork” in which the various arts such as music, song, dance, poetry, visual arts, and stagecraft were unified. He also wrote *Judaism in Music* (1850), an anti-Semitic tract directed against Jewish composers, and *Opera and Drama* (1851), in which he described ideas in aesthetics that he was putting to use in the *Ring* operas.

Schopenhauer's influence. In 1854 Wagner's poet friend, Georg Herwegh, introduced him to the works of the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. Wagner would later call this the most important event of his life. His personal circumstances certainly made him an easy convert to Schopenhauer's philosophy, which was centered on a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition. He would remain an adherent of Schopenhauer for the rest of his life, even after his fortunes improved.

One of Schopenhauer's doctrines was that music held a supreme role among the arts, since it was the only one unconcerned with the material world. Wagner quickly embraced this claim, which must have resonated strongly, despite its direct contradiction with his own arguments, in *Opera and Drama*, that music in opera had to be subservient to the cause of drama. Wagnerian scholars have since argued that this Schopenhauerian influence caused Wagner to assign a more commanding role to music in his later operas, including the latter half of the *Ring* cycle, which he had yet to compose. Many aspects of Schopenhauerian doctrine undoubtedly found their way into Wagner's subsequent libretti. For example, the self-renouncing cobbler-poet, Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger*, generally considered Wagner's most sympathetic character, is a quintessentially Schopenhauerian creation.

Mathilde Wesendonck. Another source of inspiration for Wagner was the poet-writer, Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of the silk merchant, Otto von Wesendonck. Wagner met the Wesendoncks in Zürich in 1852. Otto, a fan of Wagner's music, placed a cottage on his estate at Wagner's disposal. By 1857, Wagner had become infatuated with Mathilde. Though Mathilde seems to have returned some of his affections, she had no intention of jeopardizing her marriage, and kept her husband informed of her contacts with Wagner. Nevertheless, the affair inspired Wagner to put aside his work on the *Ring* cycle (which would not be resumed for twelve years) and begin work on *Tristan und Isolde*, based on the Arthurian love story of the knight Tristan and the (already-married) lady Isolde.



The uneasy affair collapsed in 1858, when Minna intercepted a letter from Wagner to Mathilde. After the resulting confrontation, Wagner left Zürich alone, and headed for Venice. The following year, he

once again moved to Paris to oversee production of a new revision of *Tannhäuser* in 1861, which was an utter fiasco, due to disturbances caused by aristocrats from the Jockey Club. Further performances were cancelled, and Wagner hurriedly left the city.

In 1861, the Saxony-Prussian political ban against Wagner was lifted, and he settled in Biebrich, Prussia, and began working on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Remarkably, this opera is by far his sunniest work. His second wife, Cosima, would later write, “When future generations seek refreshment in this unique work, may they spare a thought for the tears from which the smiles arose.” In 1862, Wagner finally parted with Minna, though he (or at least his creditors) continued to support her financially until her death in 1866.

Patronage of King Ludwig II

Wagner’s fortunes dramatically improved in 1864, when King Ludwig II assumed the throne of Bavaria at the age of 18. The young king, an ardent admirer of Wagner’s operas since childhood, had the composer brought to Munich. He settled Wagner’s considerable debts, and made plans to have his latest opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, produced. After grave difficulties in rehearsal, the opera premiered to enormous success at the Munich Court Theatre on June 10, 1865.

Cosima von Bülow. In the meantime, Wagner became embroiled in another love affair, this time with Cosima von Bülow, wife of conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner’s most ardent supporters, and who also conducted the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*. Cosima was the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and the famous Countess Marie d’Agoult, and 24 years younger than Wagner. In April 1865, Cosima gave birth to Wagner’s illegitimate daughter, who was named Isolde. Their indiscreet affair scandalized Munich and, to make matters worse, Wagner fell into disfavor among members of the court, who were suspicious of his influence on the king. In December 1865, King Ludwig was finally forced to ask the composer to leave Munich. He apparently also toyed with the idea of abdicating the throne in order to follow his hero into exile, but Wagner quickly dissuaded him.



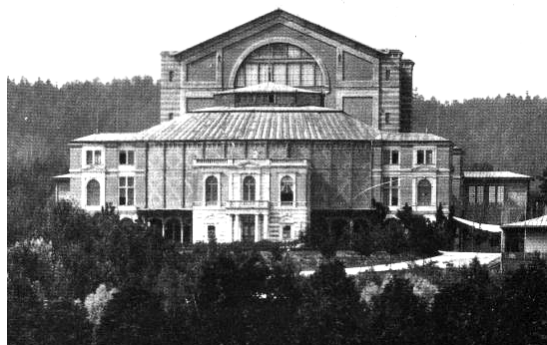
Ludwig set Wagner up at the villa Tribschen, beside Switzerland’s Lake Lucerne. Wagner completed *Die Meistersinger* at Tribschen in 1867, and it premiered in Munich on June 21st the following year. In October, Cosima finally convinced Hans von Bülow to grant her a divorce. Richard and Cosima were married on August 25, 1870. On Christmas Day of that year, Wagner presented to Cosima the chamber music, *Siegfried Idyll*, for her 33rd birthday. The marriage to Cosima lasted to the end of Wagner’s life. They had another daughter, named Eva, and a son named Siegfried.

Friedrich Nietzsche. It was at Tribschen, in 1869, that Wagner first met the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who quickly became a firm friend. Wagner’s ideas were a major influence on Nietzsche, who was 31 years his junior. Nietzsche’s first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie (The Birth of Tragedy)* in 1872, was dedicated to Wagner. The relationship eventually soured, as Nietzsche became increasingly disillusioned with various aspects of Wagner’s thought, such as his pacifism and anti-Semitism. In *Der Fall Wagner (The Case of Wagner)* in 1888 and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner (Nietzsche vs. Wagner)* in 1895, he would condemn Wagner as decadent and corrupt, even criticizing his earlier adulatory views of the composer.

Bayreuth

Wagner, now happily settled into his newfound domesticity, turned his energies toward completing the last two operas of the *Ring* cycle, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Much against Wagner’s wishes, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* were both premiered in Munich before the rest of the operas were finished. King Ludwig insisted on these “previews,” while the furious composer looked on helplessly in the face of the king’s privileges and his own dependence on the king’s funds. Wagner wanted the complete cycle to be performed in a new, specially-designed opera house.

In 1871, he decided on the small town of Bayreuth as the location of his new opera house. The Wagners moved there the following year, and the foundation stone for the Festspielhaus (Festival House) was laid. In order to raise funds for the construction, “Wagner societies” were formed in several cities, and Wagner himself began touring Germany conducting concerts. However, sufficient funds were only raised after King Ludwig stepped in with another large grant in 1874. Later that year, the Wagners moved into their permanent home in Bayreuth, a villa that they named “Wahnfried” (“Freedom from Illusion”).



Der Ring des Nibelungen was produced in its entirety at the opening of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus on August 13, 1876. Although Wagner himself would have been more than competent to conduct the world première of the *Ring*, he chose instead to remain on stage and become the first stage director. Present at this unique musical event was an illustrious list of guests: Kaiser Wilhelm (King of Prussia), Dom Pedro II of Brazil, King Ludwig (who attended in secret, probably to avoid the Kaiser), and other members of the nobility. Accomplished composers who also attended were Anton Bruckner, Edvard Grieg, Peter Tchaikovsky and Franz Liszt.

Artistically, the Festival was an outstanding success. “Something has taken place at Bayreuth which our grandchildren and their children will still remember,” wrote Tchaikovsky, attending the Festival as a Russian correspondent. Financially, however, it was an unmitigated disaster. Wagner abandoned his original plan to hold a second festival the following year, and traveled to London to conduct a series of concerts in an attempt to make up the deficit.

The Final Years

In 1877 Wagner began work on *Parsifal*, his final opera. The composition took four years, during which he also wrote a series of increasingly reactionary essays on religion and art. Wagner completed *Parsifal* in January 1882, and a second Bayreuth Festival was held for the new opera. Wagner was, by this time, extremely ill, having suffered through a series of increasingly severe angina attacks. During the sixteenth and final performance of *Parsifal* on August 29th, Wagner secretly entered the pit during Act III, took the baton from conductor Hermann Levi, and led the performance to its conclusion.

After the Festival, the Wagner family journeyed to Venice for the winter. On February 13, 1883, at the age of 70, Wagner died of a heart attack in the Palazzo Vendramin on the Grand Canal. Franz Liszt’s memorable piece for pianoforte solo, *La lugubre gondola*, evokes the passing of a black-shrouded funerary gondola bearing Wagner’s mortal remains over the Grand Canal. His body was returned to Bayreuth and buried in the garden of the Villa Wahnfried. (Cosima would later be buried there in 1930.)

Wagner: The Man

Richard Wagner made some of the most amazing contributions to music in the late Romantic period. He helped set the stage for the transition to the twentieth century, and brought opera to new heights of artistic accomplishment; however, he did it in such a crass and ungrateful manner, making as many enemies as possible along the way, that it’s hard to understand how even *his* genius could have broken through to success. It’s difficult to name another great artist who was so loathsome a man. He was a congenial user of people — he used the rich for money, the devoted for love, the public for support — and he laughed at them all. Many of Wagner’s most fervent admirers sooner or later conceived a violent distaste for the man.



Wagner had physical problems. He was an undersized little man, with a head too big for his body — a sickly little man. His nerves were bad, and he suffered from erysipelas, a superficial bacterial skin infection — it was agony for him to wear anything next to his skin coarser than silk.

Wagner was a narcissist — a man with delusions of grandeur. Never for one minute did he look at the world or at people, except in relation to himself. He not only felt that he was the most important person in the world, he was the only person who existed. He believed himself to be one of the greatest dramatists in the world, one of the greatest thinkers, and one of the greatest composers. It never occurred to him that who he was and what he did were not of the most intense and fascinating interest to anyone with whom he came in contact. He had theories about almost any subject under the sun, including vegetarianism, the drama, politics and music. In support of these theories, he wrote pamphlets, letters, books — thousands upon thousands of words, hundreds and hundreds of pages. He not only wrote these things and published them (usually at someone else's expense), but he would sit and read them aloud to his friends and his family for hours on end. An evening with him was an evening spent in listening to a monologue. He was one of the most exhausting conversationalists that ever lived. Sometimes he was brilliant, sometimes he was just maddeningly tiresome. But, whether he was being brilliant or dull, he had one sole topic of conversation — himself, what he thought and what he did.

Wagner had a mania for being right. The slightest hint of disagreement from anyone on even the most trivial point was enough to set him off on a harangue that might last for hours. He proved himself right in so many ways, and with such exhausting volubility that, in the end, his listener, stunned and deafened, would eventually agree with him, for the sake of peace.

Wagner insisted on always being the center of attention. He would write operas and, no sooner did he have the synopsis of a story, than he would invite (or rather summon) a crowd of his friends to his house and read it aloud to them — not for criticism, but for applause. When the completed text was written, the friends had to come again, and hear that read aloud. Then he would publish the text, sometimes years before the music was ever written. He played the piano like a composer, in the worst sense of what that implies, and he would sit down at the piano before parties (which often included some of the finest pianists of his time) and play for them by the hour, his own music, needless to say. He had a composer's voice. He would invite eminent vocalists to his house, and sing them his operas, taking on all the parts.

Wagner exhibited violent mood-swings. When he felt out of sorts, he would rave and stomp around, or sink into suicidal gloom and talk darkly of going to the East to end his days as a Buddhist monk. Ten minutes later, when something pleased him, he would rush outdoors and run around the garden, or jump up and down on the sofa, or stand on his head. He could be grief-stricken over the death of a pet dog, and he could be callous and heartless to a degree that would have made a Roman emperor shudder.

Wagner lacked any sense of responsibility. Not only did he seem incapable of supporting himself, but it never occurred to him that he was under any obligation to do so. He was convinced that the world owed him a living. In support of this belief, he borrowed money from everyone who was good for a loan — men, women, friends or strangers. He wrote pleading letters by the score, sometimes groveling without shame. Still others he would loftily offer the privilege of contributing to his support. Yet, he would become mortally offended if the intended benefactor declined the honor. There is no record of his ever paying or repaying money to anyone who did not have a court-enforced legal claim upon it.

What money Wagner could lay his hands on he spent like an Indian rajah. The mere prospect of a performance of one of his operas was enough to set him running up bills amounting to ten times the amount of his prospective royalties. On an income that would reduce a more scrupulous man to doing his own laundry, he would keep two servants. Without enough money in his pocket to pay his rent, he would have the walls and ceiling of his study lined with pink silk. No one will know — certainly he never knew — how much money he actually owed. We do know that his greatest benefactor gave him \$6,000 to pay

the most pressing of his debts in one city, and a year later had to give him \$16,000 to enable him to live in another city without being thrown into jail for debt.

Wagner was unscrupulous when it came to women. An endless procession of women marched through his life. His first wife, Minna, spent twenty years enduring and forgiving his infidelities. His second wife, Cosima, had first been the wife of his most devoted friend and admirer, Hans von Bülow. And, even while he was trying to persuade Cosima to leave her husband, he was writing to a friend to inquire whether he could suggest some wealthy woman — any wealthy woman — whom he could marry for her money.

Wagner totally used and abused his personal relationships. His liking for his friends was measured solely by the completeness of their devotion to him, or by their usefulness to him, whether financial or artistic. The minute they failed him — even by so much as refusing a dinner invitation — or began to lessen in usefulness, he cast them off without a second thought. At the end of his life he had exactly one friend left whom he had known even in middle age.

Wagner had a genius for making enemies. He would insult a man who disagreed with him about the weather. He would pull endless wires in order to meet some man who admired his work, and was able and anxious to be of use to him — and would then proceed to make a mortal enemy of him with some idiotic and wholly uncalled-for exhibition of arrogance and bad manners. A character in *Die Meistersinger*, for example, became a caricature of one of the most powerful music critics of his day, Eduard Hanslick. Not content with just ridiculing him in his opera, he invited Hanslick to his house and read him the libretto aloud in front of his friends.

Everything said about Wagner is on record — in newspapers, in police reports, in the testimony of people who knew him, in his own letters, and between the lines of his autobiography. That being said, it is ironic that this undersized, sickly, disagreeable, fascinating little man *was* right all the time — the joke was on us. He was one of the world’s great dramatists, a great thinker, and one of the most stupendous musical geniuses the world has ever seen. Wagner wrote thirteen operas and music-dramas — eleven of them are still holding the stage, and eight of them are unquestionably worth ranking among the world’s great masterpieces.

Among all his infidelities Wagner had but one mistress to whom he was faithful until the day he died — his music. Not for a single moment did he ever compromise what he believed in. There is not a line of his music that could have been conceived by a small mind. Even when he is dull, or downright bad, he is dull on a grand scale — there is greatness about his worst mistakes. It is a wonder that his poor brain and body didn’t burst under the torment of the demon of creative energy that lived inside him, struggling and clawing to be released — to write the music that was in him. The miracle is that what he did in the little space of seventy years could have been done at all, even by a great genius. Is it any wonder that he had no time to be a man?

When Wagner died in 1883, he was buried at Bayreuth. People still go there all the time to hear his operas and visit his grave. They still only perform Wagner’s works there, and it is still run by his family. People trying to get a ticket to the annual Ring Festival in Bayreuth have often waited well over six years — it is hopelessly sold out. There is a “cult” surrounding Wagner now. These people don’t actually worship Wagner, they are just *very* enthusiastic fans — they are called “Wagnerites” or “

Wagner and Anti-Semitism



Though Richard Wagner lived decades before the birth of Nazism, his influence on the National Socialist movement, and especially on Hitler, was enormous. Many Israelis today, both of European origin and native, perceive Wagner as a symbol of the Nazi era and the spiritual father of much of Nazi ideology.

Wagner promulgated many anti-Semitic views over the course of his life through both conversation and numerous writings. Some scholars have argued that his operas even contain hidden anti-Semitic messages, but this claim is disputed. In *Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik*, Wagner spoke of the “harmful influence of Jewry on the morality of the nation,” adding that the subversive power of Jewry stood in contrast to the German psyche. He wrote that the German people were repelled by Jews due to their alien appearance and behavior — “freaks of Nature” blabbering in “creaking, squeaking, buzzing” voices — “with all our speaking and writing in favor of the Jews’ emancipation, we always felt instinctively repelled by any actual, operative contact with them.”

It was Wagner himself who coined the expressions “Jewish problem” and “final solution.” In the conclusion to *Judenthum* (1850) he wrote, “There is only one way of redeeming the Jews from the terrible curse that hangs over them — annihilation.” Although that word has often been taken to mean actual physical annihilation, in the context of the essay Wagner refers instead to the eradication of Judaism and the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

Wagner’s first and most controversial anti-Semitic essay was *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (*Judaism in Music*), which was originally published in 1850 in the *Neue Zeitschrift* under the pen-name “K. Freigedenk” (“free thought”). The essay purported to explain “popular dislike” of the music of Jewish composers, such as Wagner’s contemporaries, Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. Wagner argued that Jewish musicians were only capable of producing music that was shallow and artificial, bereft of all expression, characterized by coldness and indifference, triviality and nonsense — a parroting of true music. The Jew, he felt, had no connection to “the genuine spirit of the Folk,” no true passion to impel him to artistic creation, and that to admit a Jew into the world of art would result in pernicious consequences. The initial publication of the article attracted little attention, but Wagner republished it as a pamphlet under his own name in 1869, leading to several public protests at performances of *Die Meistersinger*.

Later, in 1878, in a conversation with Cosima, Wagner mentioned to her, “If I wrote about the Jews again, I would say that there is nothing to be held against them, only they came to us Germans too soon; we were not stable enough to absorb this element.”

In spite of his anti-Semitic writings, Wagner had several Jewish friends of whom he appeared to have been quite fond. The most notable of these was Hermann Levi, a practicing Jew whom Wagner chose to conduct the premiere of his last opera, *Parsifal*. Initially, Wagner wanted Levi to become baptized before conducting *Parsifal*, presumably due to the religious content of the opera, but this requirement was eventually dropped. Levi maintained a close friendship with Wagner, and was asked to be a pallbearer at the composer’s funeral.

After Wagner’s death in 1883, Bayreuth became a meeting place for a group of extreme right-wing Wagner fans that came to be known as the Bayreuth circle, endorsed by the staunchly anti-Semitic Cosima. After the deaths of Cosima, in April 1930, and their son, Siegfried, a few months later in August, the operation of the Festival fell to Siegfried’s widow, Winifred, who was a personal friend of Adolf Hitler. Though Hitler himself was an ardent fan of Wagner’s music, and it was frequently played at Nazi rallies, many aspects of Wagner’s world view would certainly have been unappealing to the Nazis, such as his pacifism and calls for assimilation.

Mostly due to this Nazi association, Wagner’s works have not been publicly performed in the modern state of Israel. Although they are commonly broadcast on government-owned radio and television stations, attempts at staging public performances have been halted by protests, especially by Holocaust survivors. For instance, after Daniel Barenboim conducted a passage from *Tristan and Isolde* as an encore at the 2001 Israel Festival, a parliamentary committee urged a boycott of the conductor, and an initially scheduled performance of *Die Walküre* had to be withdrawn.