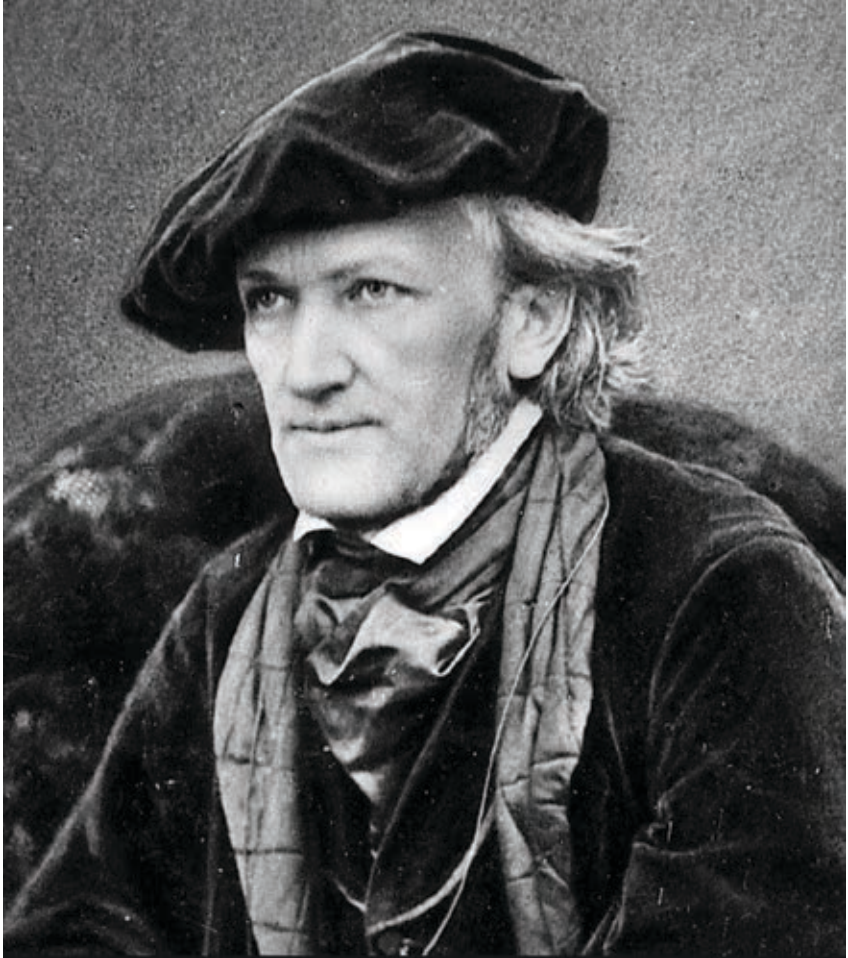


Richard Wagner et Winnaretta Singer
par Robin Saika



Richard Wagner, 1813 - 1883

The Palazzo Contarini Polignac is fortunate in its Wagner memorabilia. While the Richard Wagner Museum in Bayreuth possesses only the sofa on which Wagner died, the palace has *two* sofas on which he lived and breathed, a holding that carries much weight in the cut-throat world of Wagnerian sofa one-upmanship. These were rescued by Winnaretta from the Palazzo Vendramin Calergi where Wagner was staying at the time of his death in 1883. They have been in constant daily use for over a century and have been much photographed. A variety of happy and distinguished sitters include Stravinsky and Cocteau, not to mention Princess Helen Chavchavadze and her giant poodle. In addition to the sofas, the palace also has a portrait of Wagner by one of his great admirers, the Symbolist painter Henry de Groux. Both Edmond and Winnaretta had formed a passion for Wagner long before they met, and it was a considerable element in their relationship throughout their marriage.

Following Edmond's death in 1901, Winnaretta was determined to find a way of perpetuating his memory in Venice. The concert she organised in February 1902 in the courtyard of Wagner's former home, the Palazzo Vendramin Calergi, was the first major public event held here in Edmond's memory and a characteristically clever piece of organisation on Winnaretta's part. She first won over the Duca della Grazia, the owner of the palazzo, who was happy to host the concert. She then persuaded the city authorities to allow the Banda Cittadina, Venice's municipal

band, to transfer their annual Wagner concert, traditionally held on the anniversary of Wagner's death, from the Piazza San Marco to Vendramin Calergi. Finally, as a gesture of thanks, she offered to sponsor the annual Wagner festivities in Venice, a tradition she continued for many years. Thus, she saw to it that a much-loved annual event also came to be seen as a lasting memorial to Edmond. Every year her generosity was warmly applauded in the local press. Venetians were glad to see an expatriate actively engaged in the cultural life of the city, and they were proud of Wagner, who had had cult status here in his lifetime but had rapidly become something of a divinity in Venice since his death.

Wagner's standing here was largely attributable to the efforts of a man who is seldom mentioned in mainstream histories and deserves to be warmly feted. Those who attended the 1902 concert cannot have failed to notice the bandmaster of the Banda Cittadina, a stout, stalwart Sicilian of medium height and military bearing, who sported splendid handlebar moustaches and a clutch of medals. This was Maestro Jacopo Calascione, a familiar sight in Piazza San Marco since his appointment in the early 1880s. Every afternoon he would march his band into the square and perform medleys of Italian favourites - Verdi, Puccini, Respighi, Rossini. However, the maestro was no ordinary civic bandmaster. He was a dedicated and well-informed Wagnerian, who had met Wagner on two occasions. Since before the composer's death he had introduced an increasing number of his own Wagner arrangements into the afternoon programs. The inaugural event could not have had a more appropriate musical director.

Before looking further at Calascione's brief but intriguing association with the composer, it seems appropriate to look back to the 19th century, to consider Wagner and his work, to try to understand how Winnaretta and Edmond independently came to love it in the years before they met and married. Let us take, as an unorthodox but comfortable starting point, an upmarket Parisian hairdressing salon of the 1890s, and three markedly different perspectives on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Proustians should be aware that Marcel Proust was not the only Marcel in Winnaretta's life. Another was her Parisian hairdresser, Marcel Loisel, originator of the Marcel Wave and the acknowledged high priest of *coiffure*. Since he did a great deal of theatrical hairdressing at the Opéra and the Comédie-Française, Winnaretta would often ask him about the latest productions while she was having her hair done, or being "marcelled", to use the expression current at the time. She tells us in her memoirs that she was always interested in the opinions of the '*specialiste*', one who saw things from the perspective of his own *spécialité*. The *grand maître* did not disappoint. Once, she asked Loisel what he had to say about *Die Meistersinger*. "Well, Princesse," he said, "not a lot: just one little thing, there's a *frightful* hairdo in the Third Act. Now, that new piece at the Châtelet, there's 80,000 francs worth of hairdos in *that...*". An interesting little story, if only that it provides rare evidence of something connected with Wagner that actually cost *less* than its equivalent elsewhere.

For Winnaretta, the Third Act was irrevocably associated with her friend Gabriel Fauré, who stayed with her in Bayreuth on several occasions:

[...] I remember that he deeply admired many pages of *Walküre* and the *Meistersingers*. How often he spoke to me with warmth of the last scene in the *Meistersingers*, when after Walther's *Preislied* the people turn to Hans Sachs, the Poet, and sing the glory of his art, and their love and gratitude. I remember how much he was moved by this, and years after, at the close of his life, when he was at the height of his fame, Fauré, now bowed down with age and nearly stone deaf, was present at a concert in his honour in the great hall of the Sorbonne. At the end of the concert all those present turned spontaneously towards him with overflowing hearts, and many with tears in their eyes; he could neither hear the music nor the loud applause, but he stood there in the balcony looking down with an unutterably melancholy smile on his handsome face. It was the last time I saw him, and I remembered how moved he had been at Bayreuth when we heard the great scene together at the end of *Meistersingers*.

As to Marcel Proust's engagement with *Die Meistersinger*, perhaps he more than anyone at the time engaged with the intense and demanding subtleties of Wagner's work. Beginning with an amusing aside, we know that in 1911 he listened to the Third Act on Théâtrophone, an intriguing early version of live streaming whereby subscribers could listen to performances by telephone from home, via a bank of receivers placed directly in front of the stage. It is a pleasing vignette. Proust was an enthusiastic Théâtrophone subscriber, as was King Luis I of Portugal, who enjoyed the service so much that he elevated its franchisee, the director of the Edison Gower Bell Company, to the Military Order of Christ - surely a Proustian episode in itself. While *Die Meistersinger* is mentioned in passing in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a line in the Third Act plays a central role in an absorbing short story by Proust published in 1893, *Mélancolique villégiature de Mme de Breyves* (*The Melancholy Summer of Madame de Breyves*). It says a great deal about Proust's deep affection

for Wagner's work and is, perhaps, one of the first prolonged instances in fiction of an author utilising it to great dramatic effect. In the story, Juliette de Breyves is a shy, lonely and attractive young widow of 24, drifting aimlessly from party to concert. One evening at a *soirée*, she notices a Monsieur Jacques de Laléande. He seems neither interesting nor particularly attractive, until he quite unexpectedly makes an explicit pass at her towards the end of the evening. She spends the next fortnight trying decorously to engineer a meeting with him with the help of her friend, Anne. Unfortunately, Monsieur de Laléande leaves Paris for Biarritz, albeit only for "a few months", but for an eternity so far as she is concerned. Juliette is plunged into frenzied obsession. It is darkened and intensified when, unluckily, she hears Hans Sach's aria, *Was duftet doch der Flieder. "Vogel der heut sang dem war der Schnabel hold gewachsen..."* ("That bird that sang today, how its beak has strengthened..."). This becomes her *leitmotiv* (Proust uses the Wagnerian term) for Monsieur de Laléande. She spends hours in her music room picking out the melody on the piano. She can think of nothing else. The melody is continually with her, evoking bittersweet thoughts of that brief moment of hope and the promise of happiness she came to believe it held.

Turning to Wagner himself, it is difficult to do justice to the surges of joy and outrage the man and his music have provoked over the years. When Queen Victoria met him in London in 1855, she recorded their encounter in her diary: "He is short, very quiet, wears spectacles and has a very finely-developed forehead, a hooked nose & projecting chin." On the basis of that description, one might be forgiven for thinking that this was a harmless, noble, somewhat donnish character, a touch unworldly, harmlessly immersed in creative labour. However, a dashing portrait by Henry de Groux, here in the Palazzo Contarini Polignac collection, reveals something of his underlying zeal and ruthlessness, reminding us that Richard Wagner was a force to be reckoned with, as controversial in his lifetime as he is today. Moralists deplore his chaotic personal conduct, which was consistently punctuated by adultery and debt. Commentators deplore his anti-semitism, a position he incoherently set forth in a short but venomous pamphlet of 1850, entitled *Das Judenthum in der Music (Jewishness in Music)*. In everything he did he proceeded with an absolute sense of entitlement and an unrelenting disregard for the sensitivities of those around him: wives, mistresses, creditors, patrons, colleagues, nearly all who came close to the master soon found themselves badly burnt in one way or another with the notable exceptions of his dogs, Pepsel, Pohl and Russ. As for his music, it is potent, stirring, addictive, dramatic and sexually charged.

Given all this and his colourful personality, it is no surprise that Wagner has consistently been popular among rebels, ne'er-do-wells, bigots and tyrants, as well as among those who appreciate his music for its insistent beauty and majesty, and who are willing to forgive or overlook the less attractive aspects of the man himself. Winnaretta and her circle fell into this last category. As to his morality, they were no Sunday School: for the most part its members were neither saints nor hypocrites. As to his anti-semitism, we know that most of Winnaretta's friends were Dreyfusards and many were Jews. Winnaretta remarks at some length on how the *Affaire Dreyfus* polarised Parisian society, but with the exception of the artist Jean Louis Forain, most of her camp were firmly with Dreyfus and heartily endorsed Zola's forceful polemic, *J'Accuse*. The truth is, as Daniel Barenboim has pointed out, that anti-semitism was very much, as he put it, "part of the *zeitgeist*" then. It was still easy, in those distant pre-Holocaust days, to convince oneself that art should be judged by a set of rules distinct from those that govern either conduct or ideology.

One final problem with Wagner worth mentioning, much less emotive than the foregoing, is the sheer length of his works. *Parsifal* lasts four hours, *Götterdämmerung* four and a half. All his operas, with the exceptions of *Das Rheingold* (2:20) and *Der fliegende Holländer* (2:40) hover at

this mark, depending on the production. This is obviously a great challenge for novice opera-goers, who are often deterred by the running time. For producers, the problem of length is further intensified by the expense that his elaborate visions inevitably entail, defying all attempts at economy: even from beyond the grave, Wagner is a stern and extravagant taskmaster. For these reasons, during his lifetime and ever since, popular excerpts from his major works have often been performed in part-Wagner or all-Wagner programs, saving the expense and aggravation of a full-blown *mise-en-scène*. In this way his work has reached a significantly wider audience than it would have done had it been confined solely to the opera house. Wagner himself, always alive to opportunities, saw the advantages of the approach and was happy to arrange, supervise and conduct selections of his work. He did this in Paris, prior to the disastrous opening of *Tannhäuser* there in 1861. In Venice, as we shall see, Calascione's arrangements did much to elevate the composer's popularity there in the quarter-century following his death.

Edmond's love for Wagner was kindled in his youth. In 1861, he met the composer in person at the artistic club of which he and his brothers were founder members, the Cercle de L'Union artistique. Wagner recalls the meeting in his memoirs:

During the past few months I had busied myself with an artistic club which had been founded, chiefly through the influence of the German embassies, among an aristocratic connection for the production of good music apart from the theatres, and to stimulate interest in this branch of art among the upper classes. Unfortunately, in the circular it had published it had illustrated its endeavours to produce good music by comparing them to those of the Jockey Club to improve the breed of horses. Their object was to enrol all who had won a name in the musical world, and I was obliged to become a member at a yearly subscription of two hundred francs. Together with M. Gounod and other Parisian celebrities, I was nominated one of an artistic committee, of which Auber was elected president. The society often held its meetings at the house of a certain Count Osmond, a lively young man, who had lost an arm in a duel, and posed as a musical dilettante. In this way I also learned to know a young Prince Polignac, who interested me particularly on account of his brother, to whom we were indebted for a complete translation of Faust. I went to lunch with him one morning, when he revealed to me the fact that he composed musical fantasies. He was very anxious to convince me of the correctness of his interpretation of Beethoven's Symphony in A major, in the last movement of which he declared he could clearly demonstrate all the phases of a shipwreck. Our earlier general meetings were chiefly occupied with arrangements and preparations for a great classical concert, for which I also was to compose something. These meetings were enlivened solely by Gounod's pedantic zeal, who with unflinching and nauseating garrulity executed his duties as secretary, while Auber continually interrupted, rather than assisted the proceedings, with trifling and not always very delicate anecdotes and puns, all evidently intended to urge us to end the discussions. Even after the decisive failure of *Tannhäuser* I received summonses to the meetings of this committee, but never attended it any more, and sent in my resignation to the president of the society, stating that I should probably soon be returning to Germany.

Here we catch a glimpse of Edmond's already intense engagement with music, though it seems clear that Wagner had no great interest in his 'shipwreck' interpretation of Beethoven's 7th symphony, which to be fair seems as plausible and interesting an interpretation as any. Nor, it appears, did he have a great deal of time for the well-meaning Cercle de l'Union artistique, despite their support following the *Tannhäuser* debacle. Charles-François Gounod was particularly supportive, saying "Que Dieu me donne une pareille chute!" (May God grant me a similar misfortune!). Wagner repaid the noble sentiment by presenting him with the score of *Tristan und Isolde*, though he tells us later in his memoirs, with some satisfaction, that the underlying purpose of this apparently magnanimous gesture was to spare himself the hassle of having to sit through Gounod's *Faust*.

As regards *Tannhäuser*, the ultra-establishment members of the Jockey Club had organised a noisy claque that disrupted the opening performance and caused the Paris production to close after only three nights. Some historians attribute the disaster to a wave of anti-Teutonic prejudice in the club, occasioned by what its reactionary members were likely to have seen as over-cordial diplomatic overtures by Napoleon III to Austria in the wake of the Italian War of Independence. The alternative explanation is rather more plausible and entertaining. The Jockey Club circle had a set routine in which they would dine during the first act of any given production at the Opéra, only arriving at the theatre in time for the second act, which traditionally featured a dance sequence. This timetable enabled them to check out their favourite girls in the *corps de ballet* without having to rush dinner and endure an inelegant surfeit of culture. When Wagner steadfastly refused to transfer the decidedly lush dance of the Venusberg bacchantes from the prologue to the second act, they were understandably irritated. Wagner was within his rights, of course, since the bacchante sequence is no gratuitous leg-show thrown in for the titillation of idle stage-door Johnnys, or Jockeys. It sets the scene for the opera, brilliantly plunging the audience into the erotic maelstrom of Venusburg from which Tannhäuser, the high-minded but amorous hero, must valiantly escape.

Winnaretta's Wagnerian baptism came in 1882, when her mother Isabelle took to her to the *festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, where they saw the first production of *Parsifal*, supervised by Wagner himself, conducted by Hermann Levi, with the great *heldentenor*, Hermann Winkelmann, in the title role. This was a very different scenario from the embattled production of *Tannhäuser* in Paris. Wagner had come a long way since then. The theatre at Bayreuth was one of the last projects partially underwritten by Wagner's most generous patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who contributed 100,000 thalers towards the composer's dream-vision of a perfect setting for his work. The two had first met in 1864, when Ludwig was 19 and Wagner 51. It proved to be a perfect collision of egos. The *Märchenkönig* (the "fairy-tale king") was already dangerously immersed in German sagas, to the extent that their heroes seemed as real to him as his flesh-and-blood ministers and subjects. This was partly a result of his childhood at Castle Hohenschwangau, a crazy Gothic Revival extravaganza built by his father and decorated with beguiling tapestries and paintings telling all the old stories. Furthermore, at the impressionable age of 15, he had seen and been greatly taken by *Lohengrin*. "Alas," wrote Wagner, "he is so handsome and wise, soulful and lovely, that I fear that his life must melt away in this vulgar world like a fleeting dream of the gods." Bearing this "fleeting dream" in mind, Wagner quickly took steps to liberate substantial funds from Ludwig while the going was good. To the dismay of Ludwig's treasurers and the stony-faced burghers of Munich, there quickly followed an exuberant overture of expenditure accompanied by recurrent fanfares of scandalous behaviour from Wagner, in particular his affair with Cosima, his future wife, at this point still married to his friend, colleague and sometime benefactor, Hans Von Bulow. This, coupled with sundry acts of financial vandalism inflicted on local tradesmen and moneylenders, quickly made Wagner *persona non grata* in Munich. Though 1865 saw a triumphant premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* there, Wagner and the now pregnant Cosima were forced to flee Bavaria for Switzerland, where Ludwig eventually provided them with a villa on the shores of Lake Lucerne. In a fit of pique that comically prefigures the saga of Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson, Ludwig threatened to abdicate and follow his new hero into exile. Wagner persuaded him that this was a bad idea. In the following years he expertly manipulated Ludwig by remote control from his new lakeside headquarters, where he lived for a while in considerable comfort. It is impossible to narrate here the chaos of the following years. Suffice it to say that despite the habitual hurly-burly, he completed the Ring Cycle and managed to build and open the *festspielhaus* at Bayreuth.

The 1882 *Parsifal* was a valedictory flourish for Wagner, who was by now ageing and ill. Perhaps he sensed it; in the final performance, at the beginning of the last act, he came quietly into the pit and took the baton from Hermann Levi. It was to be his last appearance as composer-conductor. At the end of the season he decided to winter in Venice for health reasons, seemingly an odd choice given the notoriously chilly climate there. However, it was the logical place to go, since in April that year he had already rented a floor of the Palazzo Vendramin Calergi from its then owner, Count Bardi, and had spent the late spring and early summer putting the finishing touches to *Parsifal*.

During that visit, on April 21, he heard the Banda Cittadina performing the duet from *Rigoletto* in one of their afternoon concerts in Piazza San Marco. He introduced himself to the bandmaster, Jacopo Calascione, and congratulated him on a splendid performance, asking if the band might play him their arrangement of the Sinfonia from Rossini's *Gazza Ladra*. Calascione promptly had the score sent over. The meeting was reported in the *Gazzettino*, the local paper, and the band were proud of Wagner's praise, since he was known to be an irascible critic. On his return later that year, after Bayreuth, Wagner met Calascione again, this time by invitation. The maestro wrote to him saying the band would be honoured if he were to attend their performance of a *pot-pourri* of arrangements from *Lohengrin*, to be given in Piazza San Marco on November 5. This was a bold move. In the event, Wagner was very pleased, though he invited Calascione to the palazzo the next day where he gave him a stern but constructive lecture on tempi. The episode gives a fair taste of what it was must have been like to be on the receiving end of Wagner's decidedly rigorous aesthetic discourse. The meeting began well enough, with Wagner warmly praising Calascione's interpretation and tempi in general. However, he observed that the tempo Calascione took in Elsa and Ortrud's duet was a little too rushed, particularly in the *stretta*. Calascione, by way of excuse, then made the fatal (and very Italian) mistake of referring to his *fuoco sacro*, the 'sacred fire' that burns in the heart of every sensitive Italian musician and conductor. "That fire! That fire!" cried Wagner. "Water, more like. All these people boast of this *sacro fuoco*, and on that pretext they interpret the music contrary to the composer's intentions. That fire! It is the composer who determines when the *fuoco* should happen, when the situation requires it, when the dramatic moment calls for it!" Still, despite this rocky disagreement, they parted on good terms. This, so far as we know, was the last time they met. Wagner died in Venice on February 13, 1883.

Calascione benefited enormously from Winnaretta's patronage of the Band and the annual Wagner commemorations from 1902 onwards. Sadly, his wonderful career came to an abrupt end on a bright afternoon in the early autumn of 1907. As an expectant crowd awaited, the 67-year-old hero marched his band into Piazza San Marco for the last time. As they struck up a number from *Rigoletto*, he swayed slightly, sank to his knees, and collapsed. A sudden, fatal heart attack. It was no surprise to learn that thousands attended his funeral parade later that year, for as well as being a great Wagnerian, he was also a dedicated servant of his adopted city. After the Campanile of San Marco collapsed in 1902, there was Calascione in the months that followed, marching his band into the Piazza for a series of fundraising concerts. It is a pleasing thought. His *fuoco sacro* still burns bright in the annals of Venice.

