

## Wagner wars - the truth behind the long-running family saga

By Barry Millington, Evening Standard 09.09.09

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Richard Wagner has often been described as a colossus who bestrode the 19th century.

But the composer's shadow loomed ominously over the 20th century, too, and shows little sign of retreating even now. For decades his descendants have been squabbling publicly over his legacy, in particular the succession to the festival at Bayreuth, in northern Bavaria, which he founded for the exclusive performance of his operas. A film by director Tony Palmer, known for his controversial music documentaries and composer portraits, is set to open the last ever series of The South Bank Show on Sunday and throws intriguing new light on the long-running Wagner family saga.

Palmer's film, a muscle-flexer for a larger project he is planning on the same subject, combines archive footage and interviews with whole regiments of disaffected great-grandchildren, all venting their internecine spleen against the Bayreuth Festival and Katharina and Eva Wagner, its current directors.

Even the initiated may be confused by the operatic complexity of the relationships but perhaps that in itself is telling: the sheer bile pouring out of so many Wagnerian mouths says everything about the poisoned chalice that is the legacy of the genius who started it all.

Palmer's chief witness is Gottfried Wagner, son of Richard's grandson Wolfgang who, until the announcement of his retirement last year, ruled despotically over the festival (initially with his brother Wieland) from its re-opening after the Second World War in 1951.

Post-war New Bayreuth, Gottfried claims, was built on lies and falsification: both Wolfgang and Wieland had been much closer to Hitler than has been admitted and the archives of the Richard Wagner Foundation to this day have never been fully opened to public scrutiny.

The charges carry weight. It has long been known that Wagner's works were an inspiration to Hitler, for whom the Bayreuth Festival was emblematic of [Germany's](#) cultural heritage. Once in power, he did everything he could to back the festival, regarding it as central to his mission.



Centre stage: Alan Titus in the role of Hans Sachs in Katharina Wagner's Bayreuth production of the Mastersingers of Nuremburg



Handover: Katharina Wagner has taken over from father Wolfgang

Before the war, he would visit the Wagners at their family home in Bayreuth, often at the dead of night, thrilling the children with bedtime stories (the Tales of the Brothers Grimm were particular favourites). But the truth about how loyal Wolfgang and Wieland remained to the Führer as young men in the final years of the war has been harder to ascertain.

Wieland was employed during the war by his brother-in-law, a Nazi sympathiser called Bodo Lafferentz, at an Institute for Physical Research in Bayreuth. The institute was an offshoot of the concentration camp at Flossenbürg, near the Czech border, and it was there that an improved system of guiding the V-1 flying bombs (part of Hitler's drive to produce a "miracle weapon") was being developed. The enforced labourers, many of whom were skilled scientists, were not inhumanely treated and the jury is still out on whether Wieland was effectively the institute's deputy, or whether he was simply, as a budding theatre designer, constructing stage models and working out lighting systems for them, as Lafferentz claimed in a 1971 biography of Wieland by Geoffrey Skelton.

These revelations about Wieland's wartime experiences are not new: the story broke in the German press six years ago. Gottfried's accusation, however, is that all this, along with much more, was for decades swept under the carpet. He blames his father, Wolfgang, not for the misdemeanours of his youth but for failing to own up and apologise in later life.

A fair point, one might think, except that a daughter of Wieland, called Daphne, pops up later in the film to excoriate Wolfgang for allowing information about the institute to get into the public domain. The man is damned either way but other charges against him do stack up. According to [Nike](#), another daughter of Wieland, Wolfgang ruthlessly destroyed Wieland's scenery, models and correspondence with artists after his death, sacking festival staff loyal to Wieland, all with a view to making himself the new master of Bayreuth and erasing Wieland from the records.

"It felt like a vendetta against the whole of Wieland's family," Nike claims. If some of this smacks of paranoia, it is not unique to Nike, who some feel is bitter and twisted about her failure to secure the succession for herself. Her sister Daphne also has horror stories to tell about Uncle Wolfgang: about her family being put out in the street after Wieland's death, about Wolfgang's first wife, Ellen Drexel, being similarly thrown out on his remarriage, with children's nursery toys being found in the yard.

Much of the film centres on criticism of Wolfgang and the current administration of Bayreuth. Wolfgang, just turned 90, is in no fit state to be interviewed any longer, which explains Palmer's reliance on old footage. The new incumbents, Wolfgang's daughters Katharina and Eva, were apparently not available either, though Palmer tells me he hopes to speak to both for his next film. The result is inevitably one-sided, a fault one trusts will be remedied when the full-length version is released.

Also missing — because it happened after the film was in the can — is the recent announcement by Katharina that the archives of the Richard Wagner Foundation will be opened up to scholars. If the promise is kept, this is a remarkable development: historians of the Bayreuth Festival have been wilfully and obdurately impeded in their research for more than half a century.

While Katharina is to be applauded for making this brave gesture, it has to be said that it is only a first step, for the really interesting material is elsewhere. One day in the summer of 1976, as dress rehearsals were under way in the theatre for the centenary festival, Wagner's redoubtable daughter-in-law, Winifred, intimate (some say mistress) of Hitler, summoned her daughter Verena to Bayreuth. The two cleared out all of Winifred's private papers, as well as documents and correspondence left by her husband, Siegfried. Everything was loaded into a car and driven, on Winifred's instructions, to the [Munich](#) flat belonging to Verena's own daughter, Amélie.

In Munich they have resided until the present day, shielded from public scrutiny. Among this cache of documents are believed to be correspondence between Siegfried and Hitler, Winifred and Hitler, and Winifred and Wolfgang.

Already under Katharina there have been several initiatives aimed at opening up the festival to the public at large. Welcome as all this is, we need the full story told of the Bayreuth Festival and the relationship of the Wagner family to the [Third Reich](#). Revelations that both Wieland and Wolfgang were in earnest discussion with Hitler about the future of the festival as late as 1944 may prove initially embarrassing to both sides of the family. But in a broader perspective, the actions of the brothers may win them understanding. Why shouldn't they be concerned about the future of the festival? And if they were under the sway of Uncle Wolf, as Hitler was known to the family, culpably late in the day, does that cast doubt on their disavowal on the festival's reopening in 1951?

All the evidence is that Wieland was seared by what he saw and learned in the institute/concentration camp. We need to know more, not less, about his internal struggle, about the dilemmas and conflicts faced by Wolfgang, about all the family skeletons haunting the festival over the past 90-odd years. Only then will we approach a full understanding of Wagner's legacy and of the troubled institution at the heart of 20th-century German cultural history.

*Barry Millington is editor of [www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk](http://www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk). Tony Palmer's *The Wagner Family* is on ITV's *The South Bank Show* on Sunday. The next Bayreuth Festival takes place in July and August 2010.*

## A family of fighters

**1876** The first Bayreuth Festival is established by Richard Wagner

**1883** Wagner dies

**1923** Hitler makes his first pilgrimage to Bayreuth

**1933** Hitler begins to establish Bayreuth as Germany's supreme cultural showpiece

**1951** Wagner's grandsons, Wolfgang and Wieland, assume joint directorship of the Bayreuth Festival, pledging to rid it of Nazi associations

**1966** Wieland dies; in subsequent years, Wolfgang allegedly destroys his brother's sets, models and correspondence

**1975** Wagner's daughter-in-law, Winifred, unrepentant about her intimacy with Hitler, is banished from the festival by Wolfgang

**1997** Wolfgang's son, Gottfried, is also banished from the festival, and publishes his autobiography, *He Who Does Not Cry With the Wolf*, rattling even more skeletons in the cupboard

**1999** Wieland's intellectual, sharp-tongued daughter, Nike, stakes her claim for

directorship of the festival

**2001** The foundation responsible for Bayreuth nominates Wolfgang's elder daughter, Eva, as the new director. Wolfgang refuses to budge

**2008** Wolfgang gives up the reins of the festival, having secured the succession for his photogenic daughter Katharina (in conjunction with her half-sister, Eva)