

The Unveiling of a family's legacy

Richard Wagner's great-grandson to give guest lecture at IU

This story seems to be written for opera, although it took place on the stage of real life. It is a family saga that features glory and death, love and hatred, truth and lies, earnestness and irony.

When the composer Richard Wagner died in 1883, he not only left the most gigantic cycle of operas the world has ever heard, but he also founded two German institutions: The Bayreuth Festival and the Wagner clan guarding it.

A dominant figure in this familial swamp of relationships was Winifred Wagner, the widow of Richard's only son Siegfried who had died in 1930. She kept the festival opera house running and attracted the most prominent musicians of her time to Bayreuth, which preserved and even strengthened its position as not only the center of the Wagnerian, but of the German, even European opera world.

When the Nazis took over Government in 1933, Wagner became their cultural Wotan and Bayreuth their musical Valhalla. Not only did the Germanic subject matter and heroic gesture of his operas fit the Nazi image of the new arising Germany and their ideology of racial superiority. Richard Wagner himself anticipated this ideology in his anti-Semitic essay "Das Judentum in der Musik" ("Judaism in Music"), and it was passed through the generations of his family by his son-in-law, the race theorist Houston Stewart Chamberlain and his daughter-in-law, Winifred. Winifred not only motivated Adolf Hitler to save the Bayreuth Festival from going bankrupt, but even – as unbelievable as it seems nowadays – obviously fell in love with the "Führer."

When Gottfried Wagner, great-grandson of the composer and guest lecturer at IU today and Wednesday, was born in 1947, WWII was over and most people in Germany – especially prominent ones – tried to hide their Nazi past. Gottfried, who was already caught in the middle of a feud between his father Wolfgang (Winifred's son and today's head of Bayreuth) and his uncle Wieland, noticed this taboo. For example, his grandmother Winifred was often talking about "USA" – not referring to the United States, but to "unser seliger Adolf" ("our blessed Adolf"). Gottfried remembers her

calling the Holocaust “propaganda lies of American Jews,” even years after the war. He also cites several anti-Semitic statements of his father Wolfgang.

Gottfried Wagner revealed the Nazi past of the Wagner clan in his book “Twilight of the Wagners,” and focused on the pro-communist works of Brecht and Weill as a musicologist. This made him a despised outsider in Bayreuth, where the myths and past of the Wagner clan are still guarded like the Holy Grail itself.

But it makes him a fascinating guest speaker at Indiana University – especially in the political climate of the present, when totalitarian regimes again arise, based on ethical and religious fundamentalism and utilizing culture as propaganda.

Clemens Matuschek

Public Lectures:

“Wagner’s Music and Ideology in the Political Climate of the Twenty First Century”
Tuesday, Oct. 26, 7:30 pm, Jordan Hall 124

“Weill and Brecht: Two Worlds in Collaboration”
Wednesday, Oct. 27, 7:00 pm, Faculty Club, Indiana Memorial Union