Biography of Richard Wagner

Richard Wagner was a difficult child who was frail and had an unusually large head. Born May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany, he was always quick to adopt any new intellectual fashion as a youth.

During his student days in Dresden, Wagner developed a passion for the world of heroes, myths and legends through his studies of Greek history. He did not strike his teachers as a great achiever and did not show a particular interest in music, but felt certain that he would become a poet.

Wagner's talents developed slowly, giving time for his imagination to be influenced by the forces of political, artistic and social change that were sweeping across the continent. Fiercely nationalistic, politics would be a major influence on Wagner, in both his writing and his personal life.

He began to study music in earnest in 1828, turning away from his interest in literature. Despite his passion and determination, musical composition did not come easily to him. Wagner made a decision early on to set only his own texts. His first complete opera was Die Feen (The Fairies), completed in 1834 and based on the legend of Orpheus, with themes of the “Forbidden Question” and “Redemption Through Love” which reappear in his later works. Although he employed a conventional operatic framework for this piece, there is evidence of his interest in the use of recurring motifs. Die Feen was not performed until five years after Wagner's death.

Wagner's reputation as a conductor began to grow after he was appointed music director of a small theatre troupe in Magedeuburg. It was here that he met and married one of the singers, Christine Wilhelmine (Minna) Planer. This marriage lasted for 25 years, and was filled with multiple affairs, flights from Wagner's creditors and political exiles.

He had his first operatic successes with Rienzi (1842), Der fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman, 1843), Tannhäuser (1845), and Lohengrin (1850), for which he wrote both the music and the librettis. Throughout these works, one can hear the evolution of his distinctive style: extended vocal lines, an increase in the size and importance of the orchestra, and his use of leitmotifs (short musical phrases that identify people, places, things, events, and even emotions in the drama).

Wagner’s conception of Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Ring of the Nibelungs or just the Ring Cycle) began to take shape in 1848. He initially completed a prose outline and then wrote what would eventually become the libretto for Götterdämmerung.

In 1849 Wagner participated in a political uprising in Dresden. To avoid imprisonment, he fled the country and would not return for 11 years. He was welcomed in Zurich, where his music had achieved a certain amount of popularity.

His fortunes improved considerably in Zurich, in part because he had made the acquaintance of several wealthy patrons who were willing to help him out of debt. Particularly significant was Otto Wesendonck who, among other things, introduced Wagner to his young wife Mathilde, with whom Wagner quickly became infatuated. Out of their relationship grew Wagner's towering monument to love, Tristan und Isolde. He set several of her poems to music and these works have come to be known as the Wesendonck Lieder.

By 1858, tensions were high between the Wagners and Wesendoncks, as Wagner’s wife and his mistress acknowledged the other’s involvement with him. In August, Wagner and Minna separated. His affair with Mathilde was already over.

Wagner had been working on the Ring for nine years, but was nowhere near completion. In an effort to get his work in the public eye, Wagner turned his attention to Tristan und Isolde. He had tried to interest a publisher in the Ring Cycle, but was unsuccessful and once again in financial straits. The Ring was put aside until 1869.
In 1864, the new 18-year-old King Ludwig II of Bavaria, a fervent admirer of Wagner’s work, became the composer’s royal patron. He had seen a performance of Lohengrin several years earlier and was deeply affected by the work. He believed that he had at last found an artist whose romantic vision was attuned to his own. He promised to remove all concern of worldly affairs, so that Wagner could concentrate solely on his artistic development. Wagner was at the same time grateful for Ludwig’s support but somewhat resentful that he was dependent upon royal patronage.

Wagner moved to a villa owned by the king, and after a time was joined by Cosima von Bülow, who would remain his companion for the next 15 years. Cosima, the daughter of Franz Liszt, was married to the conductor Hans von Bülow, who continued to champion Wagner’s music even after learning of their affair. Wagner and Cosima had three children (Isolde, Eva and Siegfried) and eventually married. She was utterly devoted to him, and after his death worked to establish Bayreuth as a festival of international reputation.

Wagner was able to complete Die Meistersinger in 1867 from his home at Tribschen. The Munich premiere in 1868 was highly successful, and the opera was soon established as the supreme festival opera for numerous patriotic occasions. It was viewed as a reflection of the rising tide of German nationalism.

Ludwig, however, was anxious to see Das Rheingold (the first part of the Ring Cycle) performed, and rehearsals began in Munich in 1869. It premiered in September and was followed by Die Walküre in June of the following year. As his work on the Ring Cycle was drawing to a close, Wagner began to think more seriously about how and where it would be performed. He settled on the town of Bayreuth, but decided the current facilities weren’t adequate for his piece. Wagner spent the next five years in a quest to raise the funds to build the festival theatre.

The final instalment of the Ring Cycle was completed in November of 1874, 26 years after its initial conception. The festival began in August 1876. Three complete cycles were presented to great acclaim, including favourable responses from Ludwig and other European royalty. However, despite critical success at Bayreuth, the festival was in financial ruin.

Throughout his life, Richard Wagner worked to revolutionize the structures of opera to create a distinctively German art form, raising the union of music and drama to new heights. Wagner died on February 13, 1883, in Venice at the age of 69. Over the course of his life, he profoundly changed the history of opera, significantly transforming musical and dramatic aspects of this art form.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

Wagner started out as a revolutionary anarchist, involved in the Dresden riots. He was a supporter of the strength of the people against the old order. However, later he accepted the patronage of the King of Bavaria. What do you think prompted his change of politics? What might have happened if he had not accepted these favours?

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Gidon Saks as the Dutchman in The Flying Dutchman (COC, 2000). Photo: Michael Cooper