

Settling Scores

Eva Rieger's biography of Friedelind Wagner fills in gaps in the fractious history of New Bayreuth, finds Barry Millington

Eva Rieger, *Friedelind Wagner: Richard Wagner's Rebellious Granddaughter*, tr. Chris Walton (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2013). xii + 352pp. £30.00. ISBN 978-1-84383-864-7

The full story of how postwar Bayreuth came to terms with its Nazi legacy has yet to be told. But the skeins of fabrication, subterfuge and score-settling misinformation are gradually being unravelled and a fuller picture is slowly emerging. Eva Rieger, in her impeccably researched and highly readable biography of Friedelind Wagner, one of the composer's three grand-daughters, is both admirably forthright and even-handed in her evaluation of the postwar concordat known as New Bayreuth. The biography, published originally in Germany,¹ has been translated sympathetically and accurately by Chris Walton.

Delving deep into the archives of Friedelind (now in the possession of her one-time pupil Neill Thornborrow), her sister Verena, her cousin's daughter Dagny Beidler, and as much of Wolfgang and Wieland's private archives as she was allowed access to (she was able to consult Wieland's papers but not Wolfgang's, and further documents remain out of bounds to scholars in Munich),² Rieger provides a colourful account of Friedelind's life set against the changing backdrop – Bayreuth, Tribschen, London, New York, Buenos Aires, Teesside – of her frustrated career. Thus we read of Friedelind's childhood, with hours spent on the knee of Uncle Wolf (as her mother Winifred's favourite visitor was nicknamed) or climbing over, and verbally abusing, Lauritz Melchior ('fatty pig' was the children's less than respectful appellation for the leading Wagner tenor of the day). Friedelind herself was overweight and less obviously endowed with natural beauty than her sister Verena (though she blossomed later); she was congenitally rebellious too, so much so that Winifred had her sent to a fearsome Prussian boarding school, Heiligengrabe, of the type whose rigorous, authoritarian regime was reflected in the 1931 film *Mädchen in Uniform*.

Friedelind made up her mind to emigrate and left Germany on 7 May 1937, the year in which she later situated her final rift with her native country – though Rieger suggests that it was not until the end of 1938 that political doubts surfaced in her mind. She spent some time in Tribschen, but settled on Britain, with an eye on North and South America, believing at this time that it was her destiny to return one day to run the Bayreuth Festival. In Britain she spoke out fearlessly against Hitler and the Third Reich, heedless of the danger it might place her mother and family (or indeed herself) in. Did Winifred threaten (as Friedelind alleged but Winifred denied) that she would have to be 'eradicated and exterminated' if she did not return to Germany? Rieger has

¹ Reviewed by Tim Blanning in *The Wagner Journal*, vii/1 (2013), 95–6.

² Family and festival archive material (currently mixed up) was recently handed over to the Hauptstadtarchiv in Munich, which is making an inventory of the documents. Further materials, in the possession of Verena's daughter Amélie Hohmann, are locked away, also in Munich, not yet available to historians.



Photograph of Friedelind by Erich Auerbach, taken in 1961 after a lieder recital by Ella Lee and Daniel Barenboim in Bayreuth.

evidence that she did. The infamous series of articles she wrote for the *Daily Sketch*, in which she lampooned Hitler, was monitored back home by the Reich Chancellery, which rang up Winifred to complain. Then came the months of internment as an alien on the Isle of Man (later in London), the tedium and discomfort of which were moderated by sunbathing on the beach and visits to the cinema.

Eager for experience as a stage director, she hatched a plan, at the suggestion of Toscanini, to work in the theatre at Buenos Aires. By the time she reached there, however, in March 1941, she had realised that her lack of experience might expose her to ridicule. Moving on to the USA in July, she relished the cultural riches on offer and made her own witty, eloquent contributions in the form of lectures and radio broadcasts. The close friendship with Toscanini became intimate at this period, but fell short of the exclusive commitment she briefly hoped for. 'We are lovers – alas only on the

phone', she lamented. But the handsome, charismatic conductor, even though he was in his early seventies, was not short of libido and Friedelind's number was that of only one of many admirers in his address book. A few years later she told him frankly, in a letter quoted at length, how outrageous and hurtful his behaviour had been. Toscanini nevertheless remained an object of adoration throughout Friedelind's life.

Her autobiography, published in German in 1945, appeared subsequently in America as *Heritage of Fire* and in England as *The Royal Family of Bayreuth*. We are told about criticisms of its factual accuracy by the family, Tietjen, Strauss and others, but surprisingly little about what is actually in the book. Given that this is Friedelind's major publication, this seems an unfortunate oversight. One would like to have heard a lot more about the content of the book, and the extent to which Friedelind's barbs hit the mark. Rieger is otherwise very strong on the coverage of the wartime period and equally so on the struggle for the Bayreuth succession as it gathered pace after the war. Wieland and Wolfgang, both tainted by their close personal proximity to Hitler (right up to and after the end of the war), had no intention of sharing the directorship with a sister who had shamed them with her flamboyantly broadcast anti-fascist credentials.

By comparison with her brothers, who had been groomed for the succession from an early age, Friedelind undoubtedly lacked experience. Perhaps, as Rieger suggests, she missed her chance by not returning to Germany in 1947, but the American press were treating her as heir-in-waiting and she assumed that she could afford to wait until the time was right. By the time she returned, three years later, it was too late: Wieland and Wolfgang, abetted by Winifred, had the succession sewn up. The masterclasses she was allowed to set up were clearly a sop, offered with the intention of keeping her away from the serious business of running the festival. It's true that Friedelind shared her grandfather's inability to run a tight financial ship: like him she was generous to a fault and ran up debts all too easily. But she had other qualities, including charisma and promotional flair, together with an extensive knowledge of Wagner's works, that would have stood her in good stead in the festival administration, had the brothers been so minded. To her credit, she immediately appreciated the calibre of the aesthetic revolution Wieland brought about and she lectured all over the world defending and explaining the concepts behind New Bayreuth. In later years, Friedelind and Winifred spent periods of time together, but the ideological gulf between them was unbridgeable. Friedelind was never able to reconcile herself to her mother's embrace of Hitler. For her part, Winifred was never able to forgive Friedelind for letting the family side down and continued to fantasise about condign punishment for her daughter, on a spectrum ranging from smacked bottom³ to extermination.

Finally giving up on Bayreuth, Friedelind responded positively to a suggestion from Paul Duffy, then the secretary of the English Wagner Society, that she add her lustre to a promising new artistic project being planned in the unlikely north-east conurbation of Teesside, including Middlesborough, not known for its cultural riches. Rieger gives us the background to the project as planned and describes how Friedelind intended to offer the kind of interdisciplinary masterclasses she had pioneered with a good deal

³ Winifred wrote to a friend in 1968 that her daughter (who was just turned 50) was an incorrigible *enfant terrible* who 'deserves to have her bottom properly smacked'.

of success in Bayreuth in the 1950s. What actually happened and when in Teesside is more sketchily covered and there is a further shortfall in detail on the circumstances of Friedelind's final illness (pancreatic cancer) and death in 1991, which is dealt with in just five sentences.

These odd lacunae are all the more surprising in a book packed with scrupulously researched detail and judicious evaluations. Rieger is eminently balanced in her assessment of Friedelind's virtues and weaknesses. The life she describes is a life of missed opportunities and thwarted ambition, in which a compassionate, free-willed, principled woman pays a heavy price for her independence of spirit.