



Oliver Hilmes. *Herrin des Hügels: Das Leben der Cosima Wagner.* Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2007. 494 pp. EUR 24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-88680-836-6.



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A Woman with a Mission

Political scientist and historian Oliver Hilmes apparently has a soft spot for controversial, old, strong women: his biography of Alma Mahler with the fanciful title *Witwe im Wahn* (2004) was quickly followed by this biography of the “Lady of the (Green) Hill,” Cosima Wagner. This most recent addition to the mountain of Wagneriana comes at a particularly appropriate time, since the question of Wolfgang Wagner’s successor has been hotly debated during the past two years. Hilmes’s biography of Cosima is the most recent example of a sizeable tradition of books on “Wagner’s women,” which took off from Julius Kapp’s “erotic biography” of 1919, and reflected in the recent, almost simultaneous publication of two biographies of Wagner’s first wife, Minna, written by Sibylle Zehle and Eva Rieger, respectively.[1] In his prologue, Hilmes not only colorfully recounts his personal impressions of the great and good flocking to the Bayreuth Festival in 2006, but also roundly criticizes previous attempts at a biography of Cosima Wagner as being either too hagiographic, too nationalist, or lacking in solid, source-based research. Hilmes now sets out to ad-

vance a novel view on Cosima, based on original sources, that would nonetheless offer a realistic and thrilling read.

According to the prologue, Hilmes spent several months researching in Bayreuth, and thanks to the increased accessibility of the Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung Bayreuth, he is able to draw on a wide range of sources concerning the Wagner family that other authors have not yet consulted. In addition, he has also unearthed new and surprising material in other places, such as the papers of Isolde Beidler’s lawyer Siegfried Dispeker (Bavarian State Library Munich) and Cosima’s medical advisor Ernst Schwenninger (Federal Archive Berlin/Koblenz). However, the diaries of conductor Felix Mottl (Bavarian State Library) have recently been scrutinized by Frithjof Haas for his Mottl biography *Der Magier am Dirigentenpult*,[2] and of course Hilmes frequently draws on well-known and long-published books, such as Cosima’s diaries, Wagner’s letters to Ludwig II, and the letters of Hans von Bülow and Peter Cornelius (although many of Cornelius’s quotes have become standard in every Wagner biography, they never-

theless are fun to read).

The book basically adheres to a straightforward chronological narrative. Cosima's lifespan of ninety-two years is divided into six major chapters that follow the obvious breaks in her biography: the first and second chapters, "Eine Kindheit ohne Eltern" and "Zweckehe," paint equally bleak pictures of her upbringing in Paris and her marriage to conductor Hans von Bülow, respectively. The third chapter, "Wagner," spans the best-known years of her life, from the Munich scandal until Wagner's death. The fourth chapter, "Die Herrin von Bayreuth," details her activities as the director of the Bayreuth Festival. "Zeitenwende" and "Das lange Ende," the final chapters, are devoted to her attempts to secure the Wagner legacy for their only son, Siegfried. Subchapters help to structure the long stretches of time; however, Hilmes's fondness for subtitles that "wittily" allude to musical or literary works ("Liebesfreud," "Liebesleid," "Mephistowalzer," "Tod in Venedig," or, particularly forced, "Tantiemendämmerung") or that draw on well-worn clichés ("Torschlusspanik," "Irrungen und Wirrungen") can sometimes be a bit grating.

An obvious concern with making his book palatable for the general reader also inspires the author's attempts at psychological exegesis. This trend is particularly marked whenever Hilmes sketches a protagonist's early years. No doubt Cosima's upbringing at the hands of her governess, Madame Patersi, was grim even by nineteenth-century standards, but it would have helped if Hilmes had evaluated her youth (or that of Bülow, or Ludwig II) against the backdrop of the era, rather than a twenty-first-century conception of what constitutes a happy childhood. The affair between Cosima's parents Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult ("Hatte sie sich in Franz verliebt?", p. 22) or the deteriorating relationship of Cosima and her first husband ("Das konnte auf Dauer nicht gut gehen," p. 92) are at times narrated in near soap opera style. More interesting and relevant in these chapters are Cosima's hitherto little-known writings as correspondent of the French *Revue germanique* and her role as Berlin society hostess. On the other hand, Hilmes treats the more "scandalous" incidents in Cosima's life, such as the wheelbarrow affair, and her sojourn with Wagner at Lake Starnberg in 1864 (during which their first daughter, Isolde, was conceived), soberly and with critical awareness of the unreliability of the source material. The story of the love triangle of Bülow-Cosima-Wagner, the Tribschen idyll, or the making of Bayreuth have of course been told many times over from Wagner's perspective. While Hilmes teases out some of the

psychological entanglements, the creative personalities of the artists involved—Liszt, Bülow, Wagner—remain strangely lifeless and hazy. Of course, this type of biography hardly calls for an in-depth appraisal of Wagner the composer, but some acknowledgment of his activities would have helped readers to see Cosima's cult of the "Meister" in proportion.

Interestingly, the book really gains momentum after Wagner's death, when Cosima takes over the twin roles of official chief interpreter of the will of the "Meister," and (unofficial) director of the Bayreuth Festival. Again her artistic contribution to the casting, staging, and direction of Wagner's operas remains vague, but her interactions with her chief conductors Mottl, Ernst Friedrich Eduard Richter, and Hermann Levi, as well as the political side of her activities, are well covered. Her attempts to secure imperial patronage by pulling all the strings of her high-society connections, the (unsuccessful) battle for the extension of the *Parsifal* (1882) copyright, the energy devoted to forging a circle of orthodox Wagner believers, the lawsuit against her daughter Isolde, who claimed her share of the Wagner heritage—all of this material is recounted with a mix of enlightening first-hand quotations and shrewd observations that makes the narrative quite gripping. It is her activities as Wagner's widow that constitutes Cosima's relevance for a history of Wilhelmine culture and, by extension, provides the *raison-d'être* for any biography of her.

The Cosima that emerges from Hilmes's biography, both implicitly from the narrative and explicitly in several character sketches, is a woman who reveled in the suffering that fate seemed to heap upon her especially, who stylized herself as a martyr and missionary for the Wagnerian cause; a woman inculcated in upper-class values and keen on protocol and social decorum (whether this makes her a specimen of the "ancien regime" is another matter); a shrewd manager with keen business sense who was prevented by contemporary ideals of femininity from seizing openly the total control she craved; a cool and distanced society lady who was nevertheless not averse to a tittle and cigarettes. Hilmes does not gloss over the ugly sides of her character (in fact, he appears to be rather proud of his iconoclast stance), such as her rabid anti-Semitism, which was evidenced well before she made Levi's life at Bayreuth a misery, or the ways in which she fostered the increasingly illiberal, nationalist, and racist cult that emanated from the "Bayreuth circle," notably in the writings of her favorite son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain.

The later chapters in particular make Hilmes's book indeed an engaging and rewarding read that maintains a fine balance between the uncritical Wagner-adulation still en vogue among some of his adherents, and the literary and journalistic mud-slinging that—particularly when written by family members—still makes for good copy. Apart from the general readership, for whom the informal and sometimes gratingly colloquial writing style is obviously intended (perhaps Hilmes here underestimates the taste of the reader), this book can be recommended particularly to historians of late-nineteenth-century German culture and cultural politics. A sequel, *Cosimas*

Kinder: Triumph und Tragödie der Wagner-Dynastie, by the same author, has already been announced by the publisher. The Wagner saga continues.

Notes

[1]. Sibylle Zehle, *Minna Wagner: Eine Spurensuche* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2004); and Eva Rieger, *Minna und Richard Wagner: Stationen einer Liebe* (Düsseldorf: Artemis and Winkler, 2003).

[2]. Frithjof Haas, *Der Magier am Dirigentenpult, Felix Mottl* (Karlsruhe: Info-Verlag, 2006).

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