

A Bayreuth Virgin **The Afterglow**

Jessica Duchen returns from Wagner HQ elated by the music, but frustrated by grumblings over 'controversial' Bayreuth productions

I'm back from Bayreuth and I am angry. Not because the production of *Tannhäuser* was daft (parts were, parts were not); nor because the audience was stuffed full of controversial British and German politicians (it wasn't); nor because the seats were uncomfortable (they were a heap better than the Munchkinland-style ones in many London theatre balconies).

No, I am hopping mad because this was one of the best musical experiences of my life to date, and yet I have waited until now to enjoy it – when, with adequate planning and a willingness to ignore the negative rubbish in the press and the antagonistic family brainwashing earlier on, I could have done it 20 years earlier.

Bayreuth's essence is the Festspielhaus itself

Its design was adapted by Wagner, unsanctioned, from an unrealised project by the architect Gottfried Semper for an opera house in Munich. Think of all the issues in opera houses that annoy you: dry acoustics, lousy sightlines, 'restricted view' seats on the wrong bit of horseshoe whence you see an eighth of the stage. None of this applies.

Its shape resembles a Greek amphitheatre, the seats fanning out from the focal point of the stage. No overhanging balconies to shut off the sound overhead; no seats facing the wrong way. No plush, no carpet: resonance is everything.

The sound is extraordinary. The sunken pit means that the orchestra can – and does – give its all without drowning the voices; the warmth and clarity of the acoustic means that you can hear every word and every note within a gloriously balanced unity. It seems to prove that letting a seriously accomplished composer design a venue is not such a bad idea. Why has it not been copied the world over?

I didn't catch one glimpse of a sausage.

Set in a grassy park on the slopes of that famous green hill, the theatre is generous in size (it seats nearly 2000) and is surrounded by pleasant areas in which to eat, drink and socialise. It's not just champagne bars; you can pick the cafeteria, or the ice-cream stand. I didn't catch one glimpse of a sausage. The audience proved dressier than I'd anticipated, but my black-with-a-bit-of-bling blended in reasonably well.



Meanwhile, the function of those brightly coloured dwarf-Wagner statues on the front slopes became clear when surrounded by opera-goers: they are a photo opportunity. You can pat your Wagner on the head or hold one of his upraised hands.

Performance timing allows maximum comfort: for *Tannhäuser*, a 4pm kick-off, with two hour-long intervals and a finish shortly after 9pm – so you can eat before, inbetween or afterwards, according to preference. We took our own snacks and a bottle of wine, which we shared on the lawn with our neighbours from the auditorium – an ex-pat British couple, passionate Wagnerians, who became immediate new friends.

Ritual surrounds these performances. Instead of warning bells before start time, fanfares sound from the balcony above the front entrance, played by members of the brass section and chosen according to the opera. Next, you need to take your seat in good time: there are no aisles and if you're in the middle of a row you'll be climbing over a great many tutting people if you leave it too late.

Then, just before lights out, a bell rings and the ushers jump to coordinated attention. There's a swish of curtain and, in unison, a clonk of doors and keys that still makes the audience jump a little. They do lock you in. That bit is all true.

What of those 'controversial' productions everyone's been talking about?

Sebastian Baumgarten's staging of *Tannhäuser* is no exception. It appears to represent a futuristic society in which the workers, worshipping some bizarre machines, decide to put on a show right here in their own factory.

The central love triangle of this oddly-conceived opera-within-an-opera, though, was intriguingly wrought. Baumgarten turns the conundrum on its head: it is Venus – heavily pregnant – who is clearly Tannhäuser's soulmate, his earthy, feminine, impassioned partner, supporting him as he skewers the pretensions of the singing contest. Elisabeth is a touch-me-not, self-harming, nervous, narcissistic blonde, and his unattainable, destructive obsession. We've all met men like that.

Dramatically speaking, it's unusual – but it works.

Wolfram goads Tannhäuser towards Elisabeth, but sings of the evening star not to her, but to Venus. This makes sense, since the planet Venus is the

evening star. At the end, Venus gives birth. The future is hers and her baby's: Elisabeth is no more and Tannhäuser lies dead, or simply knackered. Dramatically speaking, that's unusual – but it works. It's the surrounding factory construct that is the problem. It adds nothing except expensive and cumbersome design, annoying video footage and... some dancing sperms. Literally. You half expect Woody Allen to emerge from one of them for *Everything You Wanted to Know About Tannhäuser But Were Afraid to Ask*.

If these goings-on became too irritating, you could simply close your eyes and sink with rapture into the glories of the music. Torsten Kerl delivered a brawny, confident performance as Tannhäuser; Camilla Nylund was radiant-voiced as the neurotic Elisabeth, Michelle Breedt warm and sensual as Venus. Markus Eiche as Wolfram was possessed of great vocal strength and beauty as well as exceptionally fine diction; and Kwangchul Youn as Hermann, the Landgraf, is a Wagnerian star bass of very special calibre. Axel Kober's conducting brought us a full-blooded, beautifully judged whole.

Bayreuth beyond the opera

The town had been described to me as dull, staid and devoid of interest. What rubbish. It's possibly comparable to a small Cheltenham: wide streets, goldenish stone and wonderful countryside ('Franconian Switzerland') close by with walks aplenty. Annoyingly, I did not allow enough time for sight-seeing, so missed the Liszt Museum and the Jean Paul Museum (both located adjacent to Wagner's house, the Villa Wahnfried, which is currently closed for major renovations).

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Paying respects to the graves of the Masters is mandatory if you are a fan. Wagner and Cosima are buried at the edge of the Hofgarten behind Wahnfried; two of their dogs, Russ and Marke, are interred nearby, with headstones. Franz Liszt, Cosima's father, was unlucky enough to die in Bayreuth, having caught a chill on his way to visit his daughter. Here he spends posterity forced into the shadow of his son-in-law. His grave is in a mini-mausoleum in the churchyard opposite the Ramada Hotel, festooned with Hungarian red, white and green ribbons.

Walk from the churchyard into the town centre (about five minutes) and you encounter Wagnerian tourist-tat everywhere. You can't get away from Big Ritchie – statues and images of him and his dog pop up at every glance. One ladies' loo even boasted a cartoon of Cosima – suitably seated – explaining its automated lightswitch. Everything is geared to operatic tourism: our hotel provided a shuttle coach to the Festspielhaus, handing everyone a red cushion bearing a Wagner logo on the way out plus a glass of bubbly.

Time to go home – and what do you know?

Another shock-horror-trouble-at-mill article about Bayreuth, this time in [The Guardian](#). Here a singer is quoted as saying he has never seen an audience 'so full of hate'. Funny, that – this is the most loving, knowledgeable, devoted

audience one could encounter. It is not 'full of hate'; it just knows when it sees a director whose productions are full of another four-letter word.

The media feeds us negative memes about this place as our regular diet. Someone, somewhere, must presumably be determined for reasons of his/her own to keep us convinced that the whole thing is simply ghastly. Those commentators are doing everybody a disservice. Nobody tells us how much magic there is at Bayreuth. It is all about the music; the wonders of its sound, its impact on generation after generation of composers who all came here to experience it, the devotion and excellence of its performers and the passion of its present-day audience. Why let Hitler win? It's time for us all to reclaim Wagner's musical glories for ourselves.

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