

Schwules Museum*

Press Release | Special Exhibition

Siegfried Wagner: Bayreuth's 'Fairy' Crown Prince

17 February 2017 – 26 June 2017, Opening Night February 16, 2017, 7:00 pm



The story of the Wagner clan – with all their violations of conventional morals, intrigues, scandals, and power-struggles surrounding Bayreuth – has kept the German public spellbound for over 150 years. The "Green Hill" and the festival held there annually since 1951 are regarded, by many, as the "*Pantheon of the German People*," a national shrine and cultural asset of the highest order.

Composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) is the central figure: one of the most controversial personalities in music history. One could fill entire libraries with books on his life and breaking-all-the-rules works. Among them are, surprisingly, many historical publications dealing with the special fascination Wagner's operas have had for homosexuals, e.g. Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891), Oskar Panizza's *Bayreuth und Homosexualität*

(1895), Cesare Lombroso's *Genio e degenerazione* (1897), Hanns Fuchs' *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität* (1903) and Heinrich Pudor's *Richard Wagner's Bisexuality* (1907).

On June 6, 1869, Wagner's only son, Siegfried, was born in Switzerland, named after the anarchist and women-fearing operatic hero who emerges from the incestuous pairing of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was present at the times of the birth (the future icon of the "Masculinists"), King Ludwig II was the godfather. The mother, Cosima von Bülow, was married to another man at the time. And Franz Liszt is the illustrious grandfather. From the beginning, Siegfried was destined to be "heir apparent" and continue his father's legacy: as musician, conductor, and artistic director of the Bayreuth festival. He took over the

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leadership of the festival from his mother in 1906 and navigated it into the modern era – the turbulent 20th century. His many innovations distressed many Wagnerian reactionaries, but he continued pursuing his new and successful vision until his death in 1930. Besides running the festival, Siegfried composed a total of 18 operas himself, they were successfully performed on a regular basis throughout Europe, during his lifetime. He also appeared internationally as a highly-demanded and well-paid conductor of his own works, as well as works of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt. G. B. Shaw praised the new "intimate" way Siegfried conducted Richard Wagner's music, which was an approach very different to most of his contemporaries and famous predecessors.

The fact that Siegfried was homosexual, and lived an astonishingly open gay life, was known and mostly tolerated by his family. Blackmailers were given hush-money from private cashboxes in exchange for their silence.

Following the famous Eulenburg scandal, journalist Maximilian Harden targeted Siegfried Wagner in 1914. Prince von Eulenburg had been a close associate of the Wagner family, had promoted the Wagner cult through his association with Emperor Wilhelm II., and had secured permanent financial security for the festival. Also, Eulenburg was friends with the anti-Semitic "Race Prophet" Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Siegfried's brother-in-law. After Harden publicly branded Siegfried as a "savior from a different-colored crate," Siegfried tried dodging open rumors about his sexuality by marrying the androgynous 17 year old Winifred (1897–1980). She bore him four children. Thus a scandal was avoided and the future male heirs of the festival were delivered to the world: Wieland (1917–1966) und Wolfgang Wagner (1919–2010).

A fierce Wagnerian and Nazi party supporter, Winifred took over the direction of the festival after Siegfried's death in 1930 and steered Bayreuth into the arms of the National Socialists after 1933, with fatal consequences. She also ensured that Siegfried's compositional work was no longer performed, due to its supposed "insignificance" compared to the genius of Richard Wagner. She established a preventive practice, which continued until very recently through her son Wolfgang.

In the endless books about Richard Wagner and the Bayreuth festival, Siegfried usually only gets a marginal mention, his homosexuality is never openly discussed, nor the homosexual circle of artists he brought to Bayreuth to renew the festival with 'queer' ideas. At the same time, his own oeuvre was completely forgotten, Winifred did not even allow Siegfried's private correspondence to go to the Richard Wagner Foundation in 1973, along with the rest of the family documents. Instead, she handed them over to her oldest granddaughter, Amelie, daughter of Verena Lafferentz-Wagner, with instructions that total secrecy must be kept. Only the Vatican is more mysteriously sealed off.

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The exhibition *Siegfried Wagner: Bayreuth's 'Fairy' Crown Prince* devotes itself, without inhibition, to the gay side of Siegfried Wagner's life and works for the first time. It illuminates his innovative artistic strategies for Bayreuth, analyses his relationship with the Nazi movement and anti-Semitic circles, it introduces his life-partner, British composer Clement Harris, and his illegitimate gay son Walter Aign (1901–1977). Special attention is given to Siegfried's autobiographical operas and their musical value.

One section of the exhibition will exclusively deal with "Richard Wagner and Homosexuality," to demonstrate the foundation on which Siegfried's life is based – and why his son, Wieland, feared 'becoming' a homosexual as a 'inheritance' from his father and grandfather.

A volume of essays, edited by Achim Bahr, will be published in conjunction with the exhibition. There will be a series of events in the Schwules Museum*, with lectures and discussions. Speakers will include Manuel Brug (*Die Welt*) and Johannes Kram (*Nollendorfblog*) analyzing homophobia in today's opera industry, Prof. Michael Zywiets (Bremen) will talk about the problem conservative musicologists have with homosexual aspects and artists. Peter P. Pachl will give various introductions to the different aspects of Siegfried Wagner oeuvre. A concert series will be organized by pianopianissimo-musiktheater, Munich. Our media partner is the opera magazine *Operalounge.de*.

Curators: Peter Pachl, Achim Bahr, and Kevin Clarke.

Research Fellow: Michael Baumgarten. Intern: Cindy Wegner.

This exhibition is a collaboration with the International Siegfried Wagner Society and the Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth.

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RWM BAYREUTH

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Further information and contact with the curators is available upon request at presse@schwulesmuseum.de. Press photos will be made available at schwulesmuseum.de/presse/pressebilder/2017/.