

A Contradictory Life

Simon Williams enjoys a new biography of Cosima Wagner which illuminates the many sides of her personality

Sabine Zurmühl, *Cosima Wagner: Ein widersprüchliches Leben* (Böhlau Verlag: Vienna & Cologne, 2022). 359 pp. €40. ISBN: 9783205215011

Sabine Zurmühl's new biography of Cosima Wagner begins with a list of forty-five affectionate nicknames with which Richard addressed his second wife. They range from the intimate, such as 'meine Melodie' and 'Waldweibchen' (little forest wife), through the grandly complimentary 'Grund und Ursache des Lebens' (foundation and reason for life) and 'meine Sonne zu alle Tageszeiten' (my sun at all times of day), to the frankly alarming 'Napoleon'. The sheer variety of names is testimony not only to Richard's imagination, but also to the complexity of roles, often contradictory, that Cosima played in his life.



Cosima Wagner in a pensive pose, as painted by Paul von Joukowsky

Contradiction is the primary theme of Zurmühl's book, the subtitle of which is *Ein widersprüchliches Leben* (A Contradictory Life). In the popular imagination, Cosima has been seen as the submissive, one might even say abject companion to her husband, but while married to him she displayed a powerful understanding of the need for women's independence. She was an unregenerate anti-Semite, but she still maintained cordial relations with the many Jewish figures in German musical life. After Richard's death she took over as director of the Bayreuth Festival with the declared intention of presenting his work in a manner faithful to his original intentions, and yet she still displayed a finely nuanced understanding of the way in which time would lead to changes in the production of his work. She was in many ways, as Zurmühl points out, an unremarkable woman, but her birth placed her on the edge of the aristocracy and in the midst of the most influential musical revolutionaries of the 19th century. In such company, which does not favour the unremarkable, she found in herself reserves of energy that enabled her to participate fully in the artistic life of both of her husbands, Bülow and Wagner, and, when opportunity presented itself, of her father Liszt as well. She was hardly all things to all people, but she was a woman who was more complex, intellectually curious and warmer in her relationships with both her family and friends than the popular image of her – which is also contradictory – as a wilting violet in marriage and a battleaxe when it came to guarding the heritage of Wagner.

To highlight the contradictory nature of Cosima's life, Zurmühl has structured her biography in an unorthodox way. Instead of a purely chronological narrative, she divides her material into thirty-three essays, ranging from brief chapters of two to three pages, to extended analyses. Hence we have a discussion of her religious faith, in which she was torn between her Catholic upbringing and her conversion to Protestantism during her relationship with Wagner; an exploration of the tensions between her aristocratic French background and her life among bourgeois and Bohemian artists and musicians; and an examination of the stressful demands made by the two triangles she endured for several years, with Bülow and Wagner when she was young and, fascinatingly, with Wagner and Liszt during her second marriage. Zurmühl makes no attempt to apologise for Cosima. Far from it: there is a scathing account of her anti-Semitism in a chapter on her relationship with Hermann Levi, and it is clear that while she was often an attentive mother, she was far from perfect. Neither does Zurmühl put forward any special pleading. She adopts a strongly feminist view of her subject, which is enhanced by a thorough understanding of the position of women in 19th-century German society. Cosima, she points out, was familiar with contemporary discussions over the emancipation of women and acknowledged the right of women to live independently, but she never embraced the political cause of emancipation; this was strongly influenced, of course, by her devotion to Wagner, which suggested the erasure of her personality by his shadow. After he died, she used her public persona to create the Festspiele Wagner had largely envisioned, and she became a salient figure in German culture as a result, but always in the service of the historic importance of Wagner's reputation.

The essayistic approach has the advantage of focusing on the complex figure of Cosima rather than considering her as a second string to her menfolk. It also guarantees a tone of objectivity that may well dissuade readers – be they pro- or anti-Wagner – from

rushing to judgment. Furthermore, we gain a sense of Cosima as both a private being and a public figure and, of course, of the contradictions that emerged from the friction between these two personas. Above all, we understand how she was a product of her time and yet in many ways she resisted it. Her long-term friendships with such women as Malwida von Meysenbug and Ellen Franz indicate that while Cosima was not in the vanguard of women's movements, she was highly conversant with them. She was also musically literate; indeed, while her distinction in the musical world clearly depended on her status as Wagner's widow, her business acumen, her musical knowledge and her wide range of acquaintances amongst the cultural elite guaranteed the stability of the Festspiele until several years after her resignation as director in 1906.

Zurmühl's essayistic approach prevails for much of this biography. She explores in detail the intimacies of the Wagners' life together and Richard's dependence on Cosima – she offered him more in the way of solace and succour than he did her. In an especially interesting chapter, 'Inszenierungen des Paares', she explores how the couple's 'self-staging', in which they consistently presented their life, to themselves and to others, as being elevated above that of the everyday, was essential for Cosima's idealisation of her husband and for sustaining his faith in his work. However, in the book's discussion of the final phases of Cosima's life, straightforward narrative largely takes over in recounting the almost fifty years that she outlived Richard. Zurmühl does not spend much time debating the artistic impact of Cosima's tenure as director of the Festspiele, but makes it clear that her capacity as a stage director, her munificence as a hostess and her single-minded dedication to the music dramas laid the basis for the Bayreuth Festival as we know it today.

This volume does not entirely replace Oliver Hilmes's rather outmoded biography, *Cosima Wagner: The Lady of Bayreuth*, but provides an enlightened corrective to it. And it also makes clear why Wagner had so many nicknames for her.