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**Displacement, repetition and repression: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* on stage in the Weimar Republic**

**Áine Sheil**

**Abstract**

Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the performance and reception history of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* during the Weimar Republic (1919-33), but as this article will demonstrate, the opera played an indispensable role in the repertoires of Weimar opera houses. Despite an evident desire on the part of some Weimar directors and designers of *Die Meistersinger* to draw on staging innovations of the time, productions of the work from this period are characterised by scenic conservatism and repetition of familiar naturalistic imagery. This was not coincidental, I will argue, since *Die Meistersinger* served as a comforting rite for many opera-going members of the Weimar middle classes, at least some of whom felt economically or socially beleaguered in the aftermath of World War I. But no matter how secure the conservative theatrical conventions surrounding the Weimar *Meistersinger* appeared, the repressed turmoil of the Weimar Republic seeped into ideas about the work, haunting the performance and reception of constructed German stability.

As theories of trauma and repetition might instruct us, it is not *presence* that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance but precisely (again) the missed encounter – the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten... [P]erformance plays the “sedimented acts” and spectral meanings that haunt material in constant collective interaction...<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

In his lengthy essay from 1932, ‘On the Social Situation of Music’, Theodor W. Adorno argued that opera could no longer function in its traditional role of representation, since the bourgeoisie of his day was dispossessed and no longer capable of the economic support for opera that such representation would require. In addition, members of the bourgeoisie no longer constituted a cultural unity capable of representation. ‘The most they can do’, Adorno suggested, ‘is commemorate their happier years at performances of *Die Meistersinger*’.<sup>2</sup> The nostalgic-conservative nature of that commemoration during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) is the subject of this article, as is the striking investment in

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York, 2011), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Wesley Blomster (Berkeley, 2002), 418. The ‘happier years’ were presumably those prior to World War I, an era that felt profoundly past despite its recentness, as Thomas Mann noted in his foreword to *Der Zauberberg* (1924).

*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* by middle-class commentators of different political orientations and value systems. As Adorno notes, the *Bürgertum* of the period was far from homogenous or self-evident: changes were taking place within traditional social structures that had, I will argue, a direct bearing on the reception of *Meistersinger* stagings. These Weimar stagings displayed a desire on the part of some directors and designers to draw on the period's heterogeneous developments in theatre and opera staging, yet ultimately they capitulated to scenic conservatism, relegating the theatrical experiments of the time and modernity itself to the realm of the repressed. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* has generated many conservative stagings throughout its entire history and will presumably continue to do so,<sup>3</sup> but the turmoil of the Weimar Republic

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<sup>3</sup> See David J. Levin, '*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: drastisch oder gnostisch?', in *Angst vor der Zerstörung: Der Meister Künste zwischen Archiv und Erneuerung*, ed. Robert Sollich, Clemens Risi, Sebastian Reus and Stephan Jöris (Berlin, 2008), 260-71, and Robert Sollich, 'Hier gilt's der Kunst – Aber welcher? *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* als Katalysator künstlerischer Selbstreflexion im Wandel ihrer Geschichte', in *Angst vor der Zerstörung*, 75-96.

Levin argues that *Die Meistersinger* got left behind in staging terms until Katharina Wagner's new production for the Bayreuth Festival in 2007, while Robert Sollich (dramaturg to Katharina Wagner's production) maintains that proponents of *Regietheater* have been slow to tackle the work, and that attempts at modernisation have been met with particular aggression. There is, however, nothing inherent in *Die Meistersinger* that prevents experimental staging: Wieland Wagner's 1956 and 1963 productions at Bayreuth, Hans Neuenfels' 1994 production at Stuttgart, and Peter Konwitschny's 2002 production at

manifested itself in particular ways in stagings and reception of the work. The Weimar productions of *Die Meistersinger* carried the upheaval of the period within the nostalgia of their naturalism: the contemporary times asserted themselves, not so much as a direct representation on stage, but mostly as an immaterial trace. Expressed in terms of the opening quotation by Rebecca Schneider, each conservative repetition or citation of *Die Meistersinger* alluded to other, happier times, but was also haunted by repressed ‘spectral meanings’ concerning loss, trauma and displacement.

This article begins with an overview of the Weimar period and the fate of Germany’s middle classes at the time. Contextual developments in opera are outlined briefly in order to provide a backdrop against which several representative *Meistersinger* productions and related reception materials can be examined. Returning to Adorno’s idea of *Die Meistersinger*’s commemorative function, the article proposes a symptomatic reading of the Weimar productions, drawing together political context, Weimar social developments and *Meistersinger* staging practice in an exploration of cultural displacement, ritualistic repetition and communal repression.

### **Weimar Germany: crisis and liminality**

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Hamburg are examples of radical *Meistersinger* stagings that pre-date Katharina Wagner’s provocative 2007 interpretation. For a selective production history that includes stagings from the premiere to 2015, see Áine Sheil, ‘The Performance Legacy of *Die Meistersinger*’ in Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Overture Opera Guides, series ed. Gary Kahn (Richmond, 2015), 55-72.

Established following imperial Germany's defeat in World War I and revolution throughout Germany in the winter of 1918-1919, the Weimar Republic represented disgrace and loss to many Germans. The political landscape of the Republic was characterised by fragmentation, with over thirty different parties vying for the support of German citizens. Unstable coalition governments collapsed quickly, and many German voters lost confidence in the new democratic system. Feelings of alienation across the political spectrum were compounded by the Treaty of Versailles, which inflicted territorial losses, severe military restrictions and harsh reparation payments on Germany. During the early 1920s, Weimar politicians attempted to make up for budget deficits by printing extra money, a policy that resulted in hyperinflation in 1922-23; reform of Germany's currency in late 1923 brought economic recovery in the middle years of the Republic, but this period of relief was immediately destroyed by world depression. 1922-1923 and 1930-1933 inflicted the kind of economic chaos for which no short-lived stability could compensate, wiping out the prosperity and good will of many in the process.

In *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (2007), Eric D. Weitz argues that hyperinflation in 1923 resulted in 'a general and mostly disastrous decline in living standards, but also a severe disruption of the boundaries between social groups, much to the chagrin of the middle class in particular'.<sup>4</sup> Those with savings lost a substantial component of their wealth, and as Weitz puts it, 'the middle class, to so many Germans the stable core of society, seemed to be

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<sup>4</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, 2007), 137.

disappearing before their very eyes'.<sup>5</sup> In 1925, the Deutsche Zentrumspartei [German Centre Party] politician and opera critic Adam Röder noted the dissolution of the traditional *Mittelstand* of independent small producers in the face of rapid industrialization, and observed that a new middle class of bureaucrats and office workers had emerged.<sup>6</sup> These employees were at home in Germany's large cities and had disposable income, but they did not necessarily share the tastes of the *Bildungsbürgertum* [educated middle class]. As will become apparent later, these social changes posed significant challenges for opera houses, whose traditional audiences could no longer be relied on to the same extent for support and patronage.

Given the enormous upheaval of the period, particularly in 1918-23 and 1929-33 (including unprecedented mortality rates as a result of World War I; economic chaos; a new and fiercely contested political system with lack of consensus on almost every major issue; disintegration of old social boundaries), one could characterise the Weimar Republic, especially in its early years, in the terms of anthropologist Victor Turner as a 'margin' or 'limen', in other words as a moment of 'pure potentiality' between a suspended past and then unknown future. With this potentiality came real, threatened and imaginary rupture, causing acute discomfort for many Germans. As Turner notes:

Liminality is ... an ambiguous state, for social structure, while it inhibits full social satisfaction, gives a measure of finiteness and security;

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<sup>5</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 138.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Röder, *Der Weg des Zentrums* (Berlin, 1925), 44.

liminality may be for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, of disorder into order, [rather] than the milieu of creative interhuman or transhuman satisfactions and achievements.<sup>7</sup>

The Weimar period undoubtedly incorporated creative interhuman achievements – the developments in opera mentioned below are testament to that – but it was also a time during which the will to conserve asserted itself strongly in response to significant social disruption. One of the spheres in which tensions between the forces of creativity and the desire for familiarity, order and repetition played out clearly was that of the performing arts.

### **Developments in opera: tradition and modernity**

Weimar productions of *Die Meistersinger* were staged against a backdrop of institutional reform in theatres and opera houses, technological innovation in the theatre sector, the temporary lifting of state censorship and the rise of overtly critical political performance, including those by noted left-wing theatre makers such as Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. Administrative change was particularly obvious during the opening years of the Republic, with institutions once attached to Germany's royal houses coming under the control of town councils or individual states. Because opera in particular had been the preserve of the upper classes and the *Bildungsbürgertum*, some socialist politicians were keen to make it more accessible to the wider public. As Arthur Maria Rabenalt, a Weimar opera director, noted: 'Opera in all its backwardness was to be integrated

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982), 46.

into this turbulent time. It was no longer to be an island of culinary enjoyment, a refuge for elite and esoteric sections of society, rather it was to be theatre for the masses.’<sup>8</sup> The *Volksbühne* movement, which offered discounted theatre and opera tickets to its mostly working-class or lower-paid members, expanded rapidly during the Weimar period, thereby contributing in a very concrete way to this aim. Predictably enough, this broadening of traditional opera audiences caused some consternation: in Hannover, for example, there were calls for members of the local *Volksbühne* not to receive stalls or dress circle tickets, because theatre trustees were afraid that regular patrons would abandon the theatre.<sup>9</sup>

The musicologist Karl Holl observed that opera was in crisis because of the ruin of Germany’s educated and formerly privileged social classes.<sup>10</sup> In 1930, the new-music advocate and critic H.H. Stuckenschmidt warned that unless opera adapted to social developments it would not survive. Stuckenschmidt’s forecast was based on the fate of the *Stammpublikum* [regular audience], which had

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<sup>8</sup> See Vibeke Peusch, *Opernregie-Regieoper. Avantgardistisches Musiktheater in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), 234-5. All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup> The municipal theatre in Hannover also responded to newcomers in the audience by banning the consumption of bread rolls during performances and by requesting that the audience did not laugh at inappropriate moments. See Dörte Schmidt and Brigitta Weber, eds, *Keine Experimentierkunst: Musikleben an Städtischen Theatern in der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1995), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Holl, ‘Oper in Not’, *Die Theaterwelt* 5 (1930), 117-31.

shrunk considerably in the wake of economic turmoil, with many patrons no longer able to afford to go to the opera or support it in the traditional manner.<sup>11</sup> Paul Bekker noted in *Das Operntheater* that ‘audience members who used to sit in the first tier have now moved up a few levels or do not come at all; newcomers have arrived, both above and below’.<sup>12</sup>

Many opera companies responded to cutbacks in subsidies and the loss of traditional audience members by programming more operetta, hoping in this way to attract extra box-office income from a wider, non-traditional audience.<sup>13</sup> Many Weimar critics dismissed operetta as commercial theatre and held it in low esteem primarily because it appeared to cater to uneducated tastes. This position was exemplified by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who argued in *Die geistige*

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<sup>11</sup> H.H. Stuckenschmidt, ‘Ist die Oper überlebt?’, *Das Kunstblatt* 14 (1930), 226. A good example of the existential choices opera audiences had to make during the Weimar Republic is given in Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Das Mannheimer Nationaltheater: Ein Jahrhundert deutscher Theaterkultur im Reich* (Mannheim, 1929), 372. According to Stahl, a single portion of beef cost more than a good ticket to an opera during the inflation period. Rather than indicating the affordability of opera at the time, this statistic demonstrates how drastic an effect the inflation had on basic living costs, and shows how difficult it must have been for Weimar citizens to maintain established lifestyle patterns.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Bekker, *Das Operntheater* (Leipzig, 1931), 123.

<sup>13</sup> The programming of operetta due to challenging economic conditions was widespread, and it affected theatres as well as opera houses. See John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic* (New York, 1988), 77.

*Situation der Zeit* (1931) that theatre had descended into entertainment and that mass culture was eradicating the educated class and its particular affinity for high culture.<sup>14</sup>

Another threat to traditional patterns of theatre and opera attendance was cinema, which became increasingly impossible to ignore: as a 1927 edition of *Der Neue Film* noted, turn-of-the-century Germany had only two cinema theatres, but this number had now increased to 4000.<sup>15</sup> Even more pertinently, cinema had begun to encroach on rituals of middle-class life. Before World War I, it was spurned by the bourgeoisie as low-class entertainment, but during the Weimar era, new theatre-style auditoriums with performance conventions resembling those of bourgeois theatre succeeded in attracting large middle-class audiences.<sup>16</sup> This blurring of traditional boundaries between high culture and entertainment represented a challenge to theatre and opera, prompting many

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1931), 102. This concern also manifested itself in an anonymous article in the conservative-nationalist *Zeitschrift für Musik* (1929), which poured scorn on attempts to make opera relevant to the 1920s through updated settings and costumes. This kind of updating capitulated to animalistic audiences, the author argued, people for whom time only related to the present, as opposed to those of ‘bourgeois-schooled understanding and sensibility’, who were in a position to understand earlier centuries through art works. See the unattributed article, ‘Die Rettung der bürgerlichen Oper’, *Zeitschrift für Musik* 96 (1929), 227.

<sup>15</sup> See *Der Neue Film* 4 (1927), no page number.

<sup>16</sup> See Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London, 2002), 14.

critics to issue pessimistic warnings about the future of these art forms that had been so closely associated with the *Bildungsbürgertum*.<sup>17</sup>

Some experimental-progressive strands of theatre diverged sharply from mainstream naturalist cinema with the tendency, as liberal Weimar critic Bernhard Diebold put it, ‘to destroy reality at any price’.<sup>18</sup> Although the distorted scenery, skewed perspectives and heightened language of spoken expressionist theatre passed their peak early in the Weimar Republic, expressionism survived for longer within opera, and abstract or constructivist stage design of the type associated with the Bauhaus school of design flourished in opera until the end of the Weimar period.<sup>19</sup>

Until the early 1920s, German opera stagecraft had been largely stagnant: commercial ateliers were still providing theatres with naturalist painted

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<sup>17</sup> See Bryan Gilliam, ‘Stage and Screen: Kurt Weill and Operatic Reform in the 1920s’, in *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Cambridge, 1994), 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Bernhard Diebold, *Anarchie im Drama: Kritik und Darstellung der modernen Dramatik*, 3rd edn (Frankfurt am Main, 1925), 450.

<sup>19</sup> According to Willett, ‘more elaborate apparatuses like the cinema and the opera, being by nature so much slower to move, continued to produce Expressionist works (Berg’s *Wozzeck* in 1925, Lang’s *Metropolis* in 1927) long after the movement was otherwise defunct’. Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, 76. Constructivist sets dispensed with painted backdrops and commonly consisted of abstract architectonic structures that organised the stage in a three-dimensional manner.

backdrops, and repertory pieces often looked much the same from theatre to theatre. Significant change came during the Weimar Republic, not just with the advent of expressionist, constructivist or otherwise abstract scenery, but also when technology manifested itself both thematically in contemporary works that incorporated modern phenomena such as cars, telephones and radio,<sup>20</sup> and in staging practice, for example in the installation of hydraulic machinery, lifts, mechanized sidestages and the latest lighting equipment at the Berlin State Opera between 1926 and 1928. The medium of opera also expanded technically to include film and recorded sound: Kurt Weill's *Royal Palace* (1927) contains a film intermezzo accompanied by orchestra, while the Tango Angèle in his *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* (1928) is played not by live instrumentalists but as a gramophone recording.<sup>21</sup> The world premiere of Darius Milhaud's *Christophe Colomb* at the Berlin State Opera (1930) included film strips and projected titles, and by February 1933 film projections had been used in a production of *Parsifal* at the municipal opera house in Hannover.<sup>22</sup> *Die*

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the Weimar *Zeitoper*, with its characteristic emphasis on everyday life and modern technology, see Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitoper of Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith* (Rochester, 2010) and Frank Mehring, 'Welcome to the Machine! The Representation of Technology in *Zeitoper*' , *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11 (1999), 159-77.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the use of sound media within Weimar opera, see Alexander Rehding, 'On the Record', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006), 59-82.

<sup>22</sup> See Markus Brudereck, 'Der "Pünktchen-Sadist": Rudolf Krasselt und sein Regieteam', in Schmidt and Weber, *Keine Experimentierkunst*, 143. According to

*Meistersinger* appears, however, to have been untouched by this type of development.

Less technical in nature, but equally far-reaching for subsequent opera practice, was the rediscovery of Handel opera during the Weimar Republic. In 1920, the art historian Oskar Hagen initiated a production in Göttingen of *Rodelinda*, which was performed in German in a highly edited version by academics, students and amateurs. This production marked the start of the so-called Handel-Renaissance in the 1920s, during which *Rodelinda*, *Ottone*, *Giulio Cesare* and *Serse* were staged throughout Germany. The Handel-Renaissance not only expanded the opera canon backwards to include baroque opera, but also became associated with a particular anti-romantic style of opera and oratorio staging incorporating abstract settings, massed choirs, expressionist dance and stylised gesture inspired by the choreographer Rudolf von Laban.

A desire to renew opera practice and the means of staging opera was common to many opera practitioners of the period. Carl Ebert, who had trained under the legendary director Max Reinhardt and who went on to become a founding figure of Glyndebourne Festival Opera, stressed the possibility of making classics feel contemporary when he became Intendant of the Landestheater Darmstadt in 1927.<sup>23</sup> His staff directors Renato Mordo and Brudereck, this was the first time that moving projections were used in the opera house at Hannover, and this was the first Wagner production that involved cinematography. The production was designed by Kurt Söhnlein, who worked at Bayreuth and was close to Siegfried Wagner.

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<sup>23</sup> See Carl Ebert, 'Mein Programm', *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheater* (1927/8), 1.

Rabenalt agreed with this, arguing that representational styles had to change from generation to generation;<sup>24</sup> looking back on the 1920s some decades later, he noted that ‘an opera, no matter what era it was written in, was [now] regarded as a pliant object of living theatre.’<sup>25</sup> In Darmstadt, works were transposed to different settings and times in order to establish connections with 1920s life, naturalist techniques were avoided and, in keeping with the developments of the Handel-Renaissance, performers were encouraged to learn from modern dance in order to develop new forms of physicality.<sup>26</sup>

During the Weimar Republic, opera reform was spread unequally across Germany, with many regional centres contributing to the innovations of the period. Leipzig Opera staged the premieres of notable topical and critical works such as Ernst Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* (1927) and Brecht and Weill’s *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930), while stylised opera scenery was common in Frankfurt, Bochum-Duisburg and Wiesbaden. Many of the practitioners involved in these regional centres of reform — the conductor Otto Klemperer and designer Ewald Dülberg in Wiesbaden, Rabenalt and his preferred designer,

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<sup>24</sup> Renato Mordo, ‘Zur Krise und Gesundung des deutschen Theaters’, *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheater* (1927/8), 162-3.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Maria Rabenalt, *Das provokative Musiktheater der zwanziger Jahre. Ein Rückblick* (Munich, [1965]), 8.

<sup>26</sup> See Hermann Kaiser, ed., *300 Jahre Darmstädter Theater in Berichten von Augenzeugen* (Darmstadt, 1972), 136. Claire Eckstein, who was Director of Dance at Darmstadt, had trained under the celebrated expressionist choreographer and pedagogue Mary Wigman.

Wilhelm Reinking in Darmstadt — went on to contribute significantly to the opera company most closely associated with the Weimar Republic: the Staatsoper am Platz der Republik, Berlin, also known informally as the Krolloper. This company, which existed for just four years between 1927 and 1931, now occupies a prominent position in the historiography of opera staging reform. Because the Krolloper was a new company with nothing to revive, each production was fresh and theoretically unencumbered by tradition; directors could be chosen freely, and many of those who worked for the company had a background in drama rather than opera. In similar fashion, many of the set designers were active in the field of modern art, and they worked in a manner that owed little to conventional opera design and rather more to the constructivist influence of the Bauhaus.<sup>27</sup> Dülberg, who was an instructor at the Bauhaus, designed the scenery for the only Wagner production at the Kroll, *Der fliegende Holländer* (1929), creating controversy among the more traditionalist Weimar

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<sup>27</sup> On productions at the Krolloper, see Hans Curjel, *Experiment Krolloper 1927–1931* (Munich, 1975); Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times. Volume I, 1885–1933* (Cambridge, 1983), 246–372; and Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2006), 234–60.

László Moholy-Nagy, who created particularly uncompromising constructivist sets for the Kroll productions of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* and Hindemith's *Hin und Zurück*, was an instructor at the Bauhaus. Oskar Schlemmer, who created the designs for a production of Schoenberg's *Die glückliche Hand*, also worked as a designer at the Bauhaus.

critics through the use of stylised sets, 1920s working class-style costumes and a beardless title character.<sup>28</sup>

In 1931 the subsidies involved in running the Krolloper were used as a politically expedient excuse to close it, despite the fact that it received the lowest funding of all the major opera companies in Berlin. Undoubtedly there were other, more complex and political reasons behind the closure, but financial issues were of huge concern to those working in opera. As Rabenalt noted of the time, ‘There was no money. We heard time and again: “Do something new, but it mustn’t cost anything”.’<sup>29</sup> Provincial companies operating on small budgets either had to revive old productions endlessly (and given their limited audiences this was not a fail-safe tactic), or mount new productions that kept expenditure to a minimum. Although traditionalists found it offensive, stylisation was one means of achieving lower-cost productions. Suggestive, minimal sets could take the place of expensive new naturalist scenery, and in this way unnecessary expenditure could be avoided.

### **The place of Wagner and *Die Meistersinger* in the Weimar opera landscape**

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed account of the critical response to the production, see Tash Siddiqui, ‘Flying the republican colours: The 1929 Krolloper production of *Der fliegende Holländer*’, *The Wagner Journal* 6 (2012), 15-34. Siddiqui notes that reviews of the production concentrated on the staging more than the music, and that ‘it was indeed designer Dülberg’s starkly architectonic, rectilinear sets that supplied the shock of the new’. ‘Flying the republican colours’, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Peusch, *Opernregie-Regieoper*, 230.

The idea that Wagner presented a special case among composers was common throughout the Weimar Republic, and while many commentators agreed that other operas could be stylised successfully, directors and designers modernised Wagner at their peril. In his contribution to the *Offizieller Bayreuther Festspielführer 1924*, music editor and critic Carl Siegmund Benedict described stylisation as nothing but a sign of economic hardship, and condemned the practice as wholly inappropriate to Wagner.<sup>30</sup> The progressive critic Karl Holl agreed with this position, arguing that Wagner's music demanded naturalist illusion, and that stylisation or expressionism would merely create an overall dissonance.<sup>31</sup> Adam Röder, who in addition to his work as a Deutsche Zentrumspartei politician was also the editor of the arts journal *Karlsruhe Kunstwarte*, put it forcefully in 1925: those who defended simplified scenery in Wagner productions had to be confronted with an energetic 'Hands off!'<sup>32</sup> For

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<sup>30</sup> Carl Siegmund Benedict, 'Symbol und Natur im Kunstwerk Wagners', in *Offizieller Bayreuther Festspielführer 1924*, ed. Karl Grunsky (Bayreuth, 1924), 155.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Holl, 'Bayreuth 1924', *Frankfurter Zeitung* (3 August 1924), reproduced in *Der Festspielhügel: Richard Wagners Werk in Bayreuth*, ed. Herbert Barth (Munich, 1976), 126.

<sup>32</sup> 'Wenn die Papageien des Herrn Paul Bekker in Frankfurter und andern Blättern die neue Regie mit ihren Versimpelung des Wagner'schen Originalbildes befürworten, so muß ihnen ein energisches Hände weg! zugerufen werden.'  
Adam Röder, 'Die "expressionistische Regie"', *Karlsruher Kunstwarte* (1925), 186.

Röder, stylisation and expressionism put a halt to the perfection of stage representation, and as such represented artistic regression. While some level of abstraction was tolerated in the case of the *Ring* cycle – Ludwig Sievert’s designs for the *Ring* provide an example of partially acclaimed Wagner stylisation during the Weimar Republic<sup>33</sup> – *Die Meistersinger* occupied a particular place in the imagination of many Weimar commentators. As the Professor of Aesthetics and long-standing liberal critic Oskar Bie articulated in a review from 1932: how was experimentation with such a piece possible, given the solidity of its realism and the precision of Wagner’s stage instructions?<sup>34</sup>

Bie’s need for naturalism in *Die Meistersinger* typifies the attitudes of most Weimar critics, who represented a broad political spectrum, but a surprisingly homogeneous attitude towards *Die Meistersinger*. This was, after all, an opera that offered a beguiling view of a seemingly stable and unified bourgeois identity revolving around art, precisely at a time when the notion of such an identity was becoming increasingly untenable. The desire for such an

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<sup>33</sup> According to Markus Brudereck, the new style of Sievert’s 1925 *Ring* cycle at Hannover was appreciated by critics but booed by members of the public, who were used to the old decorations, ‘painted to the last detail’. Brudereck, ‘Der “Pünktchen-Sadist”’, 148.

<sup>34</sup> Bie’s review of a performance at the Staatsoper Berlin was published on 10 August 1932 in an unidentified newspaper held in collected materials on *Die Meistersinger*, at the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne. Bie wrote for the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, a left-liberal newspaper, and *Die Weltbühne*, a high-profile left-wing weekly journal dedicated to art and politics that was banned by the National Socialists in 1933.

identity clearly went as far back as the opera itself, to what Arthur Groos sees as ‘middle-class celebration’ of the bourgeoisie in the context of nineteenth-century German festival culture,<sup>35</sup> but the challenging circumstances of the Weimar Republic served as additional cause for nostalgia among many opera-goers. As Bernhard Diebold put it in 1928, ‘[t]he chaos of reality is seething beneath us’;<sup>36</sup> for him, Wagner’s music was the last German music that spoke to an entire people [Volk], and *Die Meistersinger* in particular represented a Romantic longing for lost naivety.<sup>37</sup> During the Weimar Republic, many commentators regarded *Die Meistersinger* not only as a German artistic treasure, but also as a comfort and consolation in times of hardship. In 1924, Max Schillings, Intendant of the Berlin State Opera, described Hans Sachs’s words ‘Zerging in Dunst / Das heil’ge röm’sche Reich, / Uns bliebe gleich / Die heil’ge deutsche Kunst!’ [even if the Holy Roman Empire / should dissolve in mist, / for us there would yet remain / holy German art!] as a counsel both comforting and serious at a time “‘wo alles drängt und drückt”” [where all is stress and strain].<sup>38</sup> Quoting the same

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<sup>35</sup> Arthur Groos, ‘Constructing Nuremberg: Typological and Proleptic Communities in *Die Meistersinger*’, *19th-Century Music* 16 (1992), 29.

<sup>36</sup> Bernhard Diebold, *Der Fall Wagner: Eine Revision* (Frankfurt am Main, 1928), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Diebold, *Der Fall Wagner*, 23, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Max Schillings, ‘Geleitwort’, *Blätter der Staatsoper* 4 (1924), 1. All translations in this article of the text of *Die Meistersinger* are by Peter Branscombe and can be found in Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, ed. Kahn, 81-323.

words from the *Schlußrede* of *Die Meistersinger*, Max Koch argued in 1927 that ‘ever since the destruction of German power we must hope and strive for the restoration of our world status above all through “holy German art”’.<sup>39</sup> In 1932 the composer and music critic Robert Oboussier described a performance of *Die Meistersinger* as a victory of ‘the romantic-monumental apotheosis of the *Bürgertum* in the middle of an anti-middle class, anti-romantic, anti-monumental time’.<sup>40</sup>

Oboussier’s defensive comments reflected the unease that modernist hostility towards Wagner had generated in conservative opera-goers. For many younger composers and commentators the times had moved beyond Wagner: Kurt Weill explored this development in ‘Die neue Oper’ (1926), Ernst Latzko described the composer as ‘outmoded’ in the *Zeitschrift für Musik* (1930), while in *Der Scheinwerfer*, the journal of the municipal theatre in Essen, a debate about the younger generation’s distance from Wagner extended over several issues in

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<sup>39</sup> Max Koch, *Richard Wagners geschichtliche völkische Sendung* (Langensalza, 1927), 17. David B. Dennis draws attention to a *Völkischer Beobachter* article on the 1923 Munich Festival that asserted ‘of all our rich possessions, practically nothing is left to us but our holy German Art’. Dennis, “‘The Most German of all German Operas’”: *Die Meistersinger* through the Lens of the Third Reich’, in *Wagner’s Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester, 2003), 106-7.

<sup>40</sup> Review by Robert Oboussier in an unidentified Berlin newspaper from October 1932: Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne. Folder identification mark: ‘Universität zu Köln. Richard Wagner. Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. 1930/31 – 39/40’.

1929. The Wagner question was, as one commentator pointed out, something of an inter-generational hobbyhorse.<sup>41</sup> Typical of the younger and reform-oriented generation was critic Heinrich Strobel, who associated Wagner above all other composers with audience conservatism. ‘Wagner’s work was the experience of the middle-class listener after the war of 1870’, he wrote. ‘It confused and intoxicated in the most celebratory way. It contained the heroic-pathetic gesture that was in demand after the victorious war.’<sup>42</sup> Even now, Strobel argued, the repertory and performance style of Germany’s opera houses were still harnessed to the nineteenth-century tastes that Wagner represented.

Indeed, despite the debate surrounding the relevance of Wagner, and despite a gradual decline in the overall proportion of Wagner performances within the programmes of German-speaking opera stages in the first few decades of the 20th century, the composer’s oeuvre continued to dominate the repertoires of German opera houses. According to Franz-Heinz Köhler, new opera accounted for just 4.5% of performances at German-speaking theatres in the 1926-27 season. In the same season, Wagner operas made up 13.9% of all performances, well ahead of Verdi at 11.3%, Puccini at 7.8% and Mozart at 6.6%. As Köhler remarks, ‘Wagner was the biggest favourite of the public until well into the 1930s’.<sup>43</sup> These figures are confirmed in a set of statistics for the 1927-28 season published by Wilhelm Altmann in 1929. According to Altmann, Wagner was the

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<sup>41</sup> Adolf Rohlfing, ‘Ende der Oper’, *Der Scheinwerfer* 3 (1929), 22.

<sup>42</sup> Heinrich Strobel, ‘Opernpublikum’, *Melos* 7 (1928), 111.

<sup>43</sup> Franz-Heinz Köhler, *Die Struktur der Spielpläne deutschsprachiger Opernbühnen von 1896 bis 1966* (Koblenz, 1968), 38.

most-performed composer in 1927-28, followed by Verdi, Puccini, Lortzing and, marginally behind, Mozart.<sup>44</sup> Further confirmation can be seen in performance statistics from the Nationaltheater Mannheim: between 1889 and 1929, four out of ten of the most performed operas at Mannheim were by Wagner, with *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* taking the top two positions, and *Die Meistersinger* occupying seventh place.<sup>45</sup>

Finer details of Weimar opera scheduling can be gleaned from the *Deutscher Bühnen-Spielplan* (1896-1944), a publication devoted to the season programmes and performance statistics of German-speaking theatres.<sup>46</sup> This journal reveals fluctuations in the frequency of *Meistersinger* performances during the Weimar Republic, starting from a low point in 1918-19 (101 performances within the borders of Weimar Germany) and building to a peak in 1925-26 (296 performances within the German borders), before settling into a gradual decline after 1927-28 (in 1931-32 there were 155 performances). The

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<sup>44</sup> Wilhelm Altmann, 'Beiträge zur Opernstatistik und zum Opernspielplan', *Musik im Leben: Eine musikpolitische Gesamtschau* 5 (1929), 83.

<sup>45</sup> Stahl, *Das Mannheimer Nationaltheater*, 400.

<sup>46</sup> With one volume per season and in almost every case no index according to work, the *Deutscher Bühnen-Spielplan* yields its information in an extremely unwieldy and not always reliable manner. The journal lists performances for each month of the season according to theatre, but the editors were evidently dependent on theatre managements for their statistics, and in some cases theatre directors failed to submit the relevant details. The journal only lists public theatres, and for that reason performances at Bayreuth are not included.

work fared best during the years of relative economic stability, perhaps because of the expense involved in producing it. These fluctuations notwithstanding, the *Deutscher Bühnen-Spielplan* provides firm evidence of the popularity of *Die Meistersinger* throughout the years of the Weimar Republic. On 28 January 1929, the work was performed for the 300th time in Dresden, while on 22 May 1928, the work had its 400th performance at the Staatsoper Berlin, a record equalled at the Nationaloper München in 1932. Such was the popularity of the work that on several dates in 1923, 1924 and 1926 it was performed on the same evening in both the Staatsoper Berlin and the Deutsches Opernhaus Berlin/Städtische Oper.

Within the statistics for the Weimar years, a number of additional patterns can be demonstrated. In every year but two, *Die Meistersinger* was chosen by at least a handful of German theatres to open their season. In all years without exception the opera served in various towns and cities as a season-closer: in 1924-25, for example, nine theatres marked the end of their season with a performance of the work. *Die Meistersinger* was a popular choice for performance on 25 December each year (theatres closed on 24 December, but reopened on 25 December), and it was also widely performed on 1 January. These trends can be explained partly by the length of the opera and its unsuitability for routine weekday consumption, but they are also clear evidence of the work's status as a 'festive' opera. The work was often performed to mark the beginning and end of opera festivals such as that in Munich. In addition, the *Festwiese* scene was sometimes performed in conjunction with other works in celebrations of German culture, for example in Bremen's Hans Sachs-Celebration of 1926. Perhaps most significantly of all, *Die Meistersinger* opened the Bayreuth Festival

of 1924, breaking a silence in the *Festspielhaus* that had lasted ten years, and confirming the work's significance within German rituals of festivity.

### **The Bayreuth *Meistersinger* as rejection of the Weimar Republic**

Siegfried Wagner's decision to open the 1924 Bayreuth Festival with *Die Meistersinger* proved popular among critics and festival patrons, despite the tradition since 1882 of opening the festival with *Parsifal*. Writing in the liberal *Leipziger Tageblatt*, Heinrich Chevalley struck a nationalist note, greeting the new development as appropriate and describing *Die Meistersinger* as 'the German national opera in which German ways and customs and German spirit and art have been most beautifully proclaimed, and in which — more so than in any other of Wagner's works — the [German] people are placed in the foreground as protagonist'.<sup>47</sup>

In Hans Jürgen Syberberg's film *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried* (1975), Winifred Wagner declares that the 1924 *Meistersinger* was staged exactly as it was in 1911 and 1912, and describes this as an act of courage on her husband's part. No doubt the couple anticipated criticism for their lack of artistic adventure, but from a financial point of view the decision to revive a popular production was certainly judicious. Like other cultural institutions, Bayreuth had been badly hit by the hyperinflation of 1922-23, and the Festival Foundation funds had been wiped out. The revival of *Die Meistersinger* thus represented a practical choice as well as confirmation of its status as *Festoper*.

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<sup>47</sup> Heinrich Chevalley, 'Bayreuth', *Leipziger Tageblatt* (26 July 1924), no page number.

The scenic and technological conservatism of the 1924 *Meistersinger* is apparent from a variety of sources, some written by music critics of the time, and others emanating from Bayreuth employees and associates. Wolfram Humperdinck (son of Engelbert Humperdinck) worked as an assistant at Bayreuth from 1924 to 1927, and was initially surprised at the backwardness of the Bayreuth lighting apparatus in comparison with the facilities in other theatres.<sup>48</sup> In the *Festspielhaus*, old-fashioned backcloths were still in use, onto which light and shade were already painted. In ‘Randglossen zur Regie der Meistersinger’, published in the *Neue Musik-Zeitung* (1925), Eugen Kilian also noted a lack of technological and artistic experimentation at Bayreuth. Drawing particular attention to the *Festwiese* scene of *Die Meistersinger*, Kilian claimed that it presented a museum-like reminder of 30-year-old stage practice. He too was astonished at the lack of change in the lighting department, but was nonetheless grateful for Siegfried Wagner’s conservatism and for being spared the ‘barren experiments’ and ‘fashionable flim-flam of expressionist staging’, to which — he lamented — Wagner’s work had increasingly fallen victim.<sup>49</sup> Kilian’s sentiments were shared by Chevalley, who wrote approvingly of a ‘good conservatism’ that imparted well-being and reassurance. These words are testament to the comforting effects of theatre convention, while also providing a

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<sup>48</sup> See Eva Humperdinck, *Zwei Söhne: Siegfried Wagner als Regisseur der Werke seines Vaters Richard Wagner 1904-1930 und sein Regie-Assistent Wolfram Humperdinck 1924 – 1925 – 1927* (Koblenz, 2001), 95.

<sup>49</sup> Eugen Kilian, ‘Randglossen zur Regie der Meistersinger’, *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 46 (1925), 159-60.

reminder of the Weimar theatre developments that undoubtedly made Bayreuth's continuity all the more apparent.

When Siegfried Wagner's version of *Die Meistersinger* was first seen at the Bayreuth Festival of 1911, some aspects of the direction were greeted by critics of the time as evidence of Bayreuth's willingness to modernise. None of Siegfried's alterations detracted from the Bayreuth tradition of visual naturalism, but his direction was credited with an apparent spontaneity that made the singers' gestures more convincing than in Cosima Wagner's version from 1888. By the time the production was revived in 1924, his overwhelming pursuit of realism was bound to divide the critics.

Two direction books for Siegfried Wagner's *Meistersinger* are housed in the *Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung* at Bayreuth, one signed and dated 1911, the other signed without a date. Both provide a good idea of the mechanics of both the 1911 production — the first *Meistersinger* for which Siegfried Wagner was responsible — and the closely related version from 1924. Some details of the drive towards naturalism stand out, such as David's lecture on the rules of *Meistergesang*, which is based on a book he pulls out of his pocket. Sitting on the steps of the *Singstuhl* during his recitation of the regulations, he evidently presented a disarmingly informal picture. This novel piece of direction alarmed Kilian, who argued in his 1925 article that it made David appear disrespectful. For Kilian it was clear that an apprentice must stand to attention in front of a knight, so Siegfried Wagner's deviation from the norm was described as an unhappy development. Kilian also professed himself unhappy with Siegfried's ending to Act I, when townspeople overhear the commotion inside the church and have to be prevented from entering by a church

warden. This was described as ‘an inappropriate innovation that smacks of brash, modern sensationalism’ – a comment that perhaps betrayed a fear of mob culture on the part of Kilian, or at the very least displeasure at what he regarded as the modern world’s loss of propriety.<sup>50</sup> Further attention to social standing and stratification was displayed in Kilian’s criticism of Walther’s costumes, which to him were not sufficiently rich and detailed to differentiate him from the Nuremberg *Bürger*.

The irony of these criticisms is that social hierarchy appears to have played an important role in Siegfried Wagner’s production of *Die Meistersinger*, above all in the *Festwiese* scene.<sup>51</sup> What his production books reveal is a clear preoccupation with the social standing of Wagner’s characters, a preoccupation that manifests itself in the disposition of the characters on stage, who are divided according to status and gender. When Sachs addresses the crowd from a raised platform, the apprentices — as Mastersingers of the future — are positioned in front of the ordinary men, and the women of the town bring up the rear. All of

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<sup>50</sup> Kilian, ‘Randglossen zur Regie der Meistersinger’, 161.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Vollständiger Klavierauszug von Karl Tausig (Mainz, no date) [Piano reduction published by Schott and Co, used as a production book by Siegfried Wagner in 1911]; Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Vollständiger Klavierauszug von Karl Tausig (Mainz, no date) [Piano reduction published by Schott and Co; inscribed, signed and used by Siegfried Wagner as a production book, but undated.] Das tionalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung Bayreuth

this changes dramatically when Walther is invited to sing his song; now the girls from Fürth move forward and arrange themselves in two groups on the steps of the platform, and the women are positioned in front of the men. As soon as Sachs begins to sing, this situation is reversed, with the men once more in front of the women. Almost as far removed from the dramatic action as the women are the ordinary men in the crowd; in front of them are the apprentices, and at the very front of the crowd are the *Meister*, the skilled guildsmen of Nuremberg. This is an obvious case of division according to social status, with women relegated to the furthest reaches. The one point in the scene when they are allowed to surge forward is when Walther sings, and in that way they are associated with an instinctual and impetuous character who is himself an outsider. The acceptance of Walther into the Mastersingers signals an upholding of social customs and hierarchy, and for that reason the women are no longer required in the foreground. Hans Sachs is a figure of social authority, and when he sings he is seen to communicate first and foremost with men. In this way the Nuremberg of *Die Meistersinger* is represented as a patriarchal community in which everyone knows his or her place, at least in the scheme set out in the direction books.

Perhaps Siegfried Wagner was attempting to reflect the hierarchy of sixteenth-century Nuremberg, but as James Garratt points out in *Music, Culture and Social Reform in the Age of Wagner* (2010), in mid-nineteenth-century music festivals, ‘the lower classes were often literally marginalized, looking on from attic windows or from the back of crowds’.<sup>52</sup> The stratification of the *Festwiese* scene may, therefore, have had more to do with pre-war social practices than with

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<sup>52</sup> James Garratt, *Music, Culture and Social Reform in the Age of Wagner* (Cambridge, 2010), 84.

an attempt to create a historically accurate sixteenth-century setting. Weitz's comment that the Weimar Republic brought about 'severe disruption of the boundaries between social groups' is worth bearing in mind, for here was a staging that apparently stood in direct opposition to this development, keeping social groups strictly defined. Tellingly, it placed women in a peripheral position, as if in denial of their newly visible position in the Weimar Republic. In 1918 women won the right to vote, and in 1919 the Weimar Constitution granted men and women equal rights and duties as German citizens. Around this time, the myth of the independent 'new woman' was common; with it came the fear that confident, childless, androgynous-looking women were undoing conservative family values and challenging traditional female roles. Weitz even suggests that 'of all the flash points of conflict in Weimar Germany, none aroused so much deeply felt passion, so much debate, so much hostility, as the issues of sex and the family, and of women – what they did, how they looked – in particular.'<sup>53</sup> This concern with acceptable boundaries of femininity and the changing role of women in society undoubtedly played a significant role in *Meistersinger* reception, as will become apparent later. In the case of Siegfried Wagner's *Festwiese* scene, the burning issue of female emancipation was present only by virtue of its repression, a repression that took place through the apparent relegation of female choristers to peripheral or even invisible sections of the stage.

The Bayreuth style of disciplined ensemble was greeted with great enthusiasm in many quarters; the far-right nationalist *Völkischer Kurier* paid tribute to the unity achieved by 'voluntary subordination to the will of the creator

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<sup>53</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 298.

of the works', and in 1925 Chevalley asserted that Bayreuth needed 'malleable personalities with the will to serve the work of art and the discipline to submit to a leadership that pursues unity'.<sup>54</sup> These sentiments may in part have reflected the need to excuse the standard of solo singers — Fritz Busch, the conductor of the 1924 *Meistersinger*, recalls in his autobiography the inadequate voices of many of the singers with whom he worked, and in an article published in the influential liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* in August 1924, the musicologist Adolf Aber complained that Siegfried Wagner had chosen the wrong soloists<sup>55</sup> — but contained within them was the common contemporary theme of individual subordination as a means of overcoming individualism and the perceived threat of fractured modernity. Complaining in the *Bayreuther Festspielführer 1925* of 'the public state of inner breakdown', cultural critic Greta Daeglau pointed to the Bayreuth artistic community as an example of what Germany could achieve with good leadership (the 'Führer' in this case being Siegfried Wagner).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Anonymous, 'Bayreuther Festspiele 1924', *Völkischer Kurier* (26 July 1924), no page number; Heinrich Chevalley, *Hamburger Fremden-Blatt* (25 July 1925), no page number.

<sup>55</sup> Fritz Busch, *Aus dem Leben eines Musikers* (Zurich, 1949), reproduced in *Der Festspielhügel: Richard Wagners Werk in Bayreuth*, ed. Herbert Barth (Munich, 1976), 130; Adolf Aber, 'Um die Zukunft Bayreuths', *Berliner Tageblatt* (1 August 1924), no page number.

<sup>56</sup> Greta Daeglau, 'Bayreuther Festspielarbeit', in *Bayreuther Festspielführer 1925*, ed. Karl Grunsky (Bayreuth, 1925), 93-5.

When the Bayreuth Festival resumed in 1924, many commentators reached for the word ‘resurrection’ to sum up their feelings of jubilation. ‘How often in these past ten hard years has Bayreuth, Wagner’s Bayreuth, been proclaimed dead by the disbelievers, the cowards and the antagonists, who believed that their hour had finally come[?],’ Chevalley asked, triumphantly describing the 1924 festival as a ‘resurrection festival’.<sup>57</sup> The idea that Wagner had triumphed in the face of modernist and younger-generation criticism was closely entwined with a sense of victory for German *Bürger*: the *Völkischer Kurier* noted not only that the 1924 audience was mostly German, but also that it was mostly middle-class. In the conservative *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* Sternfeld agreed with this assessment, noting with pleasure the absence of foreign visitors, and assuring his readers that ‘the educated German bourgeoisie will stay true to its Masters’.<sup>58</sup> The more liberal Karl Holl commented on the make-up of the audience with concern, confirming the dearth of foreign patrons and observing that ‘independent thinkers’ (presumably liberals) had disappeared from Bayreuth.<sup>59</sup> Not directly related to this particular occasion in 1924, but in keeping with Holl’s sentiments, Diebold lamented forcefully in 1928 that liberals were missing from the Bayreuth Festival,<sup>60</sup> and that the left had unconditionally surrendered Wagner, whom he thought of as a liberal thinker and international

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<sup>57</sup> Chevalley, ‘Bayreuth’, no page number.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Sternfeld, ‘Ein Schlußwort über Bayreuth’, *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (8 September 1924), no page number.

<sup>59</sup> Holl, ‘Bayreuth 1924’, 123.

<sup>60</sup> Diebold, *Der Fall Wagner*, 7.

phenomenon, to ‘nationalists’ and ‘Chamberlain followers’, rather than proclaiming *Die Meistersinger* ‘a democratic festival’ and staging each performance of this ‘defence of the people’ as a ‘political celebration’.<sup>61</sup> The ‘right-wing educated public’ had therefore been in a position to ‘elevate Wagner to its special art and culture God in the wake of the war’,<sup>62</sup> and the Wagnerites were able to decorate the composer in the ‘party colours of black, white and red’.<sup>63</sup>

During the 1924 festival, Siegfried Wagner flew the imperial colours over the Festspielhaus, thus identifying himself as an anti-republican. In addition to this, the reactionary General Ludendorff — a leading figure not only in World War I but also in the Kapp and Hitler putsches of 1920 and 1923 — was a guest of the Wagners at the festival rehearsals. In the town of Bayreuth, framed portraits of Ludendorff and Hitler were positioned in shop windows and even at the railway station.<sup>64</sup> The opening performance of *Die Meistersinger* at the 1924 festival prompted an extraordinary manifestation of nationalist sentiment. As the performance was reaching its conclusion, the audience stood up — unprompted, but, by all accounts of the occurrence, as one — and listened standing to Hans

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<sup>61</sup> Diebold, *Der Fall Wagner*, 11-12.

<sup>62</sup> Diebold, *Der Fall Wagner*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Diebold, *Der Fall Wagner*, 9. Black, white and red were the colours of both the pre-war German Empire and the Nazi party. It is unclear if Diebold is referring to the Nazi party here; perhaps his comment relates more to what he sees as reactionary/anti-republican forces rather than to one specific party.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous, *Morgenpost Berlin* (23 July 1924), no page number.

Sachs's final speech and the concluding chorus. When the performance finished, the audience broke into a spontaneous rendition of the *Deutschlandlied*, and sang this in its entirety before bursting into what one correspondent characterised as a 'hurricane of applause'. More tellingly still, the slogan 'Heil!' rang out repeatedly across the auditorium, revealing how politicised the audience was and how *Die Meistersinger* had come to serve as a political rallying point.<sup>65</sup> Despite Siegfried Wagner's displeasure at the intrusion of politics into his festival, the *Deutschlandlied* was sung at subsequent performances, with audience members continuing — or at least attempting to continue — with their *Heilrufe*.<sup>66</sup> In 1925,

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<sup>65</sup> Cornelia Schmitz-Berning points out that the 'Heil' greeting has a very long history and can be traced to German medieval literature, but in *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus* she also notes that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was understood as an explicitly German greeting, particularly among pan-Germanists. She quotes a 1935 article by Manfred Pechau on the National Socialists and the German language, which argues that in 1923 the phrases 'Heil Hitler' and 'Heil Ludendorff' were used interchangeably, and that the greeting was copied by other parties, with variations ranging from 'Heil Hugenberg' (Hugenberg was an influential nationalist politician and businessman) to 'Heil Moscow'. The word 'Heil' was therefore by no means exclusive to the Nazis in 1924, but it had already become very politicised by this point. See Cornelia Schmitz-Berning, *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 2007), 299-301.

<sup>66</sup> According to Richard Sternfeld, 'the Deutschland-Lied was, however, no longer sung in the last performance, unlike at the start', which raises the possibility that several performances provoked the same response. Karl Holl writes of 'the subsequent cries of *Heil* that were repeated or at least attempted in

Siegfried Wagner took action and appealed to the audience not to sing in response to the performances. A sign that discouraged political demonstrations finished with the *Meistersinger* words ‘Hier gilt’s der Kunst’ [Art is what matters here], and this appears to have prevented any further overt political displays on the part of the Bayreuth audience.<sup>67</sup>

In *Bayreuth in der deutschen Presse* (1983), Susanna Großmann-Vendrey argues that Siegfried’s depoliticisation of the Bayreuth Festival was calculated and somewhat insincere, and that ultimately it was prompted by his continued reliance on foreign and liberal benevolence. There is, however, another way of interpreting the apparent depoliticisation that took place between the 1924 and 1925 festivals. The idea that art was what counted was, in fact, a central plank of the identity of the German educated classes, and therefore Siegfried Wagner’s later performances too’. Sternfeld, ‘Ein Schlußwort über Bayreuth’, no page number; and Holl, ‘Bayreuth 1924’, 123. The reaction to *Die Meistersinger* at Bayreuth in 1924 may, in fact, have a precedent of sorts that has never been acknowledged. In 1923 the Munich Festival opened with *Die Meistersinger*, and a review of the performance in the *Münchener Zeitung* noted that ‘after the second and in particular the third act, enthusiastic applause develops: various voices want to respond to the overwhelming impression of the *Festwiese* with a patriotic demonstration, but the iron curtain prevents this’. See *Münchener Zeitung* (2 August 1923), no page number.

<sup>67</sup> See Heinrich Chevalley, ‘Bayreuth 1925’, *Hamburger Fremden-Blatt* (24 July 1925), no page number; and Hartmut Zelinsky, *Richard Wagner – ein deutsches Thema: Eine Dokumentation zur Wirkungsgeschichte Richard Wagners 1876-1976* (Berlin, 1983), 172 and 251.

denial of party politics represented allegiance to the *Bildungsbürgertum* of the period, the educated bourgeoisie to which party politics represented an evil.<sup>68</sup> It also represented a successful attempt on Siegfried Wagner's part to achieve a response to Wagner's work that he deemed appropriate. Richard Wagner had encouraged a silent and absorbed rather than demonstrative audience: to put it in the terms of theorist Herbert Blau, Wagner and the bourgeois theatre in general had backed its audience 'into the dark of an unlit spectatorial space and granted there a newly privileged and statutory anonymity'.<sup>69</sup> That anonymity did not include the right to political demonstrations; nor did it include the prerogative to add an appendix to the composer's work, which Siegfried regarded as whole and immutable.

Both the 1924 and 1925 festivals were, however, political: in the first instance open political gestures were made, both by the Wagner family and audience members. These amounted to a rejection of the Weimar Republic, as can be seen in Siegfried's decision to fly the imperial colours, but arguably also in the audience's cries of *Heil*. At the same time, Siegfried's production of *Die*

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<sup>68</sup> As Thomas Mann argued in *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* (1918), German culture was fundamentally bourgeois and non-political: 'if "mind" as such is an inherently bourgeois concept, then the *German* mind is bourgeois in a very special degree, German *culture* is essentially bourgeois, and the German bourgeois tradition is essentially *humanistic* – which means that it is not *political*, like Western culture (or at least, has not been so hitherto), and can only *become* political by turning aside from its own humanistic tradition'. See Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden (London, 1985), 58.

<sup>69</sup> Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore, 1990), 356.

*Meistersinger* provided critics with conservative stage pictures that apparently provided respite from actual cultural developments of the day. In 1925, the political ‘apoliticism’ of the German educated classes took over, and overt political displays were avoided. This apoliticism was political not only in the sense that it was founded on distaste for parliamentary democracy and party politics, but also in the sense that it was haunted by politics, and could not have acquired meaning or substance without the new and contested governance and social structures of the Weimar Republic. This self-effacing form of politics (conservatism presented as apoliticism, in other words) set the tone for most other *Meistersinger* productions during the Weimar Republic, many of which differed only slightly from Siegfried Wagner’s conservative staging. Even theatres otherwise considered progressive resorted to a safe conventionality when staging *Die Meistersinger*. One such theatre was the municipal theatre in Frankfurt am Main, where designer Ludwig Sievert and the director Lothar Wallerstein worked together closely as a team.

### **Other productions of *Die Meistersinger*: capitulation to convention**

Even today the designer Ludwig Sievert is recognised as a significant figure in the history of opera and theatre production, not only for his forward-looking abstract settings for the *Ring* (1912 and subsequent variations in later years),<sup>70</sup> but also for his strikingly expressionist designs for spoken theatre in the early years

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<sup>70</sup> According to Brudereck, Sievert anticipated the decluttered and minimalist style of 1950s ‘New Bayreuth’. Brudereck, ‘Der “Pünktchen-Sadist”’, 148. For sketches by Sievert for the 1912 *Ring*, see Carl Niessen, *Der Szeniker Ludwig Sievert: Ein Leben für die Bühne* (Cologne, 1959), 6-8.

of the Weimar Republic.<sup>71</sup> Although he designed for spoken drama as well as for opera, Sievert was careful to differentiate between them: he regarded drama as more logical and intellectual, and claimed in ‘Das Bühnenbild der Oper’ (1925) that the theatre designer had to adopt different approaches to these two forms. For Sievert, opera had nothing to do with philosophy or abstract thought, rather it had something of the ‘illogic of dreams’.<sup>72</sup> He welcomed the move away from naturalism within opera production, and promoted the fantasy style of design as better suited to the essence of opera.

From the time of his appointment at the opera house in Frankfurt in 1918, Sievert found an accommodating home for his ideas. In autobiographical notes published in 1944, the designer described Frankfurt theatre practice in particularly positive terms: ‘Everything was risked and attempted, heaven and hell were conjured up on stage; the boldest symbolic scenery was in most demand.’<sup>73</sup> According to his biographer Carl Niessen, Sievert was fortunate to work with several directors who were sympathetic to his theories. He names

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<sup>71</sup> Willett credits Sievert with creating regional hubs of Expressionism in Mannheim and Frankfurt, and mentions Sievert’s severe and entirely black and white designs for the Expressionist play *Der Sohn* (Mannheim, 1918), in which all lighting was concentrated on the protagonist. Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, 58-9.

<sup>72</sup> Ludwig Sievert, ‘Das Bühnenbild der Oper’, *Blätter der Städtischen Bühnen Frankfurt am Main* (1925), 67.

<sup>73</sup> Ludwig Sievert, *Lebendiges Theater. Drei Jahrzehnte deutscher Theaterkunst* (Munich, 1944), 62.

Lothar Wallerstein as foremost among these, suggesting that Sievert departed most emphatically from routine when working with him.<sup>74</sup>

Wallerstein's writings include an article on Wagner that contains a number of significant points. Entitled 'Zum Wagner-Problem', this piece was published in 1927, the same year the Wallerstein-Sievert *Meistersinger* was first seen in Frankfurt. It illustrates the distance Wallerstein perceived between the composer and those members of his own generation interested in progressive opera, and makes a case for renewal within Wagner production. Speaking of the public's alienation from the composer, he argues that insufficiently imaginative productions are to blame.<sup>75</sup> Referring to the 'mental laziness of the opera director', Wallerstein challenges the belief in authority associated with Wagner, arguing that the Wagner works should spring from one generation to another without the distorting effect of tradition, and that a work's independence from the original stage directions proves its timelessness. He differentiates between the 'vision' of the creator and his/her stage instructions, which he regards as altogether less important. Lighting can be used to reinforce the symbolism of the music, he suggests, and the characters' psychology can be underlined through their disposition on vertically structured acting surfaces. Technological progress should be embraced, he argues, not just for its own sake, but rather to restore the illusory power of the Wagnerian work in a sceptical age. Illusion thus continues

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<sup>74</sup> Niessen, *Der Szeniker Ludwig Sievert*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Lothar Wallerstein, 'Zum Wagner-Problem', *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 9 (1927), 24.

to occupy a central place in his approach to Wagner, but the means by which it is to be achieved are subject to revision.

Wallerstein and Sievert's *Meistersinger* opened on Sunday 29 May 1927 under the musical direction of Clemens Krauss. This was undoubtedly an important occasion for the Frankfurter Opernhaus: the orchestra was expanded for the production, the chorus was augmented by singing association members to over three hundred voices, and costumes had been specially ordered from a Berlin theatre firm. The resulting production was widely applauded, despite some deviations from Wagner's stage instructions that several critics noted. In Act II, Hans Sachs's house was moved from the left-hand side to the centre of the stage, thus setting it firmly at the centre of the action. In addition to the usual laneway between the houses of Sachs and Pogner, Sievert's set included a laneway to the left of Sachs's house. This new arrangement brought the cobbler's house to unmistakable prominence, even though it remained a modest structure.<sup>76</sup> In the *Festwiese* scene a mobile platform on wheels took the place of the usual podium, and this allowed Sievert and Wallerstein to maximise the space available on the relatively small Frankfurt stage. The emphasis here was on the entry of the different groups and the cumulative colour they brought to the stage.

Sievert's Act II set is now regarded as one of the most important innovations in 1920s *Meistersinger* design, and is sometimes presented in stage histories of the work as trend-setting. But while the idea of a second laneway to the left of Sachs's house may have been original, Sievert was not the first to

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<sup>76</sup> The original sketch for Act II is preserved in the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung of the University of Cologne and is reproduced in Helmut Grosse and Norbert Götz, *Die Meistersinger und Richard Wagner* (Nuremberg, 1981), 169.

position Sachs's house at the centre of the stage. This had already happened in Düsseldorf in 1925, as had the positioning of steps in the foreground, which provided vertical structuring possibilities particularly advantageous to the crowd scene.<sup>77</sup> One other element connected Sievert's design with almost every other production of *Die Meistersinger* during the Weimar Republic: its undeniable naturalism. Despite his protestations that opera is a wholly unnatural phenomenon, Sievert's sketch for Act II shows a naturalist, if somewhat romanticised, view of Nuremberg. Other than adding extra acting space to the left that Wagner did not envisage, the arrangement is remarkably faithful to the composer's stage instructions. It would appear that in the case of *Die Meistersinger*, neither Sievert nor Wallerstein saw any need to confront their audience with the fantasy world both men associated with opera. This was not because they were unwilling to test boundaries — many of Sievert's sketches from the 1920s demonstrate extreme levels of abstraction<sup>78</sup> — but perhaps

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<sup>77</sup> The use of steps was a feature of stagecraft associated with the Weimar period, and in particular with the director of the Staatstheater Berlin, Leopold Jessner, who was renowned for using bare steps in place of naturalist stage sets (as Adolphe Appia had done in his pre-war designs at Hellerau). In the Frankfurt *Meistersinger*, however, the steps were far less monumental than those used by Jessner, and they were combined with a naturalist stage set.

<sup>78</sup> See for example the many high-quality plates in Ludwig Wagner, *Der Szeniker Ludwig Sievert: Entwicklung des Bühnenbildes im letzten Jahrzehnt* (Berlin, 1926) and the illustrations in Niessen, *Der Szeniker Ludwig Sievert*, including a sketch for *Salome* (Frankfurt, 1925) reproduced on page 28. This shows a wholly abstract set of acting surfaces made up of flowing, curvaceous

because the setting of *Die Meistersinger* continued to be closely linked with a specific time and milieu. Given their decision that the work was best served by realism, it would appear that Wallerstein and Sievert were fully convinced by the apparent specificity of Wagner's sixteenth-century Nuremberg: like most other production teams of the 1920s, they did not attempt to draw attention to the constructed, imaginary nature of Wagner's vision. Nor did the conventional naturalism of their production stop at the scenery, for the costumes Sievert designed were as rich in detail as his half-timbered houses.

Apart from the scenic changes outlined above, the Frankfurt *Meistersinger* remained very firmly within the bounds of tradition. Less than two months after its first performance, a production of similar ambition and rather more stylisation opened in Nuremberg. Designed by Karl Gröning and directed by Paul Grüder, the production was timed to coincide with the Bayreuth Festival of 1927. According to the critic of the *Fränkische Tagespost*, the theatre management had succeeded in staging a *Meistersinger* that could be compared quite favourably with the production at Bayreuth.

The Nuremberg *Meistersinger* was, however, significantly different from the Bayreuth version. Gröning's vision of the *Katharinenkirche* was unmistakably Gothic, but Act II was more noticeably stylised, presenting a simplified street scene with the jagged outlines of pointed roofs in the background. One aspect of the set that attracted particular criticism was the lack of differentiation between the houses of Sachs and Pogner. Although Gröning's arrangement of the houses may have been intended as a purely visual balancing forms, and is described by Niessen as 'arguably one of the most impressive coalescences of scenic expressionism'. *Der Szeniker Ludwig Sievert*, 28-9.

effect, the social implications of the gesture offended the critic of the *Fränkischer Kurier*. In contrast, the critic of the socialist *Fränkische Tagespost* had nothing but praise for Act II, and noted in particular the welcome lack of ‘kitsch lighting effects’. Gröning’s Nuremberg streetscape was, in other words, less sentimental than it might have been. But as in the case of the Frankfurt production, his set was more faithful to Wagner’s instructions than unfaithful: along with many other details, the lime and lilac were in place, as were the stone bench and the half-door leading to Sachs’s workshop. And as convention dictated, the usual *Fachwerk* [half-timbering] was in evidence on the façades of the houses.

Gröning’s stylisation reached its peak in the *Festwiese* scene, which divided critical opinion particularly sharply. His sketch for the final section of the opera again reveals a tendency towards symmetry, with amphitheatre-style seating on both sides replacing the usual *Meistersinger* platform on the left. The centre background is occupied by a bridge over the Pegnitz, and an even row of banners decorates the space more often associated with naturalist foliage (see Fig. 1a)

[FIG 1a]

Gröning’s inclusion of the double eagle and a uniform set of banners has attracted much speculation in stage histories of *Die Meistersinger*. For Reinhard Ermen the symbolic value of the gesture is unclear, but Patrick Carnegie places this production at the start of a chain leading to the Nazi-style *Festwiese*.<sup>79</sup> It is, worth

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<sup>79</sup> Patrick Carnegie, ‘Stage History’, in *Richard Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, ed. John Warrack (Cambridge, 1994), 141.

noting, however, that Gröning's sketch omits the usual picture of Nuremberg in the background, and that the omission of this important symbol throws the issue of nationalism into question. It is also worth noting that Gröning's banners are red and white; these were the colours of Franconia, and they were also present in the coat of arms of the Free Imperial City of Nuremberg. The *Fränkische Tagespost* critic spoke in wholly positive terms about the coherent colour scheme of the scene and the use of Holy Roman Empire flags. Given that this representative of a social-democrat newspaper felt unthreatened by the scene, and that the symbol of the double eagle and the colours of red and white were indeed part of Holy Roman Empire insignia, it becomes difficult if not impossible to ascribe to Gröning the intentions of a Nazi designer. The conservative critic Wilhelm Matthes did sense some politics in the scene, but not on account of the banners, which he left unmentioned. Rather, he objected to Hans Sachs's delivery of his speech in the manner of a 'party political address' (directly to the audience and with his back to the chorus) and to the simplification and stylisation of the scenery, which he described as lacking in depth and betraying a misunderstanding not just of the work, but also of the soul of the German people.<sup>80</sup> For Matthes, this *Festwiese* was not sufficiently *völkisch*, and the proliferation of Holy Roman Empire symbols was certainly not enough to win him over. For him, Gröning's failure to present *Die Meistersinger* in traditional terms indicated a lack of understanding of the German character. One particularly sore point was the lack of a credible Nuremberg background, for as a photo of the

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<sup>80</sup> W[ilhelm] M[atthes], untitled review of *Meistersinger* revival on 18 September 1927, *Fränkischer Kurier* (20 September 1927), 3.

set from 1927 shows, the town was present only in outline on a white backcloth.<sup>81</sup> This outline was itself a concession in comparison with the original sketch, but it was not enough to elicit any gratitude. Matthes argued that the final picture of the town belonged to the romanticism of the work, and that it was inappropriate to banish it in Nuremberg of all places. ‘We protest forcefully against such cheapening’, he concluded, ‘and hope that the theatre management will be obliged to do the necessary, especially since Dürer’s 400th anniversary is imminent’.<sup>82</sup> Evidently the theatre management was listening, because a photograph of the same scene from 1928 shows a highly modified set. The town of Nuremberg looms large in the background, and it is painted with a level of naturalist detail even Matthes must have applauded. The banners are reduced in size to thin strips that no longer hang from the flies, with the result that the original sense of confined and stylised internal space downstage is lost. In addition to this, the bridge over the Pegnitz is no longer visible in its original form. What remains is Gröning’s symmetry, the symbol of the double eagle, and the semi-circular disposition of the crowd (see Fig. 1b)

[FIG 1B]

This is a much-weakened version of the original stylisation, and a good example of the pressures *Meistersinger* designers faced given critics’ hostility to

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<sup>81</sup> The photograph is preserved in the Theatersammlung of the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.

<sup>82</sup> Matthes, untitled review of *Meistersinger* revival, 3 (Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne).

deviations from convention. More specifically, the importance of Nuremberg as a potent visual symbol must be noted. Nicholas Vazsonyi has commented that ‘[f]or Wagner’s contemporaries, the utopian image of a pre-industrial and ultimately harmonious community in the geographical and thus spiritual heart of Germany served as a marker against the encroachment of a modernity that had been so steadfastly resisted since Schiller and the Romantic generation.’<sup>83</sup> This held true in the Weimar Republic too: here was a picture of urban society contained within medieval city walls, hence modest in size (unlike the sprawl and mass society of 1920s Berlin, which struck horror into the hearts of many).<sup>84</sup> Here, too, was a picture of a city that apparently reconciled the opposite poles of culture and civilization, combining urban existence with traditional German ways of life and art forms. The *Festwiese* scene was crucial in this respect: combining open meadow in the foreground with a view of Nuremberg in the background, it appeared to draw city and countryside together in reassuring harmony. Perhaps, then, Matthes’s determination to have the image of Nuremberg inserted into the *Festwiese* scene was not surprising; as Lutz Koepnick has noted, ever since the industrialisation of Germany in the nineteenth century and ‘the collapse of former

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<sup>83</sup> Nicholas Vazsonyi, ‘Introduction. *Die Meistersinger*: Performance, History, Representation’, in *Wagner’s Meistersinger*, ed. Vazsonyi, 12.

<sup>84</sup> As Weitz puts it, ‘Weimar [Germany] was Berlin, Berlin Weimar. With more than four million residents, the capital was by far the largest city in Germany, the second largest in Europe, a megalopolis that charmed and frightened, attracted and repelled Germans and foreigners alike.’ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 41.

orientations, meanings, and identities, it became the privileged task of visual culture to sooth minds by replaying the old within the new'.<sup>85</sup>

Darmstadt's 1928 staging of *Die Meistersinger* also embodied visual compromises common at the time. Conducted to great acclaim by Karl Böhm, it was directed by Renato Mordo and designed by Lothar Schenck von Trapp. The choice of production team is in itself quite revealing, for this was the company in which theatre *provocateurs* Arthur Rabenalt and Wilhelm Reinking were active. For these practitioners, Wagner presented an unattractive proposition. Superficial changes to costumes and scenery were possible, Rabenalt suggested retrospectively, but the lack of temporal distance from the composer made it difficult to achieve any real renewal.<sup>86</sup> As a result of Rabenalt and Reinking's preference for operetta, Mordo and Schenck von Trapp took on the task of staging new Wagner productions at Darmstadt. As Rabenalt claimed, 'Schenck von Trapp and Renato Mordo were given the task of calming the audience that we had outraged.'<sup>87</sup>

It would, however, be wrong to assume on the basis of Rabenalt's remark that Schenck von Trapp and Mordo were uninterested in innovation. Schenck von Trapp came to Darmstadt in 1924 after four years working in the reform-orientated opera house in Wiesbaden. He was joined at Darmstadt in 1928 by Mordo, who displayed a willingness to shake up Wagnerian theatre practice.

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<sup>85</sup> Lutz Koepnick 'Stereoscopic Vision: Sight and Community in *Die Meistersinger*' in *Wagner's Meistersinger*, ed. Vazsonyi, 75.

<sup>86</sup> Peusch, *Opernregie-Regieoper*, 246.

<sup>87</sup> Peusch, *Opernregie-Regieoper*, 219.

Referring to the perceived *Wagnerdämmerung* in Germany, Mordo declared himself 'wholly convinced that such hard-hitting theatre could not be driven off the stage if performances would free themselves from the culture and tastes of the generation before last'.<sup>88</sup> With the publication of this letter in the *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheaters*, Mordo openly positioned himself as a reformer of the younger generation.

An unsentimental production of *Der fliegende Holländer* by Schenck von Trapp and Mordo in September 1929 attracted some hostility, with the spinning chorus interpreted as left-wing propaganda. Mordo dismissed the criticism publicly: 'It is not essential to prove that a loom is not necessarily a social protest. But ... this example demonstrates perfectly the sick and epidemic addiction to the interpretation of today's theatre along party-political lines.'<sup>89</sup> Mordo's denial of political intent is revealing, for it demonstrates the desire for apoliticism that existed even among artistically progressive representatives of the Weimar Republic. Unlike their *Fliegender Holländer*, Schenck von Trapp and Mordo's *Meistersinger* was only very nominally stylised. The main deviation from the norm lay in Schenck von Trapp's bright palette of colours, with the church represented in red and blue and Hans Sachs's workshop in blue and yellow. In Act I the action took place on opposite sides of the stage to those

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<sup>88</sup> See Gerda Haddenhorst, 'Das Wiesbadener Theater in der Zeit der Weimarer Republik', *Nassauische Annalen* 99 (1988), 138-9.

<sup>89</sup> See *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheaters* (1929/30), 120. Mordo's reference to a loom is presumably an allusion to Gerhart Hauptmann's best-known play, *Die Weber* (1892), in which an impoverished weaving community revolts against the capitalist system that has oppressed it.

specified by Wagner, but it would not appear that Mordo took any greater licence than this. The riot scene was admired by one critic, who in a telling comment congratulated Mordo for achieving great liveliness without focusing unduly on the fighting.<sup>90</sup> Here one thinks of Matthew Causey's comment that 'truth cannot penetrate the proscenium, it is the other to the stage and is therefore embedded in all that appears as *not-this*'.<sup>91</sup> In this case, any reminder of actual Weimar street battles and clashes between opposing political factions remained unstaged: this type of trauma was not present within the frame of the proscenium arch, yet it arguably haunted the proceedings on stage precisely because they were too safe and unlike any real-life violence.<sup>92</sup> To recap, Schneider argues that 'it is not

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<sup>90</sup> Review by a critic identified as P.B. Schr. in an article entitled 'Hessisches Landestheater: Wagner's "Meistersinger" in der Neuinszenierung von Renato Mordo' in an edition of the *Hessische Landeszeitung Darmstadt* published in December 1928. Taken from a collection of cuttings on *Die Meistersinger* in the Theatersammlung, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt.

<sup>91</sup> Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (New York and London, 2006), 96.

<sup>92</sup> Dirk Schumann emphasises the role that street violence and the occupation of public space played in stoking fear of civil war among Weimar citizens, and shows that although the most significant violence took place in the early and late years of the Republic, lower-level clashes between political opponents continued in the middle years of the Republic, particularly in conjunction with election campaigns. See Dirk Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War* (Oxford, 2009).

*presence* that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance but... the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten'.<sup>93</sup> Here, the absence of any convincing civil unrest on stage pointed to repression of fear, with the critic's comment revealing an understandable distaste for the real.

The Darmstadt production was not a *Meistersinger* intended to provoke; it was, rather, a display of musical strength that opened on 25 December and provided reassuring festivity for the Christmas period. This reassurance was seen most clearly in the *Festwiese* scenery, described in the liberal *Hessische Landeszeitung Darmstadt* as a 'spatially extraordinarily successful' closing picture. For the critic of this newspaper, the painted backdrop of the town of Nuremberg was essential to the success of the production. Indeed, a painted image of the town covered not only much of the back wall of the stage but also the two side walls. The effect was one of considerable immediacy, with the town bearing down on the *Festwiese*. The production team must, therefore, have wanted to underline this familiar background.

[FIG 2a]

The interesting point about this picture is not so much the level of conservatism it represents — one could dispute the naturalism of the scene and point to the lack of greenery as evidence of a will to stylise — but the difference between it and the original conception. Schenck von Trapp's sketch for this scene shows a simple disc-like acting surface surrounded by the type of wooden seating

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<sup>93</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 102.

Gröning designed for his Nuremberg production. The set is unadorned apart from a semi-circular arrangement of banners, and there is nothing whatsoever in the background.

[FIG 2b]

This is a bold design that evidently eschews all prettiness, and it appears in keeping with the adventurous outlook of the company as a whole. Yet despite Darmstadt's willingness to experiment in other areas, the idea of a *Festwiese* without Nuremberg was ruled out before the production was ever seen. Whether this represents a failure of nerve on the part of the theatre management or a decision taken by the production team is impossible to tell, but the compromise is all the more significant given that it happened in Darmstadt, which, as noted earlier, was a centre for non-naturalist and provocative opera staging. As the critic of the *Hessische Landeszeitung* argued, the quintessence of the opera lay in reality, and daring measures were not called for. Perhaps Mordo and Schenck von Trapp were of a similar opinion; at any rate they chose the path of least resistance for their *Meistersinger*, and were rewarded with generous applause on the opening night and several uniformly positive reviews.

If, however, Schenck von Trapp's *Festwiese* now appears disappointingly removed from what he originally envisaged, the differences involved are not as striking as those thrown up by the Mannheim *Meistersinger* of 1930. Eduard Löffler's design for Act II of the Mannheim production is included in the exhibition catalogue *Die Meistersinger und Richard Wagner* (Germanisches Nationalmuseum: Nuremberg, 1981) as a notable example of gothic

expressionism (see Fig. 3a). Löffler's buildings lean towards one another in living and conspiratorial fashion, and the windows and doorways are suggestive of bodily orifices. Hans Sachs works *within* his womb-like workshop, and a sense of interior pervades the street. The light that shines from Sachs's house and the full moon provides stark contrast with the richly dark surroundings. This uncanny scene represents an admittedly very late flowering of expressionism, but Löffler's sketches from this period (1928-1930) do tend to exhibit expressionist traces, for instance through the use of skewed perspectives, curving forms, large moons, and animated or threatening skies.<sup>94</sup>

[FIG 3a]

Löffler's style is impressionistic, and for that reason perhaps ill-suited to the practicalities of the stage. He himself was keenly aware of the long process between sketch and finished set, remarking in his article 'Gedanken zur Bühnengestaltung' that the transition from sketch to exact technical plan is never easy: 'It is all too easy to lose some of the liveliness and immediacy in the process.'<sup>95</sup> But in the case of Act II of *Die Meistersinger*, it was not merely some of the immediacy that disappeared: it was, rather, the entire original conception. A photograph of Act II with the cast on stage shows a set completely at odds with the sketch (see Fig. 3b).

[FIG 3b]

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<sup>94</sup> See, for example, illustrations in Stahl, *Das Mannheimer Nationaltheater*.

<sup>95</sup> Grosse and Götz, *Die Meistersinger und Richard Wagner*, 173.

This is perhaps the clearest example of visual compromise within existing records of the Weimar *Meistersinger*. Löffler's expressive Gothicism is replaced by a naive naturalism, and his individual vision gives way to close reproduction of Wagner's stage instructions. Apart from the three-dimensional construction of some of its components, there is little to distinguish this Act II from nineteenth-century versions of the scene. It is a set that denies its own point in theatre history, and it also documents to perfection the seemingly intractable need for prettiness within the *Meistersinger* staging tradition. The riot apparently unfolds as a polite dance, and any sense of menace or potential social chaos is present only in Causey's *not-this* sense – once again trauma is repressed and social disorder is turned into order. True, this is just one moment in the entire act, but it nonetheless seems clear that sentimentality is a central feature. Löffler's original sketch bears no trace of sentimentality; it suggests an altogether uncannier atmosphere out of which a bout of *Wahn* could convincingly explode. That it was never realised on stage is disappointing, for it stands out as a genuine document of Weimar expressionism. As noted, by 1930 the peak of expressionism had passed, and the sketch stood well outside contemporary fascination with constructivism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Yet it was not to these progressive styles Löffler turned, but to an unimaginative naturalism that spoke little for his individual creativity. The expressionist *Meistersinger* that Mannheim might have seen thus remained a sketch, and convention once again prevailed.

### **Modernity repressed yet present: the haunted *Meistersinger***

Although Löffler's initial vision of *Die Meistersinger* remained a sketch, it would be untrue to suggest that the Weimar Republic saw no attempts at an

expressionist *Meistersinger* whatsoever. A revealing article on opera staging by Adolf Aber in the contemporary music journal *Melos* records a Halle *Meistersinger* that opened in 1920 at a time when expressionism was still in vogue. Designed by Paul Thiersch, the set for Act II apparently displayed clear traces of what Aber described as ‘expressionisms’. Complaining about these features, Aber asked why Thiersch had taken it upon himself

to lock Hans Sachs into a hermetically sealed house with two windows no bigger than chinks; to endow Pogner’s house with perspectives that make it appear completely cockeyed; and above all, to give the lilac bush and lime tree the form of antediluvian dinosaurs capable of striking fear into a strong man with their crooked worm-like bodies.<sup>96</sup>

Aber’s colourful description leaves little doubt that this was indeed an expressionist *Meistersinger*. Or to be more accurate, this was an expressionist Act II, for as Aber noted, the interior of Hans Sachs’s home had a sufficiently soothing effect that the shock of Act II was soon forgotten.<sup>97</sup> That Thiersch chose the same act as Löffler to experiment with expressionism is hardly a coincidence: evidently the evening setting lent itself to an uncanniness in which inanimate buildings could take on signs of life. In this way, the Nuremberg street-scene was distanced from all comforting notions of *Heimat*, and the buildings lost their specifically German character. Aber’s rejection of Thiersch’s expressionism was

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<sup>96</sup> Adolf Aber, ‘Zukunftsaufgaben der Operninszenierung’, *Melos* 1 (1920), 252.

<sup>97</sup> Aber, ‘Zukunftsaufgaben der Operninszenierung’, 252.

couched in no uncertain terms — he likened the scenery to a blow to the eye — but the rest of his article demonstrated unqualified approval for the Halle production. Unusually, he applauded the move from naturalism to stylisation, describing it as appropriate in a time of dire economic need, but also conceded that ‘when it comes to Wagner, the problem of stylised theatre is hardest to solve’.

The Halle production set no precedent for stylisation in *Die Meistersinger*, presumably because attempted changes to the appearance of the work were apt to trigger raw nerves and met considerable resistance. As Maaïke Bleeker has noted in *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, ‘[w]hat seems to be just “there to be seen” is, in fact, rerouted through memory and fantasy, caught up in the threads of the unconscious and entangled with the passions’.<sup>98</sup> In other words, innovations in the visual language of *Die Meistersinger* had no chance of neutral reception, for as Dominic Johnson puts it in *Theatre & The Visual*, ‘[o]ur practices of seeing are thoroughly and irremediably conditioned by the places from which we look, and by our constitution as historical subjects’.<sup>99</sup> This point is illustrated well by Weimar Republic criticism of Wagner staging, which was inevitably informed by the critics’ position in history and horizons of expectations based on previous experiences of Wagner productions, familiarity with staging conventions that

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<sup>98</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (Basingstoke, 2008), 2.

<sup>99</sup> Dominic Johnson, *Theatre & the Visual* (Basingstoke, 2012), 10.

went back to the nineteenth century, and sometimes trenchant political convictions.

In any case, Wagner's very precise stage instructions left Weimar-era theatre practitioners with a real dilemma, for most of them accepted the authority of the composer unquestioningly. While Wallerstein for one argued that departures from Wagner's original stage instructions were necessary, he presented change not as an expression of his own artistry but as a means of serving the 'spirit of the work'.<sup>100</sup> Even the most progressive directors and designers were keen to stress their servitude to the composer, and to disassociate themselves from 'fashionable' staging practices. As Mordo noted publicly: 'Production style — an absurdity. The director must recognise and describe the style of the poet. Fashionable direction is a delusion of grandeur, a misuse of the theatre.'<sup>101</sup>

Mordo's idea of servitude was accepted by all but the most radical of directors, and there were few of those within the sphere of opera. Rabenalt was one, and he viewed the concept of authorial authority in terms of aberration, noting that dramatic and musical works had always been adapted to the scenic forms of the time. The educated bourgeoisie invented the concept of an untouchable work, creating holy idols in the process and demanding the deepest of respect for these, he argued.<sup>102</sup> The director framed his criticism in terms of the nineteenth-century genius aesthetic, and suggested that his generation had

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<sup>100</sup> Wallerstein, 'Zum Wagner-Problem', 23.

<sup>101</sup> Mordo, 'Zur Krise und Gesundung des deutschen Theaters', 163-4.

<sup>102</sup> Rabenalt, *Das provokative Musiktheater der zwanziger Jahre*, 8.

overcome the cultural legacy of *Werktreue*. He and his colleagues had returned theatre to its original state, in which ‘poet and composer were for their part servants of the theatre’.<sup>103</sup>

Weimar-era opera practice accommodated some significant double standards when it came to *Werktreue*. As Gundula Kreuzer has demonstrated in this journal, ‘German productions of *Don Carlos* from the first half of the twentieth century... often involved modern scenery, novel translations and large-scale revisions of text and music’, interventions comparable, she argues, with the effects of more recent *Regieoper*. And, as Kreuzer demonstrates, some Weimar critics had no qualms about experimentation when it came to *Don Carlos* and could even profess themselves to be more convinced by a production than by the work.<sup>104</sup> What was acceptable in the case of *Don Carlos*, was, however unthinkable when it came to *Die Meistersinger* – after all, this was the work that had been dubbed ‘the German national opera in which German ways and customs and German spirit and art have been most beautifully proclaimed’.<sup>105</sup>

Despite some examples of stylisation in Wagner productions during the Weimar Republic (e.g. Sievert’s various designs for the *Ring* cycle; a production of *Lohengrin* by Schenck von Trapp and Mordo at Darmstadt, *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Kroll), to most Weimar-era production teams the creation of naturalist illusion was still an important principle, particularly when it came to

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<sup>103</sup> Rabenalt, *Das provokative Musiktheater der zwanziger Jahre*, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Gundula Kreuzer, ‘Voices from beyond: Verdi’s *Don Carlos* and the modern stage’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006), 156, 167.

<sup>105</sup> Chevalley, ‘Bayreuth’, no page number.

*Die Meistersinger*. Practitioners of the time generally set out to do this with the most modern means at their disposal and in a way that made those means as invisible as possible. This need for concealment was a feature of the period: most directors and designers working in the Weimar Republic were keen to cover their own tracks and to work in a manner that would appear suitably self-effacing. As Kurt Söhnlein, designer of the 1930 production of *Die Meistersinger* at Hanover suggested in terms common to the period, stage design was above all about subordination, and any theatre art that drew attention to itself was symptomatic of degeneration.<sup>106</sup>

When Heinz Tietjen's production of *Die Meistersinger* opened at the Staatsoper in Berlin in 1932, many critics were eager to praise the unobtrusive nature of his direction. As one commentator put it, 'one "notices" nothing of the "production"; everything unfolds as if this were the only way it could happen'.<sup>107</sup> Another critic congratulated Tietjen for directing 'wholly on the basis of the music' and for allowing his direction to step back behind the effects of the

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<sup>106</sup> Kurt Söhnlein, 'Allgemeine Grundgedanken über Szenengestaltung', in *Kurt Söhnlein: Bühnenbildner*, ed. Brigitta Weber and Carsten Niemann (Hanover, 1994), 75.

<sup>107</sup> Cutting from an unidentified newspaper, Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne. Folder identification mark: 'Universität zu Köln. Richard Wagner. Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. 1930/31 – 39/40'.

music.<sup>108</sup> Indeed it was the musical direction that occupied most critics, for the production was conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler. The fact that Furtwängler was so closely associated with the German symphonic repertory led many critics to interpret his conducting in symphonic terms, and for that reason it seemed more important than ever that the staging and direction should follow convention and not draw attention to themselves. For some critics, Tietjen's direction of the final scene betrayed the overall sense of control. Their comments that the *Festwiese* was too 'noisy' exposed their interest in propriety, restraint and, it would appear, social status. According to Oskar Bie's report on the scene, the *Meistersinger* left their podium at a point of general excitement and mixed with the townspeople, giving up their distinct status. This development may have struck the liberal Bie positively, but for several other critics it was unwelcome.

Throughout the Weimar Republic, the characters of *Die Meistersinger* were surrounded by many hardened attitudes and expectations. In 1925, for example, the Wagner acolyte and far-right nationalist Hans von Wolzogen devoted an entire article in the *Bayreuther Festspielführer* to the question of Eva's character, correcting what he felt were common misconceptions. Wolzogen was at pains to deny that Eva had anything to do with the traditional operatic soubrette, and to remind his readers that Eva was an artistic, heroic soul. Justifying this by pointing out Eva's brief reference to Albrecht Dürer and her interest in the knightly Walther, Wolzogen confined his analysis to the proceedings of Act I, scene 1. His sole intention was to rescue Eva from a

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<sup>108</sup> Cutting from a different unidentified newspaper, Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne. Folder identification mark: 'Universität zu Köln. Richard Wagner. Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. 1930/31 – 39/40'.

possible charge of social impropriety, namely her outburst ‘Euch oder keinen!’ to Walther while still in church. Wolzogen sought to portray Eva as exceptional — as a poetic muse — and thus he exonerated her in his own mind from the charge of immodesty.<sup>109</sup>

That Wolzogen devoted so much energy to the reputation of Eva is a sign not only of the utter seriousness with which the composer’s plots were taken by his Bayreuth followers, but also of contemporary social attitudes that were inextricably embedded within general Wagner reception. In the case of *Die Meistersinger* and its collection of human characters, German critics apparently expected to identify with the people on stage and, in most cases, to recognise elements of pre-war social structures in the opera. Arguments about female characters went hand-in-hand with entrenched attitudes about women’s place in society, undoubtedly reflecting unease about twentieth-century female emancipation. Reviewing a performance of *Die Meistersinger* in Karlsruhe in 1925, one critic complained about a lack of decorum on the part of Eva: ‘Frl. Blättermann was too modern: the performance manner smacked of the big city of today. That she sat on the bench in front of Sachs’s workshop with one leg crossed over another was a slap in the face for those with refined taste.’<sup>110</sup> In similar fashion, the critic of the *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten* chided Erda Bieler-Schum for introducing a note of undisguised vexation to the 1924 *Meistersinger* at the Düsseldorf municipal theatre: ‘When Eva fails to get the better of the

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<sup>109</sup> Hans von Wolzogen, ‘Eva als Wagnergestalt’, in *Bayreuther Festspielführer 1925*, ed. Grunsky, 127-8.

<sup>110</sup> See *Karlsruher Kunstwart* 30 (1925), 417.

superior Sachs in front of his own door, she must not express her disappointment too crudely. Even the rebellious defiance of a girl must still be attractive.’<sup>111</sup> The critic of the *Fränkischer Kurier* had tellingly mixed praise for Margarete Ziegler when she performed the role of Eva in Nürnberg in 1927: ‘The true femininity of this singer makes her particularly suited to this role. In church, however, she should not behave flirtatiously with Stolzing, rather she should be shy and bashful, yet soulful and encouraging.’<sup>112</sup>

Despite the attempt by the Nuremberg critic to couch his preconceptions in Wagnerian language, all these comments demonstrated a need to impose boundaries on acceptable femininity. This attempt to lay down appropriate modes of womanly behaviour was, however, just one way in which certain critics of the Weimar *Meistersinger* sought to uphold traditional social divisions. Staging innovations that appeared to blur the social boundaries between the characters – David’s apparent lack of deference towards Walther in the Bayreuth production of 1924; the similarity in size between Sachs’s and Pogner’s houses in the 1927 Nuremberg production; the descent of the *Meistersinger* from the podium in the Berlin production of 1932 – were all seized on and denounced by more conservative commentators.

With established patterns of middle-class life threatened in new and tangible ways during the years of the Weimar Republic, any moves that appeared to dissolve social boundaries (even make-believe ones in an opera) were almost

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<sup>111</sup> *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten* (25 August 1924), no page number.

<sup>112</sup> ‘WK’, ‘Neues Stadttheater. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*’, *Fränkischer Kurier* (23 July 1927), no page number.

certain to give rise to protest. This applied as much to the boundaries between men and women (shared attitudes towards women helped to buttress traditional patriarchal values) as it did to boundaries between social groups and classes. The ‘modern’ Eva was unpalatable because she signalled urbanisation, the loss of patriarchal authority and — by association — the rise in influence of the working classes.<sup>113</sup> In the same way a David without respect for his social superiors furnished a potential reminder of the increasingly independent proletariat, now protected by the progressive labour laws of the Republic.

In a sense then, the Weimar *Meistersinger* and the discourse that accompanied it encapsulate to perfection not just the trauma attached to the fast-changing social conditions of the Weimar Republic, but also various attempts to compensate for this trauma. While providing opera companies with a safe choice of repertory, the work also existed at a symbolic level, bringing significant comfort and a sense of continuity to those who were least comfortable with Weimar’s liminality and rupture. The opera was one of the most frequent offerings within state and municipal opera houses, and with the exception of some isolated and abortive attempts at modernisation, a broad consensus on suitable production style was maintained both in word and in practice. The opera continued, therefore, to be seen in its traditional form, thus offering a

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<sup>113</sup> That conservative attitudes towards women were often entangled with a fear of the working classes emerges in the following comment by one of the characters in Ödön von Horváth’s *Geschichten aus dem Wiener Wald* (1931): ‘Papa always says, the financial independence of women from men is the last step towards Bolshevism.’ Horváth, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Traugott Krischke and Susanna Foral-Krischke, *Stücke 1931-1933* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), 22.

conservative vision of German cohesion and *Gemeinschaft* [community] in the midst of social change. To a certain extent, this nostalgia for an imaginary past was related to nineteenth-century historicism and commemoration practices and ‘the collapse of former orientations, meanings, and identities’ in industrialised nineteenth-century Germany noted by Lutz Koepnick and quoted above.<sup>114</sup> In another sense, the context had changed quite significantly, for Weimar Germany presented different types of discontinuity to anything experienced beforehand: World War I had killed and wounded millions of Germans; defeat in the war provoked widespread feelings of betrayal, humiliation and hardship; democracy was new and far from universally appreciated; the German Communist Party gained significant traction in the new Republic; women gained the right to vote and were now in a position to alter the outcome of any election; and opera and other high art forms associated with the bourgeoisie were threatened by financial instability and the rise of alternative forms of cultural consumption, including film-going. These were just some of the conditions under which the conservatism and nostalgia associated with *Meistersinger* staging and reception began to carry additional meaning and weight.

In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2003), Marvin Carlson proposes a theory of theatrical ghosting that involves the presentation of the familiar in new contexts. He argues that

all theatre ... is as a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and  
haunted by repetition. Moreover, as an ongoing social institution it almost

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<sup>114</sup> Koepnick, ‘Stereoscopic Vision’, in *Wagner’s Meistersinger*, ed. Vazsonyi, 75.

invariably reinforces this involvement and haunting by bringing together on repeated occasions and in the same spaces the same bodies (onstage and in the audience) and the same physical material.<sup>115</sup>

In the case of the Weimar *Meistersinger*, the material presented to audiences was indeed familiar: it was ritually re-enacted in the kind of ‘citational performances’ to which Schneider refers in *Performing Remains*. Each performance was a convention-abiding citation of a previous performance, and each performance was ghosted by a Wilhelmine past that no longer fitted well with the Weimar present. Or to put it the other way around, each repetition of *Die Meistersinger* was haunted not just by the past, but also by various traumas of the day, including breakdown in familiar social boundaries, social disorder and street violence, the unfamiliarity of women’s emancipation, and a fear of splintered urbanised society in place of idealised cohesive community. The painted naturalist backdrops of sixteenth-century walled Nuremberg; the stratified communities in which each character had a specific place; the non-riotous riots; the demure female characters: all these elements of the Weimar *Meistersinger* were, as Adorno noted, a commemoration of (idealised) happier days, and a re-enactment ritual that celebrated an imaginary, constructed past. In addition, these conservative elements functioned as a denial of unpalatable elements of the present. They were, however, inevitably accompanied by an outside world hovering just beyond the proscenium arch, an otherness that was present in spite of all adherence to convention. The conventional *Meistersinger* of the Weimar Republic existed in a

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<sup>115</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, 2003), 11.

state of profound uneasiness: it acquired meaning precisely through the spectral anxieties that haunted its nostalgia, and in that indirect sense it served as an acute barometer of the turbulence of the times.