

The Siegfried Idyll: Jewel of the Wagner Romance.

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Abstract

The Siegfried Idyll was never intended for the public, but it was published when the Wagner's were pressed by debt. In its original form it was called the Tribschen Idyll and first performed by a fifteen-piece orchestra as a birthday gift for Cosima. For its intimacy and emotion, the *Idyll* is regarded as one of Wagner's greatest works, and saw many performances. This is a study of the events of the Wagner romance that prompted its composition. Its roots stretch from their earliest days and it would affect them to their last. As a consequence, much of the Wagner romance is covered here in a condensed form.



Cosima and Richard Wagner in Vienna, 1872

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The Tribschen Idyll

On the morning of Cosima's thirty-third birthday a small fifteen-piece orchestra, that had been assembled by Wagner's resident student of several years, Hans Richter, crept onto the stairs of the Wagner's house, Tribschen. Wagner raised his engraved baton and the strings ushered in the soft music that would crescendo into a complete expression of Wagner's love for Cosima. What they would later refer to as the *Siegfried Idyll*, due to the birth of their son Siegfried and themes from the opera *Siegfried*, had achieved its desired affect:

Sunday, December 25, 1870 About this day, my children, I can tell you nothing—nothing about my feelings, nothing about my mood, nothing, nothing, nothing. I shall just tell you, dryly and plainly, what happened. When I woke up I heard a sound, it grew even louder, I could no longer imagine myself in a dream, music was sounding, and what music! After it had died away, R. came in to me with the five children and put into my hands the score of his “Symphonic Birthday Greeting.” I was in tears, but so, too, was the whole household; R. had set up his orchestra on the stairs and thus consecrated our Tribschen forever! *The Tribschen Idyll*—thus the work is called. — At midday Dr. Sulzer arrived, surely the most important of R.'s friends! After breakfast the orchestra again assembled, and now once again the *Idyll* was heard in the lower apartment, moving us all profoundly (Countess B. was also there, on my invitation); after it the *Lohengrin* wedding procession, Beethoven's Septet, and, to end with, once more the work of which I shall never hear enough! — Now at last I understood all R.'s working in secret, also dear Richter's trumpet (he blazed out the Siegfried theme splendidly and had learned the trumpet especially to do it), which had won him many admonishments from me. “Now let me die,” I exclaimed to R. “It would be easier to die for me than to live for me,” he replied. — In the evening R. reads his *Meistersinger* to Dr. Sulzer, who did not know it; and I take as much delight in it as if it were something completely new. This makes R. say, “I wanted to read Sulzer *Die Ms*, and it turned into a dialogue between us two.” (C. Wagner 312)

Thus came to be the "Tribschen Idyll, with Fidi's Bird-song and Orange Sunrise, presented as a Symphonic Birthday Greeting to his Cosima by her Richard, 1870" (Osborne).

Love Blossoms

To truly understand the *Siegfried Idyll* we must explore its place in the romance of Richard and Cosima Wagner. Our investigation shall journey from the first meeting of Richard and Cosima to Richard's death and Cosima's life afterward. We shall follow the long thread of the *Idyll* throughout their love and highlight the gifts they exchanged.

We begin our exploration with the first meeting of Richard and Cosima. Cosima's father, Liszt, having not seen his children for eight years was for some reason prompted to pay them a visit in Paris. Marek supposes that the visit may have been suggested by the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein who sought to control every aspect of Liszt's life—including his children. Whatever the reason for his visit, Liszt invited Wagner, having long been a supporter of his music. At this first meeting of Cosima and Richard he read from the last act of *Götterdämmerung* (Marek 11–15); the hero Siegfried is murdered by Hagan and then avenged by his love, Brünnhilde (Opera News).

On the whole Cosima and her siblings were rather underwhelmed by this meeting with their father as he spent more time socializing with Parisians than with them. However, Cosima was impressed enough by Wagner's reading that she read the texts of *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*. Richard only noted the shyness of Cosima and her sister. (Marek 15–16)

Princess Carolyne's daughter, Marie Hohenlohe, wrote of the meeting:

I was older than the two girls, who were still rather unpolished and looked out at the unfriendly world with timid doe eyes. The elder, Blandine, was prettier, plumper, more pleasing though in no way heaven-storming, and she was already rather pleased with herself. Poor Cosima, however, was in the worst phase of adolescence, tall and angular, sallow, with a wide mouth and long nose, the image of her father. Only her long golden hair, of unusual sheen, was beautiful. In the poor child's heart a volcano raged . . . dark stirrings of love and overweening vanity. . . . Now and then her thin lips would curl with the inborn mockery of the Parisian. . . . After a simple meal . . . Wagner read to us the end of the *Nibelungen*. The children scarcely knew enough German to understand the words. Still, even they were griped by our emotions. . . . At that time, Wagner had no eyes for the ugly child. . . . (qtd. in Marek 15)

Cosima would later write, of Richard, that “. . . it had occurred to him that his

journey to Paris, when he saw me for the first time (rue Casimir Perier, October 9–10, 1853), had been his voyage in quest of a wife; but on that occasion I had been the Tristan, who noticed nothing.”

This relationship, which promised nothing at its onset, would blossom into a great love story. Their love began as flowers do—with a bright spot of green ushering in the end of the dreary winter. Cosima’s first entry in her diary includes:

The year 1868 marks the outward turning-point of my life: in this year it was granted to me to put into action what for the past five years had filled my thoughts. It is an occupation I have not sought after or brought about myself: Fate laid it on me. In order that you may understand, I must confess to you that up to the hour in which I recognized my true inner calling, my life had been a dreary, unbeautiful dream, of which I have no desire to tell you anything, for I do not understand it myself and reject it with the whole of my now purified soul. The outward appearance was and remained calm, but inside all was bleak and dreary, when there came into my life that being who swiftly led me to realize that up to now I had never lived. My love for me became a rebirth, a deliverance, a fading away of all that was trivial and bad in me, and I swore to seal it through death, through pious renunciation of complete devotion. What love has done for me I shall never be able to repay. (27)

As her entry indicates, the year of 1868 was only the “outward turning-point,” inside the seeds of her love for Richard had long been sown. He offered her relief from her depressing and unfulfilling life with Hans von Bülow¹ and she gave him the support he needed to pursue his musical dreams. Their love would grow through flirtatious incidents such as this one related by Wagner:

Everything was still wrapped in silence and mystery, but the feeling inside me that she belonged to me assumed such certainty that it drove me in a moment of eccentricity to a display of rash high spirits. Once, when accompanying Cosima across an open square in Frankfurt to her hotel, I espied an empty wheelbarrow standing there, and on the spur of the moment I invited her to sit in it, so that I might wheel her to the hotel; she was instantly ready to comply, whereas I,

¹Hans von Bülow is also referred to as Hans and Bülow. Hans Richter is always referred to as Richter.

astonished in turn by this, lost the courage to carry out my mad design. Bülow, who was following us, had seen the incident; Cosima explained guilelessly to him what had been in our minds, and unfortunately I was unable to conclude that his high spirits matched ours, for he chided his wife for her temerity. (qtd. in Skelton 12)

Their love reached full bloom on November 28, 1863, while Bülow rehearsed for a performance that night, Richard and Cosima went for a ride in a carriage. A passage displayed only in the privately printed version of Wagner's autobiography reads, "With tears and sobs we sealed our confession to belong to each other alone." Also, Wagner would later write, "We gazed into each other's eyes and suddenly an overwhelming craving for acknowledged truth compelled us to the confession, for which no words were needed, of an incalculable disaster which had befallen us." These passages support November 1863 as the consummation of the Wagner relationship but there can be no doubt that they were intimate when Cosima visited Richard in June 1864 as their first daughter, Isolde, was born in April 1865. (qts. in Marek 45)

Scandal

An affair of two people so much in the public eye was bound to leak out. The press began to hint at the affair. At this point the suggestions were dismissed as simple slander by Richard and Cosima merely ignored them, making sure to appear in public with Hans as much as possible to be perceived as a dutiful wife. It is likely that, by this time, Bülow knew of the affair. However, his love for Wagner's music and the necessity of their positions lead him to silently endure.

March of 1864 had seen the ascension of King Ludwig II to the throne of Bavaria and the end of Wagner's current creditor problems. The young king was a nearly fanatical fan of Wagner's music. He wished, with Wagner, to reform Bavaria and all of Germany to a new age of art and music—starting with his capital in Munich. To achieve this he was willing to give Wagner anything he needed. Wagner wanted a large allowance and Bülow to conduct his works. Ludwig gave. Unfortunately, the time would soon come when the lavish support given to Wagner would lead to public outcry. The amount of money Ludwig was spending on Wagner and the influence Wagner had, greater than that of the official advisers, sealed the outcome. Ludwig was forced to choose between Wagner and the people of Bavaria; he consented that Wagner should leave Bavaria for "six months."

It was during this time that Richard, assisted by Cosima, bought a house outside of Lucerne, Switzerland. A house they would nickname Tribschen. Here Cosima and Wagner would spend the happiest six years of their lives. For King Ludwig the separation was almost unbearable. He entertained thoughts of abdication, proposing that he leave the throne to be with Wagner. This would have been disastrous for Wagner's financial situation and he advised the king to remain. Whether it was advice taken or not, Ludwig did remain king. However, he decided that he would pay Wagner a birthday visit.

This visit would come at a time when Bülow was in Munich, Cosima was with Wagner in Tribschen, and civil war threatened Germany. At all costs Cosima and Wagner had sought to keep knowledge of their relationship from the king. For, they feared, if he learned of the adultery, he who believed Cosima an ideal wife and mother, the generous support he gave Wagner would vanish. Cosima's presence at Tribschen without her husband was explained as a coincidence—she was needed to take the dictation for an autobiography of Wagner Ludwig desired.

They may have fooled Ludwig, but when news of the King's visit leaked out the press was incensed. The King, wrote the papers, had been taken away from his duties in a time of crisis by a meddling musician and his whore. This time the *ménage-à-trois* would not remain silent. Bülow had to defend his wife's, and his, honor. In typical fashion he challenged the newspaper's editor to a duel . . . and was refused. Cosima and Wagner manipulated the king into writing a letter on their behalf. The king would not remain ignorant for long. However, when he did, finally, allow himself to see the Cosima-Wagner relationship for what it was he didn't cut off support. Instead, he, disillusioned, simply cut off contact for a time.

The situation could not continue as it was indefinitely. All that was needed was a final stimulus. It was to come on two fronts: Cosima and Richard were returning from a trip to Italy when they were caught in flooding thunderstorms and nearly drowned. Wagner wrote, "To look death in the face is to know the whole truth." Furthermore, Cosima was pregnant with another child—one who's father could only be Wagner—Siegfried. She would remain in Munich no longer. When she returned to Munich she asked Bülow for a divorce, was denied, and left for Tribschen with Richard's children anyway. In doing so she had to leave her two eldest children, born of Bülow, behind.

Tribschen and Siegfried

Cosima's diaries begin January 3, 1869 with a long rationalization of her actions addressed to her eldest children. However, she soon falls to writing of the daily events and recording her love for Richard. These diaries provide the best insight into their lives. From them we learn that Richard read to Cosima nearly every night and that she enjoyed Shakespeare, Schiller, Calderon, and Goethe above others. We are privy to daily examples of their devotion to each other.

A year later, and for the rest of her life, Cosima would feel guilt for leaving her husband. This guilt was felt most acutely during the holidays. However, she felt that she had done the right thing and would do it again; it was Fate. On December 21, 1869, having been a resident of Tribschen for more than a year, she writes: "Can giving pleasure to other make up for the distress of having been the cause of suffering? Certainly it does not, yet the pleasure remains great and pure." Later, regarding her stalled attempts to secure a divorce with Hans she says: "I am willing to bear the wretched situation into which I have brought myself . . . as payment for my priceless happiness."

During these times Wagner is hard at work on *Siegfried*. Cosima writes: "The sounds he creates are the sun of my life!" and "Because of R.'s playing yesterday I have been walking on clouds." He gives her 32 pages of the biography for her birthday which moves her to tears and gifts that leave her "quite amazed" on New Years Eve. Cosima's happiness was secure, as was Richard. Cosima records him saying: "I never want to leave this house again."

Wagner meant what he said. When the King demanded a performance of *Die Walküre* in Munich, Wagner refused. He "finds it unthinkable to produce a work without my[Cosima] being there" and "on no account" will he give a performance in Munich. In a time when adultery was abhorred Cosima could not return to Munich; she could not face the slander of the papers. And Richard would not leave Cosima—not even for the king.

On June 6, 1869 the Wagner's last child and only son was born. They kept their tradition of naming their children after the piece that Wagner was working on at the time of the birth and named the boy Siegfried. Wagner had for several days been keeping Cosima's diary for her (she was unable due to her pregnancy) and his feelings on the day of Siegfried's birth are recorded in his own hand:

With feelings of sublime emotion he stared in front of him, was then surprised by an incredibly beautiful, fiery glow which started to blaze with a richness of color never before seen, first on the orange

wallpaper beside the bedroom door; it was then reflected in the blue jewel box containing my portrait, so that this, covered by glass and set in a narrow gold frame, was transfigured in celestial splendor. The sun had just risen above the Rigi and was putting forth its first rays, proclaiming a glorious, sun-drenched day. R. dissolved into tears.
(104)

In the days after, Wagner, inspired by the birth of his son, would write several themes. These themes would later be combined with others to create the *Tribschen Idyll*. It is widely known that the opening theme of the Idyll, also called “Peace Motive,” dates to the 1864 summer visit Cosima paid to Wagner—the same time Isolde was conceived. The second theme of the *Idyll*, which was also used in *Siegfried*, may also have been first hammered out during this summer. These themes were played for Cosima in May 1869: “Before lunch R. plays for me what he has written and is delighted that several themes which date from the ‘Starnberg days’ and which we had jokingly earmarked for quartets and symphonies have now found their niche. Great surge of joy at this coming together of life and art.” Other themes, including Richter’s trumpet part, were taken from Wagner’s work on *Siegfried*. A lullaby, written New Years Eve 1868—three months after Cosima moved to Tribschen, was also included.

Later, we gain more insight into the creation and meaning of the *Idyll* from Cosima’s diary:

After lunch the musicians played us the *Idyll* in an arrangement by Richter; much emotion! R. said how curious it seemed to him: all he had set out to do was to work the theme which had come to him in Starnberg (when we were living together), and which he had promised me as a quartet, into a morning serenade, and then he had unconsciously woven our whole life into it—Fidi’s birth, my recuperation, Fidi’s bird, etc.

The theme of Siegfried’s bird was also originally composed in the day’s following Siegfried’s birth. It owes its creation to a little bird that began to sing at three-thirty in the morning at the first sign of the sun. This is synchronous with Siegfried’s birth—he was born at four in the morning. Richard says, “It was Siegfried’s bird, which had announced his arrival and now came to inquire after him.”

As with the composition much of the preparation for the *Idyll*’s premier was conducted in Cosima’s sight. In the days preceding her 33rd birthday Cosima

was preoccupied with Christmas preparations and worry over the handling of the war with France. She didn't wonder why Richter was learning the trumpet and blasting the theme of Siegfried all about the house, she merely complained about the noise. Even more surprising was the fact that she didn't see the reasons for Richard's absence in Lucerne.

On the 21st Wagner nearly gives away his surprise. Cosima notes in her diary that Richard:

. . . can recall the surprise he felt on his birthday in '69, when he listened there to the quartet and saw for the first time the painted windowpane. "You must prepare no more such surprises," he said, "for I can imagine how difficult it was for you all the time you were preparing it. In a love like ours it is surely almost unbearable having to conceal things from each other." (310)

She admits that she was "deeply ashamed" for having deceived him regarding the quartet. She then advises him to see a doctor for the indisposition he has been experiencing of late. Amazingly she seems to have missed the true cause of his indisposition—hiding a surprise from her. For on Christmas Eve she writes: "It is the first Christmas on which I am giving R. no present and will receive none from him—so that is all right."

So, it appears that Wagner achieved his surprise. At least, Cosima wished him to believe he had. It is possible that Cosima intentionally hid her knowledge of the surprise to please Richard. Indeed, Richard often read Cosima's diary—even making entries when she was pregnant with Siegfried. Yet, this seems an unlikely situation as Cosima was honest with herself and her children in her diaries and would later uncover another surprise without hiding her knowledge.

Motivation

Wagner's last birthday gift to Cosima was a surprise performance of a symphony that he composed when he was 19 and was lost but recently uncovered in Dresden. Here he found himself with the chance to perform something of his for Cosima that she had never heard before. As she often noted in her diary, she often felt as if she were listening to his works as if they were new. Now she would have the chance to hear a performance of a completed work that was truly new to her. Indeed, when she had arranged a performance of several of his early works he had not even recognized them!

Richard planned a performance of the symphony for her by the Liceo Benedetto Marcell in Venice with Seidl as conductor. Unfortunately, Seidl was not available so Wagner gave Cosima various excuses for his absences while he was conducting rehearsals. She was not fooled. In fact when she pressured him as to why he would return to rehearsal even though he was suffering from stomach trouble he blurted out the secret.

Cosima couldn't wait for the performance on Christmas Eve and snuck in to hear a rehearsal. On Christmas Eve the performance was attended by the Wagner's, their household, friends, and Liszt. Liszt, the father, who had paid so little attention to her as a child, but who she dearly loved. Wagner prompted Liszt to play for a long time, to everyone's delight by saying, "Do you love your daughter? Then go to the piano and play!"

This gift, the performance of a lost symphony, may have been partially inspired by Cosima's birthday gift to Richard in 1873. The greatest surprise she saves for the evening:

Toward evening I tell R., who still thinks the Thursday gathering is to be held in our house, that the amateur society wants to put on a little celebration of half an hour at most, and we cannot spoil it for them. We walk to the opera house, which is full to bursting and looks very elegant. R. thinks at first that Zumpe has composed a festival overture for his birthday, but the program sets him straight. And now one surprise follows another, until finally he sees Franziska on the stage. He says he feels stunned, he had had no inkling of any of it—our surprise succeeded completely. (C. Wagner 638)

Wagner is stunned because the program reveals that the majority of the works were composed by him in the 1830s and he had forgotten them!

It is also likely that the *Tribtschen Idyll* was prompted by surprises Cosima sprung on Richard for his two birthdays preceding the premier of the *Idyll*. For his birthday in 1870 she, with Richter's assistance, engaged a 45 piece military band to wake Richard to *Huldigungsmarsch*. Wagner was greatly moved by this but it is his birthday of 1869 that is on his mind just before he surprises Cosima with the *Idyll*. For this, his first birthday since Cosima permanently joined him in Tribtschen, Cosima employed a Paris quartet to play works by Beethoven and replaced a window pane with painted glass. Also of note, is the fact that Richard was woken when, "Early in the morning Richter blew Siegfried's call."

Continuing Happiness and Betrayal

The *Idyll* would continue to play a happy role in their lives.

For her birthday in 1873 Richard gives Cosima the first act of *Götterdämmerung*, orchestrated. She asks him to play her the *Idyll* before bed and then sleeps with the score beneath her pillow.

Cosima's birthday of 1874 was particularly sweet. On Christmas Eve she was delighted to find the sketch of *Götterdämmerung* on her desk. In the morning Richard again woke her with a surprise playing of the *Idyll*. After she learns how he kept the secret, holding a rehearsal, with the children in attendance, the day before when she was busy with Christmas preparations. In the evening she tells Richard that this has been her happiest birthday "Because *Götterdämmerung* has been completed and thus the real worry of our life removed!"

Richard would later say of the *Idyll*, "Yes, that was our poetic period, the dawn of our life, now we are in the full glare of the midday sun, my dear wife, and climbing the mountain." The memory and the *Idyll* move Cosima to tears. (C. Wagner 580)

Unfortunately Cosima was to worry, in vain, over the publication of the *Idyll*. For her birthday in 1872 Richard, "regretting that he has no present for me, tells me he had thought of having the *Idyll* published and thus earning me 100 Imperials. How sad that would have made me—my 'sweet secret' thus betrayed!"

Wagner continued to think of selling the *Idyll*. On January 14, 1874: "He tells me he has been thinking of doing the *Idyll* for a large orchestra, but it would not come out so well; I tell him I should be appalled to see this work handed over to the general public."

As their debt rose, one of their creditors Dr. Strecker wanted the *Idyll* and the text of Parsifal to pay off their debt. Cosima offered him "youthful works by R[ichard]," but to no avail. The next day she laments: "Morning negotiations with Dr. Strecker! Oh, if only this debt did not exist! I shall probably have to surrender the *Idyll* to extricate us! Deep melancholy. . . ."

In the end she is forced to give up the *Idyll*. On November 9, 1877: "The *Idyll* is sent off today; the secret treasure is to become public property—may the pleasure others take in it match the sacrifice I am making!"

Eternal Support

The happiness the Wagner's provided each other should, by now, be clear. However, further elaboration will assist in understanding the support Cosima gave to Wagner. On April 4, 1870 Cosima wrote: "R. takes my head in his hands and says, 'You are my last support, my only support.'" When he finishes the full orchestral score of *Siegfried*, on February 5, 1871, Cosima is "Beside him as he writes the last notes."

It was Cosima that gave Wagner the strength and encouragement he dearly needed to build his own opera house in Bayreuth for performing his complete *Ring*. She convinced him to continue on in face of a huge deficit for she viewed the performance of the *Ring* on Wagner's terms of utmost importance. It was a combination of her strength and support and his musical genius and reputation, as well as support from Ludwig, that allowed the fruition of the Bayreuth festival.

For Wagner's last great work, *Parsifal*, Cosima's support was at its peak. She likened herself to Aaron holding Moses' arms on the field of battle. The third and final act of the completed poem, having been finished the day before, was read and presented to Cosima in the evening of April 20, 1877. On that day, she regarded it as her "greatest solace in life's misery." Intestinal pains kept Wagner from finishing the work in time for Cosima's 45th birthday, as he had intended. Not one to let small details spoil a moment, Wagner finished the last page of the manuscript, leaving several preceding pages unfinished. At the end he wrote "Für Dich" — For you. As he often did, Wagner presented Cosima with a gift during a birthday celebration. This gathering was to celebrate the birthday of Joukowsky who had been living with the Wagner's in Italy for some time. The gift was the finally completed score of *Parsifal*, the date was January 13th, 1882. (Marek 177, 193–194)

As they grow older their interdependence is strengthened. This is especially evident in a trip Cosima made to Munich, in the winter of 1879, to see a dentist and have her portrait done by Lenbach, for Richard's birthday. Though she was gone only three days, they exchanged 15 telegrams, some as few as two hours apart! In traditional Cosima fashion, the portrait was presented to Richard on his birthday by Siegfried, dressed as a painter pretending to add the finishing touches. (Marek 183)

Wagner died in Vienna on February 13, 1883 of a heart attack. As he died in Cosima's arms, his watch, a present from Cosima, fell to the floor and he mumbled his last words, "My watch." His death had a profoundly horrible effect on Cosima. She would not leave his side for 24 hours, nor eat, nor speak. When she finally

left his side she no longer had the will to live. For her last gift Cosima cut her hair and placed the locks in Wagner's coffin. At Wagner's funeral a regimental band played Siegfried's Funeral March, but Cosima was not present for the ceremonies. She waited until the funeral ceremonies were complete before she emerged from Wahnfried to watch as he was lowered to his final resting place.

She cut herself off from the world for months. She wouldn't even speak with her own children, writing them notes instead—though they were only in the next room. At least, they managed to convince her to eat. Nine months later Liszt wrote, "My daughter, hugging to herself the thought of death, is doing everything possible not to outlive Wagner" (qtd. in Marek 207)

It would take a fight to revive her. In her melancholy she had ignored the Bayreuth festivals and it was proposed that she was unfit to continue as director. The thought of her husband's music falling from family control prompted her to act. Perhaps she remembered Richard's words: "It would be easier to die for me than to live for me." Cosima argued her case effectively and dismissed those who had proposed her removal. Live for him she did. She now saw herself as the protector of his legacy. She took over direction of the Bayreuth festivals; managing even the smallest detail.

It may have been easier indeed to die for Richard Wagner. Yet Cosima Wagner lived for him—for him and his music.

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