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WAGNER PATHOS IN BUENOS AIRES

History and peculiarities of a Wagner cult far away from Germany

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1 An assessment by Frau Busch

“In general however, the Argentine has more inclination towards tragedy than idyll; in this lays his preference for Wagner’s pathos. Nowhere in the world is the deep and universal humanity implied in Wagner felt more deeply than in Argentina. While works of other composers were there a success, Wagner always meant a new, vital experience“ (*„Im allgemeinen jedoch hat der Argentinier mehr Sinn für die Tragödie als für die Idylle; daher rührt seine Vorliebe für das Wagnersche Pathos. Das tief und universal Menschliche, an das Wagner sich wendet, antwortet ihm nirgends auf dem Erdball inbrünstiger als in Argentinien. Andere Werke brachten Erfolge, Wagner bedeutete ein immer neues Erlebnis“*)¹. The circumstances which inspired Grete Busch’s to these reflections on the cult-like devotion to Wagner in Argentina was inspired by the public’s reaction to the *Ring* performances under her husband Fritz in 1935. The fact that the *Ring* was part of the a Bach-Wagner Festival which also included the *Matthäus Passion*, indicates the degree to which both composers had a quasi religious appeal to the „porteños“ (as the residents of Buenos Aires, the most important “puerto” of Latin America in Colónial times, are still called to the date). *“Nothing stopped the Argentine audience, young,....and hungering after music. The Festival was the highest point of the four seasons of Busch in Buenos Aires during the pre-war years“* (*“Die Argentinische Hörerschaft, jung, weitherzig, musikhungrig, stiess sich durchaus nicht am Gegensatz von Himmel und Erde, wie ihn dies Festival darstellte – der Höhepunkt der vier „Temporadas“ (stagioni) in denen Busch während der Vorkriegszeit in Buenos Aires erschien“*)²

Bach and Wagner became a cult in Buenos Aires for entirely different reasons. In spite of its Lutheran features, the *Matthäus Passion* of 1935 was considered by the Catholic establishment of Buenos Aires a truly religious event in the wake of the religious fervour unleashed by Eugenio Pacelli’s visit to Buenos Aires on occasion of the International Eucharistic Congress the previous year. Grete Busch remembers how the men listening the transmission of the *Passion* at the square outside the Colón Theatre uncovered their heads at the sound of *“O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden”* sang by the Chorus in Spanish³.

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The Wagner cult made his way to the River Plate much earlier than any Bach choral works, or even the Mozart-Da Ponte operas. Exactly fifty years before the first arrival of Busch to Buenos Aires *Lohengrin* became the first Wagner opera premiered there amidst a cultural context which prevailed until well into early XXth century where even Argentine operas were sung in Italian. The quest for a “German” Wagner in Buenos Aires was decisively influenced by the aftermath of the First World War (WWI) and, from 1933 onwards, by artists unable or unwilling to work in Germany and some few who, having decided to stay there, cherished the chances of touring abroad as long as it was possible to do so during the Second World War (WWII).

Like in any other city with a Wagnerian tradition, Wagner fans in Buenos Aires fought their cause passionately. As a prologue to the following account of their misadventures and their moments of glory, it is not superfluous to warn the reader against some wrong perceptions normally related to the reception and fostering of the Wagnerian works in the capital of Argentina.

It is wrong, for instances, to associate this legacy with the endeavours of the small German speaking communities which settled there in the late XIXth century. On the contrary, decisive in the promotion of Wagner’s art was in the beginning the zeal of Italian impresarios who by 1914 had enabled the premieres of all Wagner’s works in Buenos Aires, under the baton of conductors such as Toscanini, Marinuzzi, Mugnone or Serafin. Against this background, the campaign to abolish Italian in favour of German as Wagner’s performing language was unleashed by an active minority of Argentine composers, musicologists and aficionados members of the local upper and middle class, who saw the promotion of German classical music as a way to counteract the massive predilection for Italian opera with a more balanced repertoire.

Between 1883 and the early twenties, the performance of Wagner works in Buenos Aires was restricted to three main “international” stages accessible mainly to a financially powerful elite, namely, the old teatro Colón (1857 to 88) and, from 1908 the new Teatro Colón, as well as the Teatro de la Opera and the Teatro Coliseo. There, Wagnerians without money could only afford a seat or a standing room in the upper galleries or the Gods. Not for them, therefore, the alternative of popular theatres such as the Marconi or the Politeama where porteños and immigrants alike could enjoy performances of Italian opera or Spanish zarzuela at low prices. From the late twenties onwards performances of Wagner operas became monopolized by the Colón. Lack of choice and of alternative ticket prices must have stimulated the fervour of the hungry Wagnerians noted by Grete Busch. Until prices became more accessible, they hurled their enthusiasm or disapproval in a particular noisy way. Still in 1969 a short cut introduced in one of Gurnemanz interventions in the first act of *Parsifal* was followed by a plea proclaimed from the Gods before the beginning of the second act: “*We want a Wagner without mutilations!*”⁴

The reader should also qualify Grete Busch’s idealized depicting of the Wagnerian fervour of the Argentines with the help of some facts which clearly show that those who really cared about Wagner were a minority amidst a musical environment dominated by a bourgeoisie whose attitude towards music are perceptively described by Peter Ebert, son of the *régisseur* Carl Ebert who joined Busch and Erich Kleiber in their long exile in Argentina during the Third Reich: “*The worst ingredient of the Buenos Aires scene was perhaps the audience. The opera had become incidental to*

the social function of the evening. It was normal for the auditorium lights to remain on for the first half hour or so of the performance, to give the numerous latecomers among the rich ticket holders of the Stalls and Grand Circle seats a change to find their places. They walked down the centre aisle showing off their designer clothes and flashy jewellery, and greeting their friends. Many patrons, if that is the right word, used to leave the theatre soon after the last interval. For Carl the Buenos Aires German stagione was a dreadful burden, a negation of his artistic principles, but it formed the financial basis for survival for the whole year. For this reason he and Busch continued to lead the German season in Buenos Aires for years. Full artistic satisfaction was never achieved in those six years, but since the artists were all world class, many performances were good. They never achieved the accolade of being modern opera productions. The critical success was highly satisfactory, but that is no compensation for a producer who knows that the result of this work is nowhere near that it should have been. So the critical success tasted rather stale: the critics had no inkling of what a modern production should look and feel like, after all”⁵

Grete Busch’s reply to Ebert’s frustrations suggests an excessively moody attitude from the side of this last one: *“Thousand problems were solved but many of them were in the staging. The artist Ebert, sensitive, suffering in an old fashion way in the face of paper sets and an obsolete lack of taste, was nevertheless lucky enough to find at his disposal a troop of stage workers, most of them of Italian origin, who were good beyond any expectation.”* (*“Tausende Probleme waren gelöst, aber viele lagen noch auf dem Gebiet des Bühnenbilds. Dem Künstler Ebert –verwöhnt, empfindlich, Qualen leiden im altmodischen Trott, im Anblick von papierendem Schund und verstaubter Geschmacklosigkeit stand zum Glück ein Trupp von Bühnenarbeitern, meist italienischen Einwanderern, zu Verfügung, wie er williger und brauchbarer nicht gedacht werden konnte”*)⁶

In balance, however, Ebert’s miseries can be fully understood. Having been amongst the German *régisseurs* who did so much to modernize the staging of operas in Germany during the period of the Weimar Republic, he must have felt isolated in an artistic world where singers, public and critics cared so little about making of Wagner’s musical dramas a meaningful theatrical experience. The situation was more rewarding in the case of Fritz Busch, due not only to the availability of first class singers but as well of an orchestra described in a letter to Grete as *“in general of the best rank and never behind the level of the Dresden or the Vienna Philharmonics”* (*“als Ganzen genommen allerersten Ranges und...keineswegs hinter dem Dresdner oder Wiener zurück”*)⁷. In another letter, Busch writes Grete about challenging working conditions at the Teatro Colón: *“The seasons schedule was not considerate with the orchestra or the conductors. It could happen that you had Meistersinger on Friday, Tristan on Saturday, and on Sunday at 2 pm again Meistersinger. It was also possible to have a two and half hours stage rehearsals with Chorus startin at 9 pm”* (*„Im Spielplan wird weder auf das Orchester noch auf den Dirigenten Rücksicht genommen. Es kann vorkommen, das am Freitag „Die Meistersinger“, Samstag „Tristan“, Sonntag nachmittag um 2 Uhr wiederum „Die Meistersinger“ sind; möglich ist dann um 9 Uhr abends noch eine zweienhalbstündige Probe mit Chor und Bühne“*)⁸ Busch also concedes that in the case of Ebert hardship at work was accentuated by the fact that *„he had to produce a string of operas in quick succession with rehearsals overlapping”*⁹. On the contrary, singers seemed to have had a better time, at least in Peter Ebert’s view: *“The singers were the cream of the world’s artists*

of the German repertory. They had all sung their roles many times at different theatres and were not in the least interested in “new conceptions” of production. It was frustrating and hard work and required all Carl’s diplomatic skills, because he was certainly not prepared to let things slide, but determined to get a measure of coherent thought into an ensemble of self-seekers. The nadir of his rehearsals was reached when his Sigfried tenor arrived in his dinner jacket, explaining that he had to go on to an important social function. He was obviously not in a mental or physical condition to rehearse *con tutta forza* or to forge his sword “Notung” on the anvil”.¹⁰

2 A swan in the river Plate

“If Dante had composed music he would have done it like Wagner.”¹¹ This conclusion is part of a first page feature article announcing the *première* of *Lohengrin*, the first Wagner opera staged in Buenos Aires. This piece of early Wagner journalism in Argentina was published on 12 August 1883 by *La Prensa*, at the time was one (of only two) leading newspapers of Argentina (the other being *La Nación*), was signed by the newspaper’s music critic under the code name of “*Mefistofele*”. It contains basic information on the life of Wagner and a description of the Festspielhaus, “a luxurious theatre [sic] where everything is combined to produce the most complete stage illusion”.¹² Main purpose of the article was to warn opera goers that they were about to confront themselves with a combination of music and poetry entirely new for them. “The musical discourse becomes adapted to the plot in such a way that poetry describes the drama with the eloquent help of the symphonic music.”¹³ This blend of text and music inspires the writer to characterize the work of Wagner as akin with Dante’s ideal of poetry as a comprehensive form of art where words and music melt into each other. As for the main character of the opera, “*Ariosto did not make his Orlando perform more noble and heroic deeds than Wagner did in the case of his Lohengrin*”¹⁴. *Mefistofele* then charges against the musical tastes then *à la mode* by mocking the followers of the Italian “*cavatina obligata, with andante, allegro, coloratura and cadenza finale*”, in his view an outdated expression, when compared with the “*elevated*” form of musical art created by Wagner. In Wagner, he warns his readers, you “*should not pay attention to the note but to the phrase*”.¹⁵ From these heights *Mefistofele* descends to humorous digressions of dubious taste and blatant misogyny. After characterizing Ortrude as a “*Lady Macbeth of sorts*” he complains about the way in which women entice men to behave badly: “*starting with Little Mother Eva, who gave us the apple, followed by Dalilah, who shaved us, and so many others...this should be the moment to state that women have made us to commit the most disparate nonsenses.*”¹⁶

Mefistofele’s review of the *première* at the old Teatro Colón on 17 August duly appeared the day after in the first page of *La Prensa*, between some alarming news on the increase of taxes to foreign goods under consideration by the Argentine Parliament and the Sino-French dispute on the Gulf of Tomkin. After noting that there were more foreigners than usual, in particular Germans, among a numerous and enthusiastic public welcoming Wagner’s debut in the River Plate, the critic adds that the audience “*listened with quasi religious attitude the prelude to the first act...*”. He then explains that on account of the novelty implied in the continuous flow of the music throughout each act “*it is not at all strange that there were practically no applauses for individual singers during the performance...but rather at the end of each act.*”¹⁷ He then concludes that “*Future will tell us whether this music will adapt*

itself to Latin ears. In a city like ours, this should be to no surprise, since these ears are musically educated to such an elevated degree that the Wagnerian repertoire will probably acclimatize itself and become widely accepted here."¹⁸

3 **Alla Italiana**

Indeed. *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Meistersinger* followed at the Teatro de la Ópera in 1887 1894 and 1898 respectively. While *Die Walküre* was premiered at the same theatre in 1909, the rest of the *Ring* would have to wait until the new Colón Theatre staged *Siegfried* in his inaugural season of 1908, to be followed by *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* under Toscanini in 1912. He also conducted the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1901. Shortly after the lifting of Bayreuth's monopoly over *Parsifal*, Gino Marinuzzi conducted this work in 1914 at the Coliseo the third theatre able to provide an international opera season for the enjoyment of the financially powerful Argentine establishment.

The point to which Toscanini involved himself in the preparation of his early Wagner conducting in Buenos Aires is exemplified by his letter dated 16 February 1906 to his friend Mario Marchesi: "*Please show Nastrucci the list of the first and second violins engaged for Buenos Aires and urge him to tell me whether they are all good. Show him as well the names of those who live in Buenos Aires. Warn him that this year we will do Die Walküre in addition to Tristan; thus we need good players more badly than ever. One Viti has been recommended to me as a second violin, and I've been assured that he is very good. If there are still positions open, have him engaged*"¹⁹ The fact that the concertmaster of the Scala Gino Nastrucci was tasked with the selection of the members of the orchestra is also revealing of the way in which this selection was made. Not only Toscanini but also the concertmaster of the most important of all Italian opera houses, as well as part of its orchestra, travelled to Buenos Aires. Once there, Nastrucci would also be charge of the auditions of local musicians likely to fit the high standards required by the Maestro. All precautions were not enough to prevent one of Toscanini's famous tantrums when, during one of the 1906 performance of *Die Walküre*, the public interrupted the *Hojotoho* of Salome Krucenisky with a too prolonged applause.

Even the Krucenisky had to sing in Italian, which at that time was the only conceivable language for opera performances in far away South America. Far from restricting themselves to language, heresies against the *Meister* included the premiere in 1898 of *Meistersinger* in *four* acts, with the overture of *Tannhäuser* after the second one. There was even one occasion when a Wagnerian work was downgraded to become part of a curious double bill. The performances of *Tannhäuser* staged by the *Gran Compañía Lírica Italiana* at the Teatro de la Opera in 1897 were preceded by *Il fidanzato del Mare*, an opera of the Argentine composer Héctor Panniza. The fact that this one also had to be sung in Italian shows that not even Argentine works could be performed in their vernacular language; so indissoluble was the association between opera as a musical form and the Italian as the only language available for its expression; and so absolute the monopoly exerted by the Italian opera companies and the almighty Casa Ricordi, who made available the scores. In compensation for the loss of authenticity the use of the Italian enabled throughout the years the melting of Wagner's music with the powerful legato singing of many great opera stars working

in Buenos Aires. Still in the seventies, it was not unusual to meet at the Colón old “porteños” reporting enthusiastically of Claudia Muzio’s *Elsa*, Aureliano Pertile’s *Lohengrin*, and Titta Ruffo’s *Kurwenal*. Other examples of the services to Wagner paid by Italian singers to Wagner in Buenos Aires include the *Hans Sachs* of Mario Sanmarco and the *Beckmesser* of Giuseppe de Luca, as well as Carlo Galeffi as *Amfortas*, Adamo Didur as *Klingsor*, and Ezio Pinza as *Gurnemanz*. Aside from Toscanini, Wagner operas were conducted by other famous *habitués* at the Scala, namely Tulio Serafin, Leopoldo Mugnone and Gino Marinuzzi.

4 Wagneriana

The monopoly of the Italian language was relaxed in 1910 with the introduction of Spanish for the performances at the new Colón of *Blanca de Beaulieu* an opera by the Italian-Argentine composer Hugo Stiatessi. 1911 was the year of the French, when the ensemble of the *Opéra Comique* under Albert Wolff premiered Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Massenet’s *Le jongleur de Nôtre Dame*. They also premiered at the Argentine capital the original French version of Charpentier’s *Louise*. No wonder that the Wagnerians decided to stage a call to arms in favour of German, at least for Wagner’s sake.

In fact they did more than that. They decided to create an institution which would not only promote Wagner but all forms of classical music alternative to Italian Opera. It was to this effect that the Asociación Wagneriana de Buenos Aires (Wagnerian Association of Buenos Aires)²⁰ was established with pomp and circumstance in 1912 during a solemn soirée held at the Golden Hall of *La Prensa*, the same newspaper which had so enthusiastically reported the arrival of *Lohengrin* in 1883. *Alma Mater* of the Wagneriana was Ernesto De la Guardia, a pianist and musicologist of a traditional Argentine family of Hispanic origin, who gave on that occasion a festive lecture on the life and work of Richard Wagner. He was joined in his enterprise by scions of equally distinguished representatives of the local *haute bourgeoisie* such as the composers Julián Aguirre and Carlos López Buchardo. Other co-founders, such as Cirilo Grassi Díaz and Rafael Gironde were also exponents of a cultural elite advocating for a more comprehensive approach to classical music of all kinds. Although representatives of the small German community were noticeably absent in this club of initiators, the Wagneriana would nevertheless become the agglutinating focal point for the activities of German and Austrian artists visiting or living in Buenos Aires, from Felix Weingartner to Richard Strauss as well as Fritz Reiner, Otto Klemperer and, above all, Fritz Busch and Erich Kleiber.

The Asociación Wagneriana not only lobbied for the representation of Wagner operas in the original German but also for the performance “in cycle” of the *Ring*. It further used the emblematic name of the *Meister* as the banner under which a comprehensive and proactive set of activities took place. Important orchestral and choral works of many German, French, Russian and Italian composers, including contemporary ones, as well as chamber music and Lied were enthusiastically promoted by the new institution which shortly after its establishment became a leader of its kind and remained so until the late nineteen eighties. The Asociación even promoted the establishment of the first Argentine Conservatory, until now the leading educational institution in the country.

5 A political farrago

Until the end of WWI, Wagner remained above politics in Argentina as Beethoven or Mozart would. It was towards the end of the conflict that the Wagnerian Age of Innocence there ended abruptly when opera goers were compelled to confront some of the political dilemmas familiar to everyday life in Wahnfried.

While Argentina observed strict neutrality throughout the Great War, towards the end of the conflict the dominant Francophile cultural establishment of Buenos Aires decisively enrolled in a witch hunt against anything German, and the less distinguished but economically more powerful Italian community gladly followed. The Argentine elite of Hispanic origin was on the contrary more reluctant to take sides on European issues more vital for the immigrant communities than for the native population. As for Wagner, the Colón still managed to have *Tristan* and *Walküre* performed during its 1917 season. In face of this challenging boldness coming from Argentina, Ricordi and other editing houses imposed in their contracts clauses subjecting the use of their scores to the condition that no Wagner operas should be performed. As a result, no Wagner works were staged in Buenos Aires in 1918 and 1919.

Shortly after the Armistice the Wagneriana launched its own war with a letter written to the administration of the Colón in December 1918, in which it warned that, from thence on, they would pursue their Wagner campaign with increased intensity. The Colón answered by adducing to causes beyond its control, notably the reluctance by many of the Italian singers normally engaged in Buenos Aires to sing Wagner's works and the refusal by editing houses in Italy and France to provide scores. "Then use German publishing houses and non Italian singers!" answered the Wagneriana, which seized the Colón's reply as yet another opportunity to introduce Wagner in German. In an editorial published in its quarterly magazine, the Asociación, without further ado, named Casa Ricordi as the source of all anti-Wagnerian mischief: "*Even after the abolition of black lists, Mr. Ricordi, the opulent Milanese Editor, proclaims his holy war against Wagner and, with an Olympic gesture, evicts him from all opera stages. Otherwise he will forbid the performance of works of modern Italian composers over which the editor has property rights. Who is this Mr. Ricordi? Which new and imperialist power enables him to establish this unpalatable dictatorship over Art? Ricordi vs. Wagner! Here we have something unexpected, surprising and bizarre! ...the fight of a mortal against an immortal*".²¹

However, as the Wagnerians would soon learn, it was not only about singers and scores. On 22 April 1919 *La Nación* published "*The twilight of Wagner*" an article by Max Nordau which provided an opportunity for the Argentines to confront themselves with author's famous thesis on the intrinsic *degenerate* (*Entartete*) character of Wagner's Art.

Nordau's arguments to establish Wagner's artistic *degeneration* did not go well in Buenos Aires. In particular, his description of Wagner's music as a cultural expression of German militarism was received as a personal insult by the members of the Wagneriana, most of whom belonged to a liberal elite which not only abhorred Prussian militarism, but also had a reason to rejoice at the fall of any monarchy, European or otherwise. The Argentine establishment was not only anti-monarchic but

decisively enrolled in the French republican ideals. Accordingly, the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War and the establishment of yet another Empire in 1871 was considered in Argentina as a defeat of all what this young South American Republic stood for in its perception of world affairs. No wonder, then, that the Wagneriana so strongly took exception with Nordau's description of Wagner as "*a non written article of the treaty of Frankfurt and the real winner of Sedan, together with Kaiser Wilhelm, von Moltke and Bismarck.*"

In response to Nordau's suggestions that if you loved Wagner you were on the side of the Kaiser, the Wagneriana described Nordau (then an outstanding leader of the young Zionist movement), as an "Israelite publicist", thus implying that his anti-Wagnerism could only make sense as an emotional reaction to Wagner's antisemitism. A similar approach is reflected in the long refutation to Nordau by Ernesto de la Guardia contained in "*The war to music. Hatred against Wagner*", a comprehensive essay published by the Wagneriana that same year²² as the start of its pro-Wagner campaign: "*It seems to be a rather delicate matter to explain the origins of Nordau's hatred against Wagner. The somehow extroverted attack of the composer against Meyerbeer – a Jew respectable as a human being, but a mediocre composer- says it all: "Das Judentum und die Musik" written by Wagner in 1850, still exasperates the Israeli philosopher*"²³

In de la Guardia's words the purpose of his essay is "*to fight an injustice and the perpetration of a crime of lesser act*"²⁴. With uncommon erudition, de la Guardia refutes all Nordau's arguments and dismisses his contradictions as the product of sheer ignorance. He carefully avoids advocating on Wagner's superiority over any other composer and dismisses "Wagnerianism" as a phenomena so out of fashion as "Gluckism" or "Lullism". Even "²⁵Kaiserism" seems to him and outdated concept following the outcome of the Great War.

De la Guardia then moves to the business of confronting Nordau's characterization of Wagner as the real winner of Sedan and *au-pair* of Wilhelm 1st, Moltke and Bismarck: "*after Wagner's death, Nietzsche philosophy took over Germany with its monstrous theories on the Superman and the absolute apology of cruelty and force. Nietzsche was followed by other philosophers who reinforced his perverse ideas. To the Iron Chancellor, who proclaimed that 'la force prime le droit', followed other no less "realistic" or "ironlike" Chancellors... this is how we came to the formidable European Catastrophe unleashed in 1914 and the fall of the German Empire*" .

De la Guardia's essay became the intellectual platform for a vast opinion poll launched by the Wagneriana requesting views "*on the systematic exclusion of Wagner in opera theatres throughout the world.*"²⁶ A most important purpose behind this exercise was to summon the pro-Wagner views of members of the cultural and social establishment of Buenos Aires and neighbouring Uruguay who subscribed to the season of the Colón. No doubt that the theatre's administration would take seriously the incandescent replies from some of the most influential opera goers in town. After all, there could be no international opera season in Buenos Aires without the patronage of diplomats, members of the literary world and, least but not less, businessmen, politicians, and members of the local aristocracy. Nevertheless, the poll would only carry the weight necessary to decisively influence the public opinion in Argentina if it included views coming from international quarters. In particular it was

important to counteract the image of Richard Wagner as symbol of anything against France. Decisive in this regard were the answers to the poll received from Albert Roussel, Vincent D'Indy, Romain Rolland and Gabriel Grovlez, composer and director of the Orchestra of the Grand Opéra de Paris.

Roussel favours the return of Wagner to the repertoire in a rather qualified way, "*if not to the place it occupies before the war, which was too important in comparison to the one of our French school*"²⁷. He suggests that Wagner be reintroduced in a way similar to the one being tried nowadays in Israel, first by including fragments of Wagner's work in concert. Staging of these works would spontaneously come afterwards: *«I completely trust that the amplitude of criteria and the common sense which characterizes the French spirit will prevail, so that public order will not be troubled ("J'ai assez confiance dans la largeur de vues et la clare bon sens de l'esprit français, pour être convaincu que l'ordre n'y sera pas troublé")»*²⁸ Roussel's compatriots follow instead a less cautious approach in favour of Wagner.

D'Indy tackles the task of dealing with Wagner's famous anti-French pamphlet *Eine Kapitulation* only to attest that he has found no insult to the French in it. Wagner may have been written there some distasteful comments on the French. However *«Goethe and above all Mozart have been particularly severe in their judgements regarding the French, and in spite of this we have just restaged a beautiful "Marriage of Figaro" in a state theatre and we play "Faust" once a week at the Opéra...The great works of art never perish: sooner or later the work of Wagner, an educator of our generation of dramatic art, which also includes Debussy, will triumphantly reappear more youthful, and more vital than the sad operas which aim at replacing it. This, I say in "good French" as our old Lafontaine wrote. («Goethe lui meme et Mozart surtout ont été bien plus apprement severes dans leurs appréciations sur les français...et cépendent ont a fait récentement, et dans un théâtre d'Etat, une belle reprise des "Noces de Figaro" et on jue "Faust" a l'opéra une fois par semaine...Les chefs d'œuvre ne périssent pas, et tot ou tard, l'œuvre de Wagner, éducateur de notre génération dramatique, jusques et y compris Debussy, reparaitra triomphante, plus jeune et plus vivace que les tristes opéras que voudraint l'éttouffler. Cela je le dis "en bon français" comme écrivait notre vieux Lafontaine. »)*²⁹

*"Nobody has the power to suppress the sun. Wagner shines for all mankind" («Il nest au pouvoier de personne de supprimer le soleil. Wagner reyonne pour toute l'humanité »)*³⁰ proclaims Romain Rolland to the Argentines, while Grovlez excelees in truly call to arms: *"All artists, all those who do not expect to find intellectual convictions in their daily newspapers, must unite to demand the presence of Wagner's work in symphonic concert and opera stages, never to the detriment of national works but at the same level of any masterpiece" ("Il faut que tous les artistes, que tous ce qui ne vont point chercher leurs convictions intellectuelles dans les articles de leur journal s'unissent pour éxiter, aussi bien dans les concerts symphoniques que dans les théatres lyriques, la présence des œuvres de Wagner, non point au détriment des œuvres, mais au même titre que n importe quel chef d'œuvre humain ! »)*³¹

The pro-Wagner praises coming from France were further strengthened by an important contribution of Felix Weingartner, a German of impeccable antimilitarist credentials: *What has art to do with politics. Is it not unheard of that Richard Wagner*

who died in 1883 after a life of unparalleled success, is related to a war unleashed by criminals without conscience in 1914. Should not precisely artists, scientists and all those who have nothing to do with military, warfare and politics, get together to avoid the unlimited devastation of all spiritual achievements? The spiritual assassination provoked by anger directed against the arts and sciences of enemy nations, is not less repulsive in itself than the assassination and devastation perpetrated at the battlefields. We cannot act swiftly enough to level again a platform on which all human beings promoting art, no matter which nation they belong to, can gather again.” („Was hat die Kunst mit der Politik zu tun? Ist es nicht deradezu unerhört , dass man Richard Wagner, de im Jahre 1883 nach einem Leben voll beispiellosem Erfolg gestorben ist, in Verbindung bringt mit einem Krieg , der im Jahre 1914 von einigen gewissenlosen Verbrechern entfesselt worden ist. Hätten nich gerade Künstler, Männer der Wissenschaft und alle diejenigen, die nicht mit Militär, Kriegsführung und Politik zu tun hatten, zusammenhalten müssen, um der grenzenlosen Verwüstung aller geistigen Errungenschaften entgegenzutreten? Der geistige Mord, den man mit dem Wüten gegen Kunst und Wissenschaft feindlicher Nationen begangen hat, ist in seiner Art nicht minder entsetzlich, wie die Morde und Verwüstungen die auf den Schlachtfeldern begangen worden sind. Man kann nicht rasch genug daran gehen, hier jeden Zwiespalt wieder auszugleichen und einen Standpunkt zu finden, auf dem alle geistig wirkenden Menschen, welcher Nation sie auch angehören, miteinander wieder verkehren können.)³²

Weingartner’s anti-war undertones contrast with the cautious response from Bayreuth, where Wagner was then so closely associated with everything Germany had stood for between Sedan and its “Kapitulation” of 1918. Rather than commenting on the issue, Siegfried Wagner’s response contains only an endorsement of M. Grovlez’s views, without a single comment. In contrast with the pro-Wagner attitude of many writers and scientists, Argentine musicians were noticeably reluctant to side with the supporters of the *Meister*. In doing so they avoided the risk of incurring into the displeasure of the Casa Ricordi and the management of the Colón.

Most vociferous in its advice on the way forwards was Alfonso Par, Chairman of the Wagnerian Association of Barcelona. In his view, French and Italian editors had already been plotting against Wagner before a war which had provided them a unique opportunity to put aside his works in favour of Puccini, Mascagni and Leoncavallo. The solution was to dispose of Italian singers and sing Wagner in Spanish...or in German “*as they do in London. As for the scores, go directly to the German editors, Breitkopf, Fürstner, Schott, etc. In one word: exclude Ricordi in connection with Wagner. Use him only for things Italian.*”³³

6 Parsifal on air

Italians were nevertheless needed, not only for “things Italian” but for Wagner too. This, for a very simple reason: only Italian impresarios could bring chorus, orchestras and singers to Buenos Aires. Or, better said, only Walter Mocchi could. Defined by Toscanini as “*the most singular exponent of theatrical speculation*”³⁴ Mocchi virtually monopolized the availability of resources needed to organize an international opera season in Buenos Aires. And there was no reason for him to avoid things German at the cost of any confrontation with the influential pro-Wagner cultural establishment. In 1920, as the quarterly publication of the Wagnerian

Association of Buenos Aires happily announced the final results of its pro-Wagner campaign,³⁵ Mocchi and his partner Faustino La Rosa organized performances at the Teatro Colón of *Tristan und Isolde*, *Walküre* and *Lohengrin*. On 20 August of that same year Mocchi further obliged the Argentine Wagnerians with a universal first: he made available the Coliseo, a theatre under his administration then rivalling the Colón, for the first ever opera to be broadcasted live and *in the open air* anywhere in the world. The chorus and orchestra were those of Mocchi's Constanzi, then the most famous opera theatre in Rome, and most singers were Italian. However, the choice did not fall upon *Aida* or *Bohème* but on... *Parsifal*. Influential in this decision was the availability of Felix von Weingartner then *on tour* in Buenos Aires. Another "alien" to the otherwise wholly Italian enterprise was the Argentine soprano Sara César in the role of Kundry. Her incorporation to the cast echoed the views of the then President of the Republic, Hipólito Yrigoyen in favour providing Argentine artists with a real chance to participate in performing arts events normally monopolized by Europeans. The occasion was partially shattered by the unexpected appearance of some few upholders of the spirit of Sedan who tried to boycott the Parsifal performances at the Coliseo on grounds of the pacifist views of Weingartner³⁶.

The *Parsifal* broadcast³⁷ was made possible thanks to Miguel Susini, a scion of a well established Argentine family who had profited of this father's tenure as Argentine Consul in Vienna to study musicology at the local conservatory there. After becoming a Navy doctor, Susini was sent to France during WWI to investigate the toxic effects of gassing in the trenches. While in France, he became acquainted with the vacuum tubes made by Pathé and Metal, and smuggled some sample tubes back to Buenos Aires in 1919. He then left the Navy and got from Mocchi the job of refurbishing the Teatro Coliseo in order to launch a robust international opera season which would compete with the Colón. Parenthetically, Susini researched on broadcasting technology available at that time with the help of three other upper-class Argentines, Miguel Mugica, Luis Romero Carranza and César Guerrico. The four became famous as team under the name of the "*locos de la terraza*" ("*the loonies of the roof*") when, a week before the Parsifal broadcast, they erected a precarious roof antenna between one of the theater's roof towers and a dome of a neighbouring family house 120 feet away. Inside the theatre, a WWI 5 watt transmitter was installed in the Gods or upper gallery. The transmitter was connected to a microphone, to which a wooden horn was added.

The transmission lasted for about three hours from 9 pm to midnight. The number of listeners was limited because the crystal set radios used at the time were rare and required tedious fine-tuning with a lead glass crystal. In spite of these difficulties, that night the *loonies* got news that Wagner's waves from the Coliseo had even reached the ears of a ship's operator in Santos, Brazil. No wonder, then, that the newspaper *La Razón* published a ravinshingly inspired review the day after under the appropriate title of "*An audition from heaven. Parsifal at extremely popular prices*": "*Yesterday...a sound wave undulated through the ether, as if opening the most capricious, rich and abundant noble emotions in the whole city with its subtly skylight of harmonies...For three hours the present of Parsifal was offered not only those initiated in the secret but also many others that for reasons of their trade or sheer coincidence –sailors with ships equipped with radio, radio- telegraphy operators,...*"³⁸. President Yrigoyen commended the accomplishment with one of his

famous ambiguous comments: “*“When young men manage to play with science, it’s because they possess genius within”*. In commemoration of the 1920 broadcasting a Presidential Decree fifty years later declared the date of 27 August as *Broadcasting day*. In this way *Parsifal* became an emblematic reference in the history of Argentina: even those who have never heard the Grail’s message know what this one means for the world of broadcasting.

Encouraged by their success, Susini and his *loonies of the roof* went on to broadcast not only *Lohengrin* and *Walküre* but the whole opera season of the Coliseo: *Aida*, *Salome*, *Francesca da Rimini*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Mefistofele*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Bohème*, *Iris*, *Rigoletto*, *Manon*, *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, *Tosca*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *La Gioconda*, *Thaïs*, *Andrea Chénier*, and *Carmen*.

For his part, Mocchi went on to further demonstrate that what was needed to perform Wagner in German was a good *Italian* impresario. He also decided to placate once and for all the increasing pressure of the Wagneriana to stage a complete Ring Cycle. Not only was Weingartner enticed to come back to Buenos Aires in 1922 with the Vienna Philharmonic to play Wagner works in 19 of its concerts. That same year, a team of first class German singers was also contracted to take away Wagner from the Italians. After the first ever performances of *Parsifal* in German, Weingartner conducted six Ring cycles in the same language, one of them with the Vienna Philharmonic. Amidst the laborious singers engaged to perform all this between 21 May and 28 August mention should be made of Emil Schipper (Wotan, Amfortas) C. Braum (Gurnemanz) Walter Kirschhoff (*Parsifal*, Siegfried) Helene Wildbrunn (Kundry, Brunhilde) and Lotte Lehmann (Sieglinde and Guttrune).

The day after a performance of *Die Walküre* under Weingartner and the Vienna Philharmonic, *La Razón* reported the apparently unusual fact that everybody was in their seats by the time the curtain went up. It further adds that *the public listened with unusual awareness and applauded at the end of each act with rare warmth and insistence. The unanimous and rapturous ovation at the end of the first act had little precedent in the history of the Colón. Only María Barrientos, Enrico Caruso and Titta Ruffo in their best nights have been applauded in such a way*³⁹.

7 “In aid of Cosima...”

The following year the Vienna Philharmonic came back to Buenos Aires with Richard Strauss as its conductor. Strauss must have been particularly convincing in depicting the distressing financial difficulties of Wagner’s widow to the Chairman of the Asociación Wagneriana, whose board immediately met to hastily organize a concert in aid of “Cósima Liszt de Wagner”. The *Hohe Frau*’s situation was described by the editorial in the July issue of the Association’s magazine in a particularly dramatic way: “*Thousand times must have paraded in the memories of Señora Wagner remembrances of ...the saddest of days and the moments of triumph. Surely, she has not forgotten the Meister’s hours of need, pessimism and desperation; and afterwards the ascending march of his colossal works towards the glory and the immortality, once the spirit of Richard Wagner detached itself from the body resting at Wahnfried.*” The editorial suggested that from his throne in the realm of Immortality

Wagner's spirit watched over "the ideal theatre he conceived and its purity, so as to ensure that it avoids contamination with any vulgar or utilitarian principle. We are told that the daughter of Liszt and wife of Wagner is progressively selling her personal remembrances of the author of the *Ring des Nibelungen*, thus pulling apart the pieces of her own life". Hence the invitation to the concert drafted in equal compelling terms: "the city of Buenos Aires, home to any generous ideal, has never remained deaf to the pains of others, in particular if they burden a lady who carries such illustrious names in the history of music...The Association will therefore organize a concert participated by eminent artists at a price of 2 pesos per ticket." It would certainly **not** be a charity concert but rather "an act of reparation in compliance with a moral obligation...to contribute to the sustenance of a venerable old lady, in recognition for the beauty of the immortal works created by the great composer". Not that the audience got great value for money. At the concert given on 31st July 1923 at the headquarters of the *Wagneriana*, only nine Wagnerian highlights were heard and Maria Olszewska didn't even bother to sing all the *Wesendonk Lieder* (she only did *Souffrances* and *Rêves*). Piano accompaniment hardly seemed to be appropriate for the rendition by Emil Schipper of the Hollander Aria or by Walter Kirschhoff of the Meistersinger's *Preislied*. Be as it may, the files of the *Wagneriana* attest that in January 1924, a Mr. Llorente personally handed over to Cosima 5,000 Argentine pesos. The response from Bayreuth came in the form of an autograph of pages 109-110 of *Meistersinger* attached to a shabbily typed letter signed by Siegfried Wagner: "Bayreuth, Haus Wahnfried, 30 May 25. Dear Sir, please find attached an autograph of the Meistersingern from R. Wagner's hand, with my request to accept it as a small token of our gratitude to the R.W. from Buenos Aires. With best regards, Siegfried Wagner" ("Bayreuth, Haus Wahnfried. den 30 mai 25. Sehr verehrter Herr, Anbei ein Partiturskizzenblatt zu den Meistersingern von R. Wagners Hand, mit der Bitte es als kleines zeichen unserer Dankbarkeit dem R.W. von Bueones Aires (sic) zu übersenden. Mit hochachtungsvollen Grüssen, ergebenst Siegfried Wagner").

8 In German, or nearly so

After the breakthrough of 1922 and 1923, German conductors and artists never stopped coming to the River Plate. Their appearances in Buenos Aires were facilitated when in 1925, the creation of the orchestra and chorus of the Colón made unnecessary the negotiation of packages where soloists where Italian singers had to be included as part of the ensembles provided by the Mailand's Scala or the Rome's Constanzi. Italian incursions into Wagner continued for some time, but in parallel to splendid performances in German. In 1929 Fritz Reiner conducted *Walküre*, *Tristan*, *Tannhauser* and *Meistersinger*, and in 1931 Frida Leider, Lauritz Melchior and Alexander Kipnis sang *Tristan und Isolde* under the baton of Georges Sebastian. During the same season Klemperer conducted in Buenos Aires the last staged *Ring* cycle of his life. He did so to mixed reviews, if we are going to follow his biographer Peter Heyworth. The orchestra was exhausted after too many rehearsals and the result was a lacklustre *Rheingold*. It followed a *Walküre* with fast tempi, lack of inner commitment and arbitrary cuts to the dialogue between Wotan and Fricka. In *Siegfried* cuts prevented the Wanderer from posing more than one question to Mime in act one and further cut allowed the hero to proceed to his Brünnhilde without encountering his grandfather on the way. There seemed to be lots of tension in the cast, with Klemperer not hiding his view that Melchior was artistically inadequate to

sing Siegfried. Only *Götterdämmerung* seemed to achieve the high standards expected from such a star cast.⁴⁰ Months before Klemperer had inaugurated the season at the Colón with several performances of *Meistersinger* sung in German. Or nearly so, since a concession had to be made in the case of the celebrated basso buffo Salvatore Baccaloni who sang Fritz Kothner in Italian.

It was also in 1931 that the Municipality of the city of Buenos Aires decided to completely take over the administration of the Colón theatre, rather than outsourcing to impresarios the programming and contracting of artists. This crucial decision brought immediate misfortunes to the Wagnerians. Due to financial constraints the Colón decided not to include Wagner in its repertoire of 1932. Adding insult to injury, *Feuersnot*, the only German opera programmed for that year was confined to the unrepresentative summer season. And it was performed in Italian.

Things did not look promising during the first half of 1933. On 15 April 1933 that year, the *Argentinisches Tageblatt*, then the leading daily newspaper in German of Argentina, lamented that also that year there would not be “a dignified Wagnerian, or German season in the Colón”.⁴¹ This conclusion was drawn from declarations by Fritz Busch, then recently expelled from the Dresden Semperoper due to his anti Nazi stand, in the sense that he would not have time to organize and tutor a proper ensemble of singers to “serve the German Art and the artistic demands of the Colón”⁴². One month later luck struck, courtesy of the Third Reich.

9 A snub to Bayreuth and a present from Berlin

May 1933. In his memoirs, Fritz Busch sardonically admires the skills of the Gestapo in arranging the telephone call from Heinz Tietjen to Basel’s Dolderhotel. How on earth did they know that, while on his way to exile, Busch used to spend his evenings there?⁴³ In any case, after confirming that Toscanini had cancelled his appearances at the 1933 Bayreuth Festival, Tietjen invited Busch there “in the name of Frau Winifred Wagner” (“Ich lade Sie im Namen from Frau Winifred Wagner ein”).⁴⁴ Busch replied with a courteous snub: “Transmit my thanks to Frau Wagner, Herr Tietjen, and thanks to you too, but I am travelling to Buenos Aires in two weeks. You surely understand that one has to keep one’s word... (“Sagen Sie Frau Wagner vielen Dank. Ich danke auch Ihnen, Herrn Tietjen. Aber ich fahre in zwei Wochen nach Buenos Aires. Sie werden gewiss verstehen, dass man ein gegebenes Wort halten muss.”).⁴⁵ Busch’s change of mind is well explained in his memoirs⁴⁶. By the time of his declarations to the *Tageblatt* he was still exploring the possibility of remaining in Germany. After a decisive confrontation with Hermann Göring he decided that it would be impossible for him to do so and finally answered favourably to the insistent invitations coming from Buenos Aires.

On 8 August 1933 Fritz Busch lifted his baton for the first time at the Colón to placate Wagnerians there with one of the best *Meistersinger* in memory. Against his initial apprehensions he was able to preside over a team of first class singers unexpectedly available to travel to Buenos Aires at very short notice. And they even stayed in Buenos Aires for *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, *Fidelio* and *Rosenkavalier*! Courtesy of the Prussian Ministry for Science, Art and Popular Education, suggests Grete Busch in her memoirs.⁴⁷ Her view is reinforced by Sam Sirikawa who in his book *the Devil’s music master* suggests that the present from Berlin was part of the charm offensive

developed to counteract the widely advertised excesses that had followed the 30 of January take-over. Throughout their stay in Buenos Aires the artists were closely supervised by a representative of the Prussian Ministry, who on 12 October 1933 duly reported a generally successful tour. He nevertheless mentioned “*a few but very unpleasant confrontations involving General Musical Director Busch and tenor Lauritz Melchior...I wish to mention a particular incident where this last one broke his silence to say: “do not forget that you are representing Hitler here”. To which the tenor Seider replied: “I do not care about this”. Melchior replied: “It is really most unfortunate that for you, a German, everything goes. I have been serving the German Art for twenty years and find this business decidedly important!”*”⁴⁸

From 1933 until the early fifties Fritz Busch, Erich Kleiber and the stage directors Carl Ebert, Otto Erhard and Joseph Gielen practically monopolized the production of Wagner operas in Buenos Aires. After excelling as Tannhäuser, Sigmund, Siegfried, Walter during the thirties Max Lorenz travelled for the last time to Buenos Aires before the war in 1938 to sing Tristan and Siegfried. Always a survivor, Lorenz would visit Buenos Aires for the last time in 1947, to partner with Rose Bampton (Sieglinde) and Astrid Varnay (Brünhilde) in the last Ring conducted there by Erich Kleiber.

During WWII Wagnerian roles were sung by artists continuously commuting between Buenos Aires and New York. Those no more able to sing at Bayreuth for political reasons included Lauritz Melchior, Herbert Janssen, Alexander Kipnis and Emmanuel List. They were joined by Met stars such as Majorie Lawrence, Rise Stevens, Rose Bampton and Helen Traubel. Amidst these overwhelming star cast parade, Roberto Kinsky, a most underrated conductor during the Busch and Kleiber supremacy over the Colón, managed to make his way to conduct in 1943 *Tristan* and *Götterdämmerung* with Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel. After working as assistant conductor to Busch at the Semperoper, Kinsky made of Buenos Aires his home until his death in 1977.

10 Post war: from Evita to Birgit Nilsson

In 1944 General Juan Domingo Perón chose the occasion of a gala performance at the Colón to officially introduce María Eva Duarte to an audience of diplomats, politicians and socialites. He married her the year after, and from then on the couple rarely missed the yearly gala held at the Colón in celebration of Argentina’s Independence. Otherwise, a house hitherto seen as a bastion of the local oligarchy became a venue where opera had to alternate with folklore and tango concerts. On occasions, the Colón choir and orchestra were even compelled to record Peronist songs and marches, and Evita herself took the Colón stage to address trade union meetings. Still, the political agenda left some dates free for Wagnerian events such as Erich Kleiber’s conducting of *Tristan* and *Götterdämmerung* in 1948 with Kirsten Flagstad, Viorica Ursuleac, Set Svanholm, Ludwig Weber and Hans Hotter. In 1949 Kleiber had enough. His last Wagner performance at the Colón was a *Meistersinger* with Hotter, Weber, Suthaus and Anton Dermota. Weeks before Maria Callas had reported to her husband that the Colón “was entirely controlled by Evita.”⁴⁹ And then she goes on: “Buenos Aires is hateful...Besides it is totally fascist. All fascists in the world are here.”⁵⁰ Callas antifascist rant seems to have been provoked by her own problems during performances of *Aida*, *Norma* and *Turandot*. In any case, the diva

was only confirming similar apprehensions by Fritz Busch, who stopped working at the Colón already in 1945. According to Grete, her husband had to confront situations which reminded him too much of his earlier problems at the Semperoper in 1933.

Aside from local neo-fascist tendencies, singers and conductors who had worked in Hitler's Germany arrived to the Colón without arousing too much irritation in a country where politics and music were never mixed to conform a subject for public debate. After Busch and Kleiber's departure the Colón opened its doors for concerts under Fürtwängler and Karajan and important Wagner interpretations were assigned to artists included in Hitler's 1944 *Gottbegnadeten-Liste* of irreplaceable artists. Among them were Karl Böhm (1950 to 1952: *Walküre*, *Lohengrin* and *Der fliegende Holländer*), Karl Elmendorff, (Meistersinger in 1954), Mathieu Ahlersmeyer (1954: *Sachs*) and Joseph Greindl (1950-54: *Hunding*, *Koenig Heinrich*). Otherwise, the devaluation of the Argentine peso and the restrictions to export money did not prevent young singers such as Astrid Varnay from sharing roles with veterans such as Max Lorenz, Rose Bampton or Emmanuel List. Some of their Argentine colleagues were less lucky since the Colón became a non-go area for many native artists espousing left wing or anti-peronist ideologies.

In 1955 Birgit Nilsson made her debut as Isolde, only to have her run of performances interrupted by the military putsch that brought down Perón. In her memoirs she recalls her agitation while running to take shelter at the basement of the Claridge Hotel. Her German colleagues, she adds, knew better how to behave in such circumstances and seemed to be more relaxed.⁵¹

11 Towards the end of the twentieth century

Sixteen years later, under the baton of Horst Stein and with Jon Vickers singing his first Tristan, Nilsson sang her last Isolde at the Colón. In 1962 she had taken part in four Ring cycles conducted by Heinz Wallberg in 1962 when regisseur Ernst Poettgen surprised conservative audiences with abstract staging *à la* Neu Bayreuth. Wotan, Siegfried and Sieglinde were sung by respectively by Hans Hotter, Hans Hopf, and Gré Brouwenstijn). Nilsson also alternated as Brünnhilde with Amy Shuard during five complete Rings conducted in 1967 by Ferdinand Leitner, in a cast also led by Gwyneth Jones, Wolfgang Windgassen and David Ward. During the sixteen years separating Nilsson's Wagnerian debut and farewell, Buenos Aires also enjoyed performances of *Meistersinger* under Thomas Beecham (1958), and in 1969 a *Parsifal* conducted by Erich Leindorf brought together Regine Crespin, Windgassen, Theo Adam and Franz Crass. Victoria de los Angeles and Christa Ludwig sang their only Wagnerian roles in Buenos Aires on occasion of a 1964 *Lohengrin* conducted by Lovro von Matačić. By then, everybody thought it was over and done with Wagner in Italian, ... but no so!: Wagnerians left the theatre incensed with fury after the chorus welcomed *Lohengrin's* swan as "*il cigno!*"

During the sixties and the seventies, two important general directors of the Colón, Juan Pedro Montero and Enzo Valenti Ferro, ensured not only an eclectic repertoire interpreted by well known singers, but also a solid routine of rehearsals and availability of resources for the preparation of sets and costumes. This situation ended with the political crisis which in October 1973 brought back to power an ageing Juan Domingo Perón, days before Ingrid Bjoner sang performances of *Der fliegende*

Holländer conducted by Leopold Hager. From then on the theatre would reach again its past standards of foresight and efficiency. Wagner's absence from the Colón from 1974 to 1976 coincided with three years of political chaos where left and right wing terrorism in Buenos Aires was followed by the installation in power of the longest and most cruel of military governments ever experienced in Argentina (1976 to 1983). Even under adverse political and economic conditions the Colón brought back Hager in 1977 for a *Tristan* with Jess Thomas and Ute Vinzing. An excellent local conductor, Pedro Ignacio Calderón, took the baton for a 1978 *Tannhäuser* with Jess Thomas and Marita Napier, and in 1979, Thomas returned with Eva Marton with a *Lohengrin* conducted by Peter Maag.

The last production of *Meistersinger* ever to be seen in the Colón was conducted in 1980 by Hans Wallat and included the participation of Jess Thomas, Norman Bailey, Karl Ridderbusch and Hannelore Bode. Never since its premiere in Buenos Aires in 1898 has this most popular of Wagner operas been absent from the Colón for such a long time. The reasons are manifold and in many cases demonstrative enough of organizational shortcomings resulting from the accumulation of economic crisis and political uncertainty. Members of the "Orquesta y Coro Estable", the house chorus and orchestra, are consistently underpaid and continuously pressed to take over other jobs in order to survive. This feature, already discovered by Karl Böhm in the early fifties as a main shortcoming to enable proper orchestral rehearsals⁵², has worsened during the last thirty years to the point of making impossible the rehearsal periods demanded by conductors to achieve minimum acceptable standards.

12 Walküre's ride between dictatorship and democracy

In spite of these problems, the Colón rode undeterred with a new Ring during turbulent period characterised by a thirty per cent devaluation of the national currency, the Falklands/Malvinas war and Argentina's return to democracy in 1983. Between 1981 and 1985, a new complete Ring cycle conducted by Hans Wallat (*Rheingold*, *Walküre*) and Gábor Ötvös (*Siegfried/Götterdämmerung*), included singers such as Thomas Stewart (Wotan), Matti Salminen (Fasolt and Hunding), Jeannine Altmeyer (Sieglinde), James King (Siegmund), Waltraud Meier (Fricka), Ute Vinzing (Brünnhilde) and Gerhard Unger (Mime). As in many previous occasions before and after the eighties, the local team of Roberto Oswald (regisseur) and Aníbal Lapid (design) took over the staging. Much to the taste of the local audiences, both artists insisted in a combination of semi-abstract, spacious *Bühnenbild*, lavish customs and traditional *Personenregie*.

In 1990, Sergio Renán, an accomplished actor, film director and opera regisseur took over the General Direction of the Colón. His experience, coupled with the decision of the Municipality of Buenos Aires to provide with a sustainable and generous budget stopped the continuous decay of the Colón to the point of enabling the best seasons since the period that came to an end with Birgit Nilsson farewell in 1971. During the Renán era (1990 to 1996) the trend to cast Wagnerian roles with famous singers at the end of their career gave way to the contracting of younger ones in their prime, such as Anne Evans (Elsa in 1991), Klaus König and Mechthild Gesserndorf (*Tannhäuser* and *Elisabeth*, 1994). Needless to say, Renán programmed its own Ring. It extended from 1995 to 1998, namely two years later after he was demoted from his job due to the political scheming in 1996. Under the baton of Franz Paul Decker (*Rheingold*,

Siegfried and *Götterdämmerung*) and Jeffrey Tate (*Walküre*) opera goers in Buenos Aires enjoyed the voices of Paul Frey (Loge, Siegmund and Siegfried), Siegfried Jerusalem (Sigmund) Hildergard Behrens and Nadine Secunde (Brünnhilde), James Morris (Wotan) Kurt Moll (Hunding), Stieg Andersen (Siegfried), Ekkehard Wlaschiha (Alberich) and Erik Halfvarson (Hagen).

13 Wagner leaves the Colón... for a while

A new Ring involving many local singers and conductor Charles Dutoit did not go further than *Rheingold* in 2004 and *Walküre* in 2006. By then, administrative chaos and persistent economic problems had simply made it impossible to engage the Colón in plausible Wagner projects. It was just in time then that the theatre closed in 2007 to undergo a major refurbishment. During the closure (2007 to 2009) the Colón staged some operas at the Coliseo, but no Wagner would come out from the theatre that had broadcasted *urbi et orbi* Weingartner's *Parsifal* ninety years before.

Rather than deterrence the closure of the stage that had monopolized Wagner performances for nearly seven decades, stimulated initiative. A small opera company, Buenos Aires Lírica, managed to stage a *Fliegende Holländer*, in 2007 at the Avenida, the emblematic theatre in downtown Buenos Aires traditionally associated with the staging of Spanish zarzuela. Finally, the most promising Wagner project in years came in 2010 when Wagnerians flocked in hundreds to La Plata, a provincial town one hour by bus from Buenos Aires for an important event. The Teatro Argentino, an opera house of long standing local tradition had set itself in motion to include the first *Tristan* outside the Colón to be staged in many years in the River Plate. Local singers and a local conductor achieved such an outstanding success that the management immediately decided to go for a new *Ring*. And so it started in 2012, with a *Rheingold* acclaimed as a Wagner truly *made in Argentina* without international cast but duly acknowledged by the international media as a Wagner *made in Argentina*, and an outstanding one. Hernán Iturralde, a *porteño* member of the Leipzig Opera from 1996 to 2003 sung Wotan at the helm of Argentine and Uruguayan singers conducted by another young Argentine, Alejo Pérez. Many of those travelling to Buenos Aires in November 2012 for the *Colón Ring*, a seven hour *Ring* extravaganza programmed by a reopened Teatro Colón, had already made their minds to go further to La Plata for performances of *Die Walküre*. Alas, it was not going to be. Savage last minute cuts in the public budget of the province of Buenos Aires compelled the authorities of the Argentino to postpone this first and unique Argentine Wagner.

14 Wagnerians against Wagner

In times of continuous economic crisis such as the one affecting Argentina since 2009, common sense would have favored support for the *Ring* of the Argentino de la Plata and the further investment to strengthen the quality of national singers, choirs and orchestras. Instead of following this path, public and private sponsors seemed keener to invest their efforts in the most glittering and curious enterprise ever undertaken by the Teatro Colón, which had reopened in 2010. Although the refurbishment had not been accompanied with the necessary administrative and

budgetary strengthening needed to program an international season, the Colón insisted in being, still, international, even to the point of branding its *Colón Ring*. The project was initially concocted with the help of *régisseuse* Katharina Wagner and composer Cord Garben as a 7 hours abridged Wagner *Ring*, a *Ring Maraton* to be performed in one day. Tickets sold at exorbitant prices would include costly wine, champagne and culinary delicacies. A good conductor, good international singers and German journalists with all costs paid were invited to Buenos Aires. Furthermore the *Deutsche Welle* got exclusive rights to film a saga with unpredictable results.

Most Wagnerians old enough to have enjoyed the *Rings* sung by Nilsson and Hotter declared their hostility towards the project no sooner they heard Wagner and Garben proposals. In their view the reduction aimed at cutting precisely the essentials of this unique work, namely the unyielding unfolding of the saga through continuous reiterations, repetitions, and variations, as well as long pauses, rewindings, and the constant reminiscences of the past as a way of predicting a future inexorably geared towards a final confrontation between power and love. Many were particularly irritated at the public relation exercise of aimed at presenting the collaboration of a member of the Wagner family as an endorsement. Adding insult to injury, the *Colón Ring* was presented to the Press in Berlin, not in Buenos Aires.

Then there was the “temple” syndrome: as in the case of many Bayreuth fans, opera fans in Buenos Aires still consider the Colón as a “temple” for preservation of the best of opera, rather than an experimental stage. Little wonder thus, that the *Colón Ring* was seen by many as a desecration. Others simply noted that the project was unviable: if the Colón was unable to summon forces to produce a *Meistersinger* it would not be able to rise up to the standards of a project requiring rehearsals of a complexity frequently seen in Germany but not in a theatre with poorly paid chorus, orchestra and stage workers. No matter its renewed physical shape, the Colón remained an opera house where schedule of rehearsals was continuously affected by trade union conflicts. Sets, costumes and stage rehearsals were always a matter left for the last minute. Nobody acquainted with the working conditions at the Colón was the least surprised that very little was ready by the time Katharina Wagner arrived to start rehearsals. Her much criticized attitude of abandoning the project abruptly should be balanced against her shock at realizing that she would have to work under conditions totally unknown to her. Once again the Colón had misused its past glories to create expectations it was unable to fulfill.

Frau Wagner’s last-minute replacement, Fura dels Baus’s Valentina Carrasco, did not shy from defining her task as a work against chaos (“El País,” 11/27/12). Another desertion was conductor Julien Salemkour, who was replaced by Roberto Paternostro. Pianist and composer Cord Garben, the “musical adapter” appointed to transform Wagner’s *Ring* into the *Colón Ring* had suggested to begin with Act II of *Walküre*, followed by *Rheingold* as *racconto*. As Paternostro would have none of these flashbacks, the outcome was a straightforward sequence of the four works, preserving at least the initial and final chords in each of them. The rest consisted of an amputation, rather than an adaptation, of the scores. Bits and pieces that survived included such highlights as Wotan’s farewell, fragmented renditions of Siegfried and Brünnhilde’s duets in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, the preludes to *Rheingold* and Act I of *Walküre*, and the grand finale beginning with Siegfried’s death. Otherwise, the Gods entered Walhalla without the preceding storm, since Donner and Froh were

two of Garben's victims. As was Erda, who was never even mentioned by Wotan, so that anybody believing that Brünnhilde and her sisters were Fricka's daughters could be forgiven. Erda's advice to Wotan to yield and give the Giants the ring was replaced by a bossy command mimed by Fricka. As in silent movies, mime was repeatedly used as a device to replace the dramatic progression of Wagner's score, thus stripping it of its premonitory pace. Most scenes were shortened, and what remained was fleeting and disconnected. Garben's stated purpose of enhancing the theatrical action by purging the "philosophical" insights inevitably clashed with the fact that if Wagner's characters cannot explain their motivations regarding love, power, and crime, their stage behavior becomes incoherent.

A 1 hour and 20 minute *Rheingold* was followed by similarly long *Walküre* and *Siegfried*, the latter without a Wanderer and with a Siegfried abruptly travelling across a few chords after slaying the dragon and breaking Wotan's spear, before rushing off to wake Brünnhilde without too much vacillation. A two-hour long *Götterdämmerung* ignored the existence of the Norns and Waltraute and reduced Alberich to some gory miming around Hagen. No sooner had the latter uttered his dark afterthoughts at the end of the first scene of Act I than--hey presto!--Siegfried was back from the Walküre's rock, seconds before the Gibichungs were summoned to the wedding.

Some of Valentina Carrasco's ideas were good: the gold stolen by Alberich was a newborn baby who joined others in a Nibelheim meant to represent a clandestine torture centre. She was asking an Argentine audience to confront their history of having children stolen from their mothers before the latter were tortured and killed by the military during the 1970s. Most striking for many Argentines unacquainted with the experimental Ring tendencies in Europe was to see Perón and Evita again on stage at the Colón: Wotan wore full military regalia and Fricka's hairstyle made her look like Evita. Sets consisted of some barren and unconnected steps and a half demolished building with still usable staircases and balconies, all placed on a revolving stage.

The clumsy chopping of the scores and the lack of sufficient rehearsal time inevitably resulted in wooden acting and tentative singing of roles that were never allowed to be developed to reach their full meaning. Still, the cast worked hard and did their best and the Colón's orchestra was reinforced in order to provide two instrumental ensembles; one for *Rheingold* and *Walküre*, and the other for *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.

Beginning with Siegfried's death Wagner was left alone and everything started working towards a convincing end. Siegfried's funeral march was illustrated with projections of moving examples of collective mourning, such as Evita's funeral cortege and Mother Teresa's wake. Images of Ché Guevara's cadaver, Michelangelo's *Pietà*, and the changing of the guard at Arlington Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were also included. After singing her Immolation scene Brünnhilde snuggled next to her dead Siegfried in a final cuddle, both lying on an immense piece of red linen. Fire and water were then replaced by a multitude of men and women embracing their recovered children with immense joy all over their faces.

Rather predictably, German speaking media and the *Deutsche Welle* did their best to commend the project as a last minute heroic effort against all odds which had

produced some inspiring results. Not so the Argentines: “What a pity that it was dubbed “Colón Ring”, for now our theatre has its institutional stamp attached to a sorry fiasco” wrote Pablo Bardin for the Buenos Aires Herald⁵³. In reviewing the experiment for *Mundo Clásico*, Gustavo Gabriel Otero noted: Truly, if the purpose was to reduce the Ring, then it is better to see Looney Tunes *What’s opera Doc?* With Bugs Bunny playing Brünnhilde and Elmer, Siegfried.

15. Epilogue

In 1990 the Asociación Wagneriana of Buenos Aires paid its last great service to its beloved *Meister* by bringing *Rienzi* for the first time to the Colón, albeit in a concert version. Then the Association started decreasing its musical activities to practically zero at present. Wagner’s *Meistersinger* autograph, together with Siegfried Wagner’s covering note, still hangs on the wall of the Association’s library, in remembrance of a better past and in expectation of the golden apples and the good policies needed to restore Buenos Aires’ credentials as the Wagner city of South America. Proof of these credentials is the fact that out of approximately 370 operas performed at the Teatro Colón, the number of performances of *Tristan* and *Walküre* ranks above those of either *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Norma*, *Elisir d’amore* or any of the Mozart operas.

Following its abridged *Ring* last year, the Colón season has not included a Wagner opera for 2013. Not so the indefatigable Argentino of La Plata: *Der fliegende Holländer* is on the cards with a mostly Argentine cast.

Agustín Blanco-Bazán. London, July 2013

¹ Grete Busch, *Fritz Busch, Dirigent*, p. 98-99. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, November 1985.

² Ibidem, p. 111.

³ Ibidem, p. 107.

⁴ At a performance attended by the author.

⁵ Peter Ebert, *in this Theatre of Man’s Life. The biography of Carl Ebert*, p. 89, The Book Guild Ltd. Sussex, England

⁶ Grete Busch, *ibidem*, p.91.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 89.

⁸ Letter from F. Busch to his wife, in Grete Busch, *ibidem*, p. 89, 90.

⁹ Peter Ebert, *ibidem*, p. 88.

¹⁰ Peter Ebert, *ibidem*, p. 88, 89.

¹¹ *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, 12 August 1883 p.1.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ *La Prensa*, 18 August 1883, p.1

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Reproduced in *The letters of Arturo Toscanini, compiled, edited and translated by Harvey Sachs*. p.75 Faber and Faber Ltd. London, 2002.

²⁰ Further information on the activities of the Asociación Wagneriana can be found in *Cincuenta años de existencia de la Asociación Wagneriana*, by Cirilo Grassi Diaz, Buenos Aires, 1963, and *100 Años de Musica en Buenos Aires* by Enzo Valenti Ferro, Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, Buenos Aires 1992.

²¹ *Revista de la Asociación Wagneriana de Buenos Aires*, March 1919, page 15.

²² *La Guerra a la música. El odio a Wagner* by Ernesto de la Guardia. A publication of the *Asociación Wagneriana de Buenos Aires*. Printed by Escoffier, Caracciolo and Cia, Buenos Aires 1919.

²³ *Ibid.*, page 13, footnote 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, page 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, page 22

²⁶ *Revista de la Asociación Wagneriana de Buenos Aires*, nr. 35, December 1919, page 1 and ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pages 4 and 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, page 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pages 6 and 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, page 6

³² *Ibid.*, page 10

³³ *Ibid.*, page 4

³⁴ Letter from Arturo Toscanini to the Duke Uberto Visconti de Modrone, 1916 transcribed in the compilation by Harvey Sachs (see note 18), page 89 to 91.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, nr. 37, page 1

³⁶ R.C Newton, *German Buenos Aires, 1900-1933*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1977, p.116.

³⁷ Information on this broadcast extracted for this article is contained in *Early History of radio broadcasting in Argentina*, an article by Carlos A. Altgelt. Also in the already referred *100 años de música en Buenos Aires*, by Enzo Valenti Ferro, pages 107-108.

³⁸ *La Razón*, 21 August 1920.

³⁹ *La Razón*, 22 August 1922.

⁴⁰ *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*. By Peter Heyworth.

⁴¹ *Argentinisches Tageblatt*, Buenos Aires, 15 April 1933, page 5

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Fritz Busch, *Aus dem Leben eines Musikers*, Fisher Taschenbuch Verlag, pp. 212-213

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, page 212.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* chapter XI

⁴⁷ Grete Busch, *op.cit.*, p. 77

⁴⁸ The report is mentioned in *The Devil's Music Meiter* By Sam Shirikawa, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992. Shirikawa refers to the Berlin Documentation Center and the Busch Foundation as his sources.

⁴⁹ *Maria Callas, mia moglie* by Giovanni Battista Meneghini. Milano, 1981.

⁵⁰ *Idem.*

⁵¹ *La Nilsson, Mein Leben für die Oper*, by Birgit Nilsson. Fisher (Tb), Frankfurt 1999

⁵² *Ich erinnere mich ganz genau: Autobiographie*. By Karl Böhm. Zurich 1968.

⁵³ *Buenos Aires Herald*, 1 December 2012.