

# BARCELONA: A CITY IN LOVE WITH WAGNER

THE INHABITANTS OF THE BARCELONA OF THE BEGINNING OF THE CENTURY MET FOR COFFEE AT THE "ORO DEL RIN", STROLLED ALONG TO THE "LA WALQUIRIA" TEA-ROOMS, BOUGHT "WOTAN" LIGHT-BULBS, SMOKED "LOHENGRIN" CIGARETTES AND QUENCHED THE FIRE IN THEIR SOULS WITH "MINIMAX" EXTINGUISHERS, WHOSE LABEL BORE A COURAGEOUS SEIGFREID.



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**I**n 1862, Richard Wagner was spending his exile in Switzerland in full creative frenzy; he was living a passionate, furtive love affair, and thus bringing to a close his first marriage, to Minna Planer. His financial problems were getting serious and his fame was practically negligible. Four of his first operas had been staged, with varying success, and it could be said that he only had one real fan: Franz Liszt. However, in Barcelona, on 16 July of the same year, the *Societat Coral Euterpe*, directed by Josep Anselm Clavé, performed Tannhauser's Triumphal March, a daring selective criterion which was to be an indi-

cation of things to come. None of those who that afternoon listened to the popular choir in the Catalan capital imagined the delight which both the music and the personality of Richard Wagner were to give the citizens of Barcelona over the next fifty years or more.

First, as so often happens, he was known only to a small group of people, which here included Mestre Pedrell, Doctor Letamendi and the latter's young student, Joaquim Marsillach. It was they who, at the end of the seventies, went from Barcelona to Bayreuth, where Wagner had previously settled with the agreement of the king of Bavaria. They visited the master at

Villa Wahnfried and were captivated by the German musician's magical personality. Back in Barcelona, their enthusiasm and their confrontation with the Italian opera caused the first controversies. Mestre Pedrell founded a "Wagnerian Society", which was unsuccessful and short-lived. Marsillach published a passionate account of his experiences at the opening of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth in 1882. Letamendi, in his work *La música del porvenir i el porvenir de mi patria*, considered Wagner's reforms—with a certain amount of lucidity though with some exaggeration—a solution for his "unfortunate country", and announced that "Wagnerism forms a





complete programme, *the only complete programme*, of individual and social artistic education". A staunch antimilitarist, Letamendi declared that "progress is not found through the struggle for dominance but in dominance through culture", and that expanding this culture was the job of the "Wagnerian Associations".

In fact, this was not quite the way things were to turn out, and history did not give these "Associations" such a commendable role. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that, in the first years of the twentieth century, Wagnerism invaded the field of Catalan culture and shaped the tastes of the well-bred Barcelona bourgeoisie.

It must of course be said that the way had been prepared. The *Renaixença* had united the attempts to find a differentiated national history which had been lost in the Middle Ages, at the same time searching the nationalist movements of the time for a special identification, a national identity, for their political demands. Later on, Modernism, with its inclination towards the medieval and primitive world and its obsession with Orientalism as something more "natural", confronted the "beautiful" industrial world; in short, with its free and fantastic shapes, it opposed the rigidity of classicism. In this mixture, Wagnerism found a suitable medium in which to take root.

In 1901, a second version of the "Wagnerian Association", this time founded by Joaquim Pena, took on the unenviable task of translating the whole of Wagner's work into Catalan, both the dramatic part and the essays. The association's members published pompous inflated articles in favour of the genius of Bayreuth. Pena, a sad, grey-looking man, worked himself up in his calls for "subversion in institutional art" through the work of Wagner. The poets sang Wagner and his heroes. The music of mestre Morera emerged shaped by the Wagnerian chord innovations. Saint George, patron saint of Catalonia, was carved in the form of a daring Siegfried. The houses being built in the newly opened up area of the *Eixample* were filled with a host of nymphs and valkyries. And at the head of this symbiosis appeared the great genius Gaudí, whose architectural ideal was based on the same passion for the whole as the work of Wagner. Also, the architect Domènec i Montaner, in the construction of the *Palau de la Música*, unites all the arts and, searching for an aesthetic of his own, based on a medieval era more Nordic than Mediterranean, looks to Wagner, to whom he pays homage by having his valkyries gallop wildly (Gargallo's sculpture) across the auditorium's proscenium.

But that is not all. Groups of young people from the wealthy Barcelona bourgeoisie spent their Sunday afternoons performing Wagner's operatic works on make-shift stages or with puppet-theatres, with the help of a rudimentary gramophone. If nothing more, the inhabitants of the Barcelona of the beginning of the century met for coffee at the "Oro del Rin", strolled along to the "La Walquiria" tea-rooms, bought "Wotan" light-bulbs, smoked "Lohengrin" cigarettes and quenched the fire in their souls with "Minimax" extinguishers, whose label bore a courageous Siegfried.

Meanwhile, at the theatres *Principal* and *Tivoli* and, especially, at the *Gran Teatre del Liceu*, Wagner's operas were systematically performed before an increasingly devoted public. The "others", those who enjoyed Italian opera or listened to the new airs that Eugeni d'Ors and the twentieth century introduced, criticized and mocked, more frivolously than seriously. Today, little remains of that passion in our Mediterranean working city. Also, just like any other city in this busy world, there is little time to listen to Wagner's enormous output, but it is the only city where, when one does find the time and the soul steeped itself in pleasure, from the front of the house opposite, an untiringly galloping valkyrie is watching. ●