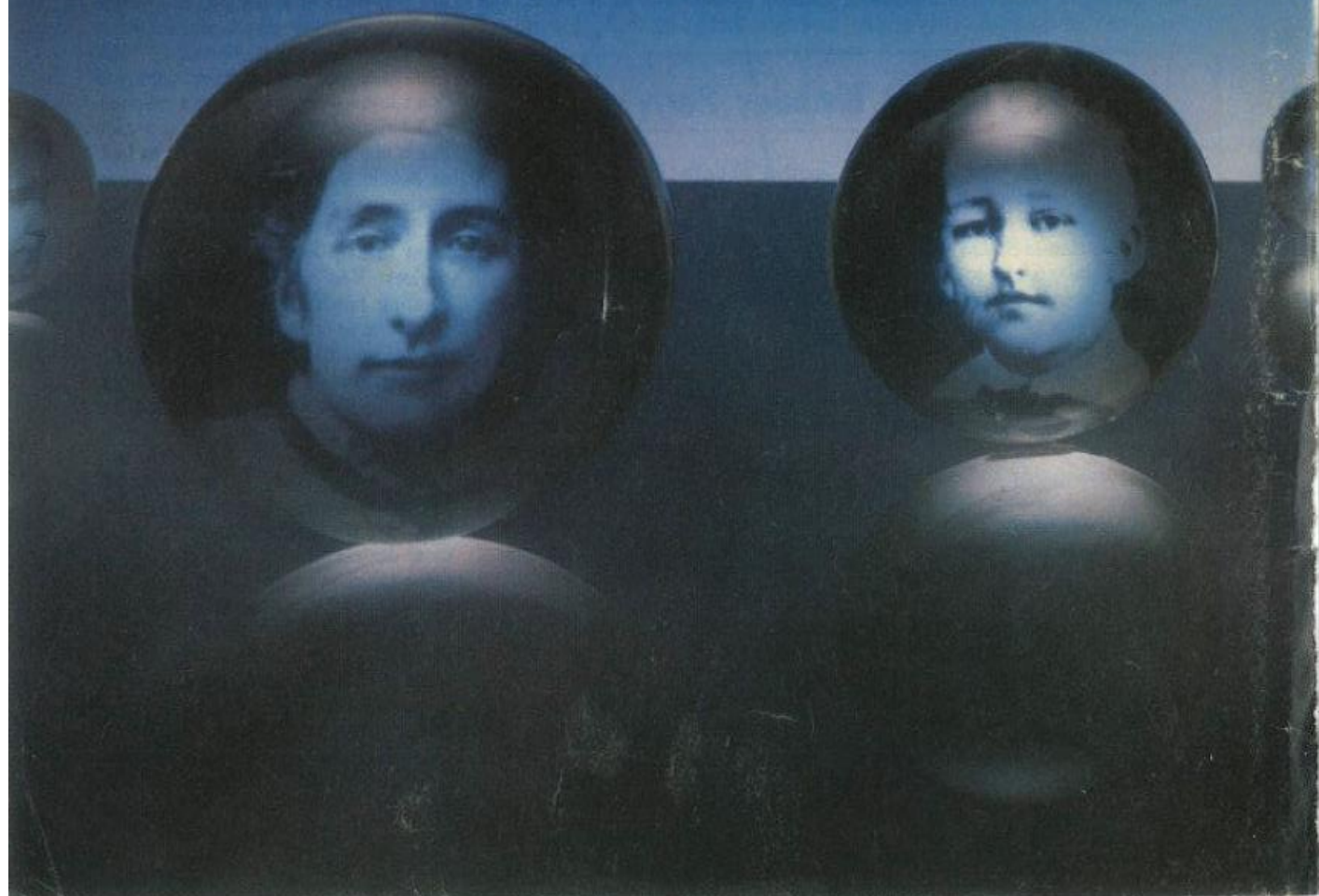


Wagnerian Dreams

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER RICHARD WAGNER'S DEATH, A STUDY OF THE COMPOSER'S DREAMS OFFERS CLUES TO HIS ODIIOUS BEHAVIOR.

By CALVIN S. HALL

On February 11, 1883, two days before Richard Wagner died in a Venetian palazzo, his wife, Cosima, wrote in her diary, "R. saw Schröder-Devrient in his dreams; telling me of it, he says, 'All my women are now passing before my eyes.'"
This dream was the last of nearly 300 that Richard told Cosima during the 14 years that she kept a diary. The diary, which Cosima began at Wagner's suggestion on January 1, 1869, and which was released a few years ago in an English translation, is a daily record of the composer's thoughts, activities, and—yes,



his dreams: 293 of them spanning the last 13 years of his life. This dream catalogue is remarkable for its completeness; nothing like it exists for any other artist. The subject is of special interest now, with the centennial of Wagner's death only a few weeks away.

Wagner was the creator of a new operatic art form, the "music drama," in which he gave intense symbolic expression to both aggression and eroticism. In his personal life, he was inordinately vain and opinionated, wrong-headed, ill-tempered when crossed, a sycophant and a sponger, debt-ridden, and viciously anti-Semitic.

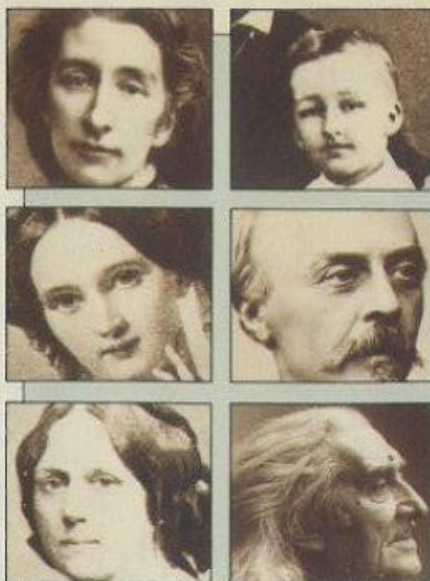
What did such a man dream about? Never about composing. He sometimes dreamed about the performances of his operas, but always in the context of something going amiss. The two musicians he dreamed about most often were Franz Liszt and Hans von Bülow, not because they were musicians but because the former was Cosima's father, the latter her first husband.

Wagner, in common with every other dreamer, dreamed about people who were or had been close to him: Cosima; Minna, his first wife; his children; his sisters; women he had loved; Liszt; von Bülow; and male friends. In his dreams, these people either treat him badly or are the victims of misfortunes. Wagner, too, is frequently a victim of adversity or hostility. Pleasant dreams are infrequent.

Cosima

Cosima is the chief character in Wagner's dreams, aside from himself. She appears in 151 of the 293 dreams. That a wife should appear frequently in a husband's dreams is not unusual. What is unusual is the very high incidence of Cosima's appearances. Possibly Wagner was more likely to tell her dreams in which she appeared, thinking that they would be of particular interest to her. On the other hand, Cosima and Richard were very close—closer, probably, than most married couples. She was completely devoted to him, and he was so dependent on her that he resented her absence even for a few hours.

Wagner's greatest fear, as expressed in his dreams, was that Cosima would leave him. This is the theme of 44 dreams, the leitmotiv of



Wagner (right) and the people who haunted his dreams (left to right, from top): his wife Cosima; his son Siegfried; Mathilde Wesendonck, a patron; Hans von Bülow, Cosima's first husband; Minna, Wagner's first wife; Franz Liszt, Cosima's father.

IN HIS DREAMS HE SAW HIMSELF AS A VICTIM OF HIS TWO WIVES, HIS CHILDREN, HIS COLLEAGUES.

his dream life during the years he lived with her.

Did Wagner's fear conceal a conscious or unconscious wish to get rid of Cosima? It is hardly likely. He was dependent on her in so many ways, and she never caused him any trouble. That she was younger by 24 years may have made him apprehensive about losing her. Or the fact that she had deserted one husband may have made him feel insecure about his own tenure.

A second prominent theme, in 19 dreams, is the expression of hostility by Cosima toward Richard. She is cold, sarcastic, disapproving, contemptuous, or angry; she does not love him; she refuses to sleep with him; she throws him out of the house; she sets a fierce cat on him; she joins her father in a plot to kill him. There is no evidence that Cosima was hostile toward Richard in waking life.

Wagner expresses animosity toward Cosima in only six dreams. In three of these he is jealous when she pays attention to another man. The strongest expression of his anger is a dream in which he is furious with Cosima for wishing to die because of unhappy love. Although it is not made clear what the unhappy love refers to, the

implication is that Cosima is not happy with Richard.

In 17 dreams, Cosima suffers a misfortune: She looks worn, pale, or sad; she cries; she is imprisoned; she is threatened by animals or by a person; or she's dying. Dreams in which a misfortune happens to a person other than the dreamer may be an indirect expression of hostility by the dreamer toward the person, or an expression of genuine concern, or both at the same time.

In contrast to the 86 "bad" dreams about Cosima, there are only 19 in which positive feelings are expressed.

The other 46 dreams in which Cosima appears are either neutral in character or involve Cosima and Richard as a couple. Examples of the latter: King Ludwig II of Bavaria is friendly to them; friends are embarrassed when visited by Richard and Cosima; they are attacked by animals; they want to drown themselves.

Other Women in His Life

Minna was Wagner's first wife, whom he married in 1836. They separated in 1861, and Wagner provided financially for her until her death in 1866. They had no children.

Minna appears in 27 dreams. In the first, Wagner dreams that Minna is insolent and malicious toward Cosima and himself. He cries out "But you are dead!" Minna had, in fact, been dead for four years. Yet she appears very much alive in Wagner's dreams for the next 13 years. Revenants are common in dreams—shades of spouses and ex-spouses in particular.

Three themes predominate in the Minna dreams. The first depicts Minna as quarrelsome and vindictive, which she was in waking life. The second is Wagner's anxiety about whether he has remembered to send her money, which was of concern to him while she lived. The third and most frequent one is how he will fit Cosima into his life with Minna. For example, he dreams that Minna is still alive and he wonders what will happen to Cosima. He consoles himself with the thought that Minna cannot live forever. (At this point, Minna had been dead for eight years.) It is apparent that Wagner still felt guilty about leaving Minna, although he did not leave her for Cosima or any other woman. They were simply incompatible.

Nonetheless, in some dreams Richard expresses a need for Minna. She comes to his aid when he is in danger of falling from a height. In another dream, when the stairs on which he is standing disappear, he calls for Minna. Once, when he dreams that Cosima has left him, he cries out "Minna!"

There are 19 dreams in which other women in Wagner's life appear. Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, a German soprano whom Wagner revered, is in five dreams, all occurring years after her death in 1860. Wagner considered first hearing her sing—he was 16—the most powerful influence in shaping his career. In the first dream, he is having a relationship of some kind with her. In the second, Mendelssohn refuses to write a song for Wilhelmine because she has not sung at his funeral! In the third, she shows a preference for Wagner. Wilhelmine is a bust in the fourth dream. Wagner thinks that he would not like to kiss the bust, because it is not good to kiss a dead person in a dream. The last dream in which she appears occurred a few nights before Wagner's death, "when all my women are now passing before my eyes."

Mathilde Wesendonck, who also appeared in five dreams, was the wife of

a wealthy businessman in Zurich. They were generous benefactors of Wagner and built a cottage on their estate for his use. He was probably in love with Mathilde, and he said he was inspired by her. She is one of the women of whom Wagner dreamed a few nights before his death. Three dreams are unpleasant: She is malicious toward him, she tries to poison him, and she makes advances that Wagner repulses. The remaining dream is problematic. Mathilde shows Wagner a newborn infant. A hawk swoops down on the baby repeatedly, and Wagner drives it off each time.

Several other women known to Wagner also figure in his dreams. One, a close friend of Cosima, tries to console him, a second makes advances to him, and a third has been with Richard, which enrages Cosima. Finally, Wagner dreams that he rejects the advances of "all his old sweethearts."

There is only one friendly dream. Liszt sings something from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Wagner thinks that Liszt's singing is very beautiful, and they embrace in a fervent expression of friendship.

Hans von Bülow was a prominent pianist, conductor, and composer, and a passionate admirer and friend of Wagner until his wife left him to live with Wagner. He divorced Cosima in 1870. The eight dreams in which von Bülow appears postdate the divorce.

Wagner dreams in 1882 that Hans is dead. This dream occurs a few months before Wagner's own death and many years before von Bülow's. He also dreams that von Bülow is shot, that he is old and pockmarked, and that he withholds money due Cosima. He dreams that Hans is delighted to hear that Richard and Cosima have separated. One dream begins on a positive note but ends somberly. Hans tries to

WAGNER'S FEAR THAT COSIMA WOULD LEAVE HIM WAS THE LEITMOTIV OF HIS DREAM LIFE.

Musicians: Friends and Enemies

Wagner and Franz Liszt, Cosima's father, were friends for years before he met Cosima, and remained friends after the marriage, although there was a brief cooling-off when Cosima became Wagner's mistress.

Liszt was Wagner's senior by only two years, from which it can be deduced that Cosima married a father figure. He appears in 13 of Wagner's dreams. He tries to kill Wagner with an instrument of torture in one dream. In others, Liszt causes trouble between Cosima and Richard, and Cosima plans to leave her husband and go away with her father. In another dream, Liszt demands that Wagner pay homage to him by kissing his hand.

establish a friendly relationship with Richard and Cosima. Hans and Cosima kiss—a fatal kiss for Hans, as it turns out, for he then meets his double, a portent of his death. In one dream Wagner asks von Bülow to take over a conducting chore for him. Hans looks astonished, as well he might. Many years later, after Wagner's death, Cosima asked Hans to conduct at Bayreuth. He refused.

Wagner dreamed twice each about Giacomo Meyerbeer and Carl Maria von Weber, and once each about Beethoven and Mendelssohn. He is walking arm in arm with Meyerbeer in one dream, while in the other he meets Meyerbeer and they become reconciled. Meyerbeer had been dead for some years and the dreams may be belated attempts at restitution for Wagner's scurrilous attacks upon Meyerbeer as a Jew, and for his contempt for

Meyerbeer's operas. Wagner was a young composer when first befriended by Meyerbeer, who used his considerable influence to promote Wagner's career. Wagner was noted for using people and praising them to their faces while stabbing them in the back. His hatred of Jews is well known.

Weber was one of the young Wagner's idols, although later in life Wagner thought less of his music. Wagner did not know Weber personally, for he died while Wagner was still a boy. In one dream Wagner encounters Weber and asks him whether he (Wagner) has musical talent. Weber doesn't say.

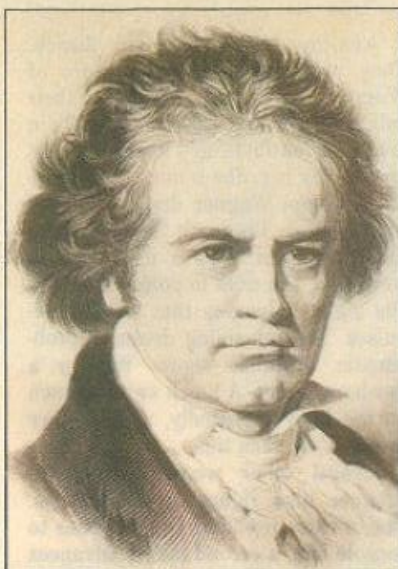
Mendelssohn was Jewish, which sufficed for Wagner to treat him and his music with contempt. Additionally, Wagner had sought Mendelssohn's assistance as a young composer and had been turned down. Yet in his dream, Wagner addresses Mendelssohn with the familiar *du*, which indicates that they are intimate friends.

Wagner admired Beethoven's music unequivocally. The dream: Beethoven invites Wagner to a performance of one of his symphonies. Each man attempts to kneel before the other. This dream suggests that Wagner felt he was Beethoven's equal as a composer.

Kings and Philosophers

The list of royalty in Wagner's dreams reads like the *Almanach de Gotha*: Frederick the Great, Wilhelm I of Prussia, the Austrian Emperor, Ludwig II of Bavaria, Napoleon III, the King of Hanover, Louis-Philippe of France, Queen Anne of England, the Khedive of Egypt, and an assortment of princes and princesses. Among the famous persons who appear in his dreams are Goethe, Lord Byron, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Pope Pius IX, Bismarck, Field Marshal Count Moltke, and one of the Rothschilds. For the most part, Wagner has friendly dream relations with royalty and with important persons. He treats royalty with the respect due them, and they honor him with their patronage.

Financial support may not have been the only reason for Wagner's cultivation of royalty. He enjoyed the company of the rich and powerful, and aspired to live like them, which he did when he could afford to. In one dream, he marries a princess; in another, the Queen of Prussia is his mother. Wagner, on his father's side, came from a



Great men in Wagner's dreams: Beethoven (left) and (left to right, from top) Napoleon III, Nietzsche, Mendelssohn, Byron.

WAGNER HAD FRIENDLY DREAM
RELATIONS WITH ROYALTY AND
PROMINENT PEOPLE—EXCEPT FOR NIETZSCHE.

line of village schoolmasters. His mother may have been the natural daughter of a German prince. Wagner's thoughts of royal blood flowing in his veins may have strengthened his partiality for the company of royalty, both in his dreams and in waking life, although the pragmatic reason suffices.

Wagner's relations with prominent men in his dreams are uniformly positive, with the exception of Friedrich Nietzsche, who was not famous when Wagner first knew him. The young Nietzsche—he was 24 when they met—worshiped Wagner's music and became a favorite of the Wagner household. Later he turned against Wagner and his music. Wagner dreamed that Nietzsche pours scorn on him, which, in fact, he did.

Family Members

Wagner's father died when Richard was 6 months old, but he still had his mother and eight siblings. His mother soon remarried. The stepfather, an old friend of the family, was fond of the children, especially Richard, who may have actually been his son. The stepfather died when Richard was 8. Richard then went to live with an uncle for a

year. This uncle, an intellectual, took an active interest in Richard's education. There seems to have been no traumatic separation from his mother, who did not die until Richard was 35.

As a child, Richard had terrifying nightmares from which he awoke screaming. He continued to have nightmares throughout his life. Nor could he endure being alone, except when composing. These facts suggest that Wagner may have experienced one or several traumatic separations in early childhood. If so, they are not noted by his biographers, nor by Wagner in his autobiography.

Wagner was the youngest of nine children; he had three brothers and five sisters. A brother and a sister died during childhood. Wagner's dreams contain no reference to his surviving brothers. His sisters appear in six dreams, all of them unpleasant. A sister tries to drown Wagner, a sister dies, a sister makes a stupid remark about music, a sister is embarrassed when Richard and Cosima visit her, the carriage in which Richard and a sister are riding falls into a chasm, and Richard is annoyed because his sister has a child, which takes Cosima away from him to attend the christening.

Cosima had three children by

Richard—Isolde, Eva, and Siegfried, all of them born while Cosima was still Hans von Bülow's wife. Wagner dreams most frequently of Siegfried.

The main theme of the Siegfried dreams is that something bad happens to Siegfried. His face is full of cuts, he has curious spots on his body, he is in danger, he falls in the water, he sinks below the surface of the water, he falls into an abyss, or he dies. In one dream, Wagner sees his son's double come through a mirror. Although Wagner does not say in connection with this dream that seeing someone's double portends that person's death, he does say this with reference to a dream in which he sees von Bülow's double. These dreams may reflect the normal concerns of a parent, or the hostile feelings of a father for a son, or both of these. There is no dream in which Wagner is unfriendly toward Siegfried or Siegfried is unfriendly toward him. Nor are any positive feelings expressed.

Misfortunes and Insecurities

As we have seen, Wagner's dreams of Liszt, von Bülow, and his son are mostly negative in tone. In 20 dreams with other male friends, hostile feelings or unfriendly acts are described. There is only one violent act: A friend kills Wagner's dog. Two misfortunes occur to friends: A man falls off a chair and breaks into pieces, and a singer forgets his role in *Lohengrin*.

Wagner has 26 dreams in which he suffers a misfortune, and only four in which something fortunate happens to him. This is about the same ratio of misfortune to good fortune that is found in most sets or series of dreams. Wagner's misfortunes do not include mistreatment by others. They consist of his losing something, such as his hat; damage to his body—losing a tooth or cutting a finger, for example; the death of a pet; the destruction of an object belonging to him; being lost; lack of money; and accidents. In one dream, he sees his double, a portent of his death.

Virtually all of the dreams of musical performances refer to Wagner's operas, and all of them are unpleasant. The most common topic consists of alterations made by others in performing his operas, which infuriated Wagner. Other annoying events include:

a bad performance of *Die Meistersinger* during which the orchestra leaves; Wagner has to conduct in a hall where he cannot see the orchestra; the bass clarinetist is missing, so *Tristan und Isolde* has to be spoken instead of sung; in a performance of *Lohengrin* the singers forget their roles; two musicians are talking while Wagner is conducting, and when he remonstrates, one of the musicians hits him.

Wagner as victim is the principal subject matter of his dreams, and it would be tempting to say that he suffered from paranoia, but there is little justification for imposing a psychiatric label on him. In the first place, nearly everyone who appears in Wagner's dreams is a victim. A true paranoiac does not see anyone but himself as persecuted; his mistreatment is his badge of distinction.

In the second place, Wagner was not

was probably deepened by his plebeian family background and by his poverty. However, the most potent cause of his insecurity was probably his mistrust of people. We can deduce this mistrust from the nature of his dreams. In them, he saw himself as the victim of his two wives, his children, his friends, his professional colleagues, and strangers.

We do not expect to find in an analysis of his dreams the key to Wagner's indisputable genius. For musical genius—indeed, genius in any field—remains a mystery. But from the dreams we can get some insight into Wagner's personality and some understanding of his behavior.

If we want to understand Wagner's often reprehensible behavior, we should keep two factors in mind. First, he firmly believed in his musical genius. He was willing to go to any lengths to bring it to fruition, even if

THE DREAMS BETRAY WAGNER'S INSECURITIES, BUT CANNOT EXPLAIN HIS UNDISPUTED GENIUS.

always badly treated in his dreams. There are friendly relations with others, particularly with royalty. It is true that these dreams of royalty—Wagner as the son of a queen or husband of a princess—are symptomatic of grandiosity, the other side of the paranoid coin. But aside from these few dreams, there are no indications of delusions of grandeur.

To account for the insecurity in Wagner's dreams, we must go back to his childhood, when his night terrors and fear of being left alone began. Children, as a rule, do not like to be left alone, which happens every night when they are put to bed (abandoned) by the parents. Isolation in darkness increases vulnerability. It is not surprising, therefore, that in many dreams the dreamer is a victim of enemies or of adversity.

As he grew up, Wagner's insecurity

doing so required that he play the sycophant and the sponger. In his mind, the end justified the means. And it seems certain that much of Wagner's odious behavior can be explained as a defense against the deep-seated insecurity that is so clearly portrayed in his dreams. □

Calvin S. Hall is a retired professor of psychology. His principal research interest for the past 35 years has been the quantitative analysis of dreams, particularly of long series of dreams recorded by individuals. He and Richard Lind wrote *Dreams, Life and Literature: A Study of Franz Kafka*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1970). Hall's analysis of Wagner's *Dreams* is based on Cosima Wagner's *Diaries* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Vol. 1 [1977]: 1869-1877, Vol. 2 [1978]: 1878-1883).