Wagner Returns to Bayreuth

By MILDRED A. SMITH

A N AMERICAN NEWSPAPERMAN stood dejectedly outside Wagner’s new Festival Playhouse in 1876 bemoaning the fact that he had been sent all the way from New York to Bavaria to cover the first Bayreuth Festival and was unable to get a coveted ticket to the final rehearsals.

Just then two men slipped out the front door. One, mopping his brow in the terrific heat, murmured: “One must be a regular Wagnerite to stand more of that!”

The correspondent immediately offered to buy one of their tickets.

“Where’s the best beer in Bayreuth?” came the reply.

“Angermann’s.”

“Take the ticket.”

The correspondent did not know what was implied until some days later when, having sat through the four-opera “Ring of the Nibelung” cycle, he sat down, exhausted, to write his story: “We are finally relieved of gods and other supernatural beings, whose ultimate conflagration in Valhalla is now heard of with unmixed satisfaction.”

That week a Berlin critic also said something derogatory about the Ring, whereupon a Wagner defender hit him with a beer mug and broke his nose.

THOUGH THE CONTROVERSY now is limited to conversation among music enthusiasts and articles in musical publications, pro- and anti-Wagnerites are staging battles today over the musical, aesthetic, moral or metaphysical values of the famed composer’s music-dramas about mythical gnomes, and gods, symbols of wealth, power, love and greed.

Wagner’s status, as he continues to provide sport for his enemies and delight for the faithful, is best described by a report on this year’s Bayreuth Festival, an annual event featuring Wagner’s works which is being revived in 1951 after a lapse of 12 years. This year’s celebration, beginning July 29, marks the 75th anniversary of the world famous music festival.

Ninety percent of the tickets for the 75th anniversary festival were sold by the last day of March, four extra days have been added to the original 24-day schedule, and reservations have been requested for 1952. A comparable rush for tickets has never been experienced by festival officials.

Between 25,000 and 30,000 visitors will make up the various audiences seeing two complete Ring cycles, an opening program of Beethoven’s “Ninth Symphony” conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, and six performances each of Wagner’s Parsifal and Die Meistersinger. Conductors for the Wagner works will be alternately Hans Knappertsbusch and Herbert Karajan.

IN A COUNTRY which under the slogan “Music in Germany” this year is staging some 20 major and minor musical celebrations, the Wagner festival towers above all in international importance. The casts as well as the audience will represent many countries, in keeping with Wagner’s original desire to have the best to be had.

Astrid Varnay of New York’s Metropolitan Opera will sing Brünnhilde, chief of those wild Valkyrd maidens whose steeds charge through the air. She and other foreign guests will join singers from all of Germany’s leading opera houses and the Vienna State Opera.

When rehearsals get under way, the town will not be unlike a description Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg wrote in 1876, the year of the first Bayreuth Festival: “As I sit here, I hear Wagner’s motifs being hummed, sung, yodeled, bellowed from the garden.” Another writer said, “Here some soprano declaimed at the top of her voice, there a tenor’s voice floated down from his room, across the street a bass practiced.”

Tourists from the world over have been coming to Bayreuth for the Wagner festival since its inception in 1876. This year’s festival, the first in 12 years, is practically sold out. US and British tourists were heavy buyers. (Renner photo)
American tourists this year will not face the same circumstances as their 150 predecessors from America in 1876. Rates will not be increased — the maximum bed price in the best hotels will be DM 8 ($1.90) per night, while rooms are to be had in homes for as little as 3.50 marks (less than 85 cents) per night. Similar reasonable rates for meals have been published.

Transportation facilities provide as striking a contrast. Most people arrived at the Festival Playhouse on foot in 1876 as "there were only seven hacks, and almost none could be procured in the neighboring towns." The 1951 prospectus lists numerous bus routes and taxi services for the guests staying in town and those who must be housed in outlying districts.

In 1876 the town had "spruced up." "The mental excitement and its consequent interference with the course of habit reached its climax when all the peasant folk of the town appeared with shoes, stockings and washed faces," Another chronicler reported: "There has been an eruption of fires. Great branches are stuck in the ground, festoons cover the fronts of the houses and line the pavements. Wreaths with paper flowers are stuck on doorways."

THE 1951 "SPRUING UP" has of necessity taken another turn. An air raid during the last two weeks of the war caused serious damage to the center of the city. Wagner's home was partially destroyed. Furniture and souvenirs had been removed before the bombing, however, and will be replaced when funds are available to restore the old villa.

Money this year is being used to insure lodgeings for visitors. This is no small task for a community which lost one-third of its dwellings and has a population, swelled by refugees, of 61,000, a 50 percent increase over prewar. Funds have also been allocated to replace props, all of which were destroyed, for the festival performances. Only Siegfried's dragon came through battered but unbowed.

Frewar funds in the festival foundation shrank to the equivalent of $1,500 at the time of currency reform. To finance the undertaking this year the Bavarian Government has supplied a subsidy of DM 200,000 ($47,600), but most funds have been made available by an organization.

A frequently visited spot during the Bayreuth Festival is the simple unmarked grave in which the celebrated composer was buried in 1883.

(Renner photo)
This is the opera house Richard Wagner had built for his "Ring" series of four operas, first performed in this Bayreuth landmark in 1876 and scheduled to be repeated again this year — its 75th festival — before capacity audiences.

(German Tourist Association photo)

formed to assist in reopening the festival, the Society of the Friends of Bayreuth. From members all over the world — particularly in France, England and the United States — DM 500,000 ($119,000) was forthcoming.

The German Federal Railway has contributed DM 150,000 ($35,700) toward modernization of the railway station for efficient handling of tourist traffic.

FEW PEOPLE REALIZE upon entering the Festival Playhouse that it has the highest stage in the world. Its height is 165 feet, but the spectator sees neither the 33 feet above the stage nor the 43 feet below it which allow for transformation scenes.

Hitler (fired by the enthusiasm of British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham) planned to present Edward VIII with a complete Bayreuth production in London for his coronation, an offer which had to be declined when it was realized that the roof of London's Covent Garden Opera House would have to be lifted to get the Bayreuth stage settings in.

The orchestra pit is made so the conductor can not be seen, and is built half underneath the stage to lessen the volume of heavy instruments in Wagner's augmented orchestras. Seats rise in tiers like an amphitheater and are constructed so that each face the stage. No galleries or boxes are on the sides, a revolutionary idea in Wagner's day. Acoustics are said to be perfect. To maintain this original structure plan, the house's original 1,300 seats have been increased only to 1,800.

Story has it that the hilltop site for the Festival Playhouse was chosen because of Wagner's love for the spot. It had impressed him when, as a young conductor, he had hiked through the surrounding hills. About 46 miles from Nuremberg, Bayreuth already was a cultural center with a famous baroque theater and the little city's inhabitants warmly welcomed the idea of the annual festival.

THIS YEAR THE NEW SETS for Parsifal and the four Ring operas will be designed by Wieland Wagner, a grandson of the great composer. The productions will also be under the direction of the young Wagner.

In staging the scenes musically described by his grandfather, who demands no less than fire and flood in his final scene of Goetterdaemmerung, he will have once again overcome problems tripping directors and designers since they first attempted staging Wagner's dramas in their regular-sized theaters.

In the first act of Das Rheingold, for example, the Rhine maidens now swim about in the depths of the river suspended by wires, each maiden's movements usually controlled by four men. In 1876, the underwater damsels had to endure huge iron frames around their middles. The frames were connected with a wagon backstage. Men hidden by rocks pushed the wagon about.

Then there is the Gnome Alberich, who is alternately visible and invisible as he takes on and off his helmet. For this, Wagner startled the audience by releasing steam from a row of jets in front of the footlights.

The "Wagner Zoo" also has taken its toll in headaches. The Ring alone requires a bear, dragon, ravens and horses. And tame theater horses have an unfortunate reputation of wanting to eat scenery instead of jumping with Brunnhildes on their backs into burning funeral pyres.

IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE that in 1876 no theater of the day could approach Bayreuth in stagecraft. Undoubtedly to Wagner's initiative the theater owes many modern developments of stage machinery.

"Anyone who believes in art and in a civilizing force, any believer in an artistic endeavor outside of its utilitarian purposes, must experience a feeling of delight in Bayreuth at the sight of the enormous artistic undertaking which achieved success, and which reached the importance of a historic epoch because of its colossal size and the strength of the interest it aroused," the composer Tchaikovsky, turned correspondent, wrote at the close of Wagner's first tetralogy performance.

"From the point of view of a materialistic benefit to mankind, the Bayreuth Festival has, of course, no meanings; but from the point of view of artistic ideals, it is destined one way or another to have enormous historic significance... in any case, what happened in Bayreuth will be well remembered by our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren." +END

Blind to "See" Movies

Regular performances of specially-selected movies will be held for blind persons in West Berlin as the result of the enthusiastic response of 400 blind to an initial experimental showing of the Austrian film "Singing Angel", which features continuous singing by the Vienna Boys Choir. The experiment was sponsored by the Motion Picture Branch, Berlin Element, HICOG and the producers of the film. Future showings are to be held once or twice a month