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# Wagnerism as Participatory Culture: Nordic Perspectives

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Richard Wagner's oeuvre and its cultural ramifications comprise a unique case in the cultural history of Europe. Wagner's music dramas were discussed all over the continent, while his ideas and plans became objects of heated debate and remained threshold issues in cultural circles until the First World War. The question of Wagner's legacy has been discussed in numerous publications in recent decades, but still there are many unsolved or only partly illuminated problems. This essay continues the discussion I initiated in my *Wagner and Wagnerism in Nineteenth-Century Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic Provinces: Reception, Enthusiasm, Cult* (2005), which concentrated on Wagnerism and Wagner activity in the Baltic Sea region during the nineteenth century. With any composer, it is intriguing to consider not only the composition of his/her audience, but also the role of the audience as part of the music-making process. This is particularly interesting in the case of Wagnerism, since Wagner fans were often described as an especially devoted group of listeners. Who really listened to Wagner's music and experienced his music dramas? Who were the audience members and where did they come from?

In music histories the audience has often remained in the shadows, as an anonymous collective. As a first research strategy, the audience might be approached by studying the availability of music and music dramas. This viewpoint emphasizes the conditions for the possibility of musical consumption rather than what was in fact heard and listened to. It stresses the question of what kind of music was avail-

able.<sup>1</sup> Following this idea, one can trace arrangements for domestic use by studying music library collections, salon music catalogues and sheet music, repertoires of military bands and soirée orchestras and, of course, the programmes of theatres and opera houses. But what happened on these occasions or in moments of musical consumption? As a second strategy, it is possible to locate newspaper columns and reviews and try to assess critically what can be concluded on the basis of reports written by special music recipients, the critics. This strategy can be enriched by trying to find ordinary music lovers who have commented on their experiences in their diaries, letters and memoirs. The further back in history the historian delves, the more difficult it is to retrieve this information. My previous assessment of Wagnerism was based on both of these strategies. This essay develops these points of departure further and concentrates on the very idea of participation, namely the role of the audience in the case of Wagner's oeuvre. In what ways did audiences of the past participate in the process of music-making and/or in what ways did they participate in creating music culture outside concert halls and opera houses? The question itself is broad, but I will draw particularly on Nordic examples.

This essay has been inspired by recent studies on social media, especially by the works of the media theorist Henry Jenkins. In his *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) and *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006), Jenkins has pointed out the paradigmatic change to understanding an audience as interactive spectators. Instead of being passive recipients, audiences are able to "archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content".<sup>2</sup> It is obvious, of course, that this idea has particular relevance in the age of the internet, but I argue that it has historical currency as well, especially considering that, in the nineteenth century, the media world was in tremendous flux, which also meant that the audience could have a more active role than before.

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1 On the role of the possible in historical analysis, see Salmi 2011, 171–187.

2 Jenkins 2006a, 1; Jenkins 2006b, 3.

Since Jenkins's studies, the notion of participatory culture has been developed in several books, including *The Participatory Cultures Handbook* (2012), edited by Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson. In their introduction, the editors identify four phases of participatory culture and place the first one, "Emergence", in the period 1985–1993, arguing that the "global communication landscape was already beginning to manifest signs of impending transformation".<sup>3</sup> The culture of computer networks lowered "barriers for artistic expression and civic engagement". Members of a participatory culture "believe their contributions matter".<sup>4</sup> It can be argued, however, that global communication networks started their explosive rise already in the first half of the nineteenth century when high-speed presses made the printing of newspapers both quick and inexpensive. This happened in parallel with the rise of a bourgeois music culture. Electric overland telegraphs and underwater cables accelerated the speed of communication during the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s.<sup>5</sup> These decades were decisive for Richard Wagner's European-wide, and in fact global, fame. The expansion of the public sphere also made it possible for his supporters to express themselves and possibly even influence the transformation of music culture.

In light of these thoughts, it is intriguing to focus on the "Wagner audience", which has often been described as a special case among concertgoers: there seems to be a persistent representation of the audience that listens to Wagner.<sup>6</sup> First of all, Wagner listeners are often depicted as Wagnerians – fans or devotees who are somewhat different as compared, for example, to those who listen to Johann Sebastian Bach or Felix Mendelssohn. This interpretation seems to insinuate that Wagner is a cult figure and, hence, his audience is especially active. Opera productions too have referred to this discourse. It was referred

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3 Delwiche & Jacobs Henderson 2012, 4.

4 Ibid., 3.

5 Osterhammel 2014, 31–37.

6 See, for example, Daniel 2015, 153.

to by the Danish director Kasper Holten in his production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Copenhagen in 2006. *Götterdämmerung* starts with the three Norns weaving the rope of destiny and singing of the past, present and future. In Holten's interpretation the Norns are Wagnerians who not only listen to *Götterdämmerung*, but also try to understand the complex plot; they cite previous Wagner books and read the handout of the Copenhagen performance. One of the Wagnerians even shows an image of the original set of the Bayreuth performance in 1876, almost as if to anticipate the conservative criticism that the performance of 2006 might arouse. It is almost as if Holten had the idea of incorporating criticism of his own work into his interpretation at a meta-level.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Holten's *Götterdämmerung* leaves room for the idea that Wagnerians are particularly eager to participate in the performances of the works.

It is obvious that there is a gendered layer in Kasper Holten's interpretation: the Norns, and the Wagnerians, are women. This may allude to the role women have played in the history of Wagnerism since the nineteenth century. Furthermore, what seems to be the argument is that Wagnerians do not take anything for granted, but rather actively debate possible interpretations. They are participating in the process of meaning-making. In this sense, as audience members they *create* culture since culture needs to be interpreted. Culture involves interpretative work. To me, it seems that Kasper Holten is arguing that Wagnerism is a participatory culture by nature, and also that, in its essence, culture is communicative and has to involve participation.

#### Infectious Wagner and the Wagnerian party

This aspect of activity, emphasized by Holten's view, is interesting if we look at the accounts of Wagner's work in his own time. There was a nineteenth-century discourse that stressed the infectious side of Wagner's music and worldview. Wagner was often personified as

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<sup>7</sup> See the DVD release of the production, *The Copenhagen Ring: The Complete DVD Set*. Decca 2008.

a contagion. In the nineteenth-century press, especially in humorous magazines, his music was described as an assault, a physical invasion of the body of the listener, as in the famous caricature (Figure 1).



Figure 1. André Gill's (1840–1885) caricature of Richard Wagner in the French magazine *L'Éclipse* 18 April 1869. Source: gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France.

This image is probably one of the most famous of the Wagner caricatures. In contrast to Wagner's own emphasis on drama, here it is his music that is presented as violent and harmful to the ear of the listener. In this conception the listener is by no means an active participant, but rather a passive victim who has to withstand the overwhelming waves of music. There were also other discourses about Wagner's music in the nineteenth century. One of these was a representation of total incomprehension. In his review of *Tannhäuser* in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in 1876, the critic Wilhelm Bauck likened Wagner's

sonic works to Chinese music.<sup>8</sup> Modern music was so incomprehensible to him that it was like a product of an unknown culture, or at least this is what he argued. Four years earlier, the premiere of *Der fliegende Holländer* had left the impression that the singers were shouting. *Aftonbladet* claimed that the music was “ett kaos af skrik och signaler”, a chaos of shrieks and signals.<sup>9</sup> These descriptions refer to some kind of involuntary audience membership whereby the audience is by no means active and would like to become a non-audience.

These strong emotions can be seen against a wider backdrop given that, at the same time, very active, even hysterical audiences were seen. Franz Liszt was famous for his almost supernatural magnetism that drew people into the auditorium. Heinrich Heine coined the term *Lisztomania* to describe the fanatical audiences who participated in the performances and were ready to express their emotions openly.<sup>10</sup> Fervent admirers fought over locks of Liszt’s hair and even collected his spent cigars from the street.<sup>11</sup>

The examples given above of Wagner audiences and responses to his music differ from this, however. These highly stereotypical images are part of the cultural struggle around Wagner, which was visible, and loud, from the late 1840s onwards. The later Finnish music teacher and music historian Martin Wegelius described this struggle in his unpublished Wagner biography, which was probably written in the 1880s and 1890s. Wegelius wrote:

From *Tannhäuser* onwards, one can speak of a Wagnerian party, and of an organized opposition, albeit this opposition did not become fashionable until the Year of Revolutions in 1848, and only in the fifties, following the publication of *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, did it take on the character of a spiteful and merciless persecution.<sup>12</sup>

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8 *Dagens Nyheter* 23 August 1876.

9 *Aftonbladet* 25 January 1872.

10 Martens 1922, 458–459; Gooley 2009, 203.

11 Walker 1987, 371–372.

12 Martin Wegelius’s “Wagner-biografi” (s.a.), 52–53. An unpublished manuscript in the

Wegelius speaks of a “Wagnerian party”. It is important to note that the idea of a “party” is very typical of the nineteenth century. The “party”, a devoted group of people working for particular political goals, has its own history. The period after the French Revolution was a time of flourishing party politics in general. Thus, during the nineteenth century, it was customary to found a party or a society if there were particular political or social goals to be forwarded and advanced.

The view of a particular “Wagnerian party” needs, of course, certain goals that the party is seen to support and aims for the future that it tries to realize. If these goals were to be achieved, there was obviously a need for active participation and active party members. The struggle and fight over Wagner’s music was a contemporary cultural representation, but it can be argued that Wagner himself was happy to support this kind of activity. As we know, in the end Wagner did not get support for his Bayreuth project from the state and had to resort to the industry of his fans. In this sense, Wagner himself was in favour of participatory culture and wanted to lower the barrier to participating in his artistic endeavour.

Already in the 1840s, Wagner became known as an artist of the future. He himself contributed substantially to this interpretation with the writing of *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, which appeared in 1849, a year after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had published their Communist Manifesto. While Karl Marx set out a vision for the future of society, Wagner aimed at sketching the future of art. They both shared a particular utopian emphasis. It seems reasonable to argue that already in the 1840s Wagner had begun to compose his works for ensembles, stages and circumstances that did not exist. To be able to realize his plans, he needed a theatre of his own, and for this he needed active supporters. Wagner forged his works for the future, which, at the same time, restricted the mobility of his art. We know that when his works were performed in the 1850s, local opera houses took the liberty of arranging them for existing resources; otherwise, it would not have been possible



to perform them in the first place. When the Riga German Theatre performed *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* in the 1850s, they employed an ensemble of just over 20 musicians.<sup>13</sup> Of course, there were extra hands hired from the local military band; nonetheless, there must have been a rather chamber music-like quality to the sound. On the other hand, this particular circumstance meant that Wagner's works were by no means ready-made but required a great deal of local creative participation.

Wagner's music was soon described as *Zukunftsmusik*. This irritated him because he wanted to stress drama, not music as such. But the idea of *Zukunftsmusik*, or *framtidsmusik* as it was called in Sweden, *tulevaisuusmusiikki* in Finland, became persistently associated with Wagner's work. In the 1990s, when I was preparing my book on Wagnerism, I read numerous Swedish, Finnish, Estonian and Latvian newspapers, and was amazed to find how many news items appeared on Richard Wagner's future plans. In the 1850s in particular, Wagner's activities were under constant scrutiny. In Riga, the capital of Livonia, present-day Latvia, *Rigasche Stadtblätter* announced as early as January 1856 that Wagner's new opera would be entitled *Die Walkyren*.<sup>14</sup> This news is astonishingly early given that the opera's premiere came fourteen years later – in 1870. *Rigasche Zeitung* printed the following notice on 20 February 1857:

Richard Wagner is even now assembling in Zurich suitable singers and musicians in order to put on his great tetralogy *Die Nibelungen* in a theatre especially constructed for the purpose. This great composition will not be complete until the summer of 1859.<sup>15</sup>

This news item is even more illuminating than the previous one. In 1857, it was common knowledge that Wagner was preparing an opera tetralogy and that he wanted to build a theatre for its performance.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *Rigaer Theater-Almanach für das Jahr 1853* (1852).

<sup>14</sup> *Rigasche Stadtblätter* 12 January 1856. For further details, see Salmi 2005, 78.

<sup>15</sup> *Rigasche Zeitung* 20 February 1857. The English translation is quoted from Salmi 2005, 78.



The theatre was scheduled for completion in 1859, yet, as we know, it was finished only in 1876. All this confirms, of course, that Wagner had formulated long-term plans. It is obvious that at a time when there was no international copyright law to regulate press journalism, news items were copied from other newspapers. The editors of *Rigasche Zeitung* had clearly read German newspapers and copied information from there. It is probable too that Wagner understood how to use press publicity for his own purposes. He was living in a time of huge expansion in printing technology, and the transformation of the public sphere had already been efficiently used by virtuosi like Niccolò Paganini and Franz Liszt, whose spectacular concerts and various private escapades were reported everywhere, including Mexico and Australia, New Zealand and India. Today, with access to digital newspaper archives on every continent, this cornucopia of publicity is easy to find.<sup>16</sup> Newspapers were indeed essential proponents of music culture, and they participated in generating emotional attachment to celebrities like Paganini, Liszt and Wagner, whose deeds were regularly reported by the press.

### Wagner and his friends

Wagner consciously used publicity to promote his project, to stimulate those who were interested and to find supporters. Through the press, his plans became known to the general public. In his *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (2010), Nicholas Vazsonyi argues that Wagner marketed himself quite efficiently and describes how Wagner made himself a celebrity, using every available means of self promotion: autobiography, journal articles, short stories, newspaper announcements, letters, even his operas themselves.<sup>17</sup> The use of the concept of “brand” sounds a bit too modern for the nineteenth-century context, but we know that cattle had been branded for centuries and that the mass market of industrial products made it necessary to

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16 For further details on Paganini’s and Liszt’s press publicity, see Salmi 2016, 135–153.

17 Vazsonyi 2010.

burn or brand products with the logo of the producer. The rise of mass culture in the age of industrialization made it necessary to stress individuality and try to mark differences in comparison to others. Perhaps Wagner had a similar feeling as he tried to make a career in a society which was in continuous flux, under constant change.

Vazsonyi also has an interesting interpretation of Wagner's views on the audience, which is valuable from the perspective of participation. According to Vazsonyi, Wagner did not use the term "Wagnerianer", but called his supporters his friends, *Meine Freunde*: "Wagner describes these people as independent minded men and women who display an aristocracy of taste that separates them from the mainstream."<sup>18</sup> This mainstream was, for Wagner, "the faceless body that comprises contemporary audiences". Vazsonyi points out that, in these instances, Wagner referred to them with the word *Publikum*, but he also employed a more pejorative word – "rabble" (*Pöbel*).<sup>19</sup> It is often noted that the rise of the "rabble" took place during the French Revolution and meant the lower classes in particular. It seems, however, that Wagner referred to a middle class that was somewhat acquainted with the arts and whose members looked for relaxation after a working day. Vazsonyi concludes: "While they possess the education and the means to attend opera, and the social urge to see and be seen, they have no independent taste. Wagner understood that this public is a product of modernity and is sensitive to the new dynamics of the public sphere, dominated by print media, and the developing phenomenon of the popular consumer."<sup>20</sup> I would like to stress that in addition to these "consumers", Wagner wanted to find active "friends" who would be participants in musical life and energetically promote his cause.

Wagner appears to have been particularly keen to increase the number of his devoted supporters, his friends. During the years of the German *Reichsgründung*, Wagner cherished the hope of associating the

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18 Ibid., 129.

19 Ibid., 130.

20 Ibid.



Figure 2. Richard Wagner among his friends in Bayreuth. In front, from left to right: Siegfried and Cosima Wagner, Amalie Materna, Richard Wagner; behind, from left to right: Franz von Lenbach, Emil Scaria, Franz Fischer, Fritz Brand, Hermann Levi. From the centre to the right: Franz Liszt (at the piano), Hans Richter, Franz Betz, Albert Niemann, Countess Schleinitz, Countess Usedom and Paul Joukowsky. This reproduction is based on a painting by Georg Papperitz (1846–1918). Source: gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France.

destiny of his own project with that of Germany, and he made contacts with Otto von Bismarck, albeit without tangible results. Having met the Iron Chancellor on 3 May 1871, only to leave Berlin empty-handed, Wagner immediately embarked on soliciting popular support in concrete terms. By 12 May, he had written a letter for circulation, *Ankündigung der Festspiele*, in which he publicly presented his Bayreuth plan. The purpose was to build a large Festspielhaus in Bayreuth before the summer of 1873.<sup>21</sup>

After 1871, it was more and more important for Wagner to obtain support from his friends. Thus, the founding of Wagner societies can be interpreted as setting a standard for participatory culture among Wagner fans. As no support from the state was available, this network

21 For further details on the relationship between Wagner and Bismarck, see Salmi 1999, 159–165.

of societies seems to have been the only means by which the future of the whole festival could be guaranteed. The collection of aid for the Festival Theatre in Bayreuth began through the Wagner societies in 1871. Wagner's supporters, his friends, could thus participate in the creation of the *Kunstwerk der Zukunft*.

In 1877, soon after the first Bayreuth festival, a general *Patronat-Verein* was founded to serve as the parent organization of the societies. According to the first paragraph of its by-laws, the societies' central task was to work for the arrangement and fulfilment of the festival by following Richard Wagner's vision. The second paragraph stated that the societies should work in two areas; on the one hand, they had to manage the financing so that an annual festival could be assured; on the other hand, their task was to disseminate knowledge about Wagner's art. It became important to increase awareness and educate festival audiences. This proved to be important for the activities of regional societies. The third paragraph defined the basics of the societies' economies, particularly annual membership fees and ticket prices of the Bayreuth festival. It was decided that the annual membership fee should be 100 German marks and the price of a ticket 100 marks. According to an additional clause, the societies were allowed to sell festival tickets to their members at a lower price than to non-members.<sup>22</sup>

The interest in Wagner now spread rapidly through the activities of this internationally organized society. This machinery also reached the Baltic world, above all Finland and the Baltic provinces, but the *Patronat-Verein* apparently failed to find an agent in Sweden. However, in Sweden there was an active supporter of the Bayreuth circle in the person of Fredrik Vult von Steijern, who devoted himself to spreading the message of Wagnerism and who supported Wagnerian activities with personal donations. The role of the advocates and agents was accentuated in the late 1870s and 1880s. Every district had a leading person to represent the Bayreuth project: Vult von Steijern in Sweden, Richard Faltin and Martin Wegelius in Finland and Carl Friedrich

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<sup>22</sup> Veltzke 1987, 136–138.

Glasenapp in Livonia. These figures embodied Wagnerism in the Baltic world and were ready to spread the idea of Wagnerism as a participatory activity.<sup>23</sup>

“Wagner’s iron will made it possible to realize the idea”, wrote Marie zu Hohenlohe later in her memoirs.<sup>24</sup> Without Wagner’s insistent vision the Bayreuth project would never have come into existence. During its opening in 1876, the Bayreuth Festival was a unique cultural event, and even the Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm I, honoured it with his presence. A surprise guest at the festival was the Emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro II, who was touring Europe at that time. Only Bismarck refused to attend. Of course, the most enthusiastic supporters of Wagner also came to the festival, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Tappert, Ludwig Nohl, Richard Pohl, Gottfried Semper and Karl Klindworth. Professional musicians came from all over the world. The most famous were the Norwegian Edvard Grieg and the Russian Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Grieg wrote a cycle of articles for the Norwegian paper *Bergensposten* and attended not only the events, but also the rehearsals.<sup>25</sup>

In 1876 the Bayreuth Festival was widely noted in newspapers throughout Europe. The atmosphere of the festival was thus portrayed to those who could not make the journey to Germany. Almost all major newspapers on the shores of the Baltic Sea either sent reporters to Bayreuth, used their own local correspondents or cited German newspapers. For example, on 24 August 1876, the *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* in Stockholm published a translation of a feuilleton by Karl Frenzel, which had originally appeared in the Berlin *National-Zeitung* but with an introduction added to the text. The paper presented a very sarcastic picture of Wagner in which the Bayreuth Festival was principally seen as an event only for high society. According to Frenzel’s article, the festival was a significant cultural event on which the attention of the whole civilized world was focused. Frenzel’s article contains long

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23 For more on the “agents” of Wagnerism, see Salmi 2005, 197–224.

24 Hohenlohe 1938, 172.

25 For more details, see Hartford 1980, 61.

lists of the celebrities seen at the event, including artists, writers, musicians, singers, scientists and politicians. Following the fashion pursued by the society diarists, he also called attention to those who were not present. “Where were Verdi, Gounod, Brahms and Joachim?” Instead, noticeably present were “the well-known aristocratic society ladies of Berlin, Vienna and St. Petersburg who constitute the essential moving force in Wagnerism”.<sup>26</sup> The presence of women was also noted by other contemporaries. I have previously conducted a quantitative analysis of Bayreuth tourism in the nineteenth century on the basis of visitors’ lists. Among the guests from Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Livonia and Courland, the proportion of women was notably high, 43 per cent.<sup>27</sup>

### Participatory Wagnerism

In Bayreuth the audience was not encouraged to be particularly interactive. However, the sheer amount of pilgrimage is evidence of participatory culture, typical of Wagner fandom. Wagner was able to arouse devotion among his audiences. In addition, it is important to note that Wagner was clever at giving his supporters a sense of participation. An illuminating example was the way the composer “orchestrated” the success of his *Kaisermarsch* in 1871. When Germany was unified under Prussian leadership, Wagner composed this march and completed it in March 1871. He had hoped that the piece could be selected as the national anthem of Germany. The *Kaisermarsch* was officially premiered in Berlin on 5 May 1871, Wagner himself conducting, in the presence of the Emperor and the Empress. In composing the work, Wagner had added to the score an instruction to be followed in the premiere: the work ended with a choral finale, but the chorus should not be placed onstage, but rather among the audience, thereby giving the work a spontaneous character and allowing the audience to join in the singing.

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<sup>26</sup> *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* 24 August 1876.

<sup>27</sup> Salmi 2005, 189.

Wagner understood the potential of a sing-a-long.<sup>28</sup> The performance was a success, but its final aims were not fulfilled. It was not given the status of an anthem, and Wagner did not receive any official financial support for his Bayreuth project. At this point, he again relied on the participation of his fans.

Already by the 1850s, Richard Wagner was known as a figure who aroused exceptional interest, devotion and passion among his audiences. There were also very strong representations of his work and of his supporters, and ultimately, it is difficult to tell how much the image of the audience was dominated by its individual members and the powerful representatives of the time. Still, the rising numbers of travellers to Bayreuth from different corners of the world, including from the Nordic countries, indicate the growth of Wagner's fame and the increase in the number of his supporters. Compared to the present day, of course, the participation in societal and tourist activities are rather mild manifestations of participatory culture if this notion is understood in the light of Henry Jenkins's thoughts. Still, as this essay has endeavoured to point out, it is important to pay attention to the modes of participation and the changing conditions of possibility for participation that were available and were consciously made available to audiences. Obviously, Wagner did not have social media at his disposal, but he used all other possible means to attract people's attention and increase social cohesion among his supporters. Through this organized Wagnerism, and through the participatory culture that it involved, Wagner succeeded not only in transforming nineteenth-century European culture into something new, but also in creating a culture of his own.

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<sup>28</sup> I have dealt with the performance in detail in Salmi 1999, 149–153.



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