

The widow of Richard Wagner, often described as the foremost woman of the nineteenth century, died on the first of April at the age of ninety-two. Here is an outline of her life and her epoch.

# COSIMA WAGNER

By KARL HOLL

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*'With her aid I can attain what I cannot possibly attain without her . . . she knew what help would mean to me and so she gave it.'*—RICHARD WAGNER.

IN THE YEAR 1809 the Count of Flavigny, a French emigrant, returned with his German wife, Maria Elisabeth, to France from Frankfurt, where he had spent the early years of his married life. Their daughter, Marie Katharine Sophie, accompanied them. After receiving the usual religious education of the aristocracy this daughter was then married, in 1827, to Count Charles d'Agoult. Seven years passed. The young Countess Marie d'Agoult was now the wife of a man of distinguished character, the mother of two children, and a woman of intense intellectual energy. It was at this point that she met the twenty-three-year-old Franz Liszt and experienced with him the mystery of a consuming love, eloping in his talented company from Paris to Geneva. Later they lived together for a time in Italy and at Nohant, George Sand's country seat. In Geneva a daughter, Blandine, was born to them and on the 25th of December, 1837, in Bellagio on Lake Como, a second daughter first saw the light of day. Because of her parents' manifold associations with the lake, with a certain book by George Sand, and with the holy Saint Cosmas, this child was named Cosima. These two little girls, along with their brother Daniel, who was born afterward in Rome, were subsequently placed in the care of Liszt's mother in Paris. As for

their mother, she returned to her husband toward the middle of the century when Liszt chose to seek again complete artistic freedom and to direct his interest toward other women, but the children remained under the care of their grandmother Liszt, who devoted herself to them.

While Liszt was enlarging his European reputation the three children grew up together in close comradeship and received a good linguistic education, which was at the same time scientific, musical, and strongly religious in character. When Liszt entered upon a fresh and passionate attachment for Princess Caroline von Sayn-Wittgenstein and began to live with her at Weimar, she prevailed on him to intrust the further education of his daughters to her own former governess, who from that time on maintained a separate household in Paris for the two girls. It was the wish of Liszt and the Princess that, in view of their proposed marriage, the three children be insulated as completely as possible from the influence of their mother. The most thrilling event of the adolescent years of Blandine, Cosima, and Daniel occurred in 1853, when they met the father whom they adored almost fanatically. On that particular occasion, however, Liszt did not come to Paris alone. A friend accompanied him—Richard Wagner, who was in Zürich and of whose genius the three children had already formed a distinct conception.

In 1854 Blandine and Cosima were brought into contact with their mother again and after this meeting the two daughters continued to feel a close bond of sympathy with her. During the intervening years Marie d'Agoult, who had come to command a certain literary reputation under the name of 'Daniel Stern,' had succeeded in attracting to her salon many of the most excellent minds in France at that period. But Liszt, in view of the growing friendship of the children with their mother, from whom they had long been separated, decided that they must be taken to Germany. Blandine and Cosima Liszt were, therefore, received in Berlin in the home of Frau von Bülow, the mother of Hans von Bülow, who was then winning fame as a pianist and conductor and who was devotedly attached to his master, Liszt. In Berlin there developed between Cosima and Hans von Bülow, who himself gave her piano instruction, a friendship which led first to a secret engagement and finally to marriage in the summer of 1857. A few weeks after Cosima's wedding her sister Blandine, with the consent of her mother, married a Parisian lawyer, Emile Ollivier, but this marriage was abruptly terminated at the end of five brief years by Blandine's premature death. Daniel, the aristocratic, highly gifted, intellectual son of a great father and the beloved of two sisters, succumbed to tuberculosis in 1859.

**D**URING Cosima's youth in Paris the conception of sacrificial love which she had inherited from her father gradually assumed a pious form

as a result of her strongly Catholic up-bringing. Furthermore, the tendency she had developed at an early age to assert her individuality and her right to her own emotions and thoughts intensified the energy of her fundamental traits without suppressing her more quixotic and childish mischievous impulses. The harmony between ethical motives and intellectual and artistic preoccupations fostered in Cosima's spirit by the example of her parents was supplemented by a self-possessed bearing, the product of the French cultural society to which her mother had introduced her. Moreover, while Cosima was still young she became familiar with German life and art. As soon as she established herself in the home of the von Bülow in Berlin, she began witnessing the violent conflict over the so-called 'music of the future.' At the focal point of this dispute stood the gifted and chivalrous son of the house. The sixteen-year-old girl felt for the first time that a personal mission had been vouchsafed her when she perceived the suffering endured by her artistic counselor, young von Bülow, in championing Liszt and Wagner. On the night when von Bülow, usually calm and inflexible, returned home completely broken in spirit after the debacle of the overture to *Tannhäuser*, she supported him unhesitatingly.

Cosima's marriage with Hans von Bülow was more than a 'friendly sacrifice' offered by von Bülow to his honored master for the purpose of giving Liszt's illegitimate child an illustrious name, it was also the union of a woman who was as self-sacrificing as she was ambitious with an important man and artist whose destiny she believed herself capable of guiding to lofty heights. Presently, however, it became evident that Cosima had set von Bülow's trajectory too high and that she would not be able to turn the great interpreter into a great composer. In consequence, this bond of comradeship began to weaken, and when von Bülow, on a visit to Wagner in Biebrich in 1860, felt compelled by the quality of *Tristan* and the *Meistersinger* to renounce all further creative effort of his own, a sweeping crisis in Cosima's fate developed, a crisis which was to grow acute four or five years later, but which was not to culminate until ten years had passed. The daughter of Franz Liszt and of the Countess d'Agoult was not destined to accompany through life a man who only ministered to greatness. She had sought with the utmost faithfulness to unveil in her husband a genuinely creative spirit, but it was in Richard Wagner that she perceived the great, overwhelming, creative spirit of the period.

As Wagner was twenty-four years older than Liszt's children he noticed almost nothing about them when he first met them except their extreme shyness. Furthermore, when young von Bülow and his wife visited Wagner in Zürich on their wedding journey in 1857 and when, in the presence of Mathilde Wesendonck, they immersed themselves in the world of harmony of the *Rheingold*, the *Walküre*, and the first two

acts of *Siegfried*, Cosima continued to conceal behind a considered attitude of reserve her profound interest in the work and person of the master. It was only when she made a second trip to Switzerland with her husband a year later and found herself in close proximity to the catastrophe in Wagner's home which had resulted from his first marriage that more and more vigorous stirrings of admiring sympathy for the restless and harassed man manifested themselves beneath the respect which, according to von Bülow, always characterized her attitude toward Wagner. Letters which she sent to the composer of *Tristan* when he was in Venice, a meeting with him in Reichenhall after the birth of Cosima's first daughter, Daniela, a visit to the *Meistersinger* studio at Biebrich in 1862, and finally Wagner's sojourn in Berlin in 1863 at the home of the von Bülows made Cosima and Wagner increasingly conscious of their mutual attraction. Their 'passionate yearning for revealed truth' reached heights of unbearable intensity.

And now there came about in rapid succession those understandings and decisions by means of which these two congenial spirits 'betrayed their truest friend.' In the summer of 1864 Cosima took von Bülow, Daniela, and Blandine, their second child, to Wagner's house at Starnberg, where she realized fully the nature of the duty which destiny had assigned to her. Beginning in November, 1864, the wife of von Bülow, who had meanwhile been called to Munich as musical conductor at the court, dwelt constantly in a drawing room and study of Wagner's house. Here she gathered into her fingers all her threads of intercourse with the outer world, including her relations with friends and with Wagner's first wife, Minna, here she negotiated with stage directors, publishers, court officials, and above all with King Louis II. In 1865 Cosima's third daughter, Isolde, was born. This child was Wagner's and was, incidentally, the first child he had fathered. A few weeks later the first presentation of *Tristan* took place under von Bülow's direction.

EARLY in 1866 Minna Wagner died. In the spring of that year Cosima joined Wagner in Geneva, with the consent of her unsuspecting spouse, and discovered at Tribschen a new haven of refuge for Wagner, who had been summarily exiled from Munich for his supposedly radical tendencies. In May, 1866, Wagner invited his friend, von Bülow, to bring his family to Tribschen. It was here that an incautious letter of Wagner's made the still trustful husband aware for the first time of the true situation. Von Bülow was profoundly affected but gave the master his consent to a divorce provided that Cosima should spend two years with her father in Rome. Yet, after the magnificent première of the *Meistersinger*, which von Bülow directed with superhuman power in the summer of 1868, Wagner summoned Cosima to him for good and all

without consideration for von Bülow's noble attitude. With Cosima by his side, Wagner then resumed work on the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, which he had started eleven years before. In the summer of 1869 Cosima bore him a son, Siegfried, a second daughter, Eva, having been born in the spring of 1867. Shortly after this event the announcement of divorce proceedings reached von Bülow. The divorce was granted on the 18th of July, 1870, and on August 25th, 1870, after Cosima's conversion to the Protestant faith, she became the wife of Richard Wagner.

At the time of his marriage with Cosima, Wagner was already fifty-seven years old and the first glow of his wandering, romantic passions had been cooled by an abundance of relationships. After the wreck of his marriage with Minna Planer he had experienced love in its most sublime and ethereal form under the charm of Mathilde Wesendonck, but after Mathilde refused herself to him he arrived at the mature and hallowed state of Tristan's 'will to death.' In that springtime of his life he had received the essential stimulus for all his further creative efforts up to *Parsifal*, having evolved as a human being from an ardent Tristan to a laughingly resigned Hans Sachs. It was given him as an artist to rejoice in the marvelous unfolding of his work before a world of hostile eyes. The thirty-two-year-old woman who had come to him with sure footsteps over a toilsome way as unerringly as if she had been walking in her sleep meant to him not only what Eva signified to Sachs—'a child and yet a woman'; she was not only his muse and his beloved in one person: after the difficult years in Munich she became his companion in the most precise sense of the word. She who had defied every insult and had borne him three children was enveloped in Wagner's eyes in the three-fold glory of martyr, mother, and spiritual mate. She became a kind of presiding angel in the paradise of Triebtschen and under her inspiration his work attained its full stature, as he himself acknowledged in the dedication of the *Siegfried* idyll.

FROM that time on, at Richard Wagner's side, Cosima exercised untiring and highly diplomatic control, eliminating all barriers to his accomplishment and helping to establish the festival opera house at Bayreuth where the completed *Ring of the Nibelungen* was first presented in 1876. She became the guardian of their home in Bayreuth, 'Wahnfried,' where Wagner's 'visions finally came to rest' and she assured the master the peace necessary for the conclusion of his final poetic drama, *Parsifal*, which fully consecrated the Bayreuth temple of art in 1882.

When Richard Wagner died in Venice on February 13th, 1883, the vision of death which he had dreamed twenty-five years previously under the spell of Mathilde was fulfilled in Cosima, for he breathed out his life in her arms. For twenty-five hours Cosima kept vigil beside the

body of her husband. It was believed that she did not wish to outlive him and would not do so, but by the time she received the telegraphed appeal from Hans von Bülow—'Sœur, il faut vivre'—faith in her mission had already revived her. The stricken woman had her daughters cut off her golden hair, which reached to her feet, and she laid it in the coffin as a last farewell. After the burial in the garden of Wahnfried there remained but one meaning and one end in life for Cosima Wagner—to give herself fully to serving her husband's work.

She who had sustained the master during his lifetime possessed after his death a supreme faith in her mission. From the highly agitated performances of 1883 to the summer of 1906 Cosima Wagner was not only the soul but also the driving energy behind all the activities of the Bayreuth festivals, social as well as commercial. Around the opera house and her home, Wahnfried, she gathered that group of spiritual friends and artistic helpmates who established Wagner's ideas upon the widest possible foundations. She exercised a decisive influence in the choice of repertories, in the engagement of artists, and in the style of the productions, her judgment often prevailing over that of prominent directors. Surrounded by her daughters and acting as the guardian of her son, she made her aristocratic household a select gathering place for the entire community of Bayreuth. She knew how to win over the influential minds of Germany to appreciate the national significance of Bayreuth, and by engaging the services of artists from outside Germany she aroused foreign interest as well.

It must be admitted that her fascinating personality had something to do with her success, and her pronounced will to power and the lack of firm opposition to that will created the singleness of spirit which characterized the whole Bayreuth group. Even after Siegfried Wagner had taken over the artistic direction of the performances, the commanding will of his mother was clearly perceptible in his activity for many years. Cosima Wagner came voluntarily to public attention for the last time in 1912 on the occasion of the controversy over the presentation of *Parsifal*. Two years later, shortly before the War, her name and fate again attracted widespread interest when her daughter, Isolde, became involved in a legal conflict with her mother and sisters which forced her to sue for judicial recognition of the fact that Richard Wagner was her father. But, after this episode, the aging woman withdrew to the tranquillity of her home. Abandoned to reminiscence, growing gradually weaker and succumbing slowly to blindness, she waited for death, which brought her release on April 1st, 1930, in her ninety-third year.

**T**HE daughter of Liszt and of the Countess d'Agoult drew from her father her will power, her generous way of helping, and probably also

her more profound artistic tendencies. From her mother she inherited most of her intellectual powers and her feeling for the great, important patterns of life. Her vigorous inner compulsion toward the materialization of spiritual and particularly of artistic values was intensified by the energy of romantic idealism that permeated the atmosphere of her time. The forces of idealism which impinged upon her received their corrective in her markedly religious French-Catholic education, which interpreted human vocation in terms of practical ethics and consequently put mystic ecstasy at the service of tangible ends. Not precisely cold, accustomed from youth to exercise a rigid control over her feelings and yet never entirely free from headstrong traits, Cosima Wagner found herself, by reason of her origin, her upbringing, and her destiny, at the meeting point of French and German culture. She extended her feminine existence beyond its natural limits until it merged into that type of androgynous personality which corresponded in an unusually high degree to the ideal type of woman of her particular period. Cosima Wagner is supposed to have been an unusually good mother. But it is of more interest that she was her husband's consort, expressing his effective will. Wagner has described her to us as 'childish and profound . . . extraordinarily gifted . . . always concentrated upon the sublime.' He had no feeling of jealousy where she was concerned: 'How could another man love that which I love in her?' He had confidence in her guiding star and in her belief in their mission. Nietzsche, who knew her intimately in the 'Isle of the Blessed' at Tribschen and who was her friend until he broke with Wagner, called her the 'most sympathetic woman' he had ever met, although later he stressed the danger which threatened a genius surrounded by 'adoring women.' He counted her among the 'few cases of high culture' which he had encountered in Germany. He attributed to her 'priority in questions of good taste.'

It is possible and indeed probable that Cosima fortified Wagner as he grew older in those sanctimonious propensities which seemed not only to Nietzsche but also to many later critics to constitute a somewhat impure element in relation to the whole of Wagner's dramatic work. Her encouragement of the posthumous adulation of Wagner, which had been a subject of discussion before his death and for which the ground had been prepared during the years at Tribschen when Wagner was dictating his autobiography to her, represented no more than the culmination of mystical tendencies inherent in her character. It has been proven that Cosima sometimes made use of that dangerous moral code according to which the end justifies the means. During the critical years at Munich she effectually controlled Wagner. In the most refined manner she implicated the ailing king in the politics connected with Wagner's personal interests. During the marriage scandal of 1866 she deceived Louis II to such an extent that he never forgave her. Under

pressure of Wagner's egocentric vitality she dealt the 'pure fool,' von Bülow, a wound that would not heal. And within the framework of her local policies at Bayreuth she sometimes treated even her own father unfairly. Yet she took upon herself the blame for her actions, suffered under it, and defied the strict rules of society in the interests of a magnificent cause. As in the case of Wagner himself, the shadows in Cosima's character, the contradictions between ideas and actions, fade and merge into the reality of a destiny whose roots spread out extensively and of work which represented and at the same time influenced an epoch. If her autonomous conception of life and her far-reaching artistic and cultural achievements are to be considered significant, it is not too much to say that Cosima Wagner was the most important woman of the nineteenth century.

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Lawn tennis may do more than naval conferences to promote international goodwill. Here is a timely study of Anglo-German rivalry on the courts.

# DAVIS CUP

By J. B. PRIESTLEY

From the *Week-end Review*  
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IT IS ALWAYS HOT when I visit Queen's Club. Baron's Court does not figure in my mind as a part of London, but as some sizzling little tropical town, with red roofs quivering in the heat. It was hot last Friday afternoon, when I went to Queen's to see the second day's play of the Davis Cup match between Great Britain and Germany. When there was no play going forward, women put up sunshades; the players used their towels very freely; many of us felt that our shoes were too tight; it was that kind of afternoon; we might have been sitting on Bar-