All dressed up, but no ticket to see Wagner

By Finn-Olaf Jones

Photographs by Oliver Hartung for The New York Times

Wagner's Festspielhaus, in Bayreuth, Germany, scene of an annual festival for which there is a several-year waiting list for tickets.

BAYREUTH, Germany

'What's your favorite Wagner opera?" I jokingly asked the 11-year-old boy wearing a black T-shirt and reversed baseball cap in the back seat of a car in which I'd hitched a ride. "Siegfried," he answered immediately.

"He likes the dragon," added his father, Stephen Specht, who was driving us to Bayreuth, Germany.

Where else in the world would one comfortably ask an 11-year-old such a question?

With two renowned opera houses and a world-class music scene going back to the 18th century, the small north Bavarian city of Bayreuth, population 75,000, is the Woodstock of the opera set. From July 25 to Aug. 28, hordes of opera lovers will descend on Richard Wagner's Festspielhaus to squeeze into one of the 1,925 thin fold-down wooden chairs — those in the know bring their own cushions — to watch the tuneful twilight of the gods in the annual Bayreuth Festival, which has been going on since Richard Wagner first conducted his four-opera cycle "Ring des Nibelungen" here in 1876.

Stepping off the train in Bayreuth without an opera ticket might seem a little sad, especially when glancing up the hill north of town and seeing the Festspielhaus set in the trees like a vision of Valhalla. Tickets are hard to come by. With a several-year waiting list, most people have a better chance of getting out of the alternative minimum income tax than scoring a ticket.

But even if you're not going to be humming along to the live version of "Ride of the Valkyries," Bayreuth is well worth a visit.

Blame the Margravine Wilhelmina (margravine was a noble title in the Holy Roman Empire) for what had been a backwater town's entry onto the world stage. The margravine, like her brother, Frederick the Great, was an enlightened ruler devoted to music and the arts. In the mid-18th century, she planned and built the New Castle with its Baroque Oriental designs and intimate rooms bursting with painted and sculptured vines, flowers and trees — a lighthearted style now known as Bayreuth Rococo.

The front of Wagner's home, Wahnfried, in Bayreuth. Wagner is buried there.

But the margravine's flair for the dramatic takes its biggest bow in her opera house, a severe-looking sandstone building on Opernhausstrasse that was completed in 1748, over a century before Wagner showed up. I walked into a three-tiered gilded Baroque riot that seemed less an auditorium than an indoor fireworks display. The margravine wanted to ensure that she would have Germany's most prominent opera house and this she got, along with an 27-meter-, or 89-foot-deep stage that was the largest in Europe.

The opera house is what attracted Richard Wagner to Bayreuth in the first place, armed with a virtual blank check from his ardent fan King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Conducting in the Margravial Opera House in 1871, Wagner must have noticed the ancient scuff marks on the gallery floors (still there) from all the dancing and prancing about, and the ornate boxes for nobles to upstage one another, and decided to build his own opera house.

In terms of contrast, there are few trips in the world more interesting than the drive from the Margravial Opera House to the Festspielhaus, north of the town center in the bucolic setting of Green Hill. The auditorium itself, with its plank floors, neo-Classical pillars and spartan seating, was revolutionary both for its egalitarianism and its acoustical engineering. The orchestra, submerged in a deep pit, is invisible to the audience, so that only a mystical gap separates the audience from Wagner's onstage singing gods, gnomes and heroes.

Eva Graf-Handel, the owner of the Hotel Goldener Anker next to the Margravial Opera House, showing me a modest room at the end of a corridor on the first floor, said, "This is the bedroom where Hitler liked to stay. But we prefer to remember the many great musicians who have slept here."

Hitler, a fanatical Wagnerian, and his cronies came to Bayreuth so often during the '20s and '30s that the Festspiele became associated with the Nazi regime. When the victorious Allies occupied Germany after the war, they didn't allow the Festspiele to reopen until 1951, six years after Hitler's defeat.

Securing a table in the hotel's clubby wood-paneled restaurant during the opera season is almost as hard as getting a Festspiele ticket. But last month, I was one of only four diners in the restaurant (though it turns out that the fellow eating at the next table was a recent Nobel laureate). I ate royally — asparagus salad, venison, cheese and berries, all fresh from the local countryside. I walked off the meal in the Hofgarten, the royal park that rolls through town, whose ancient oaks and beech trees shade Wahnfried, Wagner's old home, next to the old house of his father-in-law, Franz Liszt. Wahnfried is now a wonderfully eccentric museum of Wagner's life.

Wagner's simple grave is in the garden under an unmarked stone slab next to the marked tombstone of his dog, Russ. A small group of local men were having a weekly get-together around a keg set in a van in the parking lot. They invited me to join them.

"Do you often attend the Festspiele?" I asked the group. There was a collective guffaw. "It's too hard getting a ticket," one of the men said. "But this beats the Festspiele, don't you think?"

Last year there were nine applicants for each of the 53,900 seats available for the Bayreuth Festival (bayreuther festspiele.de).

The festival ticket office keeps a waiting list for people who apply by mail before October of the previous year. Every consecutive year someone applies, that person moves up the list. Applications: Bayreuther Festspiele Kartenburo, Postfach 100262, D-95402 Bayreuth, Germany.

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A map and a guide with suggestions for a visit to Bayreuth, Germany.