

Bard Fest dissects Wagner's influence on music, society

BY MARK SWED
Los Angeles Times

The Bard Music Festival, an intense two-weekend immersion in the world of a major composer, operates on the principle that if you put forth enough information and play enough unfamiliar music, demystification might occur. Perhaps that works for Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schoenberg, Shostakovich and other explicable artists that Bard has explored in past years. But not that old wizard, Richard Wagner.

Everyone knows Wagner didn't necessarily improve the world, although he is often given far too much credit for inspiring the Nazi cause (Hitler appeared to like the idea of Wagner more than the composer's long music dramas themselves). What the final three days of the festival, which ended Sunday, did show, however, is that the world of music was, indeed, better for Wagner's influence.

Leon Botstein, Bard's ambitious president and venturesome music director of the American Symphony Orchestra in New York City, invited his usual raft of experts, his orchestra and quite a few soloists to the verdant campus along the Hudson River. The overstuffed second weekend this past Friday to Sunday included a daylong symposium looking at Wagner's effect on European culture, a panel on the inevitable Jewish question and talks before each of the weekend's six marathon concerts. Days began first thing in the morning and extended until late at night, leaving little time to read the 542-page companion book to the festival.

Wagner has, to understate, been investigated before. Since his death in 1883, this uniquely visionary creator of music theater — who also happened to be a womanizer, scheming careerist and obnoxious bigot — has provided employment for philosophers, psychologists, visual artists, cultural historians, musicologists, political scientists, biographers, novelists, poets, critics and university Jewish studies departments. For a century and a half, Wagnerites have fought anti-Wagnerites.

What cannot be disputed is that, as a musician and a man, Wagner cast a

spell, and that was as palpable at Bard, if sometimes as oppressive, as the heavy rain clouds overhead. And however much the festival was designed to dispel the Wagnerian clouds and show you how he did it, revealing the mechanism was never enough. The better you know this master musician, the more mysterious he seems.

BEYOND MUSIC

The symposium revealed the pervasiveness of Wagnerism in European thought outside of music, be it the work of Cezanne or nutty neurologists (Wagner fanaticism was studied in 19th century Paris as though a bacteria or mental aberration).

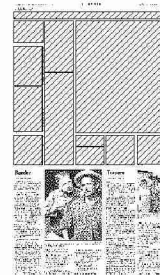
One member of the audience demanded to know why Wagner mattered as much as Darwin or Marx. Byron Adams, a musicologist at the University of California, Riverside and one of the weekend's liveliest presences, put the issue to rest. Wagner inspired Henri Bergson's theory of time, he pointed out, and Bergson's theory influenced both Proust and Einstein.

The festival did not stage any Wagner opera. The idea, instead, was to show where Wagner came from and how he operated outside the lyric theater. Earlier at Bard's Summerscape (the larger festival umbrella under which the music festival resides), Botstein did stage Meyerbeer's French grand opera "Les Huguenots," as one of the pieces that gave Wagner his grounding. That theme continued through the first Wagner weekend.

The programs I heard on the second weekend, though, demonstrated the culture Wagner worked in during his prime, and the kind of impression he made on his contemporaries.

Two concerts looked at Wagner's influence. One consisted of parodies, some affectionate, some mean-spirited, and it was hilarious. Offenbach's operetta "Le Roi Carotte," about a carrot king and his leafy vegetable court, is priceless. Byron Adams did the detective work here finding lampoons of Lohengrin, Rhine Maidens and other Wagner characters in lost or forgotten operettas by Von Suppe and Oscar Straus.

MUSIC BY FOLLOWERS



Moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, a program of Wagner's followers included lovely songs by Richard Strauss, Engelbert Humperdinck and others. Chausson's Concert, for violin, piano and string quartet, the best of French Wagnerism, got a sumptuous performance.

"The Jewish Question" was Sunday morning's intellectual lox and bagels.

Paul Lawrence Rose, an author of books on musical anti-Semitism, suggested various ways Wagner mimicked Jewish stereotypes in the dwarf characters in the "Ring." Botstein, who is also music director of the Jerusalem Symphony, shot him down point for point.

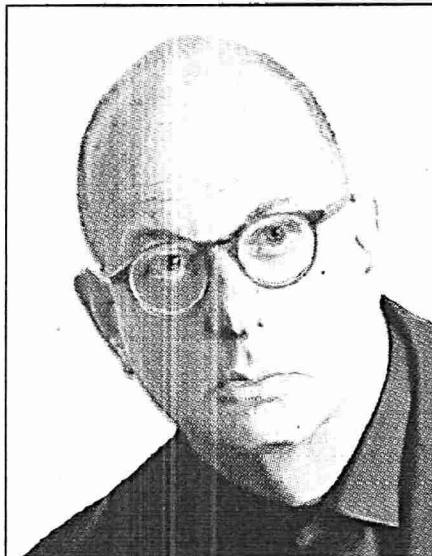
The final concert looked at the German question. Here a sizable chunk of "Die Meistersinger" was given in context with other nationalist pieces for chorus and orchestra.

Christopher Gibbs, co-director with Botstein and cellist Robert Martin of the festival, called the Handel-inspired "Triumphlied" the greatest piece by

Brahms you've never heard. I thought it a lot of Hallelujah hooley.

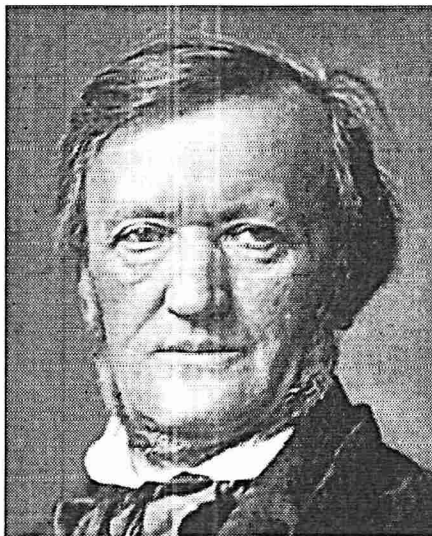
But what a setup for "Meistersinger"! With the fine Bard Festival Choral and acceptable vocal soloists, Wagner powerfully cast another spell, and there was nothing to be done but surrender to it. This had nothing to do with German nationalism and everything to do with the human spirit.

The festival's performer list is too long to go into. So I will leave you with just one name of an emerging artist to jot down. You'll want to hear mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera the first chance you get.



STEVEN J. SHERMAN

Leon Botstein, music director of the American Symphony Orchestra and Bard Music Festival.



Richard Wagner in a photo from 1873.



STEPHANIE BERGER

Erin Morley as Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre from Giacomo Myerbeer's "The Huguenots," part of "Wagner and His World" at the Bard Music Festival earlier this summer.