

A portrait of Cosima Wagner, a woman with dark, wavy hair and blue eyes, looking slightly to the right. The portrait is rendered in a soft, painterly style with visible brushstrokes. The background is a light, textured grey.

Sabine
Zurmühl

COSIMA WAGNER

A Contradictory Life

böhlau

Sabine Zurmühl

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Translated by Stewart Spencer

BÖHLAU

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Overture

“O Kosel, O Kosel, a sweet little nuisance!”¹; “dear miracle”²; “my fair neighbour”³; “you eternal ‘Prize Song’ of my life”⁴; “Elisabeth, Elsa, Isolde, Brünnhilde, Eva in one”⁵; “Cosima *Helperica* Wagner”⁶; “the king of Bavaria’s sister”⁷; “the central sun around which everything revolves”⁸; “my little pride”⁹; “the conductor of [my] life”¹⁰; “my melody”¹¹; “dear indispensability”¹²; “good old mother hen”¹³; “the holy Urdar’s Well from which I draw wisdom”¹⁴; “causa efficiens et finalis, basis and cause of life”¹⁵; “Cosima la Dieudonnée”¹⁶; “my good consciousness”¹⁷; “a salamander”¹⁸; “my buskin, my crutch, my little stilt”¹⁹; “Mater Gloriosa, Mater Amorosa”²⁰; “angelic etching”²¹; “Neoterpe”²²; “a wood nymph”²³; “my good half”²⁴; “fons amoris”²⁵; “life-giver”²⁶; “Melusina”²⁷; “my imperial crown”²⁸; “Justitia, Sapientia, Poesia”²⁹; “my lotus flower”³⁰; “gazelle”³¹; “my sunshine at all times of the day”³²; “my Allah and my all”³³; “slender happiness”³⁴; “a Roman patrician’s lady”³⁵; “the whole of Wahnfried”³⁶; “my barometer”³⁷; “Paradeta”³⁸; “*Webia*, [...] *Urlögtrygia*, [...] you All Souls’ woman”³⁹; “my *bel âge*, Belgiojoso”⁴⁰; “a splendid fellow”⁴¹; “the fair miller’s wife”⁴²; “Napoleon”⁴³; “my one and only”⁴⁴.

Richard Wagner’s terms of endearment for Cosima

1. Introducing Cosima

Cosima Wagner. A remarkable life. A breathless life. A life both strangely cut off from the world and led in the full glare of public scrutiny. Echoing the musical and political world, she polarized opinion, attracting not only admiration but also the crudest contempt. All that Richard Wagner endured as a musician in terms of the world's indictment of his life and works was something that Cosima, too, had to suffer – in her case it was focused on her in her capacity as a wife and, later, as the woman in charge of the Bayreuth Festival.

What would have become of her if she had never married? Perhaps a combination of Elly Ney, Clara Haskil and Martha Argerich? A respected pianist who, however outstanding, was nonetheless condemned to live her whole life in her father's shadow? It is rarely necessary to ask what would have become of a man if he had never married: he would still have become what he did in fact turn out to be, only perhaps a little less lovingly cared for. But someone to care for him would surely still have been found.

Is it possible for a woman to lead an independent life when her whole existence revolves round another person, supporting him, working alongside him, listening to him, doing as she is told and taking care of him in the fullest sense of that term? This is precisely the kind of life that Cosima Wagner chose to lead, a life beset by constant doubts but also filled with joy and notable for its altogether euphoric energy. This was the life she opted to lead, the realization of wishes first formed in her childhood and adolescence: she wanted people to notice her through the medium of another person, unconditionally and no matter the risks involved. If she had not been this inwardly independent, clear-sighted, resolute and proud woman, a provocative figure until her dying day, she would not have been such a contradictory figure and our interest in her as a person would not have lasted for as long as it has done.

Wagner was a genius, a man as arrogant as he was trusting. He could be both warm and brusquely dismissive, creative and witty but also self-pitying and fickle. He had a difficult life. And he made things difficult for himself. Yet his works have enriched and changed the world of music for ever. Only a woman like Cosima, who, markedly strong and steadfast as a person and self-sacrificial to a fault, was nonetheless plagued by self-doubts, while retaining the ability to adopt a tone of self-irony, could stand up to Wagner and provide an effective counterbalance. However close she may have been to Wagner's plans and to his

worries, however much her life may have been intertwined with his own on a daily basis, travelling everywhere with him and sharing the financial chaos of his life, she retained an inner independence when it came to the actions that she took. This clear-sightedness did not mean that she might ever have broken free from the moral concepts and value judgements of her age, including the crass anti-Semitism that she shared with Wagner and others – her first husband, Hans von Bülow, was every bit as vituperative as Wagner and Cosima when it came to referring contemptuously to Jewish musicians, critics and singers. The anti-Semitism that was a part of their lives is repulsive and unforgivable and it remains a suppurating wound that simply refuses to heal.

Bayreuth was always a place where powerful women flourished, initially in the background, then, when Cosima took over the running of the Festival, in much more prominent positions. Neither Cosima nor, at a later date, Winifred Wagner conformed to the patriarchal picture of the world that prevailed at that time. And even today Cosima is the subject of barbed remarks that men would not have to put up with even though they are just as competent or incompetent.

True, Cosima was virulently anti-Semitic. She was also obsessed with Wagner. Furthermore, she was not attractive in a feminine way. On religious questions she was often unreasonable and sometimes even hypocritical, but she was a lot of other things, too. The following series of biographical sketches is intended to explore her manifold qualities, her connections, her strengths, her weaknesses, her achievements and her failures. More than any other woman, she combined within herself the various lines of development that were available to women at that time, together with the social differences, the possibilities that were open to them and the punishments meted out for female disobedience.

Cosima Wagner's name seems to sum up everything that appears to be contemptible in women, more especially for jealous Wagnerians but also for writers who regard independent, thoughtful, talented and passionate women as too taxing to be taken at all seriously.

When seen in the light of a genius like Wagner and treated as a secondary figure in a biography in which he himself is the main focus of our attention, Cosima almost inevitably becomes a negative and even a ridiculous character. It was impossible for the composer's contemporaries to write to him directly because Cosima opened all of the letters that were addressed to him – whether she was motivated merely by curiosity or was not authorized to do so is unclear. She was unfaithful to Hans von Bülow by having an affair with Wagner. But whereas Wagner himself is forgiven for his infidelity, her adultery is held against her. She

is said to have been untalented as a musician, making it altogether absurd to speak of her gifts as a pianist. The fact that her father was Liszt is deemed irrelevant here. She is also said to have been greedy and to have assumed responsibility for Wagner's finances by demanding royalties and financial support from publishers, theatre administrators and even King Ludwig of Bavaria, all in Wagner's name. To cap it all, she was tall, towering over Wagner by at least a head, in that way drawing attention to the genius's diminutive stature.

There is also the hint of a reproach to the claim that she somehow locked Wagner away and cut him off from all other contacts, with the implication that she did not really help him in the sense of serving the Bayreuth "cause". Indeed, this act of service is invested with negative connotations: Cosima was allegedly so fixated on Wagner and so submissive towards him that even the photograph of her sitting and looking up at him standing in front of her is said to say everything that needs to be said on this subject.

From a man's perspective, this list of repellent qualities seems more than enough to dismiss Cosima Wagner out of hand and to regard the events of her life as unworthy of our attention. Such writers are inclined to give way to the impulse to shield Wagner and his music from this altogether ghastly woman.

And then there is the charge of her hostility to the Jews and of the fossilization of the Bayreuth Festival in the wake of Wagner's death. Her clear and constant anti-Semitism is held against her because she was a woman more than was ever the case with either of her two husbands. Indeed, Hans von Bülow's aggressive hostility to the Jews has largely been forgotten. Following her second husband's unexpected death, she took over the running of the Bayreuth Festival, and although it was only thanks to her leadership that the Festival was able to survive as an institution, her achievement in this regard is only reluctantly acknowledged. The "yes, but" of her initially purely practical decision to stick to Wagner's aesthetic ideas seems for far too long to have overshadowed her merits. In particular, her work directing Wagner's music dramas and running the Bayreuth Festival still awaits a proper study, a study that it would undoubtedly be a joy to read, allowing us a chance to assess her achievements for ourselves.

An additional factor may be worth considering here, namely, that Cosima Wagner occupied a position in society that despite the stigma of her illegitimate birth provided her with a sound education, with genuine culture and with a privileged code of conduct. There is no doubt that she was Wagner's superior when it came to her confident ability to engage in conversation with others, to say nothing of her social skills, her ability to speak several languages and her experience in administering the family's finances. In short, she was a wife who, living at

Wagner's side, also exposed her husband's insecurities and fears, a situation that Wagnerians have never been willing to accept.

And as with one of Alexander Calder's mobiles, where all of its parts start to move as soon as one of them is set in motion, our view of Wagner changes when our picture of Cosima becomes clearer, allowing us to see her in a more apposite and appreciative light. Just how dependent Wagner was on his wife and on her mere presence in his life emerges from the countless nightmares from which he suffered, dreams that tell of loss and of absence and even of Cosima briefly turning away from her husband. How often he strikes an almost plaintive note when mentioning his own simpler background – impoverished, lacking all sense of security, frequently having to move and reduced to a state of homelessness during his professional years as a conductor, as a political insurgent with a price on his head and, finally, as a debtor. And how happy he is when Cosima seems to bring him constancy, reliability and, to a certain extent, a feeling of being protected from the world around him. With Wagner's full understanding and even on his specific instructions, she becomes his shield, protecting him being overtaxed by everything that in the modern world is kept as far away as possible from all creative individuals. No one used to complain when Karl Lagerfeld left everything apart from his sketches to his entourage to deal with. No one resorts to mockery whenever wives work as assistants to their husbands and accompany them while they travel the world as singers, painters, actors, composers and musicians, since the wives' clear purpose is to ensure that their husbands can attend meetings on time, stick to their deadlines and no longer need to deal with the many enquiries, annoyances and disruptions to the creative process that they may otherwise have to endure. This is precisely what Cosima Wagner did, carrying out her duties not only reliably and precisely but to the point of self-exploitation and exhaustion. But beyond all of this, she was a star in her own right in the firmament of contemporary society. She had a gift for persuading the well-to-do to support the Festival, people whom Wagner could never have approached directly since he lacked the requisite social polish. She accompanied him on his travels – he wanted to be separated from her as little as possible – and, aware of all his health issues, she arranged for him to see doctors and take the waters, availing herself of the latest technology to fire off often lengthy telegrams, running his household, which comprised five children and all the requisite staff, and every year organizing numerous moves to Switzerland or Italy, to say nothing of the tours that Wagner undertook, when he conducted concerts and was expected to attend performances of his own works. And he enjoyed appearing with her as a successful composer and as a successful husband. He had helped himself to the

daughter of his friend and patron, Franz Liszt, as well as to the wife of Hans von Bülow, a man devoted to him who was also his preferred conductor. Only now, at Wagner's side, did this woman truly blossom and find happiness, while radiating the feeling that she had finally found her rightful place in life.

The contradictions are plain to see. Indeed, they repeatedly exercised Cosima's thoughts. She saw herself as a servant but also as someone who was both demanding and easily offended. Many of the marital rows between Wagner and her stemmed from her mood swings and from her extreme emotional sensitivity. More than once Wagner – ill-tempered and jealous – initially ignored her own interests and gave no thought to her objections or to her plans. Later, however, he generally apologized and showed greater understanding. For this to happen, the two sides of the equation needed to be equally balanced, a point that many of Cosima's critics refuse to accept. Time and again Wagner stressed that he and his wife were evenly matched and insisted that they had grown together as equals. This, he argued, was the only kind of marriage or union that he could imagine.

A further contradiction lies in the emphasis that some commentators have placed on Cosima's altogether nun-like physical restraint, a reserve that in her alleged or actual refusal to open up to others may even have implied an erotic aura and held out a certain promise. Whether from inexperience or from calculation, she refused to play the coquette in society: flirting was not in her nature. Unlike her strikingly beautiful mother, Marie d'Agoult, Cosima was described from an early age as skinny, inhibited, ungainly and clumsy. She herself had particularly painful memories of her years of adolescence. Her "Lisztian" nose was a clear reminder of her famous father but did nothing to enhance her in other people's estimation. She was, after all, something of an unwanted child, an afterthought, not as pretty as her sister Blandine and not a boy like her brother Daniel. These descriptions of her were hurtful, and they undermined her self-confidence. But she still had to endure them and there is little doubt that they preyed on her mind for the rest of her life. Even the awkward young girl's marriage to Bülow was seen as a step up in the world: he was, after all, a baron. It was as if she had to be grateful to her father's favourite pupil for choosing her despite all of her negative points, which included her illegitimate birth and the dubious circumstances in which she had lived in Paris. Bülow's inability to show her any affection emerges from countless contemporary accounts, including his own assessments of his own character. It was only when Cosima discovered that Wagner loved her that her self-assurance, her charm and her sovereignty really began to develop. There is no contradiction in observing that despite her superficial polish

and decisiveness her experience of being belittled continued to haunt her, a point confirmed by page after page of her Diaries. In describing her “nun-like” qualities, her contemporaries may have been referring not only to her manifest desire to maintain a physical distance from others but also to her almost fanatical focus on the goals that she pursued and from which she refused to be distracted by any male objections and certainly not by any gallantry on their part. In the eyes of contemporary society the much-despised “bluestockings” were those women who had exchanged education for sex but who remained spinsters because they were professionally active and no man from the educated classes wanted a wife in fulltime work. Up to a point Cosima Wagner was just such a “bluestocking” who had nailed her colours to a particular mast: that of championing Wagner’s music, including performances of his works and the royalties that were due to him. But above all she was keen to ensure that new works were to follow on from those that already existed. Today we would describe such a person as a music agent.

But the fact that Cosima was also in a physical relationship with this musician, a relationship so passionate, moreover, that it produced three children whom she brought up with the children from her first marriage in agreement with both fathers, adds a physical aspect to our otherwise simplistic picture of a “bluestocking” and means that at least for a time there was a sexual element to the relationship. In short, Cosima conformed to no current image in nineteenth-century society.

A final word on the name that I shall be giving the subject of these biographical sketches. It has become customary to refer to women by their first name in accounts of their lives: “Cosima had...”, “Cosima wanted...” and so on. In a biography of Richard Wagner, conversely, no writer would refer to him as “Richard” throughout the entire text. In the case of women, there is a tendency to treat them like children. For them, their first name is sufficient. I no longer regard this as an appropriate way of referring to women and would have preferred to use Cosima Wagner’s full name: Cosima Liszt, Cosima von Bülow and Cosima Wagner. But here the use of the names of her father and of her first and second husband implies a patriarchal affiliation. Ultimately, I decided to be inconsistent and to call her simply “Cosima” since she has drawn much closer to me throughout the time that I have taken such a sustained interest in her.

Please note that the spelling of the quotations corresponds to the respective source; obvious spelling mistakes have generally been left as they are and not been corrected.



1 Cosima Wagner in her costly Maraja/Maharaja dress. Her sittings with the painter Paul von Joukowsky began in Naples in February 1880. The painting now hangs in the salon at Wahnfried.

2. An Apparition

Cosima was physically striking. Very tall for a woman, she was slim to the point of appearing emaciated. She wore fashionable handmade clothes that were sent to her from Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, Milan and Venice. “Modern streetwear looked almost strange on her.”¹ Her long, slightly curly hair, which appears now light, now darker in contemporary photographs, was parted in the centre and drawn back from the temples to the right and left before being tied in an elaborate plait at the back of her neck. As long as Wagner was alive, she wore her hair in this way, revealing her very high forehead. A photograph of the family taken in the rear garden at Wahnfried in 1881 shows her hair to have already turned grey by this date. Apart from her servants, it was presumably only Wagner who saw Cosima with her hair let down. He loved the intimacy of her undone hair – he called it “true Geneviève hair”.² She cut it off when he died and had it buried with him in his grave. The singer Anna Bahr-Mildenburg later described Cosima’s “full head of silky curly hair as fine as any spider’s web above a high, white and unusually delicately and richly lined brow that was almost manly in character”.³ The familiar impression remains as before of a face framed by white and slightly wavy hair with a central parting.

Judith Gautier, who may have been Wagner’s lover, described Cosima admiringly on their first encounter as “a tall and slender young woman, with a noble and distinguished air, a sweet smile and very blue eyes under her beautiful blond hair”, adding many years later that “the sympathy that she inspired in me from the very first moment was never belied. No clouds have ever marred our friendship, which has lasted for many years”.⁴

Cosima’s voice is said to have been very attractive, not least because of the faintest trace of a French accent. One of her contemporaries, the Swiss writer Walther Siegfried, reports on the forcefulness with which she spoke: “The unique power of her unusually low and resonant voice surprised everyone at their first encounter. And on subsequent occasions, too, it left a vivid impression: entirely feminine in calm conversation, it acquired a man’s energetic resolve if the dispute became any livelier and especially when she needed to insist powerfully on a particular point or to defend her own position, at which juncture something of the bewitching demonism of her father, Franz Liszt, would often suddenly appear at the corners of her large mouth.”⁵

Cosima’s grandson, Franz Wilhelm Beidler, later wrote admiringly how observers felt almost universally that she “cut a harmonious figure and was seem-

ingly delicate and almost fragile. All sense of weight and heaviness would then disappear and even in extreme old age she appeared to float through the air. All who observed her were captivated by her hand movements. [...] It was not only when she moved, however, but also when she was motionless that the outlines of her physicality vanished as if behind a veil and were forgotten in the face of an intrinsic ambiguity, on the one hand gentle in a feminine way and wearily evanescent and on the other revealing a degree of overexcitement that she sought to conceal, making her then seem tense and stiff. [...] Half suspecting that in this figure the formative principles of spirit and soul were triumphing in a mysterious and incomprehensible way over recalcitrant matter, the observer was left with an impression that was, as it were, metaphysically satisfying and profoundly attractive.”⁶

Cosima’s very appearance was challenging, inviting the most disparate and divisive reactions.

The artist Franz von Lenbach, who was friendly with both the Wagners, described the way they walked: “Wagner seized control of the world with every step that he took, while Frau Wagner barely touched the ground.”⁷ She appeared to float along, moving at a regular pace, her body held proudly erect in the most disparate social situations, whether as the female boss and as his companion, as a hostess at Wahnfried and in the Bayreuth Festival Theatre or, finally, in her negotiations with publishers and opera-house administrators. Cosima brought a good deal of experience to these roles and revealed remarkable composure in the way she presented herself to others. This sort of composure requires not only practice and the ability to correct oneself and others but also constant self-control and knowing when the time has come to make it plain that one’s demands are self-evident and will brook no dissent. At every stage of her life her aristocratic background was reflected in her movements and in the way in which she interacted with others. Anna Bahr-Mildenburg, who had a keen eye for such things, describes a reception at Wahnfried: “Frau Wagner received her illustrious visitors at the entrance to the vestibule and when her proud figure sank down in a low bow, it always struck me as more of an act of condescension than an actual curtsy.”⁸

Not infrequently it was Cosima’s almost masculine, androgynous side that caught observers’ attention – alert, direct and resolute. Not even in the case of Wagner was a gesture of submission necessary to make her presence felt. In old age, too, one eyewitness reported, “Frau Cosima never leaned against the back of her chair at table but sat there, magnificently straight-backed. Once, when

someone referred to this, she recalled the formative influence of her governess: ‘Madame Patersi would rise up in her grave in admiration!’”⁹

Let me again quote from the reminiscences of Anna Bahr-Mildenburg, a celebrated Wagnerian who sang Kundry in Bayreuth. She was not yet twenty-five when she first appeared in Bayreuth in 1897 and was greeted by Cosima: “Fortunately the door was now opened and I saw coming towards me a tall, slim woman in a black dress that hung down in loose folds. There was something incorporeal about her gait, she seemed to be gliding along and yet at the same time there was also something unyielding and resolute about it, the sense of an unbending will, qualities just as clearly etched into her long, narrow, wan face, while her magnificent greying hair nestled gently round her face, above which her high forehead rose. Two infinitely kind eyes greeted me, while leaving me feeling that they were seeking out and fathoming my very soul and taking control of every desire and impulse on my part. And so everything about this face spoke as with a single voice and even though her austere and striking nose was inclined to make me feel abashed and hesitant, her narrow-lipped, wonderfully beautiful mouth, with its gentle smile, nonetheless filled me with hope, rather than fear, and when I sensed this beautiful woman’s hand in my own, I warmed to her and my whole heart went out to her.”¹⁰

3. A Background Full of Contradictions

Cosima's background was that of a princess and an orphan. Her mother, Marie d'Agoult, was a member of one of the highest echelons of the French nobility, while her father, Franz Liszt, was one of the most outstanding musicians of his age. Both were absentee parents.

Marie d'Agoult was born in 1805, the daughter of a French aristocrat, Alexandre de Flavigny, and of a German banker's daughter, Maria Elisabeth Bethmann. Maria Elisabeth Bethmann married in the face of opposition from her family in Frankfurt, an early example of a rebellious daughter who blazed a trail for both Marie d'Agoult and, later, Cosima herself. Marie de Flavigny enjoyed a good education and led a life of relative freedom in the family castle at Mortier near Tours. Following her father's death in 1819, she returned to Frankfurt for a time in order to be with her mother, moving freely between the two different cultures and speaking two languages, just as was later to be the case with her daughter Cosima.

In 1827 Marie de Flavigny chose to marry Count Charles d'Agoult, a member of a family of cavalry officers from the old French aristocracy. It was a socially "appropriate" marriage and produced two daughters, Claire and Louise, the second of whom died in 1834, when she was still only six. It was in the December of 1832¹ that Marie d'Agoult first met Franz Liszt, one of the stars of the world of classical music, at the home of the Marquise Amicie Le Vayer in the rue du Bac in Paris. She fell in love with the French musical world's most eligible virtuoso, and the attraction was mutual. By the spring of 1835 she had decided to leave her husband, a decision that marked the start of a euphoric, dramatic and increasingly complicated relationship between two people who could hardly have been more different. Although there was never any talk of marriage between the couple, the liaison produced three illegitimate children. Cosima was the second of the three and was clearly one of those children who had to fight for attention because, in her case, her beautiful elder sister and her younger and more delicate brother were manifestly more attractive.

Throughout her life Cosima complained that she had little contact with her mother and missed her very much. Despite this, she remained a part of her parents' milieu, even if only at a distance. She was brought up in the way that they wanted, with clear differences between her father and her mother. As a rule, it was third parties who assumed this responsibility. How could her mother, whom

Cosima met only rarely but who always led such a glamorous life, provide her with any real sense of direction?

Marie d'Agoult was a lively, talkative person who showed great courage in terms of the decisions that she took in her private life. She was also fond of writing about herself and was herself a subject of conversation – and not just in Parisian society. But as a young woman she felt that she was too timid: “I was extremely shy, something which was by no means as rare as one might suppose, given the boldness and the enthusiasm of my mind and imagination.”² As a member of the aristocracy, Marie was privileged but she was also entrammelled by a class of society that had felt only contempt for the French Revolution and that welcomed the return of the Bourbons with the Restoration of 1814: “It is very difficult from today’s point of view to imagine the importance of the opinions and of the power of the aristocratic society in which I was brought up, a society as proud of its venerable heritage as it was exclusive and disdainful. The old nobility that had been active at court returned from exile with its princes, having seen only itself in every other country, while in the Revolution it had seen only an assault on its indefeasible rights. In the face of its lost privileges it merely redoubled its contempt for new ideas, new customs and new people. [...] What could the vague instincts, the confused forebodings and the feebleness and ignorance of a young girl achieve in the face of dominant, established opinion?”³

As for her decision to marry the Count d'Agoult, a member of her own social class, Marie later recalled that “from the day I married, I did not know a single hour of happiness. The feeling that both heart and mind were completely cut off in this new relationship that had been created by married life, together with a sense of painful astonishment at what I had done by giving myself to a man who inspired no love in me, cast a fatal pall over all my thoughts from that first day forth.”⁴ The experience that Marie d'Agoult describes here was identical to the one endured by her daughter, Cosima, in her first marriage with Hans von Bülow. Cosima, too, would suffer as a result of her husband’s coldness and lack of interest in her, even though she had ostensibly chosen him of her own free will. She was merely taking her own mother as her own behavioural model.

Marie d'Agoult was brought up as a strict Catholic and she passed this mentality on to her children, intending it to serve as their guide, even if she later changed her mind on the subject. On her father’s side, too, a Catholic upbringing was felt to be desirable. For a time Marie attended the convent school run by the Sœurs du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus in Paris and became a devout Catholic, while still retaining a lively, inquisitive mind and in the longer term tending to appeal to her Protestant mother when it came to criticizing Catholicism. Her daughter

Cosima was also brought up to be a strict Catholic but later switched religions, embracing Protestantism out of her love of Wagner.

Marie d'Agoult subsequently spoke of the grave doubts that undermined her early sense of Catholic obedience: "Religion offered its consolations. I sought refuge in them. [...] I had been brought up to respect the Holy Writ, but then, prompted by no ulterior motives or by any sense of presumption, I began to question those people who interpreted the word of God, and yet I did this only in the expectation that in this way my faith would grow stronger. [...] Exactly the opposite happened. Thanks to the attention that I lavished on books about Church doctrine and as a result of my more sustained study of the sacred texts and their meaning and in the light of a capacity for critical examination that I was not previously aware of having possessed but which I may perhaps have owed in some vague way to my mother's Protestant blood, even though I had yet to exercise that faculty, my first free and direct contact with powerful thinkers instilled in me an initial sensation of doubt."⁵ Marie ultimately became a free-thinker, incautious and publicly rebellious. For Cosima, this cannot have been a straightforward aspect of her mother's nature.

In her memoirs Marie recalled the fascination that Liszt exerted on her at their first encounter: "Tall of stature, excessively thin, with a pallid complexion and large sea-green eyes in which the swift flash of light glistened like waves catching the sunlight, a face that expressed both suffering and power, a hesitant step that seemed less to press down on the floor than to glide across it and an air of absent-mindedness and unease, like that of a ghost about to be summoned back into the darkness: this was the impression left on me by the young genius whom I could now see standing before me."⁶ Generally thought to look like twins, Liszt and Marie d'Agoult were drawn to one another, forming a liaison that had a sensationalist air to it, so disparate were they in terms of their social class. The following day Marie recalled one of her aristocratic acquaintances "hazarding a few reflections on the eccentricities of artists and the problems that he foresaw in admitting them to one's home on an equal footing."⁷ This social gulf was initially bridged by Liszt and Marie d'Agoult, only for it then to be seen all too clearly and all too painfully. And Marie evidently sensed this reserve in Liszt since she went on to write that in our conversation the previous evening I had sensed a certain nervousness, an overhasty desire to recall how far apart we were socially as if he feared that he would be made to feel it. The remarks on the part of the marquise's relative had made me aware of something that I had never had any reason to think about until then, namely, the differences in name, blood and fortune that we owed to the chance of our birth and that made us superior

to the rest of humanity. I now felt embarrassed by this apparent superiority in my relations with a man whose immense talent and all that I thought I already knew about his character placed so far above me in terms of my own estimation.⁸

In this way Marie d'Agoult established a hierarchy in which the man – in this case a man of genius – held a higher position than she did. In terms of her social background her sense of superiority was justified but with regard to talents and achievements she remained inferior to Liszt. She had been able to enjoy what for women at that time was a good education but in the eyes of her own social class she had no professional calling. If she took an interest in the politics of her time, she did so out of curiosity and out of her own free will. Indeed, she even published a number of books and articles, albeit mostly under a male pseudonym. But, for her, this was never a way of earning a living. In her own estimation, then, she saw herself as inferior to a musician as talented as Liszt, who earned his fortune by playing the piano.

Franz Liszt had been born in 1811 in the village of Raiding (modern Doborján) in the German-speaking part of western Hungary, which was then a part of the Austrian Empire. His father was a steward on the Esterházy estates and also taught music. Franz was exceptionally gifted and from an early age was taken on tour by his parents, an object of astonishment and amazement as well as a source of income for his family. His father arranged for him to take part in private recitals in the homes of the aristocracy, for which he was able to command what for the time were unusually high fees, and he also organized large-scale public concerts. Paris fêted “le Petit Litz”, a affectionate nickname that clung to him in manifold variants for a very long time afterwards.

In Paris Liszt forged an early contact with the piano manufacturing firm of Érard – initially with Sébastien Érard and later with Sébastien's nephew and successor, Pierre, who placed the firm's pianos at Liszt's disposal. This was a contact that was to last for much of Liszt's long life. Liszt was twelve when he and his father left Paris for London, while his mother, Anna, returned to Graz, a difficult separation for so young a child. Liszt came from a relatively modest background and was unused to the middle-class and aristocratic practice of entrusting children to tutors and governesses. He was close to his mother and felt abandoned when she returned to Austria to stay with a sister in Styria. Adam continued to accompany him, supporting him but also making demands on him, strict and yet grateful, his overriding feeling one of enthrallment.

But Adam Liszt fell gravely ill while he and his son were staying in Boulogne in northern France and it was there that he died on 28 August 1827, shortly be-

fore Liszt's sixteenth birthday. Adam Liszt's death changed his son's relationship with his mother, so that she now came to the aid of her adolescent son, whose future so clearly lay in music and in the career of a virtuoso. Mother and son moved to Paris in September 1827.⁹

Simple though this step may sound, it represented a great change for the two of them. Until then the young Liszt's French will have been no more than passable, but a knowledge of it was one of the most important preconditions of the sort of social life that he intended to lead while gaining recognition as a musician. In moving to Paris, Liszt's mother entered a completely new world. As "Mistress Maria Anna Laager", she had worked in Vienna as a "parlourmaid for Frau von Kurzbeck from Krems".¹⁰ She spoke the purest Austrian dialect, perhaps with the hint of a Hungarian accent thanks to the years she had spent with her husband and son in Raiding. Her move to the French capital was intended in the first place to help her to care for her son but later also for her grandchildren. She was a loyal, punctilious and warm-hearted woman whose social position remained simple even when her son was earning vast sums of money in the years and decades that followed and was moving in very different circles. She remained the person to whom he turned for help with countless practical errands that Liszt asked her to run for him whenever he was away on tour. She was able to write, even if clumsily. Her grandchildren would later come to love her as someone with whom they could have genuine, direct contact, unlike the higher reaches of the aristocracy in which Liszt now moved as a result of his relationship with Marie d'Agoult.

Liszt took a very critical view of his place in high society. "I was overcome by a bitter disgust for art, which had been reduced in my view to a more or less lucrative occupation, a diversion for polite society, and I would sooner have been anything in the world than a musician in the service of the Great Lords, patronized or paid by them on a par with a juggler."¹¹

Despite their great personal differences Liszt and Marie d'Agoult soon became emotionally involved, partly, perhaps, because Marie was keen to see herself as a free-spirited bohemian who wanted to lead a "disorderly" life in her desire to shock the world. By 1835 the couple were in a relationship. That year they were in Switzerland, which in many ways became a place of refuge for them. Liszt was not short of money and was able to support them both, although this change in their situation was ultimately to harm their relationship.

It is no accident that they both knew the French writer George Sand, a champion of women's liberation. Together they enjoyed being free from conventions, attachments and gender categories. All three of them spent some time in Cham-

onix in 1836, where, according to one account: “They all wore their hair long à la Liszt. This remarkable band, which was often mistaken for a troupe of travelling circus performers, spread panic among the other guests at the Hôtel Union in Chamonix. Not only was it impossible to tell the women apart from the men or to say who were the masters and who were the servants, but the landlord was reduced to counting his silver spoons several times a day. Liszt had entered his name in the visitors’ book as “Musicien-philosophe, né à Parnasse, venant du Doute, allant à la Vérité” [Philosopher–musician, born on Parnassus, coming from Doubt and travelling towards Truth].”¹² In love with themselves, the group’s members were intent on provoking others, the intensity of their self-absorbed lives unsustainable in the longer term.

It was on 18 December 1835 that Marie gave birth to the first of the three children that Liszt fathered with her. It was a girl, Blandine, who, as usual, was sent to live with a wet-nurse. But even though they did not have a child to look after, their relationship remained volatile and difficult. By the time that the couple left for Italy in July 1837, Marie was already expecting their second child. At Bellagio on Lake Como they visited the Villa Melzi before taking rooms at a “delicious little inn” in the town.¹³ By early September they had moved to the Albergo dell’Angelo in Como and it was here that, according to her birth certificate, Francesca Gaetana Cosima Liszt was born on 24 December 1837. The name “Cosima” refers to Saint Cosmas, the patron saint of physicians. His feast day, 27 September, was chosen by Cosima to celebrate her own name day. The parents’ names were entered in the parish register as Francesco Liszt and Caterina de Flavigny, a half-hearted attempt to draw a veil over Marie d’Agoult’s true name: from a strictly legal point of view the children were in any case the sole responsibility of their father, their illegitimate, aristocratic birth of no concern to anyone any more. Blandine was two years older than her sister and, by general consent, the more attractive of the two.

Throughout this period Liszt continued to give concerts in Milan, where Marie joined him on 29 January 1838. More recitals followed in Italy and Vienna, but by October 1839 the strain of so unsettled an existence and Liszt’s repeated absences had persuaded Marie to return to Paris with her two daughters, while Liszt betook himself to Vienna. It was a wounding blow for Marie but it was to inflict an even deeper wound on her daughters’ lives as their father was always away working. Although he wrote from time to time, it was generally to say that his work was more important and to apologize for not being there for them. Meanwhile he was making a name for himself with his incredible talent, his handsome features, his virtuosity and his charm. He gave concerts in Vienna

in aid of the flood victims in Hungary, a solitary star in the musical firmament. Robert Schumann, who rated him highly as a musician, recalled meeting him in Leipzig: “Liszt arrived here like some spoilt aristocrat, complaining so constantly about the lack of fine clothes and the absence of countesses and princesses that I finally grew annoyed and told him that we had our own local aristocracy in the form of 150 bookshops, 50 printing houses and 30 journals. I said he should be careful.”¹⁴ Here, too, two worlds clashed: that of Schumann, who had received a solid middle-class education and who was well grounded, and that of Liszt who spent his whole life suffering from the lack of a proper education and who must from time to time have felt that he was a fraud.

The couple met again briefly and even made plans in the belief that their separation was merely a temporary one and that their two worlds would one day merge again. Their third child, Daniel, was born on 9 May 1839. He was their only son and the most delicate of the three children. Was this no reason to be happy? A month later we find Marie writing to George Sand: Franz, she complained, was “growing melancholic at the thought of being the father of three very young children”.¹⁵

The complaint was symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Within a month of the birth of her third child Marie herself needed urgent care and support. She lacked a reliable partner to lend her that help, not least because she was recovering only slowly from what had been a difficult birth. But Liszt was living in a world of his own as a musician. He needed to travel, he needed to play and he needed the money.

Marie arrived back in Paris on 3 November 1839, where at least she had Liszt’s mother, Anna, to comfort her. There now began a long waiting game, during which the couple continued to correspond, often writing several times a day but equally often missing the point as a result of postal delays. Their letters reveal the complicated relationship, the tensions and the expectations that were repeatedly rekindled. Their children were now four, two and six months old. How often they learnt that their mother was waiting for their father! That he stayed away left a lasting mark on their conscious lives.

Time and again the couple tried to settle down together, including three attempts to spend time on the island of Nonnenwerth in the Rhine. They both enjoyed these visits and retained an unsullied memory of them.

The letters that Marie d’Agoult later wrote to Liszt make it clear that she felt useless, passive and ignored by him. As she herself admitted, she was envious of the audiences that could see and hear him at first hand, while she herself could



2 A tableau of musical and literary society painted by Josef Danhauser in 1840. Commissioned by the Viennese piano manufacturer Conrad Graf and entitled “Liszt at the Piano”, it depicts Liszt seated at the piano. To his left is his friend and sometime travelling companion, George Sand, smoking a cigar. To her right, also seated, is the novelist Alexandre Dumas père. Behind them are (l. to r.) the writer Victor Hugo, the violinist Niccolò Paganini and the composer Gioachino Rossini. Seated on a cushion, with her back to the viewer, is Liszt’s lover, Marie d’Agoult. This is one of the few portraits showing the rebellious couple together.

follow his concert schedule only in her thoughts. She found waiting an unbearable imposition, a situation made worse by the fact that for a time Liszt refused to allow her to see their daughters, both of whom were now living in Paris. Finally, however, he consented to her meeting her now adolescent offspring. Her former feelings of self-worth returned, as did her pride and her volatile temperament. This was how Cosima and her sister got to know their mother at this time. It will have been on the occasion of these later meetings with Marie d’Agoult that they learnt of their illegitimate birth and at each new visit will have found in her a woman who concealed things from them, limited the time that they spent together and threatened possible consequences on the part of the often angry Liszt.

The example of her mother’s liaison with a musical genius, which is how Liszt was described in his youth thanks to his magnificent abilities as a pianist, gave