



Press Pack: *Wagner & Me*

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Wagner & Me - Press Pack

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Running Time

88m 37s

Synopses

25 WORDS

Actor Stephen Fry explores his passion for history's most controversial composer, Richard Wagner. Can he salvage the music he loves from its association with Hitler?

56 WORDS

Actor Stephen Fry explores his passion for history's most controversial composer. Can he salvage Wagner's music he loves from its association with Hitler? Animated by Stephen's trademark wit and intelligence this is a fantastic introduction to the life and legacy of one of music's great geniuses, and required viewing for anyone who already loves Wagner's work.

200 WORDS

Actor and writer Stephen Fry explores his passion for the world's most controversial composer. Stephen is Jewish, and lost family in the Holocaust - can he salvage Richard Wagner's music from its dark associations with anti-semitism and Hitler?

Stephen's quest unfolds against the backdrop of the annual Wagner festival in Bayreuth, southern Germany. Granted unique access to this legendary arts institution, he eavesdrops on rehearsals and discovers its backstage secrets. He also explores other landmarks of Wagner's career. In Switzerland he discovers the origins of his masterpiece, *The Ring*. In Bavaria he marvels at the fairytale castle inspired by Wagner's music. In St Petersburg he learns why Wagner fascinated Russian audiences.

Stephen also confronts the composer's dark side. In Nuremberg he investigates how Hitler appropriated Wagner's music. In London he meets a cellist who played in the prisoners' orchestra at Auschwitz, where some of Stephen's relatives died. What will she think of his passion for Hitler's favourite artist?

Animated by Stephen's trademark wit and intelligence, and featuring a soundtrack of Wagner's extraordinary music, this is a fantastic introduction to the life and legacy of one of history's great geniuses, and required viewing for anyone who already loves Wagner's work.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Actor and writer Stephen Fry explores his passion for the world's most controversial composer, Richard Wagner. Can he salvage the music he loves from its dark associations with anti-semitism and Hitler?

Stephen Fry is one of Britain's best loved performers - a multi-talented actor, presenter and writer. He played the title role in the Hollywood movie **Wilde**, presents the cult quiz-show **QI**, and makes regular appearances in the hit US drama **Bones**. He is a lifelong fan of the music of Richard Wagner – the world's most controversial composer.

But Stephen is also Jewish and, as he is acutely aware, the intensity of his enthusiasm for the composer was matched - or even surpassed - by that of Hitler.

In this film Stephen makes a journey to explore his fascination for Wagner and confront his troubled legacy. Can he disentangle the music he loves from its poisonous links with Hitler?

His journey plays out against the backdrop of preparations for the Bayreuth Festival - the annual Wagner extravaganza held in a theatre purpose-built by the composer. Immersing himself in preparations for the 2009 Festival, Stephen eavesdrops on rehearsals and discovers more about the music he loves. He explores the backstage workings of the Opera House and discovers what makes the theatre, designed by Wagner himself, such a unique musical institution. He plays music on Wagner's own piano and meets the composer's great grand-daughter, Eva Wagner-Pasquier who recently took control at Bayreuth alongside her sister, after a long family struggle.

His exploration also takes him to the other key locations in Wagner's turbulent life. He visits Switzerland where Wagner first dreamed up his masterpiece, *The Ring Cycle*. He marvels at the fairytale *Neuschwanstein* castle built by Wagner's patron King Ludwig of Bavaria. In St Petersburg he meets legendary conductor Valery Gergiev and visits the Mariinsky Theatre to discover what Russian audiences thought of Wagner's revolutionary music.

Finally he confronts the composer's controversial links with the Nazis. In Nuremberg, home to Hitler's infamous propaganda rallies, he discovers how and why the Nazis appropriated Wagner's music. In London he has an emotional meeting with a Holocaust survivor who played in the prisoners' orchestra at Auschwitz, where some of Stephen's own relatives died. What advice will she give as he prepares to return to Bayreuth for the opening night of the Festival?

Animated by Stephen's wit and intelligence, and featuring a soundtrack of Wagner's best-loved music, **Wagner & Me** is a fantastic introduction to the life and art of one of the most important composers ever, and a must-see film for those who already know and love his work.

Wagner & Me re-unites Stephen with Wavelength Films, with whom he made the 2009 BAFTA-nominated BBC film, **Stephen Fry & the Gutenberg Press**.

Stephen Fry - Biography and Filmography



Stephen Fry's numerous film appearances have included award-winning performances in *Peter's Friends*, *Wilde*, *Gosford Park*, *V for Vendetta* and *Eichmann*. He is currently shooting *The Hobbit* (dir Peter Jackson) and will be seen playing Mycroft Holmes in the new Sherlock Holmes movie. Stephen also wrote and directed *Bright Young Things* in 2003.

Stephen was born in 1957 and educated at an unfeasibly large number of educational establishments, most of which rapidly tired of him. At Cambridge University he met and worked with, among others, Emma Thompson and Hugh Laurie, a life long friend and comedy partner. The Footlights revue he wrote and performed with Thompson, Laurie and Tony Slattery won the first ever Perrier Award and was

televised by the BBC. There followed three series of *Blackadder* with Rowan Atkinson (and Hugh Laurie again), four series of *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* with Hugh Laurie (both for the BBC) and also with Hugh, four series of *Jeeves and Wooster* for Granada TV and WGBH Boston.

He hosts the BBC quiz show *QI* (6 series), has completed two series of *Absolute Power* with John Bird for the BBC and appeared in numerous single dramas for television, including *Tom Brown's Schoolboys* and most recently the series *Kingdom* for ITV. He has also presented the documentaries *The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive*, *HIV and Me* and *Stephen Fry & the Gutenberg Press* all for the BBC. Stephen's documentary series, *Stephen Fry in America*, a journey through all 50 America states, aired in the UK in 2008 and was shown in the US on PBS stations in November 2009. The accompanying Harper Collins book, *Stephen Fry in America*, was released in the US on November 3rd 2009. His latest documentary series, *Last Chance to See*, was filmed in remote parts of the world and revisits endangered species that Douglas Adams first reported on 15 years ago.

As a stage actor he performed in Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On*, Michael Frayn's *Look, Look*, Simon Gray's *The Common Pursuit* and *Cell Mates*. He won a Drama Circle award and a Tony Nomination for his work on the revived musical *Me and My Girl* which ran for years and years on Broadway and in the West End.

He has written four best-selling novels, an autobiography, *Moab is My Washpot*, and a book on poetry form, *The Ode Less Travelled*, and is well-known among a younger generation as the reader of the audiobook versions of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels.

Director's Biography – Patrick McGrady

Patrick McGrady is creative director of award-winning company Wavelength Films. After graduating with a First Class English Degree from Oxford University, he trained as a producer / director with the BBC, where he made short films for BBC2's arts strand *The Late Show* and worked as a drama script editor. Before establishing Wavelength Films with Lucy Ward, he worked as a freelance director, making films for ITV, BBC and Channel 4. For Wavelength he developed and directed *Stephen Fry & the Gutenberg Press*, which was nominated for a BAFTA in 2009 (Huw Wheldon Award for Specialist Factual Films). He also series-produced the RTS award-winning show *Disappearing London* and executive-produced Suggs' *Italian Job* (8 x 30' for Sky Arts HD). *Wagner & Me* is Patrick's first feature-length documentary.

Director's Filmography

2010 *Wagner & Me* (88' feature documentary) – winner Audience Choice Grand Prize, Rhode Island International Film Festival 2010

2008 *Stephen Fry & the Gutenberg Press* (BBC) – BAFTA nominated 2009

2007 *Suggs' Italian Job* (Sky Arts HD)

2007 *Disappearing London* (ITV) – winner of 3 RTS Awards

Director's Statement

This film marks the end of a journey which began nearly 3 years ago. In summer 2007, my company, Wavelength Films, was lucky enough to be working with Stephen Fry on a film for the BBC about Johannes Gutenberg – the man who invented printing. As we travelled through Germany in quest of that elusive Medieval genius we found ourselves on a twisting road which ran along the sides of the River Rhine. In the backseat of the crew vehicle Stephen was plugged into his ipod when a mysterious sound filled the van. “Rhinegold! Rhinegold!” The great man was singing along to the music of his favourite composer – the legendary, controversial, Richard Wagner. And what better choice for this impromptu burst of karaoke than Wagner’s opera, *Rhinegold*, the first instalment of his famous quartet of operas *The Ring*, which kicks off with a scene played out in exactly the landscape we were driving through? As the journey continued the singing ended and the talking began, sowing the seeds of our next collaboration with Stephen. The result is our film *Wagner & Me*.

Stephen has loved Wagner’s music since he was a child. But over the years his passion for it has also grown more complicated. It’s no secret that his enthusiasm for Wagner was also shared by Hitler, or that Wagner himself was outspokenly anti-semitic. Stephen is Jewish, and he lost members of his family in the Holocaust, so those have always been hard facts for him to stomach. This film is his opportunity to tackle that dilemma head-on – an attempt to salvage the music he loves from its dark association with the Nazis.

It’s also an opportunity for him to realize a lifelong dream by attending the Bayreuth Festival – an annual extravaganza of Wagner’s music held in a theatre, the Festspielhaus, designed and built by the composer himself. You can’t really understand Wagner without visiting this extraordinary venue, so it was crucial for us to film there. It took many months for us to negotiate access before we were finally able to begin shooting there in June 2009, a few weeks before the Festival began. But it was worth the wait just to be there to film Stephen’s first arrival at this legendary venue and watch him tiptoe his way into the rehearsal room with Wagner’s extraordinarily powerful music in full swing, and the composer’s great-granddaughter Eva keeping an eagle eye on proceedings in the corner.

Over the next few days we had a chance to explore every nook and cranny of what is perhaps the most famous music venue in the world – and to eavesdrop on the singers and musicians as they prepared for the Festival. Away from Bayreuth we visited Neuschwanstein – the fairytale castle built by another Wagner fan, ‘mad’ King Ludwig, as a tribute to his hero - and filmed in St Petersburg’s Mariinsky Theatre, to get a Russian perspective on Wagner.

Running alongside Stephen’s celebration of the music he loves, the film also tackles the darker aspects of Wagner’s legacy. In Nuremberg – scene of the infamous Nazi propaganda rallies – Stephen grappled with the stain placed on Wagner’s music by this association with the Hitler regime. Every year, on the evening before the rallies began in earnest, a gala performance of Wagner’s opera *Die Meistersinger* was staged in the city’s Opera House. According to a historian we met, Hitler loved this opera so much that he would whistle the tunes – and what tunes they are - to his guests. On the steps of the famous stadium - now slowly decaying and overgrown with weeds - Stephen thinks aloud and very movingly about the quandary which faces any fan of Wagner’s music, comparing it to an extraordinarily complex and beautiful tapestry with one indelible stain - a stain which can’t be washed out. It is a powerful moment – not something which can be scripted or prepared in advance but the result of a lifetime’s engagement with the music and the issues which surround it. Just a few yards from where we filmed stood the podium from which Hitler would harangue the assembled masses. In the time we were there, scores of visitors climbed to this famous

vantage point to take in the view. Stephen wondered if I wanted him to go there too. I said it was up to him. He couldn't bring himself to do it. Minutes before we left, an almighty thunderstorm broke out drenching us all in the minute or two it took us to dash across the parade ground to our vehicle. A strangely cathartic ending to our visit.

Before returning to Bayreuth for the first performance of the Festival, there was a final visit for Stephen to make – another encounter with special resonance for him. In London he met Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, once an inmate in Auschwitz, the camp where members of Stephen's family died. Mrs Lasker-Wallfisch was a teenager when she was imprisoned. She was also a cellist whose love for music probably saved her life, when she was recruited to the inmates' orchestra at the camp (a story told in her book, *Inherit the Truth*). The orchestra was forced to provide entertainment for the guards, and you might think that performing under such appalling conditions would have corroded her love for music. But, as Stephen discovered, that wasn't the way things turned out: after the war she had a very distinguished career as a cellist. Stephen also wanted to find out more about one of the darkest aspects of Wagner's legacy – the suggestion that his music was used as a psychological weapon against prisoners in some of the camps. He was relieved to discover this wasn't something she experienced, although there is evidence to show it did happen in some camps. Stephen's conversation with this remarkable woman is, for me, one of the most powerful moments in the film.

Our film ends, just as our journey did, with the opening night of the Bayreuth Festival itself. This is one of the hottest tickets in classical music, a high point of the German social calendar. On the balcony above the main entrance, a band of musicians summon the audience to their seats as they have done since the very first Festival 1876 and the audience clutch their hired cushions to their chests in anticipation of the five hours of music to come (Wagner operas are famously long) and make their way into the auditorium. The lights dim and the opening bars of the music emerge from out of the darkness. After spending months immersed in the story of this extraordinary composer – genius, tyrant, egotist and mythmaker – it's a memorable experience to sit in the theatre he dreamed of building and give yourself over to the music. I can only begin to imagine what it must feel like for Stephen, who first fell in love with that music when he was just a child.

Patrick McGrady
Director, *Wagner & Me*

FESTIVALS, AWARDS & SCREENINGS

Official Selection, Rhode Island International Film Festival 2010*

Official Selection, Vancouver International Film Festival 2010**

Official Selection, Hamburg FilmFest 2010

Official Selection, Cambridge Film Festival 2010

Official Selection, Atlanta Jewish Film Festival 2011

Official Selection, Sydney Film Festival (2011)

Official Selection, Minneapolis-St Paul International Film Festival (2011)

Official Selection, Berlin Jewish Film Festival (2011)

Official Selection, Bucharest Film Festival (2011)

Official Selection, Haifa Film Festival (2011)

*Winner Viola M. Marshall Audience Choice Grand Prize, Rhode Island International Film Festival 2010

**Audience Selection, Returning Festival Favourite

PRESS REVIEWS

Patrick McGrady's fine documentary ... Fry's enthusiasm for the music is infectious ...

David Parkinson, **Empire Online**

Absorbing and elegantly produced ... Fry's engagement is infectious and genuinely serious.

Paul Byrnes, **Sydney Morning Herald**

A salutary and important document ...

Arnold Whittall, **Gramophone**

A dazzling emotional whirlwind of a documentary

Vancouver International Film Festival

Fry undertakes a personal odyssey to his favourite composer's world, and keeps the viewer alongside him on every riveting step ... A beautifully constructed and deeply moving film.

Anna Britten, **Classic FM Magazine**

*an affecting, personal film ... Seeing Fry struck with awe and ambivalence as he entered Bayreuth for the first time was mesmerising, and his childish sense of wonder as a maestro laid bare the score of **Tristan and Isolde** on the piano was a joy.*

John Crace, **The Guardian**

The questions he posed about art and politics, propaganda, power, myth and belonging and the sheer potency of expensive music were real and profound and touched the heart of all civilisation.

A.A. Gill, **The Sunday Times**

Even those allergic to the music will be riveted by Fry's love for the art, ambivalence for the creator, and loathing of the Nazi associations.

Martin Hoyle, **Financial Times**

CREDITS LIST

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STEPHEN FRY

Camera
JEREMY IRVING
SERGEI DUBROVSKY (Russia)

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STEPHEN CRAWLEY
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With thanks to

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BAYREUTHER FESTSPIELE
MARIINSKY THEATRE TRUST
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Developed with support from the Screen East Content Investment Fund, a project part funded by the European Regional Development Fund, UK Film Council and Screen East

A Wavelength Films Production in Association with the BBC

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MUSIC

Tristan und Isolde
BAYREUTH FESTIVAL THEATRE 2009

Conductor
PETER SCHNEIDER

Director
CHRISTOPH MARTHALER

Tristan
ROBERT DEAN SMITH

Isolde
IRÉNE THEORIN

Das Rheingold
MARIINSKY THEATRE 2009

Musical Director
VALERY GERGIEV

Stage Designer
GEORGE TSYPIN

Stage Director
ALEXANDER ZELDIN

Alberich
NIKOLAI PUTILIN

Wotan
ALEXEI TANOVITSKI

Träume
ORCHESTRE SYMPHONIQUE BIENNE

Violin
ALEXANDRE DUBACH

Conductor
THOMAS RÖSNER

Siegfried Orchestral Rehearsal
BAYREUTH FESTIVAL THEATRE 2009

Conductor
CHRISTIAN THIELEMANN

Brünnhilde
LINDA WATSON

Siegfried
CHRISTIAN FRANZ

Parsifal Rehearsal
BAYREUTH FESTIVAL THEATRE 2009

Parsifal
CHRISTOPHER VENTRIS

Kundry
MIHOKO FUJIMURA

Klingsor
THOMAS JESATKO

Additional Wagner music excerpts licensed courtesy of Naxos Rights International

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