

Visions of Wagner and Memories of May 1968 in the Bayreuth Centennial *Ring* Cycle

Opera scholars have long recognized the groundbreaking nature of the Bayreuth centennial *Ring* (1976), staged by Patrice Chéreau and conducted by Pierre Boulez. However, they have failed to take into account the competing visions of Wagner at the heart of this production. While Chéreau depicts the modern state as a totalitarian-like force, Boulez focuses instead on the artistic innovations of the music. In spite of these differences, both artists approach the theme of Wagner the revolutionary as an opportunity to comment on their own experiences of the May 1968 events. In May 1968 and the months following it, France witnessed widespread student protests and the largest worker strike in French history, affecting all parts of France and all sectors of the economy. Both Chéreau and Boulez participated in the May events, albeit in different ways. At the time, Chéreau was experimenting with collective theater and bringing theater to local schools and factories. Boulez proposed sweeping changes to the new music landscape in the form of an experimental research center – what would later become the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (IRCAM). Yet by the mid-1970s, the political and cultural climate had undergone a significant transformation, and both artists wished to distance themselves from the revolutionary past. Be that as it may, Chéreau and Boulez adopt ideas and themes of the May 1968 period in the Bayreuth centennial *Ring*. This paper examines manifestations of May 1968 in the Bayreuth centennial *Ring* in order to shed light on the shifting nature of memories of 1968 during the mid- to late 1970s.

Keywords: Pierre Boulez, Patrice Chéreau, Memories/Afterlives of May 1968, Opera staging, Bayreuth, Richard Wagner

Word count: 259