The signature event of most years in Bayreuth is a new production. This year it was Tannhäuser, the second of Wagner’s mature operas, which went down in musical history for the titanic failure of its revised “Paris version” in 1861. The director Tobias Kratzer chose the earlier and rawer “Dresden version” for his debut production in Bayreuth. The major difference is that the Dresden version lacks the ballet that Wagner was compelled to write for Paris, but the music of the earlier overture is also rougher and more rebellious.

Kratzer has partaken in a recent trend that makes productions in Bayreuth self-referential—that is, conscious of the town itself. Stefan Herheim’s ethereal production of Parsifal and Barrie Kosky’s recent Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg situated those works in and around Wagner’s nearby villa, now a museum. Kratzer places Tannhäuser at the Festspielhaus itself. The title character, sung by the brilliant American tenor Stephen Gould in the Wagner role best suited to his voice, is no medieval knight, but a Bayreuth soloist who has abandoned his operatic calling for the realm of Elena Zhidkova’s enchanting Venus, who is here the leader of a countercultural band of street artists rounded out by a dwarf and drag queen. As the overture plays, they drive around rural Germany in a van, stopping to steal gas and fast food while distributing posters with a catch phrase borrowed from Wagner’s theoretical writings about the point of an artist’s life: “Free in will, free in deed, free in enjoyment!” Caught while defrauding a Burger King, Venus arouses Tannhäuser’s doubts by running over a security guard. His return to grace follows from his discovery by fellow artists behind a recreation of the Festspielhaus, where he is to perform the eponymous opera’s title role. His old love Elisabeth, voiced with passion but also room to grow by the young Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen, is a fellow singer who forgives him while in character. The singing contest in Act II unfolds during a traditional staged performance, which Venus and her confederates infiltrate to tempt Tannhäuser back into their deranged company. Ironically, the scene was the opera’s least believable, since it asked us to accept that Bayreuth would actually stage a traditional production without meta-dramaturgical gambits or unconventional set design. Our hero succumbs, running off with Venus. By Act III, Elisabeth awaits his return among the marginal down-and-out, giving a bout of pity sex to Tannhäuser’s besotted friend Wolfram before ending her life in bloody suicide. When the shriven hero returns, there is little hint of redemption—only a video image of an imaginary sunset drive with Elisabeth
while he holds her corpse on stage, palely wallowing in what might have been.

Kratzer balanced irony with philosophical insights that deserve respect. His production responds to the idea that the spiritual has become less about place than experience, now the main priority of the younger generation. It made sense that Tannhäuser’s suspension between the sacred and the profane should depend upon the company he keeps. Just to remind us, Kratzer engineered an intermission show with Venus and her band frolicking around a pond in the park outside the theater (the real one *circa* 2019, not the theater of the play-within-the-play). The frivolity lightened the mood during what can often be a somber intermission hour. The eminent Russian conductor Valery Gergiev made his Bayreuth debut with a magnificently disciplined performance from Bayreuth’s specially assembled orchestra.

The revived productions were less daring. Yuval Sharon’s *Lohengrin*, which opened last year, is one of the first works of art self-consciously inspired by the election of Donald Trump, which preceded the director’s commission by a few weeks. Ostensibly an outgrowth of #MeToo hysteria, it attempts a feminist reinterpretation of Wagner’s fairy tale romance. In a world evoking vintage 1940s science-fiction comics, Elsa’s persecution by the men around her does not come up against the purity of Wagner’s knight-errant, but rather against her equally noxious confinement by him. She is led to the altar in the second act’s wedding with her hands bound by a blue ribbon, which the scheming Ortrud unties in what Sharon would like us to believe is a moment of enlightenment about gender dynamics. By Act III, when Elsa wants to ask Lohengrin the forbidden questions of his identity and origin, he ties her up to stifle her curiosity. As #MeToo diminishes in potency, however, its relevance to what is happening on stage falls by the wayside, a mute byproduct that would have been undetectable to anyone who did not read the program.

Another disappointment came in the superstar Russian soprano Anna Netrebko’s cancellation of two performances as Elsa this summer. Annette Dasch, who sang in the last production, has lost the creamy, lustrous soprano of her better years and often sounded shrill and unconfident. Piotr Beczała’s Lohengrin, though far from heldentenor material, fared rather better. More enjoyable were the evil duo of Elena Pankratova’s Ortrud and Tomasz Konieczny’s Telramund, both in excellent form. Pankratova, who returned as Kundry in *Parsifal* this summer, seems to have lost whatever vocal inhibitions she may have suffered and is now a Wagnerian villainess par excellence. Under the dynamic baton of Christian Thielemann, the score radiated the inimitable sound that draws people to Bayreuth despite its inconveniences.

Thielemann also took the podium for the revival of Katharina Wagner’s production of her great-grandfather’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Around since 2015, it now seems stale. The ship that Tristan sails to bring Isolde home to marry his uncle the king is a three-dimensional puzzle that recalls the impossible constructions of M. C. Escher. Innovative at the time, its revelation that these two characters can never be together in the reality of phenomena now seems obvious. Their second-act rendezvous in a surveilled prison yard highlights their misery while ignoring their transcendence. Depressing costumes suggest a dour criminal underworld. Thielemann’s energy held the
performance together, but Petra Lang’s lackluster Isolde rang shrill. Her Tristan, Stefan Vinke, initially had some power, but by Act III’s difficult monologues he sounded tired and wiry.

For sheer musicality, the return of Uwe Eric Laufenberg’s ecumenical Parsifal scored highest. Set in a war-torn Syria that has been so for some time, however, the production almost seems dated. But its “can’t we all just get along” message, which suggests that at least the Abrahamic faiths might find reconciliation, is now less obnoxious. Semyon Bychkov’s talents resound with authority, making the build-ups to the score’s mighty crescendos irresistible. Andreas Schager takes the prize for world’s leading heldentenor, and his stellar performance improved on his already outstanding reading of two years ago. Ryan McKinny’s affecting Amfortas also resonated with magnetic talent. Derek Welton’s Klingsor was the picture of anguish. It was the bass Günther Groissböck’s evolution into the most powerful Gurnemanz of my experience, however, that elevated the performance above the other revivals. Resonating with a dark, charcoal sound in the tradition of the deepest Wagnerian basses, he is continuing a fine Bayreuth tradition. We should look forward to his casting as Wotan in the new Ring of the Nibelung that will open in Bayreuth next year.

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