

Reasons to Forego a Performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* at Bayreuth (July 23, 1889)

Abstract

The novelist Theodor Fontane (1819–1898), regarded by many as the most important German-language realist writer of the nineteenth century, admired neither Richard Wagner (1813–1883) nor his operas. In this letter to his wife Emilie, Fontane describes a performance of Wagner's opera *Parsifal* in the Festival Theater in Bayreuth in 1889, six years after Wagner's death. With wit and understatement, Fontane mocks the opera as excessively long: he admits that he lacks the stamina to endure such a performance.

Source

To Emilie Fontane
Bayreuth, July 28, 1889, Sunday night, 9 p.m.

[...]

It is now 9 p.m., and when I think that *Parsifal* will not be over for another hour, at the earliest, I simply can't imagine how I would have endured those eons inside the theater. I heard the overture and, just as I was leaving, caught a glimpse of the first scene; then I strolled slowly back to my hotel (which is quite far away) and did some reading; then I went into town and had my first coffee at a confectioner's shop near the big bridge (across from the military barracks) and then a second one at the much talked-about Sammet's, since I needed to do something after all. Then I walked back to my hotel, where I wrote two letters. I took these letters to the post office and went for yet another half-hour walk. Then, back at the hotel again, I read for a whole hour and then had supper and tea in my room—*Parsifal*, though, is still far from over, despite all this. The 1500 people who attended today's performance will have to be miraculously healthy, otherwise, in three day's time—for it's raining and utterly freezing—750 of them will be afflicted with catarrh, diarrhea with vomiting, stomach flu, and rheumatism. A passionate person can withstand anything; for my part, I am almost sad that while traveling (and at other times, as well), I have always been a weakling. [...]

It is now 9:20, but *Parsifal* is still playing. The catering tents are outside; some people must have frozen to death by now, or else this world no longer makes sense.

As always,
Your "Old One."

Source: Theodor Fontane to his wife, Emilie Fontane, Bayreuth, July 28, 1889; reprinted in Theodor Fontane, *Werke, Schriften und Briefe*, edited by Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, twenty-one volumes in four sections. Section IV, *Briefe*, vol. 3, 1879–1889. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980, pp. 706–7.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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