

RIGA, the CITY of WAGNER YOUTH

By *Viacheslav Vlasov*



Richard Wagner lived and worked in Riga from 1837 to 1839. Six facts from the biography of the young (24-27 -year old) composer will give us an idea of what his Riga youth was like, and what place did Riga occupy in his life and work.

1. Flight from creditors

Need brought Wagner to Riga. Almost all his life, and especially during his youth, he lived in debt. Persecuted by creditors, the young composer grasped the offer of the position of Kapellmeister of the local theater in Königsberg. Unfortunate fate would befall him as the theater was soon bankrupt.

Riga was his only real opportunity to escape and earn money to cover the debts. So in 1837, Wagner became the conductor of the Riga German Theater. The city sheltered him but dreams of a large salary, allowing him to live in style, remained dreams.

2. First Infidelities

Wagner fled to Riga not only to escape the creditors but also to avoid a desperate situation in his private life. Already in Königsberg, his young wife-actress Minna has left him and ran away with some other gentleman. Well paid work in Riga might allow him to return his wife and provide her with the carefree home life she desired.

In 1838, Minna came to Riga and reunited with Richard, but she could not stick to her word and suppress her frivolous nature known even before her marriage to Wagner. As fate would have it, she succumbed to the courtship of the director of the local opera house.

3. Ideas for his own theater

Wagner did not like The Riga German Theater. It was tiny. Still, from there he adopted several ideas for design of his own theater in Bayreuth, i.e. deeply located orchestra; dark auditorium; lack of luxury in décor; a very few boxes; seats located in the ascending order: all this he owed Riga.

4. Rienzi

Wagner was distressed by the need to write vaudeville-like opera. He wanted to create a serious, real Opera. But the public willingly visited and paid money for vaudeville, and the money was much needed by the composer.

If not Riga, the Parisian audience would certainly appreciate the real opera, thought Wagner, and in between the "vaudeville", he created the opera *Rienzi*. During the years of his life in Riga, Wagner finished the libretto, the first and second acts of the opera.

5. Facing the orchestra

There is a joke which has its roots in Riga about how, when addressing a conductor, one music official said: "And why, my dear, are you standing with your back to the hall? You will have a venerable respected audience listening to you!" This official meticulously followed old etiquette standards and considered it mandatory for conductor to lead the orchestra facing the public.

Etiquette was radically changed in Riga in 1837 when the young conductor, Richard Wagner turned to face the orchestra to achieve more contact with the musicians. Since then this has become a new standard.

6. Overture to commemorate the memory of Riga

Vanity and arrogance in the young composer increased from year to year. And, so did his debts. He hated the idea of sharing his wife with Minna's frustrated admirer – the director of the German Theatre. Ultimately, the director dismisses Wagner.

In 1839, Wagners flee from Riga on a smuggler's ship. They dreamed of getting to Paris. Riga's farewell to them was an enormous sea storm. It was this storm that composer commemorated later in the famous overture to the opera *The Flying Dutchman*.

To summarize, during two years Riga gave Richard Wagner quite a lot: shelter from bondage; family reunion; new ambitions; ideas for his own theater and sounds of the sea storm for the overture to his first really serious opera *The Flying Dutchman*. It can rightfully be said that Wagner's conducting style, as well as opera *Rienzi*, genuinely belong to Riga.

THE ROUTE FOR WAGNERIANS

Walking along the Wagner Route in the center of Old Riga will take no more than an hour and will be enjoyable for true Wagnerians.

1. Kaleju iela

Start your walk at the house No. 18/20 in Kaleju Street, where Wagner settled right after his arrival in Riga and lived in 1837-1838 before the arrival of his wife Minna. Wagner himself described the residence as "a poky, uncomfortable apartment in the old city", but it was in walking distance from the theater, where he worked.

A small narrow lane to the left of the house will take you to the parallel street - Riharda Vagnera iela - the way which Wagner took going to work for several months.

2. Richarda Vagnera iela, Vagnera Zale

A very small street can be completely viewed in a few minutes. The age and condition of many buildings suggest that they are the same as the composer might have seen them.

Building No.4 accommodates Vagnera Zale - the Concert Hall named after Wagner. This is the building of the former German theater, in which Richard Wagner worked for two years. Here he became famous as the first conductor in the world who turned his face to the orchestra.

From outside, the concert hall gives a depressing view that confirms the viewpoint given to the theater by Wagner himself. "The theater was located in an extremely small and cramped building, a tiny scene excluding any thought of theater luxury," he wrote.

A few years ago there were concerts of chamber music here, but now the building is closed due to the hazardous conditions.

3. Kalku iela

On the way from Richard Wagner Street to Kalku Street, make a stop at the house No. 24. Legend has it that after the concerts the great composer did not hurry home, but lingered in a small pub located in this house. Now it is called the Cash Bar.

Order a couple of drinks here, and you may feel the urge to write a sequel to the Rienzi. And if the inspiration still does not come, proceed towards Brivibas Street.

4. Brivibas iela

In the house No. 33 on the street now called Brivibas, was a mansion in which Wagner rented more spacious lodging after the arrival of his wife Minna in Riga. The original mansion was replaced by a new house where at the front entrance there is a stained-glass window created to memorize the Wagners' residence here in 1838-1839.

The way from the little pub on Kalku St. to this mansion can be covered in 15 minutes by an unhurried walk. Just try to imagine in what mood did Wagner return home by this path in the evenings. Having quarreled with everyone in the theater, dissatisfied with the scale of his stage production work and small fees, furious by hearing constant rumors about his wife adultery with the director of the theatre and a bit drunk.

5. Palasta iela

Not enough about Wagner? Go back to the center of Old Riga to Palasta Street, 4. Here, right behind The Riga Dome, in the Museum of Riga History and Navigation, Wagner's conductor's wand with a squeezed woman's hand on the end is displayed. The legend has it that while conducting, Wagner used it to scratch his back.

It is not easy to find this item as not all museum keepers know about it. Look for the column hall on the second floor, the first stand on the left from the entrance to the hall.

6. Melngalvju Nams (House of the Blackheads)

During his stay in Riga, Richard Wagner conducted the symphony orchestra at the House of Blackheads. In 2017, a memorial plaque was erected there with the inscription: "Riga is the city of Wagner's youth".

Finally, you should enjoy a performance at the Latvian National Opera. In 2017, it will sport the premiere of Tannhauser by Wagner. Over the years the theater has staged the "Flying Dutchman" and "The Ring of the Nibelung".

Pay attention to the bas-relief of Wagner in the upper right corner above the stage. It's best to go up to the gallery to get a good look at it.

You are most welcome to share your impressions or ask for more information. Just contact me at viacheslav.v.vlasov@gmail.com.

May I wish all the Wagner's admirers a nice time in Riga!