

How Tristan and Isolde Almost Went Down to Rio

Peter Bassett [Originally published in *The Wagner Journal*, Volume 15 Number 2, of July 2021.]



Dom Pedro II of Brazil, the year before he visited the opening of the Bayreuth Festival in 1876.

In 1857 Richard Wagner was in exile in Zurich and in dire financial straits. His publishers and potential patrons were losing patience with the seemingly endless *Ring* project. He was unable to return to any of the German kingdoms and principalities because of a warrant for his arrest after the failed Dresden revolution of 1849, and he was desperate to find a patron.

In March 1857 he received a communication from Dr Ernesto Ferreira França,¹ son of the Brazilian Minister for Foreign Affairs and loyal subject of the Emperor

¹The family name is usually spelt without a hyphen but it is hyphenated in the French texts of the letters sent to Wagner.

Dom Pedro II (Gonzaga de Bragança e Borbón).² The letter invited Wagner to settle in Rio de Janeiro and write and perform his operas there. Ferreira-França wrote:

I am one of the admirers of your works, both musical and literary. Knowing that you find yourself in Zurich and perhaps lack anything at the moment that binds you to Europe, the idea occurred to me of establishing a relation between you and my country. In my thinking, the great talent which none can deny you invites association with our enchanting southern environment. I thought that perhaps you might be prevailed upon to make a trip to Brazil, the capital of which, Rio de Janeiro (as you must know), possesses a very well installed Italian Opera where your works could be presented, and where without doubt you would find support and protection from the emperor - a person who zealously foments letters and arts. Accordingly, I have taken the liberty of consulting you on the matter, and if you authorize my doing so, I will write the direction of the Theatro Lyrico of Rio de Janeiro on the 24th of this month [March 1857] a letter transmitting your desires.

The letter continued:

Although not myself charged with taking any initiative in this matter, I believe that I will be doing my country a service by affording it an opportunity to appreciate such a talent as yours. I also understand that you are now finishing a large work, the title of which is worthy of you - *The Nibelungs*. If perchance you are interested in dedicating your new opera, I will with great pleasure undertake to convey your desire to the emperor, whose qualities and learning exceed all praise. In that event, your request should be accompanied by a copy of all your musical and poetical works. I hope, Sir, that you will excuse the liberty I have taken, and will accept my expression of

²In *Mein Leben*, Wagner miss-remembered the name as 'Ferreiro' and referred to him as Consul of Brazil in Leipzig. Other writers have referred to him as Brazil's Consul General in Dresden. The confusion seems to have arisen from a reference in a letter (March 22, 1857) in which Ferreira França asks Wagner to send any material for the emperor to the Brazilian Consul in Dresden. For a comprehensive analysis and the texts of letters, see *Wagner's Latin American Outreach (to 1900)*, *Inter-American Music Review*, <https://iamr.uchile.cl/index.php/IAMR/article/download/52802/55400> PDF file. Also, Hunsche, Carl Heinrich, and Ernesto Ferreira-França: *Richard Wagner und Brasilien*, *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1939, pp. 199-216.

highest esteem.³

Wagner was intrigued (why wouldn't he be!). Although he was reluctant to dedicate his on-going *Nibelung* work to the emperor, he did offer to dedicate another work that was 'awaiting realisation'. In further correspondence he revealed his intention to dedicate *Tristan und Isolde* to Dom Pedro II, having set aside his *Ring* project after the Second Act of *Siegfried*. In his autobiography, Wagner later wrote: 'The old and ever-recurring inclination revived, and I thought of *Tristan und Isolde*'.⁴ In fact, he had been thinking seriously about *Tristan* since October 1854 when he had first written a prose sketch (now lost) inspired by his reading of the works of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. He sent Dr Ferreira França expensively bound editions of the vocal scores of three of his earlier operas – *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* – and wrote to Liszt and to the music publishers Breitkopf & Härtel that he was prepared to dedicate *Tristan und Isolde* to the Emperor of Brazil and stage the first performance in Rio de Janeiro in Italian, the language of the Imperial Opera and the language in which most operas were sung all over the world in those days. On May 8, 1857, he had written to Liszt that 'The Emperor of Brazil has just caused me to be invited [*jetzt hat mich der Kaiser von Brasilien auffordern lassen*] to go to him at Rio de Janeiro where I am to have everything in plenty.'⁵

But for the reluctance of the emperor's ministers to embark on an extravagant theatre-building project (an obstacle that Wagner's later royal patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria would also encounter), the composer's most revolutionary work would have received its first performance in Brazil as *Tristano e Isotta* – and Richard Wagner might well have spent the rest of his life in the southern hemisphere! Is that so unlikely? Just seven years earlier he had come close to making a new life for himself (far away from Minna) in an eastern land, with Jessie Laussot. On that occasion though, he had revealed his intentions prematurely and they came to nothing.

Wagner's interest in the 'Brazilian option' was bolstered by the fact that his

³Letter of March 9, 1857, translated in *Wagner's Latin American Outreach (to 1900)*, op.cit., 73.

⁴Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1983), 548 [ML].

⁵*Wagner's Latin American Outreach (to 1900)*, op.cit., 64.

friend and fellow-revolutionary, the architect Gottfried Semper, whose Dresden Court Theatre had witnessed the first performances of *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, submitted a design in a competition for the proposed new opera house in Rio de Janeiro. Wagner had kept in touch with Semper while they were both in exile and, in 1855 he persuaded him to come to Zurich to take up a professorial appointment at the university there. By luring Semper to Zurich, Wagner had hoped to involve him in the design of a unique theatre for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, when that ambitious work finally came to fruition. But by 1856 the *Ring* was on 'hold'. Wagner and Semper discussed the Brazilian theatre project. 'Semper entered for it', wrote Wagner, 'and produced some splendid plans, which gave us a good deal of enjoyment'.⁶

Officially, Semper's designs were excluded from the competition because they did not meet formal requirements relating to the size and placement of the theatre. In practice though, it seems that the designs failed to persuade the jurors. Determined to be climatically sensitive, Semper had inserted a whimsical external imperial loge together with rectangular colonnades on the cylindrical façade. The renaissance-like colonnades were joined by gothic flying buttresses, and the total effect was described by some as 'exotic architectural primitivism'. Colonnades on the ground floor were characterised as forming a 'transparent curtain'. The jury awarded the first prize to the German architect Gustav Waehnelde, who had been established in Rio de Janeiro since 1852. Ultimately though, in 1858, a new government put paid to the whole idea of an expensive new theatre and, by the 1870s, the site - the Campo de Santana - was transformed into a park.⁷

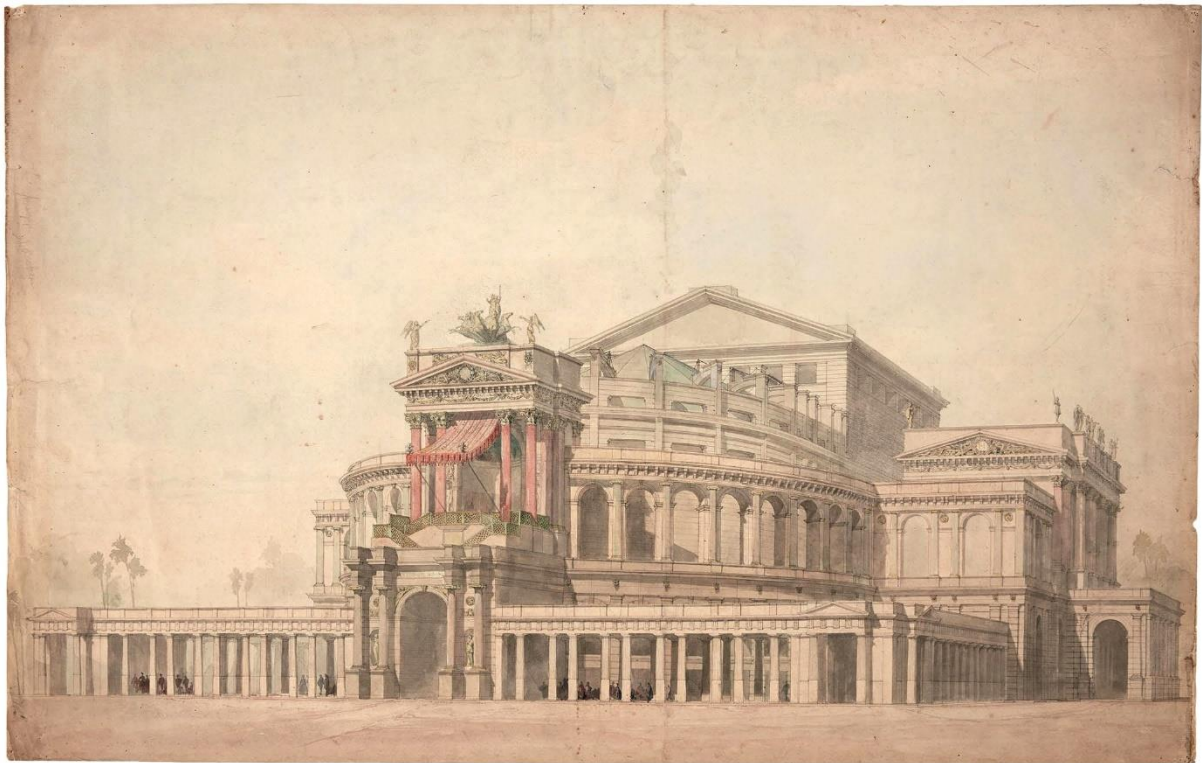
Wagner heard no more about an opera commission either. However, many years later, in 1876, Dom Pedro II attended the first performance of the *Ring* at Bayreuth. Composer and emperor finally met, and Wagner learned that the emperor's interest in his work had indeed been genuine.

⁶ML, 548.

⁷For more on the 1857 theatre competition, see Michael Gnehm, 'Tropical Opulence: Rio de Janeiro's Theater Competition of 1857', in *New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias*, Comitê Brasileiro de História da Arte (CBHA); Comité International de l'Histoire de l'Art and Vasto São Paulo, 2017.

Wagner had soldiered on in 1857, with Otto Wesendonck in Zurich coming to his immediate rescue. Act One of *Tristan* was completed in Zurich on 3 April 1858, Act II in Venice (where he had to fend off extradition attempts by the Saxon government) and Act Three in Lucerne. The last note was written on 6 August 1859.

Wagner initially hoped to have the work performed in Strasbourg or Karlsruhe. The possibility of a performance in Paris beckoned in 1860 but the scandalous reception and early withdrawal of *Tannhäuser* the following year put paid to that. In 1861, Wagner turned to Vienna, only for the project to be abandoned after seventy-seven rehearsals amidst rumours of the work's unperformability. In May 1864, with ruin and a debtors' prison looming, Wagner was tracked down by the eighteen-year-old Ludwig II of Bavaria who offered to do everything in his power to help him. The young king was as good as his word and the first performance of *Tristan und Isolde* took place at the Court Theatre in Munich on 10 June 1865.



Gottfried Semper's design for an opera house in Rio, with its whimsical external imperial loge and rectangular colonnades on a cylindrical façade.