Performing Wagner for the 21st century

Richard Wagner’s works have repeatedly been the focus of questions concerning the possibilities, limits and necessity of the director’s role in opera productions, especially in Germany, and very prominently at the Bayreuther Festspiele. The famous and infamous term “Regietheater” or “director’s theater” tries to describe a performance practice which retains the musical dramaturgy of the work while at the same time radically questioning, re-examining and re-contextualising the layers of meaning of an opera, layers conveyed by all the available texts: libretto, full score and the discourses about the work’s staging practice. I will talk about some recent developments in staging Wagner’s operas at the Bayreuther Festspiele, including Katharina Wagner’s production of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (2007), Hans Neuenfels’s production of Lohengrin (2010) and Sebastian Baumgarten’s production of Tannhäuser (2011). All of these productions could be subsumed under the category “Regietheater in opera”. At the same time, these productions also mark new steps in the staging practice of Wagner’s work, going beyond questions of interpretation of a single work. First, the Bayreuther Festspiele have started to deal with their performance history and their history in general which is mirrored in productions. And second, the productions are not primarily seen as interpretations of a work but rather from another angle: the work as basis and material exposed to a setting or situation of experimentation, resulting in the question: How does a well-known work react under the conditions of a newly established situation as in a laboratory?