

The Myth of Cola di Rienzo: Richard Wagner's *Rienzi* between political and aesthetic staging

Study Day in collaboration with the National Academy of Santa Cecilia

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Markus Kiesel

Rienzi – A Bayreuth Debut

"Rienzi, in particular, is in special need of the Bayreuth Festival's care." So wrote – and hoped? – the editor of Wagner's Collected Writings and Poems as early as 1912. But it wasn't until 2026 that the Bayreuth Festival finally included Rienzi in its program. Since the fall of 2023, the team has been working on a version for this premiere that attempts to bring this "battle of materials" into a coherent form.

The presentation for the Study Day will attempt to shed light on this hybrid in the history of the genre. Which models served as inspiration for Wagner? What strategies did Wagner pursue in the conception and composition? What did Wagner compose – but what was he thinking? Which layers of transmission and which histories of reception – in addition to the two "dynastic" versions (Cosima Wagner, 1899; Wieland Wagner, 1957) – are available? What, then, would constitute a "valid" version – including for Bayreuth – and what dramaturgical and scenic outcome have been presented at the Festival's performances during the anniversary year of 2026?

Markus Kiesel is a musicologist and cultural manager. He studied in Heidelberg and the United States. In 1992, he earned his doctorate with a dissertation on Siegfried Wagner. He has held positions as an assistant director, dramaturg, chief scheduler, and theater, orchestra, and opera director at theaters in Freiburg, Kassel, Frankfurt, Cottbus, Dortmund, Wiesbaden, Ludwigsburg (Schlossfestspiele), and Essen. From 2015 to 2021, he served as head of program planning for the Beethovenfest Bonn (under Nike Wagner). He has held teaching positions in Bayreuth, Berlin, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Munich, Vienna, and Zurich. From 2013 to 2015, he was a member of the "Wahnfried Kuratorium" in Bayreuth. Numerous publications on theater and music law and on Richard Wagner. Member of various committees of the Richard Wagner Foundation in Bayreuth through 2025. Since 2022, has served as a dramaturg for the Bayreuth Festival.

Andreas Rehberg

Cola di Rienzo: The Historical Foundations of his Legend

The social and political rise of Cola di Rienzo (1313–1354), the son of an innkeeper who – thanks to his rhetorical skills and the knowledge of the classical authors – became first notary

of the Capitoline Chamber and then, in 1347, tribune of Rome. In this capacity, he was hailed by many of his contemporaries – foremost among them Francesco Petrarca – who were eager to see the City liberated from the tyranny of the overbearing Roman barons and restored to the splendour of ancient Rome, caput of the world; yet he also made many enemies. When fortune deserted the tribune and certain character flaws – such as vainglory and avarice – got the better of him, he lost the support of the ‘masses’ and, during a second chance in 1354 (this time as senator of Rome by the grace of the Pope residing in Avignon), he was brutally murdered by his own people. Here his fame might well have ended after a few decades, following in the footsteps of so many popular leaders in Roman history who were soon forgotten. The memory of Cola di Rienzo, fallen victim of a sort of *damnatio memoriae* (erasing many accounts and documents), has survived through the centuries solely thanks to a literary work of extraordinary power and expressive quality, the so-called *Cronicadell’Anonimo Romano*. Many hypotheses have been put forward regarding the identity of the author of this text, written in the Roman dialect. The „Life of Cola di Rienzo“ formed the central part of the work, which only began to circulate in the sixteenth century and was first printed in the early seventeenth century, soon enjoying some fame and popularity, which will be discussed in more detail in other papers presented at the study day.

Andreas Rehberg studied Medieval and Modern history, as well as in Political Sciences in Munich and Rome. His doctoral thesis (1994) dealt with the ecclesiastical benefices of the Colonna family. In January 1995 Rehberg joined the German Historical Institute of Rome (DHI) with particular expertise in the sources of the communal regime of Rome in the period from 1400 to 1527. His study on the most ancient communal decrees of Rome, from 1515 to 1526, was translated into Italian in 2010. More recent works regarded the history of the hospital of S. Spirito in Sassia, the monastic immigration from beyond the Alps to the monasteries and convents of Rome and its hinterland, aspects of religious life (as the impact of indulgences) and the heraldic and genealogical self-representation of Roman families. In recent years Rehberg was engaged in block-courses about Roman and Papal history at the Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg. Rehberg is a member of the "Società Romana di Storia Patria", the association "Roma nel Rinascimento" (2004) and the "Gruppo dei Romanisti" (2004). On 28 May 2011, in the Palazzo Borghese in Rome, he was awarded the Daria Borghese Prize for his merits in the study of the history of Rome.

Nicolas Dufetel

***Rienzi*, the First (and Last) Wagner for Liszt: On the Dresden Meeting (1844) and the Last Opera Conducted by Liszt in Weimar (1860)**

Rienzi was the first Wagner opera Liszt heard, during their meeting in Dresden in 1844. It was also the last one he conducted in Weimar in 1860: Wagner’s early opera entered the repertoire just as Liszt decided to resign from his position as “Kapellmeister im außerordentlichen Dienste” at the grand ducal theater. More precisely, Liszt agreed to conduct only the rehearsals, as he refused to appear in public during the performances, thereby marking his retirement from the Weimar scene. Nevertheless, he was keen to convey to the musicians of the grand ducal orchestra the correct stylistic interpretation of the score. Liszt had, in fact,

become an indispensable authority on Wagner's music by the 1850s, having conducted *Tannhäuser*, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and the world premiere of *Lohengrin* in Weimar. This presentation will trace the Weimar context and Liszt's role in general in the establishment of Wagner's music, and in particular his connections to *Rienzi*, focusing on his judgment – for example, when he believed that this opera would not cause a scandal in Paris, as *Tannhäuser* had – but also on the history of his *Phantasiestück über Motive aus Rienzi*, composed for piano shortly before the Weimar performances.

Nicolas Dufetel is a musicologist at the CNRS, at IReMus (Paris), and the author of a dissertation on Liszt's religious music. He studied in Tours and Rome; he was a visiting researcher (*chercheur invité*) at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, a Joan Nordell Fellow at Harvard University, and later, in Weimar, a postdoctoral fellow of the Humboldt Foundation. His research focuses on Liszt, Wagner, religious music, and the Ottoman Empire. As the author, editor, or co-editor of fifteen books, critical editions, and articles in French, Italian, German, and American journals, he received the Prix des muses (2012) for his book *Il Suono di Erard* (Milan: Villa Medici Giuliani). He has published in the *Quaderni Liszt* series of the Liszt Institute Foundation, with which he collaborates regularly, as well as an unpublished book by Liszt on Wagner (Il Saggiatore, 2016). He teaches at the Université catholique de l'Ouest in Angers. He recently produced a podcast on the history of the Bayreuth Festival for France Musique (*Bayreuth, la « colline sacrée » de Wagner*). His recent publications include *Leçons de Liszt à ses élèves*, a translation of Lina Ramann's *Liszt Paedagogium* (2025), musical representations of Jerusalem (*Les Voix de Jérusalem*, 2024), religious music in 19th-century France (2022), and *Voyages croisés entre l'Europe et l'Empire ottoman au XIXe siècle* (2023). He is currently working on the correspondence between Liszt and the Grand Duke of Weimar, an anthology of travel accounts from the first Bayreuth Festival (1876), and a study on European music in Constantinople. Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters and recipient of the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, Nicoals Dufetel is Deputy Mayor for Culture and Heritage in Angers and regularly collaborates with festivals and concert halls, such as the Philharmonie du Luxembourg, the Rencontres musicales de Vézelay, the Lisztomanias in Châteauroux, and the Academia Liszt founded by Louis Lortie at the Kempf Foundation in Positano.

Alexander Koller

Alexander Koller studied History and Classic and French Philology at the Ludwig-Maximilian-University of Munich. After obtaining his Master's degree in Latin Philology in 1989 he earned his doctorate in Early Modern History in 1993 with a dissertation on the mediation of the Peace of Vosseme (1673).

In 1993 he entered the German Historical Institute of Rome as a scientific member in charge of Early Modern History. Between 1993 and 2018 he was the editor of the scientific journal of the Institute *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*. Since 2018 he is responsible for the editing of the Online Publications of the DHI Rome (New Series). In 1999 he became Deputy Director of the institution. After finishing his habilitation treatise about the relations between the emperors and the popes between the Reformation and the Peace of Westphalia, he was awarded the *Venia legendi* in 2010 at the University of

Vienna, and has regularly been teaching there since. In 2016 he was appointed Honorary Professor for Early Modern History of the University of Leipzig. In 2019 he was awarded the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art 1st Class (Österreichisches Ehrenkreuz für Wissenschaft und Kunst 1. Klasse).

Maurizio Giani

Notes on the Success of *Rienzi* in Italy

The report offers an overview of *Rienzi*'s major performances in Italy, starting with the premiere, which took place at the Teatro la Fenice in Venice on 15 March 1874. This was followed by Bologna in 1876 (in the presence of Wagner), Florence in 1877 (in the Teatro della Pergola), Rome in 1880. At La Scala *Rienzi* was performed for the first and only time in 1964, conducted by Hermann Scherchen in a production by Nicola Benois, with Giuseppe di Stefano, Raina Kabaivanska and Gianfranco Cecchele in the leading roles. On the basis of the contemporary press, space will be given to the public's alternating reactions.

Maurizio Giani completed his university and music studies in Florence. After earning a degree in Philosophy, he went on to receive a diploma in guitar from the "Cherubini" Conservatory and performed in concerts as a soloist and in chamber ensembles until 1990. He subsequently earned a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Bologna with a dissertation on Wagner's early writings. Since 1994, he has taught History of Modern and Contemporary Music at the University of Salerno, and from 2002 to 2020, he taught Musical Aesthetics at the University of Bologna, where he is currently an Alma Mater Professor. He teaches Aesthetics and Sociology of Music in the bachelor's degree program at the "Incontri col Maestro" International Academy in Imola. He has published the books *Un tessuto di motivi. Le origini del pensiero estetico di Richard Wagner* (Turin, 1999), *Johannes Brahms* (Palermo, 2011; new ed. titled *Johannes Brahms. La musica della memoria*, Naples-Salerno, 2023), *La sublime illusione. Sul teatro di Richard Wagner*, Naples-Salerno 2017, as well as numerous essays published in Italian and international journals. Very active as a translator, he has edited, among other works, an annotated edition of *Opera e dramma* by Richard Wagner and *Bach. Una biografia musicale* by Peter F. Williams.

Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri

The Reception of Cola di Rienzo in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

The myth of Cola di Rienzo underwent an extraordinary political, literary and artistic transformation between the 19th and 20th centuries, evolving into a complex symbol of modern European ideologies. Initially reimagined by Romantic authors like Georg Noel Gordon Byron, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Richard Wagner as a tragic, magnanimous hero fighting for liberty, the "Last Tribune" became a secular martyr and a key nationalist symbol during the Italian Risorgimento. However, the 20th century fractured this idealized vision. Gabriele D'Annunzio dismantled the heroic myth, portraying Cola as a cowardly, ambitious upstart. This anti-myth led the Italian Fascist regime to avoid his memory, while dynamic interpretations in

Germany saw Wagner's opera directly influence a young Adolf Hitler, who weaponized the figure to legitimize National Socialist propaganda. After World War II, following the parallel violent demises of Hitler and Mussolini, Cola's massive symbolic utility was exhausted, relegating him almost exclusively to scholarly history.

Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Urbino and President of the Società romana di storia patria. His research concentrates on Roman medieval history, the Roman Church, and central Italy during the Middle Ages. In addition, his academic production focuses on medievalism – the study of how the Middle Ages are reimagined, politicized, and used in modern culture. His research on 14th-century Roman political dynamics is articulated in his monograph *Cola di Rienzo*. The book investigates the political trajectory of the Roman tribune alongside the subsequent construction of his modern political myth. The volume won the Premio Internazionale Ascoli Piceno in 2025 and has been translated into French under the title *Il se voyait déjà empereur*.

Sandro Cappelletto

Is a writer and music historian, Sandro Cappelletto was born in Venice in the second half of the 20th century. He studied harmony and composition with Maestro Robert Mann. Among his major publications is *La voce perduta*, the first critical biography of Carlo Broschi Farinelli (EDT, 1995). In 2006, *Mozart – La notte delle Dissonanze* (EDT) was published, a book dedicated to the mysterious introductory Adagio of the String Quartet K 465. In 2002, together with Pietro Bria, he published *Wagner o la musica degli affetti* (Franco Angeli), a collection of reflections and interviews by Giuseppe Sinopoli; in 2006, he edited *Il mio Wagner – il racconto della Tetralogia* (Marsilio) by Sinopoli. He is the author of radio and television programs (he created the Rai-Radio Tre program Momus, produced a television film about Maurizio Pollini for Rai 3, and wrote and hosted the program Inventing Time for Rai 5). He is a member of the Accademia Filarmonica Romana, where he served as artistic director from 2009 to 2013. He is a professional journalist. He is a member of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia and serves on its Academic Council.

Gesa Zur Nieden

"Highly organized calisthenics". The Stuttgart Rienzi Productions of 1934 and 1957

Around the second world war, the Stuttgart State Theatre prepared two productions of Richard Wagner's *Rienzi*: One in 1934 under the artistic director Otto Krauß and another one in 1958 directed by Wieland Wagner. While the first production was performed on the theatre forecourt with members of the Reichswehr, SA and local fencing clubs as extras, the second was a singular combination of Wieland Wagner's abstraction with a realistic scenery. In the international press, Wieland Wagner was criticized for the uneven, eclectic and contradictory performance. This related primarily to *Rienzi*'s murder by a square formation of the Roman citizenry that the music critics qualified as "highly organized calisthenics".

In the presentation the Stuttgart *Rienzi* productions and their reception will be studied from the perspective of the institutional history of the Stuttgart State Opera and the surrounding urban culture in connection with national and international arts and politics. A special emphasis will be on the corporeal presentations and modes of gazing and listening to *Rienzi* between folk-like open air performances and closed abstraction. While Richard Wagner's "grand opera" *Rienzi* has already been interpreted as a blueprint for Adolf Hitler's dictatorship (Vaget 2009) and of the mobilization of the masses during the 1930s and 1940s (Geiger/Reichard 2015), this will add another layer to the complex readings of the opera itself (Janz 2017). On this basis, *Rienzi* can not only be evaluated in its multiple meanings and long-term receptions during the 1930s-1950s, but also in its limited applicability for Wieland Wagner's aesthetics.

Gesa zur Nieden has been a professor of musicology at the University of Augsburg since 2025. After her studies of musicology in Bochum, Venice and Paris she completed a French-German PhD at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales Paris and the University of Bochum. From 2008-2011 she was a research fellow at the German Historical Institute of Rome. After that, she was a junior professor at the University of Mainz (2011-2019), a professor at the University of Greifswald (2019-2025) and a deputy professor at the University of music, theatre and media Hannover (2019-2021). Since 2008 she has been leading various research projects on early modern musicians' mobilities and music transfers together with colleagues from Italy, France, Croatia, Slovenia and Poland (ANR-DFG Musici, EU-HERA MusMig, DFG-NCN Pasticcio). She is currently a leader of the Austrian-German project PopPrints (FWF-DFG) and of the Austrian-German-Swiss project Tartinians (DFG-FWF-SNF). Her further research fields cover the music aesthetics of Hannah Arendt and the reception of Richard Wagner after 1945. Since 2025 she has been a co-editor of the series *Transgressionen* (with Eva Meineke and Anne Gisbertz) and *Musik – Philosophie – Praxis* (with Daniel M. Feige).

Vera Grund

***Rienzi* after 1945**

The success story of the opera *Rienzi* continued in Germany during the National Socialist period under changed political circumstances. The fact that this was true, more broadly, of large parts of Wagner's oeuvre contributed significantly to the young German avant-garde's turn away from opera as a genre after 1945. Theodor W. Adorno, in particular, criticized opera – and Wagner's operatic compositions especially – as petit-bourgeois and as a readily consumable form of mass culture.

In Italy, by contrast, opera's popular character was regarded precisely as one of its virtues. According to Antonio Gramsci's definition, such popularity was a prerequisite for opera to fulfil its social function. In Italy, Wagner's conception of Bayreuth as a *Volkstheater* ("people's theatre") was invoked as an argument against criticism concerning his problematic association with National Socialism.

Against this backdrop of political and aesthetic tensions, *Rienzi* received its first post-war performance in Italy at La Scala in 1964, conducted by Hermann Scherchen. Scherchen's German-Italian background, his communist convictions, and his resolute advocacy of the

musical avant-garde make this performance a particularly revealing case through which the divergent political and aesthetic interpretations of Wagner and of opera after 1945 can be examined in exemplary fashion.

Vera Grund has been the director of the Department of Music History at the DHI in Rome since 2024. Prior to that, she worked as a postdoc researcher at the Department of Musicology in Detmold/Paderborn. She received her Ph.D. in 2009 from the Mozarteum University in Salzburg with a dissertation on the journal *Melos* as a central medium for Contemporary Music in Germany in the 1950s. From 2009 to 2015, she was a postdoc researcher at the Christoph Willibald Gluck Opera Study Center at the University of Salzburg. In addition to several research grants of the DHI in Rome and the German Study Center in Venice, she led various research projects in the fields of opera and ballet. Her habilitation thesis, "Venetian Opera as Euergetism and Popular Culture," was accepted in 2024 at the University of Paderborn where she has been teaching ever since.

Nicolò Palazzetti

The Pilgrimage to Bayreuth as a Prototype of Contemporary Fandom

Fan communities in the performing arts have been extensively analyzed in studies of popular music, sound studies and theater studies. Opera fandom, however, remains largely unexplored, especially within musicology. At the intersection of cultural sociology and fan studies, this paper analyses the famous case of the pilgrimage to Bayreuth – both in its historical forms and in its most recent developments – as a possible prototype of contemporary fandom (drawing on the sociological studies of Daniel Cavicchi, Philip Smith and Florian Stoll). The pilgrimage to Bayreuth – and Wagnerism more broadly – foreshadows certain characteristics of today's fandoms, not only those related to music, thereby allowing for a better understanding of contemporary cultural practices. Although the term "fan" became popular in the modern sense during the twentieth century (first in sports journalism and then in film and television), prototypical forms of fandom can be traced in the nineteenth century, particularly among enthusiasts of performing arts. Today, fandom plays an active role in shaping operatic canons and repertoires, in influencing the media and marketing strategies of opera companies, in structuring the formation of audience identities, in promoting alternative forms of socialisation. The Internet has strengthened fan communities, facilitating digital fandom through social media, the circulation of memes, and other rituals of participation both online and offline (e.g. queuing, autograph hunting, cosplay, and even fan fiction). The concepts and methods developed within the field of fan studies can thus enrich the sociocultural analysis of the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, both in terms of its legacy and its contemporary relevance.

Nicolò Palazzetti is Associate Professor (Maître de conférences) in the Department of Music at the University of Tours, France. After earning his Ph.D. from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris in 2017, he worked as teaching fellow and postdoctoral researcher at the universities of Birmingham (2017-2018), Strasbourg (2019-2021) and Rome "La Sapienza" (2021-2025). His research focuses on twentieth-century performing arts, the cultural history of opera and the relationships between music, media and politics. He is the

author of the monograph Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021). He was a visiting researcher at Yale University in 2023 and at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Australia in 2024.

Michael Klaper

Michael Klaper studied Musicology, Old German Literature, and Art History at the universities of Tübingen and Erlangen, where he received his PhD in 2002 with a thesis on *Die Musikgeschichte der Abtei Reichenau im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert* (*The Music History of the Abbey Reichenau in the 10th and 11th Centuries*). Habilitation in 2008, also in Erlangen, with a study on the *Italienische Oper in Frankreich im 17. Jahrhundert* (*The History of the Italian Opera in France during the 17th Century*). After having been scientific assistant and *Akademischer Rat* at the Institute of Musicology in Erlangen, since 2010 he is professor of Musicology with a specialization in Ancient Music at the Friedrich Schiller-Universität Jena. Klaper is vice chair of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Centro tedesco di studi veneziani (German Center for Venetian Studies) in Venice. Publications, amongst others, on the history and theory of medieval music and on the Italian and French musical cultures of the 17th century. His most recent book publication is *The Beginnings of Opera in Europe. Origins, Adaptations, and Cultural Exchange*, edited together with Nastasia Heckendorff (Brepols 2025).
