

WAGNER at THIRTY? You decide

Ken Sunshine



In March 1844 Richard Wagner was 30 and living in Dresden. In his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, he recounts “no recollections of any importance in [early] 1844 other than two enterprises: the first to Berlin early in the year, for the production of my fliegender Holländer, and the other in March to Hamburg for Rienzi”. Strangely, he doesn’t mention (although one imagines the experience, coupled with his passion for self promotion, would have been memorable) a session at the daguerreotype studio of Rudolph Turnau in Hamburg. The first successful portraits via this process had occurred only 5 years earlier and the procedure was still elaborate.

168 years later Mr Albert Kaplan, a member of the Daguerrean Society and a keen collector of early daguerreotype images publishes on his website the image above, reproduced here actual size. But, is it the young Richard Wagner? If it is then it’s a truly remarkable find and Wagner News is proud to be the first publication to display this image – a world-wide scoop!

Let us imagine Wagner taking away a fragile sixteenth-plate (1³/₈" x 1⁵/₈") image on silver; an image easily erased with a fingernail and therefore needing to be in a protective case. He takes it back to Dresden and perhaps brings it out occasionally as a talking point until in 1849 he flees to Zurich to avoid arrest for his part in the Dresden Revolution. The image is left behind, forgotten, lost, acquired by person unknown, turns up in a Munich bookshop and is purchased mid 2012 by Mr Kaplan for € 100. Seeking some information about Wagner’s visit to London in 1855 Mr Kaplan wrote to the Wagner Society and mentioned the daguerreotype image which he, with the help of Mike Hager (owner of Museum Photographics Inc., Rochester, NY) and Grant Romer (former head Advanced Residency Program in Photograph Conservation, George Eastman House, Rochester, NY) had very recently restored.

Their work testifies that the image is not a fake but the crucial question of whether it is the young Wagner remains open. Albert Kaplan owns to having a rare ability to recognise faces. He is in no doubt about it being Wagner. There are techniques that can accurately identify images with a high degree of probability but unless there is a clear paper trail leading back to the actual session, provenance is difficult to establish with certainty.

There are at least four areas of concern:

1. Why didn’t Wagner make any reference to having an image made? As mentioned above being daguerreotyped was much more complicated than a click on a mobile phone. It involved being perched high on a raised platform, remaining still for up to a

minute, coping with vapourised mercury fumes (see <http://www.photohistory-sussex.co.uk/dagprocess.htm>). Not an experience one would quickly forget but one to boast of and include in one's memoirs.

2. Is the dimple in his chin an issue? There is no sign of a chin dimple in the 1877 image. Either it has gone away (unusually) or it is a blemish on the early image (quite possible) or we have two different people. Mr Kaplan himself points out that a pencil drawing by Ernst Bendikt Kietz (1850) shows a dimple, as does a painting by Ernst August Becker (1843). See <http://www.kaplancollection.com/the-cased-collection/richard-wagner/>
3. Comparing the image with a known (1877) photo (opposite) Wagner's left ear seems to have disappeared. The left ear is much flatter to the head (or hidden by hair?)
4. Difference in head shapes. The head in the early image is broadly rectangular; more trapezoidal in 1877. Is that significant?

We would be delighted if provenance could be established; Mr Kaplan even more so. What is the trail? And how far can we follow it?

We know that Mr Kaplan bought the image from a Munich bookseller. We believe that the bookseller purchased it from a known source (Mr X) but attempts at identifying that source have so far been unsuccessful. Even if that next link could be established and Mr X knew how he had inherited it from Mr Y That would take us at best back to early 20th century with still at least 60 years unaccounted; a seemingly impossible task. We then would have to rely on expert analysis of the two images (1844, 1877) to try to establish beyond reasonable doubt that they are images of the same person.

What is your opinion? We would appreciate feedback either to Editor Roger Lee or to me via our website where further details may be found in the Forum section.



1877



1844

Albert Kaplan's website is at <http://www.kaplancollection.com/>