**Ludwig II, King of Bavaria** (b. Nymphenburg Palace, Munich, 25 Aug. 1845; d. Lake Starnberg, near Munich, 13 June 1886; reign 10 Mar. 1864 to 13 June 1886). Succeeded his father, Maximilian II, but closer in artistic ambition to Maximilian’s deposed father, Ludwig I. Aestheticism was a hallmark of Ludwig’s reign, which witnessed construction of neo-Romantic, “fairy-tale” castles such as Linderhof, Herrenchiemsee, and Neuschwanstein; the latter’s wall frescoes depict Wagnerian scenes. Though Ludwig was hardly devoted to the more mundane of his duties and was no consummate politician, Bavaria under his rule nevertheless successfully held out for a high price even when there was no alternative to German unification. Ludwig won a private, secret income from Bismarck’s Guelph fund in return for putting his name to Bismarck’s “Kaiser letter,” bidding Prussia’s William I to “re-establish a German Empire and German imperial dignity.” Extensive correspondence, both with Wagner and Cosima, is an invaluable source for the Wagner scholar.

At thirteen, Ludwig was enthralled by reports of *Lohengrin* in Munich. He heard it there in 1861 and, inspired by the swan knight (cf. “Neu*schwan*stein”), engaged in study of Wagner’s writings. Increasingly tormented by his homosexuality, he would sooner withdraw from society, always preferring to experience private performances of Wagner’s works. In response to Wagner’s 1863 call for a German prince to fund model operatic performances of the *Ring*, Ludwig dispatched Cabinet Secretary, Franz von Pfistermeister, only a month after his accession (1864), to bring Wagner to Munich. The King’s “Friend” received a generous stipend, so that he might compose and perform his works. Soon exiled, if temporarily, to Tribschen, following machinations by Pfistermeister and Ludwig von der Pfordten, Wagner’s counsel persisted. Such was his influence that Bismarck attempted to have him ensure Bavarian neutrality between Prussia and Austria in 1866. In this context, and partly influenced by Constantin Frantz, if not Bismarck, Wagner penned “What is German?” (1865) for Ludwig’s instruction. Wagner counseled Ludwig against abdication, apparently strengthening his resolve – not least since, as King, he would be better placed to assist Wagner.

Ludwig paid the most pressing of Wagner’s debts, afforded him free residence, and supported the world premieres of Tristan und Isolde (1865), *Die Meistersinger* (1868), Das Rheingold (1869) and Die Walküre (1870), the latter two against Wagner’s will. Plans for a Munich festival theater by Gottfried Semper were thwarted, yet land for the Bayreuth Festspielhaus was provided at no cost and the first Bayreuth Festival was saved by Ludwig’s loan of 100,000 thalers. Ludwig also sponsored land-purchase and construction costs for Wahnfried.

Ludwig grew heavily indebted, though Wagnerian expenses totaled under a seventh of the Civil List. (He funded artistic projects personally.) In 1886, exasperated by Ludwig’s refusal to economize and fearful of dismissal, ministers presented a medical report signed by four psychiatrists, none of whom had ever met Ludwig, declaring him unfit to rule – for life. Maximilian’s brother, Leopold, was declared Regent; Ludwig was transported to Schloss Berg. The cause of his tragic drowning in adjacent Lake Starnberg remains unclear: suicide, accidental death through escape, or murder?

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