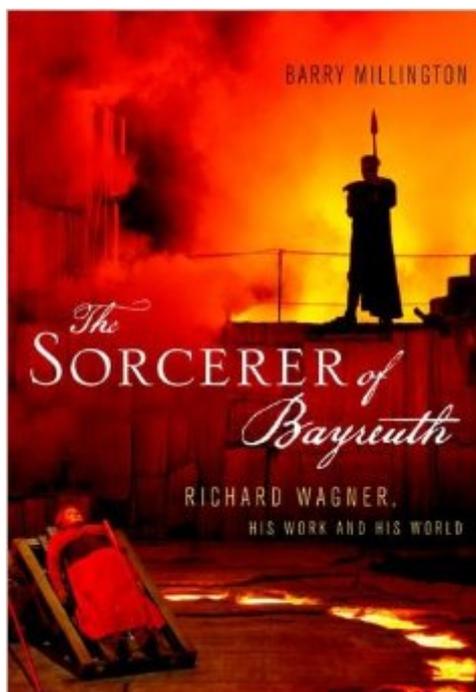


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The Sorcerer Of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, His Work And His World



Synopsis

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) is one of the most influential - and also one of the most controversial - composers in the history of music. Over the course of his long career, he produced a stream of spellbinding works that challenged musical convention through their richness and tonal experimentation, ultimately paving the way for modernism. This book presents an in-depth but easy-to-read overview of Wagner's life, work and times. It considers a wide range of themes, including the composer's original sources of inspiration; his fetish for exotic silks; his relationship with his wife, Cosima, and with his mistress, Mathilde Wesendonck; the anti-semitism that is undeniably present in the operas; their proto-cinematic nature; and the turbulent legacy both of the Bayreuth Festival and of Wagnerism itself. Making use of the very latest scholarship - much of it undertaken by the author himself in connection with his editorship of *The Wagner Journal* - Millington reassesses received notions about Wagner and his work, demolishing ill-informed opinion in favour of proper critical understanding. It is a radical - and occasionally controversial - reappraisal of this most perplexing of composers. The volume's arrangement - unique among books on the composer - combines an accessible text, intriguing images and original documents, thus ensuring a consistently fresh approach. Bringing new insights to an endlessly fascinating subject, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth* will charm anyone interested in music and in the wider cultural life of the 19th century and beyond.

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Customer Reviews

I'm not sure who this was written for. It is a mile wide and an inch deep. If you're a Wagner newcomer, there is much here that you will have no interest in, and indeed many references that only the "initiates" will grasp. If you are one of those initiates, you may find a few nuggets here (note the "mile wide") but for the most part the topics of interest are treated in a frustratingly shallow manner. Other criticisms: 1. The organization of the book is an "original format" (author's preface) in a series of chapters that each "explor(es) a theme through text, illustrations, and documents." The result is a series of (mostly) disconnected essays rather than any sort of continuous development of a theme. Great, I suppose, for bathroom reading, but rather frustrating if you're hoping for a coherent narrative. 2. Millington's fixation on Wagner's anti-Semitism in some places renders his analysis of the musical works non-sensical. This is most apparent in his chapter on "Parsifal" where he resorts to contortions such as "there is no denying that the light of compassion burns brightly throughout this work. Compassion and an obsession with racial purity are its twin poles" (with no textual references to the "racial purity" part) and "Just as the notions of compassion and fellow suffering are common to both Christianity and Buddhism, so hatred -- in this case of other races -- may be seen as the obverse of love. Two sides of the same coin, love and hate, add up to a world view formulated on the concepts of racial purity and regeneration of the species" (again, with no textual support for the "hate" side of the coin).

Barry Millington is editor of *The Wagner Journal* and has written extensively on Wagner for many years; so it is a pleasure to read his magnum opus on the old sorcerer, his life and times. Before discussing the content, I must say that the book is magnificently produced, on thick quality art paper and it is profusely illustrated throughout (285 of them actually, 165 in colour). Millington's style wears its erudition lightly and is bright and engaging from start to finish. I must admit I do find myself just picking it up and dipping into it very regularly and its style does facilitate this, indeed seems to positively encourage it. One can scarcely open the book at a random page without stumbling upon a wonderful sidelight thrown on an aspect of Wagner, his compositions or the context of the time in which they were fostered. An example: I had often idly wondered why, in the Ring, *Götterdämmerung* jars slightly in comparison to the rest of the cycle. By this I mean, it seems closer in conception to more 'conventional' opera, for want of a better word. The huge set pieces such as Hagen's blood-curdling Summoning of the Vassals or the splendid Vengeance Trio in Act II seem at variance with Wagner's avowed distaste for self-contained set pieces, arias, duets and choruses (as set out in his essays of 1849-51). In fact George Bernard Shaw felt that the political allegory built up in the first three operas collapsed at this, the final hurdle. Millington explores the

fact that the libretto for *Götterdämmerung*, though it is the final section of the Ring cycle, actually pre-dated the others, so is chronologically closer to *Lohengrin* than *Rheingold*, which goes a long way to explaining the phenomenon.

Barry Millington is one of the world's leading scholars on Wagner but this book is not at all academic or off-putting. There are hundreds (thousands?) of books on Wagner but I can't think of a better overall look at his life and works. And immediately on its release it has become the next book to get for those studying Wagner and the first book to get for those new to Wagner. Why so? First, it is so readable and entertaining that the scholarship flows through easily and it does not seem like work to read. While its structure more or less coincides with Wagner's life chronology, it is not a "this happened and then that happened" linear biography. Rather, Millington organizes his approach to Wagner by using a wide range of themes. For example, many people dislike Wagner and his music because both were appropriated by the Nazis. But the chapter detailing this is not "in 1939 this happened and in 1943 that happened" but, rather a clever chapter detailing "how" the spread of the Wagner cult happened. And Millington does not let Wagner off the hook for this later appropriation. All the themes were there for Hitler and Company to use and the Wagner family completely cooperated with that use. (I am no relation by the way.) Next, the illustrations are numerous and beautiful. I doubt there has ever been such a beautiful biography or history. Seeing, for example, playbills, paintings of stage scenes, drawings of Wagner and his critics, and numerous other topics really come to life. Much of the art is lavish and sumptuous, for example a beautiful reproduction of Fantin-Latour's painting of the "Prelude to *Lohengrin*" or the photo of the temptation of Tannhäuser from the 2010 Covent Garden production of that work.

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