
Richard Wagner

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Richard Wagner (22 May 1813, Leipzig, Germany - 13 February 1883, Venice, Italy) in the opinion of Robert Ellis Crawford, founder of this site, joins Sophocles and Shakespeare as the top triumverate in the entire history of the Theater. For those who respond to his Operas, attending performances of those works or listening to them provides the ultimate

artistic experience. They are of monumental proportions and today command a fervent following. To attend the entire "Ring" cycle of four works within a six day period is to participate in the Super Bowl of the theater, provided one has one's mythic corpuscles and is properly attuned. There are many who shy away for this sort of experience, but if they aspire to be knowledgeable about Music, Opera, or 19th Century Artistic history, they need to know about the basics of Richard Wagner. The best thing to do is to read the following. - Newman, Ernest, 1868-1959, English music critic. Outstanding among his writings is his Life of Richard Wagner (4 vol., 1933-46, repr. 1976). I read this about 1952. In 1956 I attended the entire "Ring" in Bayreuth produced by Wieland Wagner (grandson) with Hans Hotter as Wotan. I have attended three Seattle "Rings" the Met "Ring" in which Hildegard Behrens, after a fabulous performance, nearly was killed by falling Gibichung beams at the immolation. I caught Birgit Nielsen both in Bayreuth and at the Met as Isolde, and have reveled in around eight "Die Meistersingers". Although I have attended but one "Parsifal" and one "Tannhauser" and no "Lohengrin" or "Flying Dutchman", I think I can claim to be a dedicated Wagnerian. For those who need a quick highlight of the Wagner bio, Wikipedia has a decent synopsis.

Many aspects of Wagner's works and especially his life are suffused in controversy, and the ranks of those who, with but superficial knowledge therein eagerly participate, are legion. Let us trot out a few of these bones, whereby I claim the privilege of first comment.

Claim) Wagner's Operas contain great Orchestral passages but there are long tedious stretches between them.

REC) The amazing dramatic and musical pertinence of every moment in the ten great Wagner Operas is in fact the most extraordinary and satisfying strength of these works. Wagner not only conceived and wrote his own Libretti, but as a Librettist there is as a far greater gap in quality and originality to the nearest rival in comparison than there is in the realm of masters of music composition. Not a line in these works can be cut without important damage being done. Probably this is not the case in his one early transitional Opera "Rienzi" which was quite successful in its day but is very rarely done today, though it is likely worth doing on rare occasion. His earlier youthful (about age 20) works are almost surely pure junk.

Claim) Whatever Wagner's artistic merits, he was a person of bad character and quite unlikeable.

REC) If Wagner's life had no special significance outside of the works he produced, as is the case with the majority of creative artists, this view could simply be ignored. But in addition to being the ultimate as a creative artist, he was also intimately involved as the key figure in a variety of revolutionary practices of theatrical arts. The claim is 95% without merit. He was of a somewhat prickly character, but his intimates loved him and were fascinated by him. About the only claim that holds water is that he often made himself scarce to his many creditors. His whole life was a series of epic endeavors that he met with great, if not quite exemplary, fortitude.

Claim) His sex life was scandalous and he treated women badly.

REC) Actually, by today's norm for star artists, his history in this realm is pretty tame. He was not known to tomcat around. He fulfilled his obligations to his first wife Minna very staunchly, and sustained her for many years until her death although she was apparently a very ordinary dull woman with whom he could have loved but briefly. The second woman was Mathilda Wesendonck in whom he seems to have found something of a soul mate. The details of their relationship are unknown, but in any case they apparently were not of such to turn her husband and his great patron, Otto Wesendonck, against him. The saga of the third and final woman in his life, Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt - a staunch supporter, indeed comes across like a novel of one of the great romances of history. But the important thing is that although it looks on the surface as if he stole her outright from his chief conductor, Hans von Bülow, and was some 24 years older than she, there was no professional break at all between the two men. At the height of this rearrangement of the connubial, von Bülow conducted the premier of "Tristan und Isolde" in Munich. Probably the marriage thus broken up was a dry one of convenience. In any case Cosima ended up the absolute ruler of the Wagnerian legacy and of Bayreuth from Wagner's death in 1883 until 1930.

Claim) Wagner was chauvinistic and actively anti-jewish.

REC) Although this claim has some substance in that Wagner did produce tracts that railed against Jewish dominance in some fields, especially as controllers of the Parisian theatrical scene, nothing of such attitude shows up in his works. There is no such trace overtly in his works, but one could argue that in hoping to establish a pure native German ethos free of foreign influence that this in itself was tied to his attitude on Jews. This did not bother a number of Jewish colleagues who participated in his productions. As a probably unimportant note, there is a considerable chance that Wagner himself had

Jewish blood, in that there were many of that race among the theatrical folk of Dresden, from whom his mother was descended. There is a speculation not resolved entirely, that he may have had a natural father named Geyer.

Claim) Wagner greatly influenced, and shares responsibility for, the rise of German nationalism that led to Naziism.

REC) Influence - yes. Responsibility - no. Just because Hitler was welcomed and lionized at Bayreuth by the English born Winifred Wagner who married into the family, does not mean that the trappings of Naziism need adhere to

the Richard Wagner legacy. Actually most of the Wagner ethos one experiences today precurses and supercedes Germany itself a a state. Only the sunny "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" and "Tannheuser" have connection with specific dates within Germanic territory. The mythic and spiritual nature of the works go far beyond any aspect of 20th century politics.

They will prevail forever so long as the orchestra can prevail, and will increasingly penetrate all cultures because of the immense vitality and universality of their reach. - Robert Ellis Crawford - August 2008

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