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Wagner And The Erotic Impulse



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Synopsis

Though his image is tarnished today by unrepentant anti-Semitism, Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was better known in the nineteenth century for his provocative musical eroticism. In this illuminating study of the composer and his works, Laurence Dreyfus shows how Wagner's obsession with sexuality prefigured the composition of operas such as *Tannhäuser*, *Die Walküre*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal*. Daring to represent erotic stimulation, passionate ecstasy, and the torment of sexual desire, Wagner sparked intense reactions from figures like Baudelaire, Clara Schumann, Nietzsche, and Nordau, whose verbal tributes and censures disclose what was transmitted when music represented sex. Wagner himself saw the cultivation of an erotic high style as central to his art, especially after devising an anti-philosophical response to Schopenhauer's metaphysics of sexual love. A reluctant eroticist, Wagner masked his personal compulsion to cross-dress in pink satin and drench himself in rose perfumes while simultaneously incorporating his silk fetish and love of floral scents into his librettos. His affection for dominant females and surprising regard for homosexual love likewise enable some striking portraits in his operas. In the end, Wagner's achievement was to have fashioned an oeuvre which explored his sexual yearnings as much as it conveyed—as never before—how music could act on erotic impulse.

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Customer Reviews

Buy this book - no, actually buy multiple copies of it and distribute to friends as a late Christmas/Chanukah gift. This work is so full of incredible insight, I barely know where to begin to

describe its pleasures. Rich in historical context, the author provides a look into how initial audiences grappled with hearing Wagner's revolutionary art for the first time. For example, I just read a section on how Berlioz - himself no slouch in terms of musical innovation - heard the Prelude to Tristan, how he scoured the score, over and over, not fully able to come to grips with the amazing music before him. He couldn't 'decode' such an experience in conventional musical analysis, and one gets the sense of his trying to fully digest a musical feast the likes of which he never encountered before, and did not even possess the palate to fully taste its richness; in short, he knew something profound had transpired with this piece, but was not quite sure exactly what it was. At any rate, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* is full of such treasures and the author surpasses all others who have written on Wagner, excepting possibly the early work of Bryan Magee, which was equally brilliant. Buy it, you will not be disappointed. Kudos to Lawrence Dreyfus for his great accomplishment here!

Bravo Laurence Dreyfus! It is all too easy to pigeonhole the life of a man as controversial and complex as Richard Wagner. We've heard all the stereotypes and all the ugly truths...or have we? Has musicology been again guilty of censorship through silence? Prof. Dreyfus via straightforward scholarship reveals the sensual sexual side of Wagner's music, while also revealing Wagner's own form of kink sexuality. This is not done for pure gratification's sake. Its only purpose is to help us enjoy and understand Wagner's amazing and complex music through understanding Wagner's own amazing and complex life. This book assumes you have already heard about Wagner's many appalling personality traits, including his pathological anti-semitism. This frees up Dreyfus to look at a single issue: sexuality and allow for once a picture of a human Wagner to emerge. Wagner's bad traits shine through all right: like his nasty letter to Nietzsche's doctor accusing him of homosexuality. So nothing is sugar coated or glossed over. But one also sees a human side. One that harkens back to his troubled childhood, Wagner's own frailty. Finally we can look at Wagner with not just condemnation but also human understanding. Personally, I also discovered why I enjoy Wagner's music so much. Why it had always spoken so deeply to me. The book is written in a way that it invites rediscovery of Wagner's operas. I Thank Laurence Dreyfus for taking the time to unravel this mystery. I feel I can now go and enjoy Wagner's operas without feeling guilty about it.

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