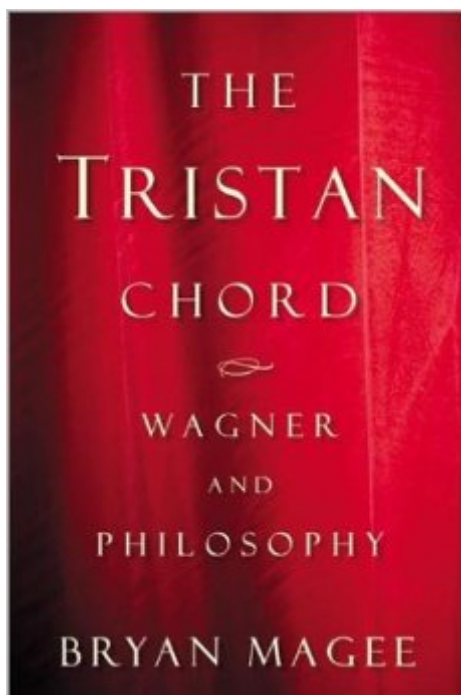


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The Tristan Chord: Wagner And Philosophy



Synopsis

A profoundly searching investigation that reveals for the first time the philosophical foundations of Wagner's art. Richard Wagner's devotees have ranged from the subtlest minds (Proust) to the most brutal (Hitler). The enduring fascination of his works arises from his singular fusion of musical innovation and theatrical daring, but also from his largely overlooked engagement with the boldest investigations of modern philosophy. Now, in this radically clarifying book, Bryan Magee traces the Wagner's involvement in the intellectual quests of his age, from his youthful embrace of revolutionary socialism, to a Schopenhauerian rejection of the world as illusion, to the near-Buddhist resignation of his final years. Mapping the influence of ideas on Wagner's art, Magee shows how abstract thought can permeate musical work and stimulate creations of great power and beauty. And he unflinchingly confronts the Wagner whose paranoia, egocentricity, and anti-Semitism are as repugnant as his achievements are glorious. At once a biography of the composer, an overview of his times, an account of 19th century opera, and an insight into the intellectual and technical aspects of music, Magee's lucid study offers the best explanation of W. H. Auden's judgment that Wagner, for all his notorious difficulties, was "perhaps the greatest genius that ever lived."

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Customer Reviews

There aren't many composers whose philosophical views are of such crucial, and controversial, importance as Wagner's. But this is not because Wagner was an important philosopher. As Magee shows, Wagner's thinking should not be too readily dismissed. Wagner was no philosophical dilettante. He was awesomely well-read in the philosophy, philology and linguistics of his day, in

addition to his vast reading in literature ancient and "modern", in history, myth, and the history of myth, and much more. And he was an intelligent and sometimes extraordinarily perceptive man, whose erudition was not just for showing off with but of vital importance to his thought and work. However Wagner believed, wrongly, that his intuition was as sure a guide in the world of ideas as it was in music and drama. So his philosophical writings follow his intuitions, not his reasoning - indeed he seems to avoid reasoning, except in small bursts, out of principle. His writing is therefore irrational and self-contradictory, obscure in the worst German manner: neither original (except accidentally, where he achieves originality by misunderstanding a source, particularly Schopenhauer), nor lucid, nor "true". "True", that is, in the sense of being based on "matters of fact or reason". So his philosophy is not, despite what Wagner probably thought, of much importance in its own right. It is mainly important because it permeates and influences his major works, which are among the few most endlessly fascinating human creations of any kind.

I went into this book knowing the Wagner, Schopenhauer/Buddhist and Nietzsche connection. This book was a major explicator of all these themes. The book's greatest highlight for me was a precis on Kant's philosophy and how it linked with Schopenhauer's eventual world view. The concepts of phenomena and noumena are well explained, and there is a brilliant vision of the occidental philosophical grasp of reality in the romantic era. Certainly, these German philosophers were brilliant and sufficiently detached to transcend their cultural outlook and fly over it. To me the book did not wade deeply enough into Nietzsche and Schopenhauer but this was obviously not the author's objective and his treatments though non voluminous are comprehensive. On the other hand the book is also a eulogy of Wagner and was certainly a bit subjective as the author pours over some of the operas and gives a great deal of over zealous details, which a reader unfamiliar with the stuff may want to pass over in preference to actually getting the CD (telling us what to buy would have spared most of the description). The author uses the book as a stage from which to demolish Wagner's neo-Nazi credentials and he gives the low down as to why Nietzsche abandoned Wagner, using the composer to enhance Nietzsche's reputation at the same time as ridiculing the composer later on. Whether Wagner was really that philosophical compared to any other great composer (the philosophical interests of which are less known) as the author contends is debatable. That the composer drew on the finest German philosophy and myth available to him is not in doubt.

This is THE book on Wagner that I hoped would be written one day and which I knew could be written. The author has no use for post-Holocaust axe-grinding or for any of our various ideologizing

modes of regard. Neither does he indulge in any of the widespread but ultimately superficial KULTURGESCHICHTLICH approaches in which Wagner is but one more symbol-player to be pigeon-holed and arranged in a trajectory tour of the modern imagination (much like the props in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's "Parsifal" film), nor does he dish up Wagner with a sideorder of Marxist criticism. Instead what you get is Wagner considered as a living, breathing, thinking, AND creating human being, a real man (no mere puppet of impersonal cultural forces here!) who when he encountered ideas and people reacted to them in the completely unique way that his personality (like it or not!) demanded. In a way one can only appreciate this book if he has already spent some time ploughing through even a fraction of the tendentious trash in print that attempts to deal with this man (e.g. Gutman, Millington, even M. Owen Lee at times). If you have done that, then you will really be in a position to enjoy what Bryan Magee has done, how he has done it, and what a tremendous debt we owe to him for presenting to us Wagner the man in all of his outrageous and openly contradictory complexity. This is a book for people who are interested in learning more closely what kind of man Wagner actually was (that, for example, he possessed a most 'commanding' personality but yet what that simple fact might mean in real terms, and why that in itself might be a petty thing to hold against him in our age of pathologically inflated egos and equally calculating self-interest). And Mr.

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