

## Total Wagner

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**“Can Wagner the composer only be loved *in spite of Wagner the man?*” To answer this question, Timothée Picard points out that music is not “in and of itself anti-Semitic or nationalistic,” and his encyclopedic dictionary of Wagner goes a long way towards proving the point.**

Reviewed: *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Wagner*, chief editor Timothée Picard. Arles: Actes Sud, 2010. 2496 pages, €79.

After the success of *Tout Mozart* and *Tout Bach* in the Bouquins series, another publisher, Actes Sud, has taken up the idea of putting a great composer in an original perspective in this *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Wagner*. And there is matter a-plenty in this encyclopedia to convince us that a dictionary will ultimately provide a better approach to a creative artist’s world than a biography. Nearly 2500 pages, six million characters, 1400 entries penned by 30-odd specialists under the supervision of Timothée Picard, a young and already renowned Wagnerian, on a wide range of subjects, including biographical elements, of course, but also on performers of his works, characters in his operas, contemporary composers, writers and poets who drew on Wagner’s work etc. Almost as if this dictionary were as ambitious in scope as Wagner’s oeuvre itself, aspiring to a totality reminiscent of Wagner’s total artwork.

Wagner, even more than all the composers who laid claim to his legacy (Bruckner, Mahler, Strauss and Schoenberg, to name just a few), is the one who aroused the greatest passions, fixations and rejections of them all. As a matter of fact, we have a hard time nowadays imagining the virulence of the debates about Wagnerism, whether this term is taken to mean his compositional processes, dramaturgical principles, poetics or philosophical thought. In France,

the positions *pro* and *contra* Wagner became radicalized in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, eventually subsiding from 1914, when Paris – which had become the uncontested hub of the arts in the Western World – opened up to Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and their disciples. Wagner also gave rise to the greatest misunderstandings. It is even claimed that more pages have been written about Wagner than anyone else...except of course Jesus Christ and Napoleon. But this is an urban legend: in fact if Wagner does hold any records, it is probably for being the subject of the greatest number of myths and legends – so it's a shame the label “myth” or “legend” is not employed in this dictionary, which would have helped clear up a number of matters.

Enlightened Wagner enthusiasts and fanatics alike will delight in roaming through the myriad entries; perusing Martin Gregor-Dellin's monograph *Richard Wagner, sein Leben, sein Jahrhundert*; discovering what Nerval, Baudelaire, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Mallarmé, Romain Rolland, Suarès, Louÿs, Valéry, Gracq *et al.* had to say about Wagner; disentangling the intricate fabric of literary and artistic associations woven by his oeuvre and unraveling the underlying cultural, political and aesthetic issues of his day. This is far from being the first guide to Wagner in French. Fayard, for example, published in 1988 a *Guide des opéras de Wagner* (republished in 1994) edited by Michel Pazdro, followed in 1998 by a *Guide raisonné* edited by Barry Millington – two books that have deepened our knowledge of the man and helped us appreciate the composer's genius. But, aside from its elegant presentation – bible format and most definitely a bedside book – the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Wagner* has the advantage of targeting Wagner experts and neophytes alike and, above all, of providing multiple angles of approach for the inquisitive reader, displaying a conspicuous facility for making connections, spotting points of convergence and divergence, and homing in on significant simultaneities.

This at once exhaustive and accessible compendium provides all the key biographical background (“family relations,” “posts held”), whilst covering technical musicological matters (“harmony,” “piano (music for),” scholarship (“Wagner studies,” “Wagner journals”), iconoclasts (“boredom (Wagner as a source of)”), and felicitously blends the history of Wagner reception with 19<sup>th</sup>-century history per se: in particular, see the entries on “Composing after Wagner?,” “anti-Wagnerism,” “Wagnerian dramaturgy,” “Wagner recordings (history of).” Moreover, it even indulges in tangents generally passed over by musicologists: e.g. “Ken Russell,” “Films

(theoretical reflections”), the question of kitsch, advertising – as well as the influence of Wagnerism on fantasy worlds, of which Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is one popular example.

In his concluding remarks, Timothée Picard asks: “Can Wagner the composer only be loved today *in spite of Wagner the man* ?” He bases his answer to this question on an assertion that is simple but too often forgotten: music is “not in and of itself anti-Semitic or nationalistic.” He draws a parallel between the reception of Wagner in Germany and that of Verdi in Italy: “What is to be said, for example, of the nationalistic, reactionary ‘Verdi Renaissance’ of 1930s Italy? That Verdi’s post-Resorgimento nationalism and the fascistic nationalism of the 1930s were as closely intertwined as those of Wagner and the Nazis?” In closing, he argues that “Wagner and Wagnerism are not wholly contained in the Nazi appropriation thereof,” but that it is difficult all the same to reiterate, as some do, “with annoying repetitiveness how impermeable the world in which Wagner and his oeuvre moved was compared to that in which their most despicable sycophants evolved.” These questions found a particularly acute resonance when the Paris opera put on a new production of the *Tetralogy*. And all the more so as Günter Krämer’s staging deliberately revisited some of the symbols of European nationalism: the 2009/2010 season productions of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* did not always go in for subtleties.

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