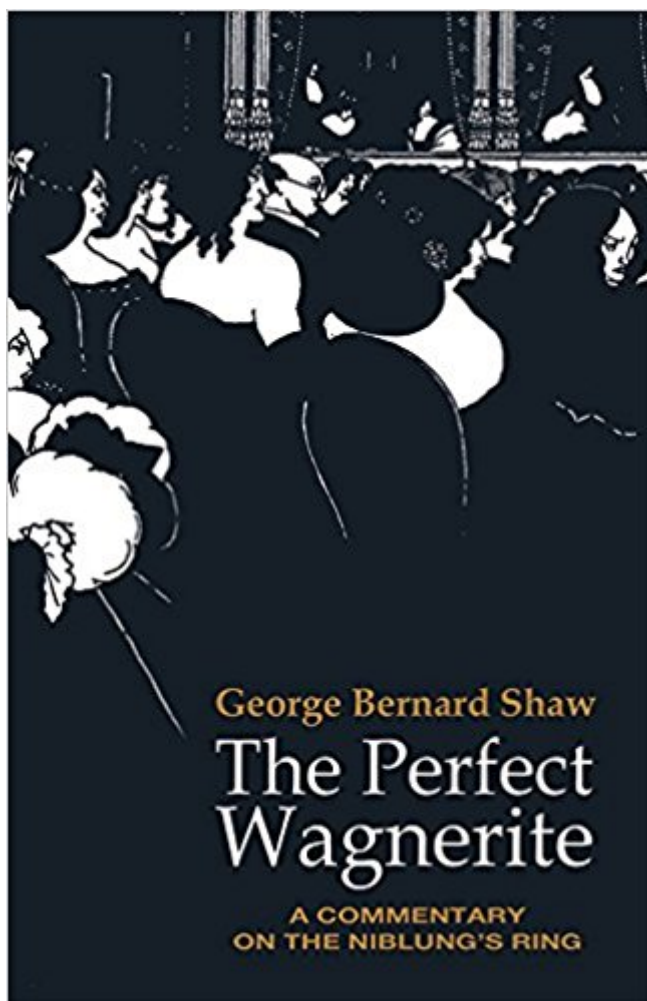


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The Perfect Wagnerite (Dover Books On Music)



Synopsis

As a commentator on music and music critics, Bernard Shaw was experienced and knowledgeable, strongly opinionated, and, as in all his writing, unsurpassed for brilliance and wit. The reader will find that this commentary on the cycle of four Wagner operas known as "The Ring" contains all these characteristics: it is enlightening and provocative, and it makes very entertaining reading. Shaw was firm Wagner partisan, and in the book he enthusiastically endorses the operas and Wagner's music in general. Particularly interested in the philosophic and social ideology behind the Ring operas, he also discusses Wagner's life, the character of music drama as opposed to grand opera, the role of the Leitmotif in unifying the cycle and delineating character, the character of Siegfried, and many other related questions. As with all of Shaw's work, even if the reader disagrees with much of it, he will still find the analysis full of stimulating ideas and valuable insights, and written throughout with rare liveliness and wit.

Book Information

Series: Dover Books on Music

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: Dover Publications; 4th ed. edition (July 21, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0486217078

ISBN-13: 978-0486217079

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.4 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 20 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #682,124 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #49 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Wagner #1334 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Forms & Genres > Opera #12758 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature

Customer Reviews

In the course of his long and prolific career, George Bernard Shaw (1856â€”1950) wrote 60 plays, in addition to music and literary criticism. An avid socialist, he regarded his writing as a vehicle for promoting his political and humanitarian views.

For me, this provides an excellent survey of the Ring Cycle, despite being 120 years old, and

despite being Marxist in approach. Shaw worked as a music critic, combined a keen appreciation of music with the ability to write about it for a general audience. He was also a social critic, a socialist rather than a communist, but still Marxist in his theoretical orientation. These elements of Shaw combine in this book, and he explicitly views the Ring as a criticism of modern capitalism. His Marxist approach, however, is by no means controlling. This is very useful as a guide.

Gutman has an axe to grind. He despises Wagner and sets out to discredit the composer whenever possible. While it is true that Wagner had many despicable traits (antisemitism, mendacity, opportunism, megalomania, womanizing, etc.), Gutman creates a wholly unsympathetic picture of this musical genius. Gutman sees the influence of Wagner's antisemitism everywhere, similar to the way UFO enthusiasts see the influence of space aliens everywhere in our culture. As a result this biography is not fair and balanced. Gutman's goal seems to be to get the reader to despise Wagner as much as he does. Laon, in his review, gives many detailed examples of Gutman's intellectual slipperiness as a biographer. Gutman maintains that Parsifal is Wagner's antisemitic magnum opus and the fact that Wagner's text does not support his argument, Gutman regards as proof of how clever Wagner was in hiding his antisemitism in his artistic works. He hid it so well that only Gutman can see it. Give me a break! How could the fact that there is no evidence be proof of the argument he is making? Regarding the "ihn" versus "ihm" controversy in Tristan, Laon does a good job in elucidating Gutman's silly inuendoes. There is another possibility, which is that Wagner was trying to emulate an archaic German, so he may have deliberately chosen the "wrong" grammar (by modern standards) to make the sentence sound like an older pre-modern Germanic tongue. Native German speakers sometimes have difficulty understanding Wagner's texts for that reason. I agree with Laon that Gutman's book is decent on the facts of Wagner's life but is biased and misleading on the interpretation of those facts. It's too bad that such a knowledgeable writer as Gutman could let his personal biases mar what could have been a balanced and thoughtful biography of this controversial musical genius. Gutman's logic appears to run as follows: Wagner was anti-Semitic, Hitler liked Wagner's music and ideas, therefore Wagner was responsible for the Holocaust. I read this book hoping to understand how Wagner, with all his character flaws, could write such beautiful and psychologically insightful musical dramas. Gutman did not answer my question, except to say that what appear on the surface to be works of genius are really clever attempts by a scoundrel to indoctrinate others into his antisemitism. How is it then that I come away from listening to Wagner with a loathing of anti-Semitism and a overwhelming experience of compassion for the human family?

Mister Shaw makes crystal clear everything I ever suspected about Mr. Wagner. A musical genius, poet and unbelievable assessor of the human condition. I'm addicted to the man and his music. O.

Shaw's idiosyncratic views of the Ring colored by his socialistic philosophy. Entertaining and thought provoking. Not for the beginner or an introduction to the Ring.

A wonderful read.

In case you're wondering who to blame for the Ring Cycle performances where Wotan is dressed in a frock coat and top hat, and the Rhine Maidens are cavorting in front of a hydroelectric dam, George Bernard Shaw (GBS) might be your man. "The Perfect Wagnerite" (1898) certainly spends a great deal of print discussing various European revolutions (mainly aborted), and their influence on Wagner's philosophy and music. I admit to having to struggle to figure out that 'Michael Bakoonin' was really Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin, the Russian revolutionary anarchist. GBS props him up and knocks him down several times during the course of the extended essay (89 pages) that constitutes "The Perfect Wagnerite." Although GBS approved of socialism, he was not a fan of anarchism. According to Peter Conrad, author of "Verdi and/or Wagner: Two Men, Two Worlds, Two Centuries," "George Bernard Shaw criticized the 'Ring' for regressing from sternly preachy music drama to Italianate grand opera, from the radical attack on capitalism in 'Das Rheingold' to the nihilistic frivolity of the apocalypse at the end of 'Götterdämmerung.'" According to GBS, the latter two operas in the Ring Cycle strayed from the theme of social revolution and into the frivolous, although highly entertaining genre of Italian grand opera. You don't have to agree with Shaw's thesis in order to enjoy the wit with which he presents it. My favorite passages in "The Perfect Wagnerite" involve Shaw's interpretation of Wagner's music, rather than his social goals. Shaw himself is of course a self-confessed 'Perfect Wagnerite' who felt that we use great works of art, including the Ring, in order to see into our own souls. Music reaches more deeply into our psyches than words ever can. Robert Donington, author of "Wagner's 'Ring' and its Symbols" remarked that GBS "mingles great sense and great silliness in about equal proportions" in "The Perfect Wagnerite" and GBS left it up to his readers to figure out which was which. This remarkable extended essay is required reading for all fans of Wagner's music dramas.

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