



The Philosophies of Richard Wagner

By Julian Young

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In addition to being a great composer, Richard Wagner was also an important philosopher. Julian Young begins by examining the philosophy of art and society Wagner constructs during his time as a revolutionary anarchist-communist. Modernity, Wagner argued, is to be rescued from its current anomie through the rebirth of Greek tragedy (the original *Gesamtkunstwerk*) in the form of the “artwork of the future,” an artwork of which his own operas are the prototype.

Young then examines the entirely different philosophy Wagner constructs after his 1854 conversion from Hegelian optimism to Schopenhauerian pessimism. “Redemption” now becomes, not a future utopia in this world, but rather “transfigured” existence in another world, attainable only through death. Viewing Wagner’s operas through the lens of his philosophy, the book offers often novel interpretations of *Lohengrin*, The *Ring* cycle, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*.

Finally, Young dresses the cause of Friedrich Nietzsche’s transformation from Wagner’s intimate friend and disciple into his most savage critic. Nietzsche’s fundamental accusation, it is argued, is one of betrayal: that Wagner betrayed his early, “life affirming” philosophy of art and life in favor of “life-denial.” Nietzsche’s assertion and the final conclusion of the book is that our task, now, is to “become better Wagnerians than Wagner.”

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Editorial Review

Review

Young here presents the results of extensive research into Wagner's philosophical writings. Perhaps the most surprising thing one learns is that Wagner had a relatively clear and coherent philosophy. In fact, Wagner's philosophy evolved over time, and he always saw himself as more than a composer of operas. Early on, Wagner, influenced by Hegel, maintained that art and music could play a key role in changing the world for the better. Later, his philosophical intuitions and artistic aims would be molded by Schopenhauer's pessimistic but redemptive views of music. Today, Wagner would be saddened, though perhaps not surprised, to find that most of his operas are heard only by the affluent—a situation that is the antithesis of what he was trying to do. Young's straightforward writing style is more than welcome in explaining 19th-century German philosophical concepts, which can get very complex very fast. This book is beautifully written, clear, and concise. Summing Up: Highly recommended. Upper-level undergraduates and above. (CHOICE)

Keenly attuned to Wagner's intimations of impersonal immortality, Julian Young explains Wagner's evolving views on the redemptive power of musical drama, an artistic salvation that remains possible even after the death of God. By critically examining Wagner's philosophical transformation from a Feuerbachian anarcho-revolutionary to a Schopenhauerian world-renunciate, Young uncovers the enduring spiritual quest at the heart of Wagner's work: Our deep and enduring philosophical need to learn how to die well. (Iain Thomson, University of New Mexico)

In deft, elegant prose, Young convincingly reconstructs two distinct Wagnerian philosophical positions, especially as concerns the relationship between art and society: an early revolutionary and a later Schopenhauerian position. In doing so, Young casts considerable light on the meanings of Wagner's musical dramas, and presents an array of fascinating positions on the proper relations between art and society for contemporary reflection. This is an important book for anyone interested in late-nineteenth-century philosophy of music and art. (Sandra Shapshay, Indiana University, Bloomington)

About the Author

Julian Young is Kenan Professor of Humanities at Wake Forest University.

Users Review

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