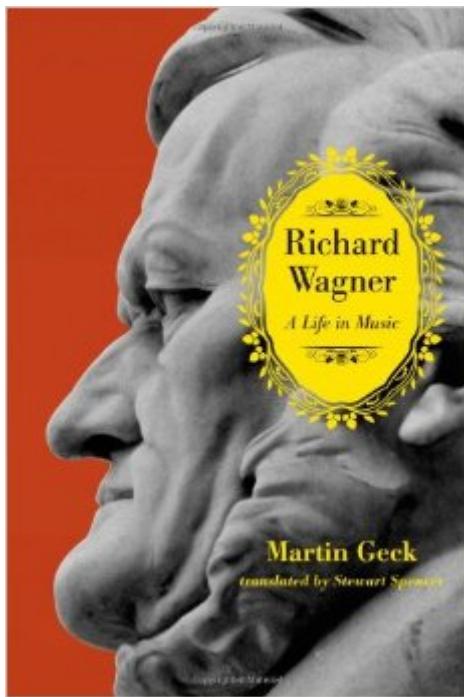


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# Richard Wagner: A Life In Music



## Synopsis

Best known for the challenging four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Richard Wagner (1813-83) was a conductor, librettist, theater director, and essayist, in addition to being the composer of some of the most enduring operatic works in history, such as *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Tristan and Isolde*. Though his influence on the development of European music is indisputable, Wagner was also quite outspoken on the politics and culture of his time. His ideas traveled beyond musical circles into philosophy, literature, theater staging, and the visual arts. To befit such a dynamic figure, acclaimed biographer Martin Geck offers here a Wagner biography unlike any other, one that strikes a unique balance between the technical musical aspects of Wagner's compositions and his overarching understanding of aesthetics. Wagner has always inspired passionate admirers as well as numerous detractors, with the result that he has achieved a mythical stature nearly equal to that of the Valkyries and Viking heroes he popularized. There are few, if any, scholars today who know more about Wagner and his legacy than Geck, who builds upon his extensive research and considerable knowledge as one of the editors of the Complete Works to offer a distinctive appraisal of the composer and the operas. Using a wide range of sources, from contemporary scholars to the composer's own words, Geck explores key ideas in Wagner's life and works, while always keeping the music in the foreground. Geck discusses not only all the major operas, but also several unfinished operas and even the composer's early attempts at quasi-Shakespearean drama. *Richard Wagner: A Life in Music* is a landmark study of one of music's most important figures, offering something new to opera enthusiasts, Wagnerians, and anti-Wagnerians alike.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I first encountered the German musicologist, Martin Geck, through his book on Bach. His writing was so thorough, so knowledgeable and so sympathetic that I assumed he was a baroque specialist. But last summer, as I began reading Richard Wagner A Life in Music, I found the same virtues applied to Wagner's romantic realism. This is not a huge book, it's under 500 pages. However, Geck has the ability to make every word count, to suggest more than he says and compress much meaning in each page. His focus in each chapter is very tight; he doesn't let his writing sprawl. Still, he manages to relate events in Wagner's life and details of his character which are new to me. Although the main purpose of this volume is biographical, I find his comments on the individual music dramas as they unfold chronologically to be original and perceptive. One touchstone in evaluating the quality of an artist's biography is: Does it make you want to return to the artist's work and experience it informed, refreshed and excited. Geck's book achieves this excellence. Geck's biography was published in Germany last year. This year another book on Wagner was published in England and the U.S. It is *The Wagner Experience* by Paul Dawson-Bowling. I have already reviewed this title for , so I won't repeat my enthusiastic gushing about it. But Dawson-Bowling's book makes Geck's seem, well, conventional. There is space enough in the Wagner Universe for both types of books, and I would encourage anyone who passionately admires Wagner's music and dramas to read these two books in tandem. I have been doing so for the past few months. I am purposely reading slowly, with many interruptions to play Wagner's music, reflect on the meaning of the *Wagner Experience* and write my own commentary on these inexhaustible works of creative imagination. I can't think of a better way to pay homage to this art we love, that enriches us and renews us continually.

The title of this book is (for once!) an accurate indication of what it contains - an in-depth, detailed, and extremely knowledgeable discussion of the music, rather raking over the coals of the the (over?) familiar biographical details. So for example, the early years of Wagner's life (up to Leubald) are addressed in a couple of pages, which is something of a surprise if you are expecting (as I was, initially) a more "conventional" biography. This pattern is repeated for all subsequent works - some essential details are provided, but the focus is always on the music, of which the author has a deep understanding. I found this book insightful, informative, and a pleasure to read. To take one example of many - this book makes a very persuasive case in presenting how early Wagner's

artistic "vision" was formed, and how he remained faithful (!) to this vision throughout his life (in music, of course). A must for anybody interested in understanding Wagner's music.

In a field filled to overflowing with new studies of Wagner (surely the most written-about artist in history), Martin Geck's 444-page work paddles desperately to keep from sinking under the hundreds of other volumes. Geck's book (translated bravely and capably from the 2012 German original by Stewart Spencer, a specialist in this composer) blends a chronological account of Wagner's developing intellect with analyses of each of his operas. In those analyses, Geck tries -- and largely succeeds -- in finding something new and important to say about each work. The result is a valuable, if not INvaluable, addition to the groaning shelves of Wagneriana. Further, his book gives non-German-speaking readers access to many of the scholars whose books and articles remain untranslated -- scholars listed in Geck's bibliography: 21-pages long, all in fine print! Sidebars offer details about Wagner's interactions with many of the JEWISH composers and impresarios whose lives interwove with his career. Here Geck uncovers many fascinating and little-known facts and anecdotes. The book's interior graphics (in black-and-white) include many of Wagner's portraits, well known or otherwise, beginning with the book's front cover: a close-up profile of Arno Breker's giant, aggressive 1939 marble bust of the composer, erected outside the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth. That portrait alone makes this book hard to ignore.

Geck's work follows Wagner's life chronologically and concisely while still contributing insightful commentary on his philosophies and music. At the conclusion of each chapter he includes a brief essay on different German Jewish figures in relation to die Meister. One wishes, however, that Geck were a little more discerning (they come across as vague and defensive) in his critique in these sections.

This superb work shows me the prehistory of The Ring, Wagner's view of the world. This musical narrative of nature, fear, resurrection, the curse, the sword, Erda (Earth Goddess), and Valhalla from Das Rheingold through Wotan's vision. The Wanderer archetype appears as an integral part of Wagner's life and music.

Very good read to give a better understanding of the man and with that a better understanding and interpretation of his music.

Great read! Learned a hell lot from this epic musician and composer than by reading online articles.

Thanks for this!

Excellent biography of Richard Wagner.

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