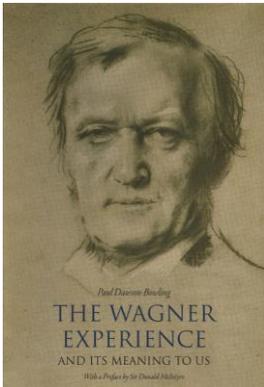


## PAUL DAWSON-BOWLING *THE WAGNER EXPERIENCE AND ITS MEANING TO US*

Roger Lee



With 800 pages of text plus 100 more of illustrations, this monumental work invites comparison with Ernest Newman's 736 page *The Wagner Operas*, its predecessor by 64 years which provided this reviewer's epiphany regarding Wagner's canonical output. Wagner News readers who are familiar with the work of Paul Dawson-Bowling are likely to have positive expectations of his *magnum opus*. As one whose fairly diligent reading over the last 20 years or so has resulted in an accumulation of the "usual" yard and a half shelf-full of Wagner books I was not expecting *The Wagner Experience* (to use a less unwieldy version of its title) to provide me with another such epiphany. I should declare at the outset that it has succeeded in doing exactly that.

The distillation a lifetime's work which has clearly been a labour of love, this book is organised as two beautifully illustrated volumes. The first deals with Wagner's output as a whole and attempts (very successfully, in my view) to explain what the author terms "the miracle of the music". Those of us who struggle for coherence when asked what the secret is of Wagner's hold over the imagination and the intellect will find such chapters as the boldly-titled "Towards a definition of Wagner's fascination" to provide much assistance.

One may have reacted sceptically to the pre-publication blurb which claimed that this is a book like no other on the subject, but the fact that it is written with the benefit of a lifetime's experience as a medical practitioner alone brings an abundance of justification for such a claim. The biographical chapters in particular provide a doctor's insight into Wagner's psychological development and the influences upon his work which can be traced back to his earliest childhood and beyond.

The work and life of "the supreme artist of dramatic psychology" are illuminated for the author by the psychologist Carl Jung. We are told that Wagner never escaped a compulsive tendency to be self-centred to its pathological point of narcissism. "Narcissists are often aware of exactly how different people work and how they are likely to respond, but exploit this awareness overwhelmingly for their own interests." So Wagner came to have an insight and a feeling for character that was extraordinary, "as outsiders often do".

Throughout the book original angles of approach provide freshness, but one chapter in particular may come to be seen as revolutionary. Would you have expected "Femme inspiratrice, femme fatale" to be about *Minna* Wagner? With this chapter the author has to justify its opening sentence: "Of all the experiences which went into the making of Wagner, Minna Planer was the most far-reaching." He adds: "The importance of her role is impossible to exaggerate, and yet it goes unrecognised." The 39 meticulously researched pages which follow cover the ground of comparing her influence with that of Cosima Wagner. Although he concedes; "It was Cosima that made possible what is for me the most extraordinary achievement of Wagner's life, the fulfilment of *Parsifal* down to its staging within a year of his death." He continues: "It was Minna who became the source of all the heroines in Wagner's dramas. Cosima, and briefly Mathilde, would re-invigorate the paradigm of woman as life's ultimate fulfilment which Minna had instilled in Wagner. But it was Minna who had forged it in the first place."

The chapter: "Puzzles, Obstructions and Objections" addresses the matter of the hostility which the music itself can call up. "When Wagner stirs the depths what comes welling up can be ecstatic and liberating, but it can also take the disturbing form of dark phantoms that come screaming out of the blackness. Not many people are happy to recognise any shadow or disunities in themselves." He explains that this is not the only inner problem which some people foist outwards onto Wagner. Another objection to Wagner apparently represents another pathology: "it is bound up with the lure that Wagner holds for anyone who is looking for shortcomings in greatness and feels satisfaction from finding them. To do this is the mark of a neurosis, a compensation mechanism for people who cannot accept that others exist who are more significant than they are themselves. Wagner's towering greatness and his great faults provide these people with a ready target."

Two important refutations are adroitly provided in this chapter, namely that Wagner's political views ("he always remained far away to the left") were in some way compatible with Hitler's and that the composer's anti-Semitism is present in his musical output. We are provided with a useful tool to test the work to determine whether or not it qualifies as "anti-Semitic art".

Volume 2 is a guide to each of the ten "great dramas". The author throws medically-informed illumination upon many of Wagner's characterisations in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century handbook which is likely to become as indispensable as that of Ernest Newman. The author avoids dry presentations of the stories by integrating narrations with the points of discussion which they generate at the very places in the plots where they come up as he does with the music examples. Those who are unable to read musical notation are catered for with the verbal descriptions of motives, etc which are also provided.

Space allows the picking of no more than a couple of exemplar cherries. Remember that each of the following claims have closely-argued support. We are told that, thanks to its music, "*Tristan und Isolde* describes romantic love and erotic passion more vividly than any other story or description in existence. Because of the music *Tristan und Isolde* is more than a description; it creates the actual feeling within us. Through the music it creates the very experience in the imagination. It conjures up all that love might be, even for people who have never known it, switching on the mind to ecstatic possibilities that may previously be unimagined but are innate, and to the hope that they may be realised."

Of the author's favourite work, *Parsifal*, he writes: "Our encounter with Montsalvat comes with a demand that we accept its standards for actual life. The experience of *Parsifal* enjoins kindness, compassion, loyalty, generosity, integrity, responsibility, a willingness to get involved and act, and a willingness to leave well alone."

Paul Dawson-Bowling has written powerfully succinct conclusions to the Volume 2 chapters, each covering one of the great music dramas. If I may be permitted an editorly quibble it is that, with one exception, (*Parsifal*) the effect is spoiled by the fact that before the reader can sit back and contemplate the chapter now completed it starts up again with a list of performers of the work's first performance at Bayreuth! Let me challenge the wisdom of this editorial decision with the example of *Götterdämmerung*. Who would want to move on to the 1876 cast list immediately upon reading the following? "*The Ring* as a whole is a compelling validation of human existence, a secular redemption. Simply to have lived life in all its richness and variety is an experience of such value that is not negated by the fact that it must end. The prospect of it ending does create a degree of regret; yes, that is there in *The Ring's* final eight bars; but it still establishes the conviction that to have lived life is an experience so worthwhile that not even the prospect of total, eternal oblivion can detract from that worthwhileness."