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Drama and the World of Richard Wagner

Dieter Borchmeyer

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Richard Wagner continues to be the most controversial artist in history, a perpetually troubling figure in our cultural consciousness. The unceasing debate over his works and their impact--for and against--is one reason why there has been no genuinely comprehensive modern account of his musical dramas until now. Dieter Borchmeyer's book is the first to present an overall picture of these musical dramas from the standpoint of literary and theatrical history. It extends from the composer's early works--still largely ignored--to the *Ring Cycle and Parsifal*, and includes Wagner's unfinished works and operas he never set to music. Through lively prose, we come to see Wagner as a librettist--and as a man of letters--rather than primarily as musical composer.

Borchmeyer uncovers a vast field of cultural and historical cross-references in Wagner's works. In the first part of the book, he sets out in search of the various archetypal scenes, opening up the composer's dramatic workshop to the reader. He covers all of Wagner's operas, from early juvenilia to the canonical later works.

The second part examines Wagner in relation to political figures including King Ludwig II and Bismarck, and, importantly, in light of critical reactions by literary giants--Thomas Mann, whom Borchmeyer calls "a guiding light in this exploration of the fields that Wagner tilled," and Nietzsche, whose appeal to "philology" is a key source of inspiration in attempts to grapple with Wagner's works.

For more than twenty years, Borchmeyer has placed his scholarship at the service of the famed Bayreuth Festival. With this volume, he gives us a summation of decades of engagement with the phenomenon of Wagner and, at the same time, the result of an abiding critical passion for his works.

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