

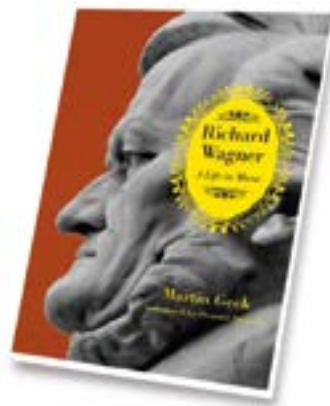
as opposed to the 'professional biographers' who regularly try their hand at Napoleon. Broers, like Dwyer, draws on current research, notably a new, enlarged edition of Napoleon's letters. So what distinguishes them?

In his introduction, Broers states that the fresh epistolary material 'makes a new biography imperative' and he puts the recently collected correspondence to good use, frequently citing Napoleon in his own words. Indeed he devotes a fair amount of space to the Buonaparte family, from their Corsican origins to their sibling rivalry, not least after Napoleon made good and excluded two of his brothers from the imperial succession. Broers draws on his own research to emphasise the importance of Bonaparte's political, as well as military, apprenticeship in northern Italy, before he went on to grasp power in France. He also describes the repressive as well as reconciliatory side of the Bonapartist system under the Consulate, down to 1804, especially the way its gendarmerie and special courts dealt with those who refused to be won over by 'great reforms' in administration, religion and the law. Closely focused on Napoleon's fortunes, this biography takes a more thematic approach. It is written with some verve, albeit with the odd slip when referring to the rebellions in Provence in 1793 (when Bonaparte was first brought into the limelight), or the plebiscites used to seal Napoleonic rule with popular approval as he consolidated his authority.

Broers is not uncritical of Napoleon, but Dwyer is keener to stress his shortcomings. He highlights weaknesses during the creative Consular period, suggesting that while ending the revolutionary schism, the Concordat with the Pope simultaneously inaugurated a century of conflict between Church and State in France. Later, under the heading 'Hubris', he deals with the declining years of the Empire, when Napoleon overreached himself in the East and was unwilling to make peace. Nemesis came hard on its heels, yet Dwyer also emphasises the revolutionary dimension that made it so difficult to

take the measure of Napoleon. The 'Citizen Emperor', who crowned himself, turned into something of a despot, before further complicating his identity during the final fling of the Hundred Days in 1815, when he briefly reinvented himself as the returning people's ruler. Dwyer exploits a series of visual images of Napoleon to trace his protean character and offer insight into the different ways he sought to present himself and was perceived by others. His is the more detailed account, extensively documented with 200 pages of endnotes and bibliography. It contains many fascinating nuggets of information, such as the tale of the hot air balloon that lofted a giant crown above Paris to celebrate the imperial coronation in 1804, but severed its moorings and ended up in Italy. While both Dwyer's volumes are now out, Broers has paused for the moment, with Napoleon facing a mighty military challenge, his destiny once more in the balance.

Malcolm Crook



Richard Wagner

A Life in Music

Martin Geck

(Stewart Spencer, trans.)

Chicago University Press 464pp £24.50

IN 1923 Richard Wagner's son, Siegfried, appealed to Bayreuth Festival audiences to refrain from responding to Hans Sachs' paean to 'holy German art' at the close of *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* by singing the German national anthem. 'Art is what matters here!' he declared, lest increasingly boorish far-right political voices scare away

Jewish patrons. The controversial 1951 re-opening of the festival witnessed a knowing re-instatement, Siegfried's sons, Wieland and Wolfgang, requesting: 'In the interests of trouble-free progression of the Festival, we kindly request that you refrain from political debate and discussion on the Festival Hill. "Art is what matters here!"'

Such is the message of Martin Geck's biography, which skilfully interweaves themes from history with discussion of the operas. Geck does not deny Wagner's political concerns. How could he? This is a composer who fought alongside Mikhail Bakunin on the barricades in Dresden and who would certainly have faced a prison sentence for involvement in the 1849 Saxon uprising, had not Franz Liszt ushered him into Swiss exile. Moreover, Wagner declared that the purpose of his four-part operatic cycle, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, was 'to make clear to the men of the Revolution the meaning of that Revolution, in its noblest sense'.

Geck admits a political 'taint' to certain works. *Lohengrin*, for instance, is 'incapable of concealing its affinities with nationalism and National Socialism'. Yet that is not Wagner's fault, we read; had German unification, let alone Nazism, not come along, we should read the work very differently. In a sense, it is implied, it would now for us actually be a different work, the historian's difficulty of how to treat with an artwork and its reception thus creditably, artfully considered. Geck throws a bone to detractors in order to attempt an anti-political rescue. He claims Siegfried – hero of *The Ring*, after whom Wagner named his son – as 'entirely unpolitical', George Bernard Shaw being closer to the mark in dubbing this thoroughgoing anarchist 'Siegfried Bakoonin'. In attempting to save Wagner, Geck somewhat neuters him. Wagner defends himself: against Hitler, *The Ring's* proclamation of the futility of all forms of power. More generally, dismal

contemporary politics would be enlivened by an injection of Wagner's socialist critiques of property, law, marriage and the state. The Romantic artist to the nth power, Wagner strove to move, to incite, to (re-)educate. Not only the subject matter of his operas but their very conception, an attempted renewal of Greek tragedy, stood as a savage indictment of a world in which art had become 'industry, its

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moral purpose the acquisition of money, its aesthetic purpose the entertainment of the bored'.

Geck's biography is commendably self-reflexive. He points to Wagner's lack of distinction between 'life' and 'art'; he shows awareness of the nature of history as writing, even briefly discussing 'language games' and Hayden White's rapprochement between history and poetry. Such an approach is perfectly possible, indeed desirable, for a dangerous, radical Wagner.

Stefan Herheim, in his Bayreuth production of *Parsifal*, pulled down a final curtain on the alleged 'New Bayreuth' of Wieland and Wolfgang by displaying onstage their 1951 declaration as part of a progression through *Parsifal* and its history, which, swastikas and all, made it clear how abidingly political and historical a drama this always had been. With a little help from Herheim, Wagner rescued – in Wagner's language, 'redeemed' – his own work. Geck's fine synthesis deserves to be read, especially as beautifully translated by Stewart Spencer; perhaps, however, it is he and we who still require redemption through Wagner.

Mark Berry