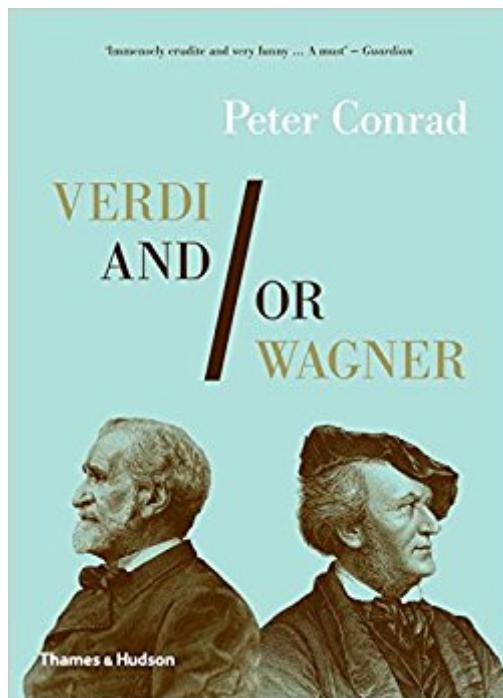


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# Verdi And/or Wagner: Two Men, Two Worlds, Two Centuries



## Synopsis

Offers beautifully written considerations of the masters' affinities and divergences and much else besides. *Operavore* This is the first book to compare these two composers and cultural heroes, both of whom were born in 1813 and achieved huge national and international renown in their lifetimes. Yet not only did they never meet, but the differences between them—*in* music, culture, environment, significance, and legacy—*were* profound. Peter Conrad begins his tale in a public park in Venice, home to a pair of statues of the composers that are positioned so as to appear to shun each other. This provides a fitting starting point for his argument that they represent two opposite yet equally integral and compelling dimensions of European culture: north versus south, cerebral versus sensual, proud solitude versus human connection, epic mythmaking versus humane magnanimity. The book is a richly argued tour de force that engages passionately and profoundly with music, biography, history, politics, philosophy, psychology, and culture in the broadest sense. As Conrad concludes, "At one time or another, if not simultaneously, we still need the two contradictory, complementary kinds of music that Verdi and Wagner left us." 51 illustrations, 24 in color

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Well-researched, immensely absorbing...adds captivating context. - Cool Hunting  
"Epic in scope. . . . An intriguing . . . study in contrasts. For opera buffs, cultural critics, and fans." - Library Journal --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Peter Conrad is the author of over twenty books, including *Creation*, *How the World Was Won*, and *Verdi and/or Wagner*.

Conrad's thesis is that Verdi was a more likable personality than Wagner; therefore his music is better. He too closely blends what M. Owen Lee distinguishes in his book **WAGNER: THE TERRIBLE MAN AND HIS TRUTHFUL MUSIC**. Conrad draws out endless spurious contrasts like a student trying to fill up so many pages for a paper, when he lacks sufficient solid substance. If this diffuse, overlong tome has a central thesis, it is that healthy-minded, loving, progressive humanitarian Verdi produces good music; whereas perverse, egotistical Wagner pathologically drags us back into a decadent past of irrelevant and poisonous myth and despair. A pedal point of Conrad's line is that religion in general, not just Wagner's bizarre myths of gods and redeemers, is all archaic nonsense. He cites with approval Feuerbach's assertion that "Hebrew egotism" enshrined in the Bible claims Creation was [literally??] an instantaneous moment when nothing became something. He bizarrely thinks the beautiful and moving Good Friday Spell in *PARSIFAL*, where Gurnemanz points out the polar connection of Kundry's tears [suffering, death] and the creative renewal of life in the landscape in Spring [resurrection] is incompatible with Christianity. Verdi, he says, wisely dispenses with all cosmic nonsense. Music is the new substitute for religion. Conrad is clueless concerning metaphysics and living religion, like a tone-deaf man dismissing music, or a blind man dismissing visual art. If we can't depend upon an Oxford literature professor understanding how myth, metaphor and analogy mean and work--where are we in our culture? Conrad does not seem to be tongue-in-cheek when he worries that listening to Wagner may cause us to practice incest [Siegfried/Sieglinde] and self-immolation [Brunhilde]. Concentrating on--and taking literally--the wilder passages of Wagner [*RING* and *TRISTAN*], he continually praises Verdi and denigrates Wagner. His one-sided diatribe would have been harder to carry off if he had compared, e.g., the relevance and deep insight into human experience of their respective comedies: Wagner's *MEISTERSINGER* and Verdi's *FALSTAFF*. Or the religious, spiritual insights of Wagner's *PARSIFAL* and Verdi's *AIDA*!

Conrad spews a jumble of facts and information in more or less chronological order on the cultures that gave birth to the composers and their impact on them, the tensions between them artistically and personally as well as their admirers and their detractors, in almost free association. One snippet of data or thought leads to another with no direction or coherence. At best it's a book to browse for

curious bits of information. It's definitely not a cover to cover read without a high tolerance for migraines.

This is a complete train-wreck of a book. No one can doubt Conrad's love and appreciation of Verdi and Wagner, but he does those gifts little service here. The method is ostensibly thematic. But the result is a free-form association, a welter of loosely connected observations that amount to little at all. After a few chapters Conrad's whimsy becomes irritating. He is simply all over the place, unable to stick to a topic for more than a few sentences. I am amazed that so distinguished a publisher as Thames and Hudson would allow this dreadful book to appear under their imprint. In sum, the great book on Verdi and Wagner remains to be written. Maybe Conrad will try again and do better next time.

When I start something, I have to finish it. This can be a very positive trait, but when it comes to books (and movies), it can also cause a lot of frustration and wasted time. I had high hopes when I started reading Verdi and/or Wagner, but after spending three weeks struggling to get through it, I am wondering what I gained. I certainly didn't learn anything about Verdi or Wagner, because any real information contained in the book was buried in a load of fluff. Having been an opera lover for about ten years now I had never taken the time to get to know the men behind the music. I often looked for books on Wagner and Verdi, but the only ones I seemed to find had been out of print for years. So when this was released I thought it was the book I had been waiting for. I had hoped to learn about these two composers, about their life stories and how it influenced their art. I knew there would be some comparison involved, hence the name of the book, but I did not expect every concept and statement regarding one to be compared to the other. You can't compare every aspect of their lives because they were so very different. Every little detail and statement is overly analyzed, as if everything they did and wrote had some kind of hidden meaning. I had some basic knowledge of Verdi and Wagner before I started, from Verdi's involvement in politics to Wagner's building of Bayreuth, and that is still all I have after 300+ pages. This book is an endless list of anecdotes and facts flung onto the page at random. Even the chapter names had no relation to their content except for the first paragraphs. Nowhere did I gain any real insight into why they wrote the operas they did. Maybe this book should have come with a disclaimer: must have basic knowledge of German and Italian in order to make sense of this book. If I didn't have a basic knowledge of German, like I do with Italian actually, this book would have made even less sense. The book is chockfull of references to Verdi and Wagner's operas (as I would have expected and wanted), and

often the lyrics of certain arias are included...the translations are not. If you have been listening to opera for thirty or forty years, with a libretto, this will probably make sense to you, but I was only able to deduce the meanings through their context. Yes, I could have looked up the translations, but that would have meant spending even more time on this book. Verdi and/or Wagner feels elitist, and is just the kind of attitude that has turned the younger generation away from opera. If you are looking to learn about the lives of Wagner and Verdi, this is not the book for you. If you are interested in finding out why a diaper commercial might use the Ride of the Valkyries as background music ("Are infant bowel movements as unstoppable as the wind on which Wagner's equestrians ride?"), then Peter Conrad wrote this book with you in mind.

This book is full of misinformation and opinion; it should not be considered scholarly by any measure. Conrad is far from an expert on either composer, and he seems to have undertaken this project as a platform to degenerate Wagner and gush about Verdi. You can do far, far better than this book unless you simply wish to affirm biases that you already hold.

Conrad's book is a fount of endless insights on both men and their music.

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