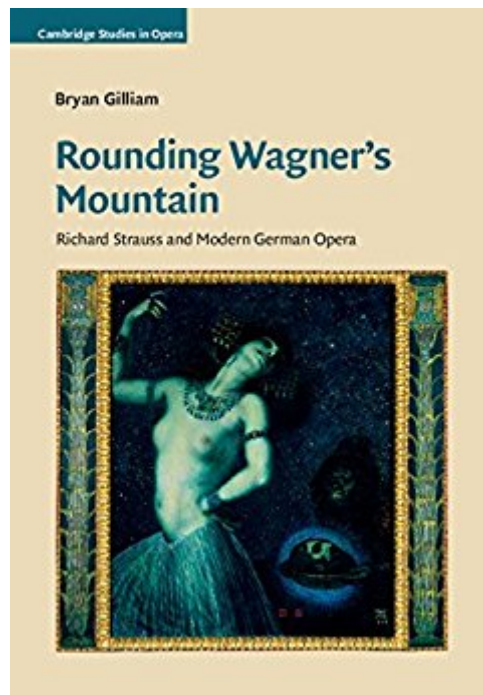




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# Rounding Wagner's Mountain: Richard Strauss And Modern German Opera (Cambridge Studies In Opera)



## Synopsis

Richard Strauss's fifteen operas, which span the years 1893 to 1941, make up the largest German operatic legacy since Wagner's operas of the nineteenth century. Many of Strauss's works were based on texts by Europe's finest writers: Oscar Wilde, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig, among others, and they also overlap some of the most important and tumultuous stretches of German history, such as the founding and demise of a German empire, the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic, the period of National Socialism, and the post-war years, which saw a divided East and West Germany. In the first book to discuss all Strauss's operas, Bryan Gilliam sets each work in its historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and literary context to reveal what made the composer's legacy unique. Addressing Wagner's cultural influence upon this legacy, Gilliam also offers new insights into the thematic and harmonic features that recur in Strauss's compositions.

## Book Information

File Size: 22672 KB

Print Length: 356 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0521456592

Simultaneous Device Usage: Up to 4 simultaneous devices, per publisher limits

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (October 31, 2014)

Publication Date: November 4, 2014

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00N4PLYEO

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #377,846 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #11

inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Strauss, Richard

#16 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Opera

#42 inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Wagner

## Customer Reviews

There are a few (very few) books about opera that stand head and shoulders above any others in

their field, books that have been viewed as virtually definitive when it comes to their subject: Ernest Newman's four volume *THE LIFE OF RICHARD WAGNER*, Norma del Mar's three volume *RICHARD STRAUSS*, and Julian Budden's three volume *THE OPERA OF VERDI*. To that elite group must now be added Bryan Gilliam's *ROUNDING WAGNER'S MOUNTAIN, RICHARD STRAUSS AND THE MODERN GERMAN OPERA*. I cannot think of a book about Richard Strauss, written in English in the last 50 years that comes close to what Gilliam has done here. Certainly no one who cares deeply about Strauss's operas, either professionally or personally (or both), can afford to not ponder at length what Gilliam says here. It is not a light read, but it is an engrossing one. Gilliam does not recycle what most other writers in English have said about Strauss. He thoroughly refutes the still-prevalent notion that Strauss wrote "good" modern (meaning filled with dissonance) music in *SALOME* and *ELEKTRA*, then turned his back on what he "ought" to have been writing as a serious German composer, and settled for writing crowd pleasing music that would make him lots of money with *DER ROSENKAVALER* and spent the rest of his life spinning notes for easy success. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner's godless, life-affirming individualism, Strauss believed that the only religion for a new century was the act of artistic creation," writes Gilliam in the Preface. "Strauss the nonbeliever, the practitioner of Bergsonian "élan vital, was indifferent to post-Wagnerian notions of redemption through music." But Strauss was most definitely interested in responding, through music, to the rapidly changing world in which he lived. "Strauss uniquely embraced the triangular relationship of philosophy, humor (as protest against tradition), and the erotic, sometimes in a single opera. No other German composer of the time embraced all three, least of all in one work." A surprising amount of the source material on Strauss has never been translated into English: Strauss's youthful letters, his letters to Clemens Kraus and Josef Gregor, for example, so Gilliam's quoting of them, sometimes at length, sheds new light on the subject. Equally valuable (and new) are the results of his own exploration of the Strauss archives and quoting (sometimes for the first time in English, so far as I know), from Strauss's diaries, his wife Pauline's diaries, as well as the odd find that any writer prays to uncover, like a memo from Joseph Goebbels admonishing Strauss, "The world is not as you see it from your Garmisch study." The discussions of Strauss's tonal structure of each opera will, obviously, be more meaningful for musicians, but Gilliam's writing is so clear that anyone can understand the basic points he's making. And the technical musical section is only one of several different ways he explores "in riveting fashion" each of the operas. This is a book I will

reread in its entirety several times, and, quite often, will pull out to refresh my memory about an individual work before I enjoy a Strauss opera. All of us who love Strauss's operas owe Bryan Gilliam an enormous THANK YOU for his stupendous work here. I only wish I could give it more than five stars.

The first thing I want to make clear is what this book is not. It's not a guide to Richard Strauss's operas with plot synopses and leitmotiv labels. If a listening guide is what you want, you are referred to Norman Del Mar's three volume biography of Strauss or William Mann's book on the operas. Rather Rounding Wagner's Mountain is an in-depth analysis of Strauss's musical philosophy, his reasons for composing each of the operas, and the musical means he used to achieve his goals. Gilliam also tries to demolish some common myths about Strauss, such as the trope that he was "converted" to Wagnerism after a flirtation with Brahms. Gilliam shows how Strauss's compositions would have been unthinkable without Wagner, and yet they are anti-Wagnerian in their philosophy. Calling Strauss a musical atheist, Gilliam points out that Strauss rejected the Wagnerian concept of redemption by love with Salome which ends with the deaths of the "redeemer" and the "redeemee". An excellent book but probably not for someone new to Strauss's works.

I have always loved the music of Richard Strauss and have therefore always relied on the scholarship of Bryan Gilliam to interpret and guide me through the works of this complex composer. Gilliam's career as a Strauss specialist has explored the entire spectrum of that composer's music from detailed studies to comprehensive biography. As a result, this book represents the pinnacle of a lifetime of careful, passionate scholarship. I am impressed by the evidence on every page that Gilliam knows his subject inside and out. He addresses the controversies that surround Strauss the man as easily as he explicates minute questions about texts and music. It is a pleasure to read such an articulate and comprehensive study of the genius that a music critic once called "the composer of the 20th century." I cannot imagine anybody other than Gilliam doing justice to this topic.

Gilliam's new book is the state of the art account on the operas of Strauss and also perhaps the best book and most concise account of the composer's life. Gilliam makes clear that Strauss always intended to make his life in the theater even if he had early success with his tone poems. Once he established himself in the world of opera with Salome, pure orchestral writing became only

occasional until the very end of his life. By tracing the development of all fifteen operas which encompass beginning *Guntram* (1888) until the dress rehearsal of *Danae* (1944) you realize that Strauss spent 56 years continuously involved in creating opera. And that doesn't count the fact that a year before Strauss died in 1949 he was at work on a small opera called *The Donkeys Shadow*. Seeing the extensive bibliography covering the most recent Strauss research from around the world emphasizes that the book takes nearly all the best research into account. There is also a great deal of newly translated materials by Gilliam--letters, sketches, notes--by Strauss and his collaborators that adds depth. While the book is heavy enough to be appreciated by serious scholars and musicians, it is also written primarily in clear non-technical language that any lover of music will find very accessible. At only 315 pages it is also one of the most concise books on the composer. I would say that it is the best available book for a reader who really wants to understand Strauss the man as well as Strauss the composer.

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