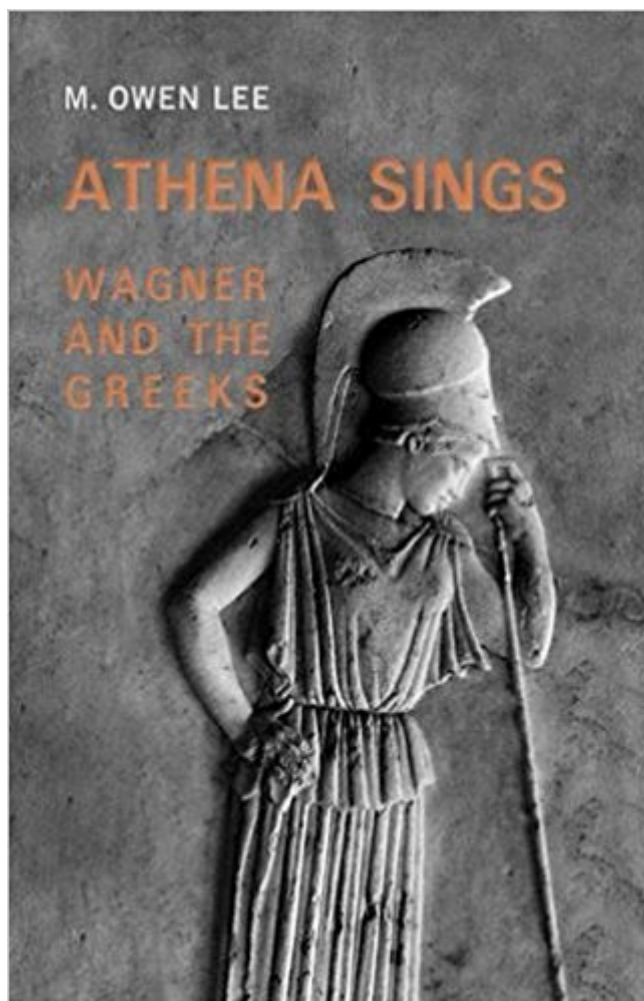




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# Athena Sings: Wagner And The Greeks



## Synopsis

Richard Wagner's knowledge of and passion for Greek drama was so profound that for Friedrich Nietzsche, Wagner was Aeschylus come alive again. Surprisingly little has been written about the pervasive influence of classical Greece on the quintessentially German master. In this elegant and masterfully argued book, renowned opera critic Father Owen Lee describes for the contemporary reader what it might have been like to witness a dramatic performance of Aeschylus in the theatre of Dionysus in Athens in the fifth century B.C. - something that Wagner himself undertook to do on several occasions, imagining a performance of *The Oresteia* in his mind, reading it aloud to his friends, providing his own commentary, and relating the Greek classic drama to his own romantic view. Father Lee also uses Wagner's writings on Greece and entries from his wife's diaries to cast new light on *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal*, and especially the mighty Ring cycle, where Wagner made extensive use of Greek elements to give structural unity and dramatic credibility to his Nordic and Germanic myths. No opera fan, argues Father Lee, can really understand Wagner saving Brãnhilde without knowing the Athena who, in Greek drama, first brought justice to Athens. Written with a clarity and depth of knowledge that have characterized all Father Lee's books on the classics of Greece and Rome and made his six other volumes of opera bestsellers, *Athena Sings* traces the profound influence - an influence few music lovers are aware of - that Greek theatre and culture had on the most German of composers and his revolutionary musical dramas.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'For lovers of Wagnerian opera, the pleasure of reading this book will be intense and lingering. It affected me powerfully and I may never be able to listen to Wagner's operas in quite the same way. Father Lee has truly excelled himself.' (Ross S. Kilpatrick, Professor Emeritus of Classics, Queen's University)'In *Athena Sings*, Father Lee brings his vast classical knowledge to bear on Wagner with the grace and wit of an engaging and illuminating teacher. Only a master classicist and a formidable Wagnerian like Lee could make us not only see but hear the Oresteia in the Ring. I enjoyed the book immensely.' (Linda Hutcheon, Professor of English, University of Toronto)

M. Owen Lee, CSB, is a Catholic priest and Professor Emeritus of Classics at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto. He is a commentator for the Texaco Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts and the author of a number of books on opera, including *A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne* (UTP 1998) and *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art* (UTP 199).

M.Owen Lee, Classicist and Wagner fan, here combines and brilliantly sums up in a short monograph the essence of a life long devotion and study. Owen, who for many decades gave the intermission talks on the Texaco broadcasts of the Met - see *First Intermissions: Commentaries from the Met Revised and Enlarged Edition* - here focuses his attention on the imaginative and remarkable way Wagner in his mature music dramas reconceived and developed the dramatic theater of classic 5th Century BC Athenian Greece, and most particularly, the dramatic world of Aeschylus. The highpoint of this book is Lee's gift for recreating the original presentation of Aeschylus' great trilogy, the Orestia. The first half of the book, largely centered around Lee's marvelous 'you are there' presentation, starts off with an evocative verbal orchestrating of the premiere of Aeschylus first of three new plays to be given back to back throughout the morning. As the theater-goers settle down in pre-dawn darkness the play begins with the announcement of the night watchman, and the sudden highly dramatic blazing forth of a signal torch above and behind the audience, thus beginning the play, *Agamemnon*. By the time Lee finishes his re-telling your conception of Wagner's Ring Cycle will never be quite the same. Over and over Lee opens up new perspectives, new links, through his own insights into just how powerfully Wagner's massive artistic vision and final creation was based on the great plays of Athens' first - and to Wagner - greatest playwright. What's so wonderful about this very short work - it's barely 87 pages long without the

notes - is Lee's gift for making the complex understandable. Anyone fearing another heavy-handed overwrought book on Wagner need not worry: this is one of the pithiest and most delightful examples of writing on Wagner I've yet encountered. How Lee can take such serious artists as the center of his book and pull off so eminently accessible a book, one achieving such profundity with such clarity, is as miraculous as the cooking of a great chef. Lee propounds the fundamental connections between Wagner and his great Greek dramatic predecessor with greater assurance and certainty than anyone else has yet done. If you are a huge Wagner fan this book will be an eye-opener! Not to be missed.

Prof. Revd. Fr. Lee leads a double or indeed triple life: with erudition in Classics, with a passionate love and comprehensive knowledge of music in general and of opera in particular, as well as the intellectual depth and integrity one expects from a gentleman of the cloth, he writes here with suave elegance, palpable personal enthusiasm and sophisticated command of all he surveys. This little book began life as a talk for the Toronto Wagner Society, and the friendly conversational tone is justified - a fireside talk from which Wagnerians and classicists alike can learn, and above all enjoy the infectious enthusiasm with which Fr. Lee writes.

Excellent analysis.

Sets Wagner in a rich context of myth and literature. The author's voice is assured and learned. It's as if Harold Bloom or Jacques Barzun had written about The Ring.

This is well written book offering a first impression on how Wagner's work was influenced by ancient Greek theatre in developing the Gesamtkunstwerk, an idea whose influence for the development of 20th century music was crucial.

Athena Sings Wagner And The Greeks by academician and musicologist M. Owen Lee is an informed and deftly written introduction to how ancient Hellenic culture and art influenced the compositions of work of Richard Wagner. Examining the origin and soul of great music with scholarly depth, Athena Sings Wagner And The Greeks is a refreshing study and dissection of the melding and interplay between narrative and fluid ideals which is enthusiastically recommended for students and scholars of European classical music in general, as well as the non-specialist general reader with an interest in Wagnerian productions in particular.

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