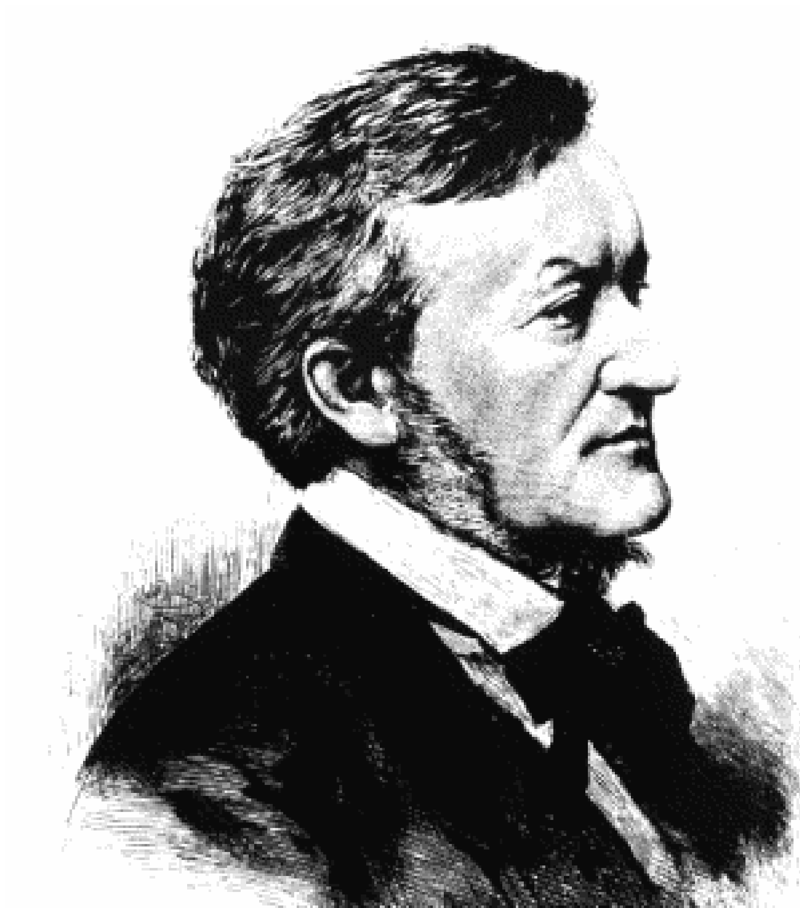
Wagnerianism and the Italian Opera

By William F. Apthorp



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Wagnerianism and the Italian Opera

By William F. Apthorp.

Some months ago it was my privilege to consider some of the aspects of Richard Wagner's poetic gift in the pages of this magazine; my purpose in the present article is to discuss—if soliloquy can be called discussion—one point in his musical theory which has led him to follow a path divergent from that of most of his great predecessors in the field of lyric drama, or opera. Out-and-out Wagnerians might, perhaps, take exception to the word *discussion*, for, although I can just now call to mind no instance in which such a claim has been categorically made by them, the general drift of their more recent writings seems to imply that Wagner and Wagnerianism have already been accepted *in toto* by all reputable thinkers on music to-day, and are hence outside of the proper pale of discussion. But it seems to me that one may rightly say of Wagner, even to-day, what Émile Zola once said of Victor Hugo: "... It is not true that his work should be placed above the examination of readers, like a dogma. I am quite willing to admire, and am even of the opinion that admiration is one of the rare good things in our existence. But never will I consent to admire, if I am deprived of my own free judgment. What, then, is this strange claim? Victor Hugo, man of genius though he be, belongs to me. It sometimes happens, in this century of ours, that we discuss God; we can well discuss Victor Hugo."

No great genius has ever yet been quite able, either during his lifetime or posthumously, to live up to the claim of being *indiscutable*.

Of all existing developments in the field of lyric drama the Italian opera has been most frequently held up by Wagnerians as a monstrosity, against which the music-dramas of the Bayreuth master stood forth in the sharpest contrast, and the ruling principles of which had been most convincingly stultified by his theoretical arguments.

That Italian opera is now on its last legs everywhere, save in its own home, is the generally accepted opinion to-day, and there can be little doubt that Wagner and the Wagnerian movement in Europe and this country have had much to do with its decline in popular favor. If I speak here especially of Italian opera, it is partly for the sake of simplicity of plan, for almost all the objections that have been urged by Wagnerians against the French, or the German opera, apply *a fortiori* to the Italian; and partly because the history of the Italian opera shows us a direct descent in an unbroken line from the very beginnings of the lyric drama it self, and the theoretical principles on which it was first established are curiously like those promulgated by Wagner. The parallel between the musical doctrines of Wagnerianism and those of the Florentine music-reform of the seventeenth century has been drawn more than once, and notably by Wagnerians; [488] but I hardly think that its instructiveness has been quite exhausted. Indeed, I find it strongly suggestive in several ways which Wagnerians have as yet been prone to ignore.

The musical formula, both of Wagner and of the Florentine music-reformers of the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, was, to all intents and purposes, partly this: That the aim of music should be to heighten, color, and vivify the expression of the poetic and dramatic idea presented in the text. That the Florentine reformers, on the one hand, and Wagner, on the other, should have arrived at this formula by diametrically opposite paths may seem a little strange at first sight, but it was not unnatural. The Florentines approached it, so to speak, academically. Ambros heads his chapter on this subject, in his "History of Music," "The Music-Reform and the Fight against Counterpoint." That there was a fierce war waged against the old strict counterpoint of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

in the strenuous endeavor to establish a new musical style, is perfectly true. But the reformers' championship of the one, and their attacks upon the other, were, in every case, based upon what was in their eyes incontrovertible *authority*, not upon a free, spontaneous, instinctive predilection or aversion. Indeed, one finds a certain circumspect spirit of premeditation pervading the whole renaissance. We are told that we owe to the renaissance the first budding of personality and individualism in art, and this is, in the main, true. This growth of individualism was the only original and spontaneous element in the whole renaissance, and was probably the one thing that vivified it, and kept it alive as something real, and prevented its being a rather hollow sham. But you would sorely have astonished the great promoters of the renaissance had you told them that this growth of individualism would in time be recognized as one of the prime characteristics of the movement. For it was quite spontaneous, and not of their planting; it crept in unforeseen and unfeared, and was, in reality, in direct opposition to the very fundamental principle of the renaissance itself, which cared little for spontaneity or originality, but set out as a wilful, premeditated, and almost servile return to classic Greek and Roman models. The renaissance movement was consciously academic ; it based its principles and tenets upon the authority of the classics. The Florentine music-reform was intrinsically the renaissance of the art of music. That the renaissance spirit should not have entered into music until near the beginning of the seventeenth century, that is, not until renaissance poetry, painting, and sculpture had already crossed the threshold of their period of decadence, is explained by the exceedingly late development of music in comparison with that of her sister arts. It is also to be noted, by the way, that it was through this florentine music-reform that the element of individualism was first brought into musical composition.

The Florentine reformers fought against counterpoint simply because counterpoint did not tally with the æsthetic principles laid down by Plato and Aristotle; from the eleventh to the sixteenth century music had been undergoing a process of formal evolution in a wholly natural way, and had arrived at that exceedingly complex, but stoutly organized, form known as strict simple (or, more properly, *single*) counterpoint. The classical authority of Greek or Roman æstheticians had had little or no influence upon this evolution, and it is not surprising that the result should have diverged widely from those principles of art which were established *a priori* by philosophers who lived at a time when music was hardly out of its first infancy. But the renaissance dogma demanded that classical authority should prevail at all hazards, and as the Florentines fought against counterpoint, intrenching themselves behind the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle, so also did they seek to establish their new expressive and dramatic musical style in strict conformity with the teachings of those philosophers. Thus the whole reform movement in Florence at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with the establishment of the so-called *stile rappresentativo* in which it resulted, was purely academic in character; based [489] wholly upon classical authority. It is, as I have said, a little curious that Richard Wagner, to whom all authority was as nothing, and who believed firmly that the artist's instinct was an authority to itself, should, in the nineteenth century, have arrived at almost precisely the same conclusions concerning the art of music that the old Florentines did, and this, too, by a perfectly free, spontaneous, and untrammelled process of natural selection. It is one of the most striking confirmations of a philosophic theory in all history; for what more brilliant confirmation could a philosophic theory of art ask for than to find itself mirrored in the unprompted instincts and actual practice of the originally creative artist?

The pure *stile rappresentativo*, the musical style established by the Florentine reformers, and the one in which the first lyric dramas were written, was, however, exceedingly short-lived. The music in this style was amorphous, without organic form, (1) but it was highly expressive. Its monotony seems terrible to us now, and there can be little doubt that it was felt to be a disadvantage by the new school itself, as soon as the novelty of the style had begun to wear off. Let the reader look at the longish monologue of Orpheus in Caccini's

"Euridice (published in F. Rochlitz's Collection de morceaux de chant, vol. ii., p. 2), and try to imagine an entire opera fashioned upon this model. Flesh and blood could not long stand it, and, indeed, did not stand it long. The music was not only amorphous, but was even hampered in its free expressiveness by an iron rule which demanded a stately, measured cadence at the end of every distich of the poetry. One might have thought that this strict adherence to what is to be recognized as a metrical element in the versified text would have imparted at least a certain rudimentary, rhythmic organism to the music, for rhythm is assuredly one of the prime elements of musical form. But the truth is that it did not do so; those regularly recurring, leaden cadences were but so many milestones by which the length of the dreary monologue could be measured, and upon which the weary ear might rest for a moment; but they had little musically organic, form-giving virtue. But, amorphous as the music of the *stile rappresentativo* was, this very fact made it peculiarly ready for undergoing a process of evolution; and it might easily have been predicted that this evolution would proceed either in accordance with some hitherto undiscovered law, or with the laws in obedience to which already existing musical forms had been developed. The evolution did set in almost immediately, such is the inveterate tendency of art to spurn the amorphous condition, and to become organic. Hardly a generation after Caccini and Peri, the first founders of the *stile rappresentativo*, and, with it, of the lyric drama, principles of organic growth, derived from the hitherto disregarded people's song, the dance, and, wonder of wonders! even from the old, despised counterpoint itself, began to show themselves at work in the amorphous mass, together and in harmony with another newly discovered principle, that of tonality. The tonal system was developed, and with it the laws of harmony; modern music was born, bringing with it the development of new and more highly organized forms than even the old counterpoint had been able to realize, for, under the sway of the new law of tonality, musical forms became not merely organic, but essentially *vertebrate*; music developed a spinal column. Amid this general evolution of musical forms, which went on with unexampled vigor during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Florentine *stile rappresentativo* was not wholly discarded. It still survived in its original amorphous condition (dropping, however, that sham semblance of a form-giving principle, the heavy cadence at the end of each distich), side by side with the higher, organic forms that had been evolved from it. It became what is now known as recitative.

Now it is well worthy of note that, while some of the dramatic and emotional expressiveness, upon which the old Florentine *stile rappresentativo* solely based its claim to respect, still survived, in greater or less vigor, in every musical [490] form that was subsequently developed, the evolution of musical forms which went forward during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries displayed almost as great activity in the field of lyric drama itself as in any other domain in the whole art of music. Indeed, one finds that, with the exception of the fugue, the sonata, and of those forms which belong properly to the dance, almost every form that is characteristic of modern music was first developed in the lyric drama before it was applied, with greater or less variation, to other styles of composition, while most of those other forms which owed their first development to instrumental composition made their way soon enough into the lyric drama, by which they were willingly adopted. Thus the lyric drama, which began with its music in the amorphous condition of pure emotional expression, soon became one of the principal fields for the evolution of purely musical forms.

It has been claimed that, during this formal evolution of music in the lyric drama, more and more of its original dramatic, emotional expressiveness was gradually lost until, in the Italian opera of the nineteenth century, this expressiveness vanished entirely, and the opera became a mere aggregation of musical stencil-pictures, pleasing enough to the ear, but of no dramatic value. Yet, admitting that the opera became in time the field for much inveterately undramatic

music, it seems to me wholly a mistake to attribute this to the evolution of purely musical forms within its domain. True, the progressive introduction of undramatic moments and the formal evolution went on pretty much together, but I do not think that the latter can rightly be assumed to have been the active cause of the former. Music in the opera did not diminish in dramatic quality because it became organic, but from a totally distinct cause; and this cause is not hard to discover. It was solely and simply the contemporaneous growth of technical virtuosity in singers. It must be remembered that the opera was, from the beginning, an article of luxury; it has always cost more money than any other form of musical entertainment, and has been forced to look for its support largely to the moneyed classes, and hence to appeal mainly to their taste. It has thus had to appeal to a frivolous liking for luxury and easily sensuous enjoyment quite as much as to a more serious æsthetic taste on the part of its peculiar public. And there are few things that a sensuously inclined musical public take to more readily than a display of virtuosity in any of its branches; brilliant florid singing by fine and exquisitely cultivated voices is always sure of an applauding audience. The singer, the vocal virtuoso, became in time a ruling power in opera, and it is to him, principally if not entirely, that the introduction of undramatic music into the opera is chargeable. Indeed, the baleful influence of the virtuoso did not stop here; it was exerted fully as much to the detriment of musical form in opera as it was to the hurt of dramatic expression. From a co-operator who had to be considered and humored, the singer became an autocrat whose pleasure it behooved the composer solely to consult—for the public was almost invariably on the singer's side. Thus, whereas at one time it was only necessary so far to modify musical forms as to enable the singer to display his vocal virtuosity, it at last came to a point where these same forms were more and more stunted and robbed of their higher organism, in order that the display of virtuosity should be all that was left for the public to admire. Anyone can appreciate this who will take the trouble to compare a florid air by Handel with a *cabaletta di bravura* by Bellini. The voice-part is florid and brilliant in the one as in the other. But in the Handel air it is, like the Pope, only *primus inter pares*: it and the instrumental accompaniment are functional and interdependent factors in a stoutly constructed and very highly organized whole. In the Bellini *cabaletta*, on the other hand, the voice-part is all in all; the accompaniment stands in merely harmonic relations to it, and is withal of so rudimentary a character as to serve for little else than to mark the rhythm, support the voice, and keep the singer to the pitch; the musical organism of the whole is infinitely lower, not to say often defective. Thus the influence [491] of the virtuoso singer in opera has been not only to lessen, at times almost to annul, the dramatic and expressive vigor of the music, but also to induce a retrograde movement in the evolution of musical form itself. (2)

The ever-growing supremacy of the singer in opera, with the unfortunate influence it exerted both upon the organic form and dramatic expressiveness of opera music, reached its climax in Italy; but that the effects of this supremacy were not confined to the Italian peninsula is easily explained by the immense popularity of Italian opera all over Europe during the latter half of the last and the earlier part of the present century. Yet it is a mistake to think that this supremacy of the vocal virtuoso ever was wholly unquestioned and uncombated even in Italy itself. Recalcitrant and reactionary composers were never quite wanting, and although the opposition to the reigning evil was seldom, if ever, of the thorough-going, root-and-branch sort, an opposition still existed. In almost every instance when a composer of special note had submissively offered his neck to the yoke of victorious virtuosity, and had made florid vocal writing almost his exclusive specialty, it is noticeable that he was succeeded by one or two others who took more or less reactionary ground. For an instance that comes near our own time, take the case of Rossini (3) He had pushed florid vocal writing fairly *ad absurdum*; but he was immediately followed by Bellini and Donizetti, who, although they showed no disposition to break wholly with brilliant vocalism, did do at

least something, and with fixed purpose, too, toward rehabilitating the dramatic and expressive element in opera music. They were reactionaries, if not very thorough-going ones, and although they made no attempt to alter or modify the traditional musical forms of the opera of their day, they did much toward rendering them more dramatically expressive than they had been in Rossini's hands. With a certain happy astuteness of instinct they even knew, as not a few of their forbears had done, how to turn the singer's art itself to expressive account. For with and beside all their astounding vocal agility, the great Italian singers were also masters of musical phrasing, and of the production of a warm and expressive vocal tone. In both Bellini and Donizetti we accordingly find a frequent return to an emotionally expressive vocal *cantilena* which was by no means deficient in dramatic value. They, in turn, were followed by the rough and fiery Verdi, in the music of whose operas, even of his earlier ones, the element of intense dramatic expression is at least on a par with, and generally predominates over, that of mere vocal display. Again, we must not forget that florid Italian opera, almost universal as its popularity was at one time, had, both in France and Germany, a more and more formidable rival in French opera, which had never lost sight of the fact that the dramatic element was the one of prime importance, although, in its early beginnings, it did not set out upon so specifically dramatic a formula as that of the old Florentines. In Germany the native works of Mozart, Beethoven, Spohr, and Weber, with Marschner following closely in the latter's footsteps, were not without weight as a counterpoise to the imported Italian article, albeit they were hard put to it, for a time, to hold their own against its incursions. And it is particularly to be noted that, while German and French opera of the latter part of the last and the early part of the present century bowed less submissively under the thraldom of the virtuoso singer than Italian opera, and showed a finer and stouter dramatic fibre, they, and especially the German, were infinitely superior to it in respect to perfection of musical construction, and in their wealth of highly organized musical forms.

That Italian opera was really well on in its decadence could not escape the more knowing heads in France and Germany, little as the fact was suspected in Italy; but eventually it became [492] evident even to Italians themselves. Indeed, it had been noticeable for some time that more than one great Italian composer had fallen (or risen) musically out of the ranks of his countrymen, to enlist, in so far as his inborn nature would permit, under the French flag. Spontini and Cherubini began it, (4) next followed Rossini, with "Guillaume Tell," and then Verdi, with "Don Carlos," "Aïda," and "Otello;" and Verdi may fairly be said to have brought all that is of much weight in young musical Italy with him. Of course, the defection of Rossini and Verdi from the Italian school was not so complete as that of Spontini, whose style in his later operas is almost wholly French, or Cherubini, who shows himself in his music as half French, half German. Indeed, it could not well have been so, for both Rossini and Verdi joined the French cause late in their careers, when a radical remodelling of their musical style was no longer possible; but, although much of the Italian style still remains in both "Guillaume Tell" and "Aïda," and both works have an unmistakably Italian flavor, the *attempt* on the part of the two composers to follow French models is none the less evident and significant. Both were as French as they knew how to be.

But, decadent though it was, Italian opera continued to enjoy an immense, almost a supreme, popularity both in France and Germany until about twenty or twenty-five years ago. But that Italian opera of the traditional stamp has long been decadent, and is now moribund, is not so important to my present purpose as are the causes which have brought about this decadence.

It has been claimed, and especially by Wagnerians, as I have already hinted, that this decadence has been owing chiefly, if not solely, to an ever-increasing and systematic unfaithfulness on the part of Italian composers to the original dramatic purpose of the lyric drama; and that this unfaithfulness has manifested itself in a servile compliance with the

demands of virtuoso singers, on the one hand, and in an adherence to set and rigid musical forms, developed according to purely musical principles, on the other. Of the untoward influence of the virtuoso singer I have already spoken; it was undoubtedly one of the chief causes of the Italian decadence in opera; as for the adherence to set and rigid musical forms, I cannot think that this can rightly be assumed to have had much, or anything, to do with it. On the contrary, it seems to me that it was neither the rigidity nor the purely musical origin of the established forms in Italian opera that hurried on its decadence, but their ever-increasing intrinsic musical poverty. After the decline of the great Neapolitan operatic school, Italy occupied a position in the world of opera music that had every outward appearance of being a highly enviable one, but was in reality a very deplorable one indeed. She was for a long while the chief purveyor of operas for the whole civilized world; she exported immense quantities of dramatico-musical goods, but imported practically nothing, neither works, nor ideas, nor principles. She lived musically wholly upon herself. Germany and France were growing in music at a tremendous pace, but Italy remained stationary and fell inevitably behind the times. Here we have, together with the supremacy of the virtuoso, an all-sufficient cause for her musical decadence, which means virtually the decadence of Italian opera. It was induced by what may be called a long course of breeding-in, a process which sooner or later results in decrepitude and cretinism. Italian composers studied only Italian masters, and eventually ceased to study even them any more than was needful to acquire the bare rudiments of their art. And as the older masters, one by one, died off, the country suffered more and more from a dearth of capable teachers. From possessing men like Padre Martini and his successor Padre Mattei, the former of whom was an undisputed contrapuntal authority for the whole world, whose instruction was eagerly sought by some of the greatest musicians from France and Germany, Italy at length fell so low, to such a depth of musical ineptitude, as to consider Saverio Mercadante a *gran' contrappuntista*. And [493] note also the fact that, about this time, music-students began more and more to shirk their studies; running away from conservatories became the fashion. It is well known that Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi all gave their masters the slip, and began composing for the public stage long before their musical education was completed. The result was inevitable: Italian music had to suffer. There is no doubt whatever in my mind that the decadence of Italian opera has been purely and simply a musical decadence, not a dramatic one; the thing has become moribund though its musical poverty—not through its deficiency in dramatic vigor, but through its continued and systematic stunting and impoverishing once stoutly constructed and highly organized musical forms. So far from the history of Italian opera showing a constant decline in the dramatically expressive element in its music, as Wagnerians would have us believe, I insist that it shows exactly the opposite. Although there is an immense superficial disparity between the singleness of dramatic purpose in the *stile rappresentativo* of Caccini and Peri, and the apparent singleness of musical purpose in the rigid formalism, the elaboration, and often contrapuntal development of the aria of Alessandro Scarlatti, we find no such disparity when we consider the intrinsic emotional and dramatic expressiveness of the music written in these two styles. The real weakness of the aria of Scarlatti, Handel, and others of their period, as an operatic form, lay not in its lack of dramatic, or expressive quality, but in its wholly *unscenic* character; by its length, and the frequent repetitions of the text it necessitated, it obstructed the progress of the dramatic action. But, from the time of Scarlatti and Handel down to Verdi, the history of Italian opera shows a progressive elimination of unscenic elements from the musical forms employed, as well as a pretty constant increase (except in the case of the *aria di bravura*) of intrinsic dramatic vigor and expressiveness in the music. And cases can be cited in which the undramatic character and scenic unfitness even of the *aria di bravura* may very well be disputed. Take Amina's *"Ah, non giunge,"* at the end of the "Sonnambula," a piece of florid vocalism upon which Wagnerian criticism has been particularly severe. It has

been objected that young girls, when perfect felicity is suddenly sprung upon them, do not go off into warbling florid roulades. Don't they? Ah, but sometimes they do; I, *moi qui vous parle*, have heard them. But let that pass; admit that singing brilliant scales and arpeggi is not an usual expression of supreme joy in real life. Neither is singing anything; judge the situation by naturalistic, or realistic, rules, and Amina ought not to sing at all. I, for one, am quite incapable of feeling the dramatic unfitness of Amina's *"Ah, non giunge;"* its purely musical distinction is another matter, and has nothing to do with the question. But, leaving aside the *aria di bravura*, where in all music can you find more characteristic examples of intense dramatic force than in Italian opera? (5) Take the ensemble-piece, "*Maffeo Orsini, Signora, Son' io*," in the prologue of "Lucrezia Borgia," with its inexorable closing-in of the opposing forces around Lucrezia, her cries of terror, and the whirlwind *stretto* that terminates the whole! The thing is as dramatic, both in plan and effect, as can well be imagined. Take the quartet in the fourth act of the "Trovatore," with Manrico's terrible phrase, *"Ha, questa infame l'amor venduto;"* I do not think that Wagner himself has ever written anything more poignantly expressive of ungovernable rage, and utter misery of soul. And let no one think for a moment that I am laboriously ransacking the whole literature of Italian opera to find a few sporadic examples of dramatic force; I have taken my examples quite at random; they are characteristic, and might be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*. No, whatever may have been the course of Italian opera, considered as pure music, it has almost steadily followed the principle of eliminating what was unscenic in the musical forms employed, and of increasing its dramatic vitality, vigor, and expressiveness. The principal charge that can be brought [494] against it, in this connection, is that it did not carry this process of elimination of unscenic elements quite far enough.

One of the most interesting points, to my mind, in the whole history of Italian opera is the short-livedness of the original Florentine *stile rappresentativo*, and the extreme readiness the opera showed to follow a path of development almost diametrically opposed to that indicated by the precepts of its founders. It is, indeed, highly significant that the opera so soon abandoned the formula with which it first set out. Of this formula I have as yet given only a part: That the aim of music should be to heighten, color, and vivify the expression of the poetic and dramatic idea presented in the text. But this positive part of the Florentine formula was really conditioned and limited by a quasi-negative clause, which may briefly be stated as follows: That, in thus heightening the expression of the poetic and dramatic idea, music must forego all such principles of organic structure as are derived solely from its own nature. (6) Now it was just this negative clause of its original formula that the opera so soon disobeyed, for, as I have said, the evolution of musical forms in accordance with purely and exclusively musical principles of organism set in very soon. The positive part of the formula was adhered to, with greater or less tenacity, to the end; its primary importance was undoubtedly lost sight of at times, but it was never, or hardly ever, wholly abandoned. It has been claimed that the evolution of musical forms that went forward in the opera was a wholly artificial one, that it corresponded to no rational artistic need, and necessarily contravened the true fundamental principles of the lyric drama. I can see no valid reason for believing this to be true; indeed, I hold it to be utterly and totally false. But even if it were true, it is none the less indubitable that, if an evolution of musical forms was to take place at all, it must of needs be in accordance with, and dependent upon, purely musical organic principles. It is quite idle to expect music, or anything else, to develop organically except in obedience to the organic laws that lie in its own nature. If the old *stile rappresentativo* was to develop organically, it absolutely had to develop musically. It is quite clear to my mind that the second clause of the original Florentine formula was essentially fatal to all musical vitality in the lyric drama it was the great mistake of the music-reform, and of the founders of the opera. Their successors saw it to be so, and did their best, at first, to correct it, then to expunge it altogether. I do not

mean to say that opera composers, in Italy or elsewhere, invariably followed the wisest course in developing musical forms, or that the forms they hit upon were always those best fitted for their purpose. Every onward step that the art of music has ever made in its gradual growth and progress has been purely tentative, and many mistakes have been made. But it is of signal importance to acknowledge the truth that it was æsthetically unavoidable that an organic evolution of some sort should go forward in the music of the lyric drama; that it should remain wholly inorganic and amorphous was impossible, for it is contrary to a fundamental law of nature that that which contains within itself the potency and power of organic development should remain forever inorganic. And that music does contain within itself such potency and power has been abundantly proved.

Now Wagner has been the first to attempt to re-establish both clauses of this formula, as a law governing music in the lyric drama, since the original promulgators of the doctrine passed away. Gluck came near doing so, but even he hesitated to subscribe to the second clause. Wagner still remains the only composer who has made a thorough-going and consistent attempt to bring the lyric drama back to a complete allegiance to its original principles; he alone has accepted the Florentine formula in its entirety, and made it the primary article of his musical creed. And [495] Wagnerians have not hesitated to proclaim this formula as an all-important and integral factor of the greatness of his works. This seems to me to be imputing too much power to a formula, for I hold, with Zola, that "every formula, in itself, is good and legitimate, it is enough that a man of genius make it his own; in other words, a formula is nothing but an instrument furnished by a certain historical and social environment, and which owes its beauty above all to the more or less superior way in which the predestined man knows how to draw music from it." The value of an artistic formula resides not so much in itself as in the living faith with which it inspires the artist. The theory may be incomplete or irrational, or, again, it may be irrefragable; in either case, it mirrors the bent of the man who formulated it; and, the formula once arrived at, he will unavoidably have profounder, more complete, and unshaken faith in it than in any other. It thus becomes the means by which he can best bring his own genius to a focus upon his work, the tool of all others with which he can work with the greatest freedom and security. But it does not in the least follow that another man can work equally well with it, or even do his best possible work with it. That a certain formula is even the *sine qua non* of this or that man's artistic productiveness, that it is at once his strength and his guide, is no certain proof of its general excellence; all that is proved is that it is the tool with which he individually can best work. It furnishes him, on the one hand, with the channel through which his genius draws its inspiration, and, on the other, with the mould in which he casts this inspiration that it may begiven an intelligible and plastic shape.

As for the Wagner formula, I do not believe that, with the exception of a few Wagnerian extremists, anyone in our day has the complete faith in it that Wagner had. And, for the Wagnerian extremists, let it not seem invidious if I say here that their faith in Wagner's creed seems rather of the mediæval sort, as based more upon the miracles the prophet worked than upon an unbiassed sifting of his preaching; at all events, it is certain that no one of them has ever had his faith put to the test of being brought face to face with artistically creative promptings from within. It is enough to examine some of its logical corollaries to see that a complete faith in this creed of Wagner's is hardly imaginable to-day. Take only one point: If Wagnerianism were true, through and through, all purely instrumental composition would have been irrational after Beethoven's Ninth Symphony! Who is there that believes this? Not many, surely, with the stock of Mendelssohn and Schumann symphonies we have, and while Brahms still lives. I can see nothing for it but to conclude that it was the splendor of Wagner's genius, as exhibited in his works, that has led the present out-and-out Wagnerians to accept his formula *in toto*; and that, under the double influence of the evangel and the miracles, they

have turned round to use the dogma as an irrefragable argument to prove the perfection of the works.

It is, however, far truer to say that the prime value of this formula lay in the fact that it was the perfectly free expression of Wagner's personal artistic instincts, so that, pinning his entire faith to it, he could work with it in absolute freedom, unharassed by the shadow of a doubt. So far the formula was, secondarily, but only secondarily, a factor in the greatness of his works. But, primarily, it explains their besetting weakness. Holding fast by both of its clauses, Wagner, like the old Florentines before him, failed in one point: in giving the lyric drama an organic musical form. Indeed, it could not have been otherwise, for the formula forbids all essentially musical organism. To object that the development and establishment of an organic musical form was no part of his artistic striving is not to answer this; for, whether he tried to or not, the fact remains that he did not. Do not think that, in saying this, I forget the many pages of musically coherent and organic writing that are to be found even in his later music-dramas; I willingly admit that he often rose superior to his formula. But the general lack of organic quality in his music is none the less undeniable. I would not, either, be thought to underrate [496] the puissant splendor of his genius, nor the immense good he has done in the field in which he worked. He alone has carried through to its absolute completion that process of elimination of undramatic and unscenic moments from the music of the lyric drama, in which the Italians halted, and in which the French and the Germans themselves had (with few exceptions) not gone much further than they. Undramatic or unscenic music is now, and will henceforth forever be, a solecism in the lyric drama, not to be endured; and this we owe to Wagner. Perhaps it was necessary for a man of commanding genius to have the complete faith in an extreme formula that Wagner had, necessary for him to see only one side of the question, to be able to make a clean sweep of all such solecisms, as it were, at one fell swoop. But with all the miracles, both creative and destructive, Wagner worked, the weak point in his doctrine and his practice is none the less to be criticised. It is not true that, in order to heighten, color, and vivify the expression of the poetic and dramatic idea presented in the text, music must forego those principles of organic development which are derived solely from its own nature; it is not true that, in order to be dramatic, music must be inorganic, and take what semblance of form it can from the poetry alone. The second finale (statue scene) of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" proves this. The music in this thrice-wonderful scene is as stoutly organic in structure, its development is as strictly based upon purely musical principles, as any that was ever written, while it is as thoroughly and essentially dramatic and scenic as any that Wagner himself ever wrote. Here music not only performs its proper dramatic function in the lyric drama, but performs it in the best possible way, in accordance with the highest laws of its own being. Here we have the complete transmutation of dramatic poetry and dramatic action into music. And let me say, to conclude, that, no matter what function music may be called upon to perform, whether it be to appeal to our emotions and imagination as pure form and color in the symphony or sonata, or to heighten and idealize the expression of poetry in the song, the cantata, or the lyric drama, it would be contrary to every known law of nature for it to relinquish any principle of organic structure that has been evolved from its own substance, and in accordance with its own laws. This or that particular musical form may become extinct and make way for others in the general and unceasing struggle for existence, and only the fittest will survive; and what is fit to-day may be unfit to-morrow. But the great principle of musical form and organism of some sort is eternal; and, if we may trust the lesson of the past, the evolution of the future will still be one from simpler to more complex and more highly organized forms. Just as the lack of musical organism in the old Florentine *stile rappresentativo* was soon felt to be a weakness, and not a source of strength, in the lyric drama, so will the similar lack of musical organism in the Wagnerian music-drama be found to be a weakness, and, in time, be cured by a new formal evolution of some sort. Wagner's

famous dictum, that the composer in lyric drama must remember not to be too musical, will give way to Von Bülow's far truer and profounder counter-apophthegm, that a composer cannot, in any case, possibly be musical enough. A certain German critic once said that, whatever might be thought of Wagner, he was indisputably the gate through which the future path of the lyric drama lay. Yes, but the lyric drama must pass *through* this gate; stop at it it cannot.

Notes

Note 1 on page 6

I may as well say here, for the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with musical terminology, that what we call *form* in music is virtually identical with *organism*, or *organic structure*.

Note 2 on page 8

A similar tendency on the part of the virtuoso has been noticeable in pianoforte music; it is very striking how pianoforte virtuosi, from Herz and Hünten to Thalberg and Liszt himself (in his earlier, "finger-knight" period), have shown a peculiar fondness for writing in musical forms of very low organism, such as the "operatic fantasia" and the like.

Note 3 on page 8

In speaking of Rossini in this connection, I would leave his "Guillaume Tell" out of the discussion. The strong French Influence of which this opera gives evidence places it apart from his other works.

Note 4 on page 9

Lully was an Italian by birth and parentage, but is in no sense to be ranked as an Italian composer; his whole musical education was got in France, as his whole public career was in France.

Note 5 on page 11

Let me say once more that I am now considering the music simply for its dramatic quality, and wholly without regard for its purely musical value.

Note 6 on page 11

This statement of the negative clause of the Florentine formula is true to the spirit rather than to the letter of the æsthetic code of the music-reform. The Florentine reformers only included the principles of counterpoint in their taboo; hut as counterpoint was the only organic musical development recognized, or even known, in their day, it was naturally the only form they attacked. But it is none the less evident that the spirit of the reform movement was inimical to all independent musical development, and my statement of the formula is consequently quite fair.