
Richard Wagner

By Franz Hueffer



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Richard Wagner

GAMBLERS say, that after the consummate bliss of winning, the next degree in the scale of happiness is the sensation of losing. Applied to the rules of artistic success, this axiom might be translated thus: Next to being cried up, the best thing for a man is to be cried down. How little the latter process, even if carried on in the most systematic and unrelenting manner, can obstruct the ultimate victory of great progressive movements in art, is best proved by the example of Richard Wagner. It would be difficult to discern at first sight, what there is in his dramas or theories to excite the ire of critical worthies; certain it is, that, wherever the former have been sung, or the latter expounded, the effect on musical critics has been that of the red flag on the bull in a Spanish arena. It is well known that in his own country Wagner's operas have retained their footing on the stage exclusively by dint of their immediate impression on the public, which in this case laudably upheld its own opinion against the incessant and almost unanimous declamations of adverse critics. Even at the present time, while Wagner's reputation is established beyond dispute, the large German newspapers look upon him with ill-disguised hostility, and dole out their approbation with as chary a hand as their necessary regard for indisputable facts will allow them. Wagner told me himself not long ago, that if he wished to state a point of theory or experience in a certain leading journal, he would not be at all above a fear of its falling a victim to editorial scissors, or even to the waste-paper basket. A similar spirit of enmity on the part of influential journalists balked his success at Paris and partly paved the way for the signal fiasco of "Tannhäuser" in that city. *Quantæ molis erat* to uphold the standard of "the Music of the Future" against the ignorance and cliquism of musical criticism in England, the present writer from his own experience might have a long story to tell; too long, however, and too dreary to be interesting or (it must be hoped) even comprehensible to American readers. Moreover, my present purpose is not to write a diatribe or plead a cause; I only wish to give a short account of the life and artistic aims of a man who since the great success of "Lohengrin" at New York, cannot be looked upon without interest by any lover of music and poetry in America.

The Germans are fond of making a distinction between a man of genius and a man [82] of character. Seldom the two qualities are found together amongst them. Their lyrical poets generally live in the obscurity of small cities, whence they pour forth their song as the nightingale does her note from the loveliest nook of the wood. Even their dramatic writers are rarely men of character in our sense of the word; like the poet in "Joseph Andrews," they consider it their "business to record great actions and not to do them." Think of Schiller celebrating the hero of Swiss liberty in the æsthetic atmosphere of a diminutive German court. Wagner forms an exception to this rule—his nature is active, progressive. He looks on established rules and institutions with the suspicious eye of a reformer, but his genius is not negative only. He has overthrown much, but his reconstructions are vaster and more harmonious than the old fabric. If fate had placed him in a different position of life, he might have become a great statesman, a leader of nations. Being born in the obscure sphere of German middle-class life, he had no chance in that direction; so, fortunately for us, his energy was not diverted from that field of action to which the highest gifts of his nature tended—poetry and music. But the type of his character never denied itself. From his earliest youth his plans were of vast, almost superhuman scope. He himself tells us that the *Norne*, the Pandora of old Teutonic lore, deposited on his cradle "the never-contented spirit which always seeks the new," and this fatal gift has remained the rule and guidance of his life-long struggle. Having thus defined the prevailing tendency of this genius, let us now look a little closer at its earthly surroundings and appendages.

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born May 22d, 1813, at Leipsic, where his father held a small municipal appointment. After his death, which took place in the same year with our composer's birth, the widow married L. Geyer, an actor, and afterwards a portrait-painter of some merit. He, however, also died before our composer had finished his seventh year. We know little of his influence on his step-son. It seems, that to some extent he recognized in the small boy artistic talent of some kind, and wanted to make him a painter, but Wagner proved an awkward pupil. At this time he used to practice by the ear little tunes on the piano, and it is said that hearing him one day engaged in this manner, his step-father remarked to the mother in the weak voice of an almost dying man. "Do you think he has talent for music?" After old Geyer had died, Wagner tells us, his twice-widowed mother came into the nursery to repeat to each of the children the father's parting word. To himself she said: "He wanted to make something of you." "For a long time afterwards," Wagner adds, "I used to imagine that something would become of me."

However, the idea of bringing him up as a musician, if ever seriously entertained, was soon abandoned. He was sent to an excellent day-school at Dresden, and received only occasional piano-forte lessons from his private Latin master. His progress in this noble art seems to have been anything but satisfactory. Instead of practicing scales and other useful digital exercises, he loved to hammer away at overtures and symphonies with a most abominable fingering of his own. After a short time his master gave him up as hopeless. "He was right," Wagner says, "I have never learned to play the piano in all my life." The truth is that he, the great virtuoso on the orchestra, looks down on that supplementary instrument with some disdain.

His first attempts at original production we have to date at a very early period. They were not of a musical but of a poetical kind, a fact full of significance in the future advocate of the "poetic principle" in music. At the age of eleven we find him pondering over the plan of a gigantic drama, conceived in the spirit of Shakespeare, but intended to far outdo the tragic pathos of that mastermind. Wagner describes his tragedy as a kind of compound of Hamlet and Lear. "The design," he says, "was grand in the extreme. Forty-two people died in the course of the piece, and I was obliged to let most of them re-appear as ghosts in the last acts, for want of living characters." We have no doubt that the piece was quite as ridiculous as this humorous self-criticism implies, but we have mentioned it, nevertheless, as indicating in its embryonic stage that Titanic struggle for the utmost expansion of artistic forms which characterizes the whole of Wagner's career. It proved important for his development in another respect. Not long after his play was finished he became acquainted with Beethoven's works, which excited his impressionable youthful mind to the utmost. His witnessing a performance of that master's music to Goethe's "Egmont" may be considered as the decisive turning-point in Wagner's life, for it filled him with emulative zeal to supply his own tragedy with a musical accompaniment of equal [83] grandeur, a bold resolve certainly in one who had yet to learn the rudiments of musical art, but again indicative of that indomitable courage and energy which conquers at last. He now saw himself compelled to make some preparatory theoretical studies; the first difficulties of thorough-bass and harmony once bravely encountered and overcome, impelled him to attack new problems; his attention became riveted, his genius roused; he had imperceptibly grown into the musician. I, of course, do not by any means wish to assert that by some miraculous process he acquired the mechanical part of that most difficult of arts, music, without a good deal of previous study. On the contrary, he had to combine his fugues and puzzle out his counterpoint in exactly the same manner as lesser mortals are wont to do. Indeed his struggle with merely formal difficulties seems to have been not an easy one. Patience and quiet application were wanting. His master could do nothing with such a pupil, and fairly put him down as a dunce, in musical matters at least; his family was in despair; only his own courage remained undaunted. He began writing overtures on a grand scale for the full orchestra, one of which the "climax of his nonsensicalities," as he

himself calls it, was actually performed in public, but excited only irrepressible hilarity on the part of the audience, greatly to the mortification of the aspiring young genius. This was his first period of "storm and stress," to use Carlyle's words; everything was seething and bubbling. But soon the waters began to clear; his first disappointment cured him of his vanity; he began to see the necessity of theoretical knowledge, and a course of serious study under Cantor Weinlig resulted, as that excellent teacher expressed it, in Wagner's independence of formal fetters. But more than any living master could teach him Wagner learned in his intercourse with the great dead. The well-known Heinrich Dorn, at that time a friend, now the bitterest enemy, of Wagner, has described the young student's passionate, not to say violent, enthusiasm for his great predecessor's (Beethoven) works. "I am doubtful," he writes, "whether there ever has been a young musician more familiar with the works of Beethoven than Wagner was at eighteen. He possessed most of the master's overtures and large instrumental scores in copies made by himself; he went to bed with the sonatas, and rose again with the quartets. He sang the songs and whistled the concerti, for with the playing he could not get on very well. In brief, there was a regular *furor Teutonicus*, which, combined with considerable scientific culture and a peculiar activity of the mind, promised powerful shoots."

Beethoven was thus the load-star of our master's early aspirations, and well had it been for him had he never swerved from it. But his longing soul had still to pass through many errors and vanities before, cleansed in the fire of adversity, it could return to the original purity of its ideal aims.

The surroundings in which we next discover our hero, seem certainly anything but suited to a Beethoven enthusiast. To meet the exigencies of life, he had now to look for a more lucrative employment of his time than penning eccentric and inexecutable compositions, and the conductorship of a small operatic troupe at Magdeburg being offered to him, he accepted the position the more eagerly, as the unconventional ease of theatrical life tallied but too well with the high-strung sensuality of his nature. Neither were his artistic duties of a very elevated kind. He had chiefly to conduct the light though clever productions of the French and Italian stages, then so much *en vogue* in the Fatherland, and he himself confesses his childish joy in letting the orchestra "bang away," after a fashion, to right and left of his conductor's desk. His own productions during this period distinctly show the signs of the atmosphere in which he moved. I will not encumber the memory of my readers with the titles of several operas and numerous *pièces d'occasion*, which owe their origin to this time of pre-historic chaos. They were written for ephemeral applause, and without any conscientious scruples as to the artistic purity of their effects. But this abandonment of principle, fortunately, did not meet with its desired reward; only one of Wagner's operas saw the light of the stage, and, owing to insufficient rehearsals and an accumulation of other unfavorable circumstances, proved a failure. I repeat that, upon the whole, this ill-luck must be considered as a decidedly favorable circumstance. It may certainly be presumed that sooner or later his higher nature would have impelled him to leave the flesh-pots of easy success for the toilsome desert-paths of ideal aims; but when, or how this exodus of the satiated soul might have taken place, nobody can tell. As it was, the cares and troubles of his narrow sphere of action soon became intolerable to him. The small emoluments of his office were [84] wholly insufficient to supply the demands of his refined, luxurious taste, and when in a spirit of obstinate recklessness he resolved upon marrying an actress, the *res angusta domi* further entrained his already straitened circumstances. In addition to his domestic discomfort, he soon began to loathe the professional jealousies and intrigues which, combined with an utter want of artistic spirit, characterized the society in which his professional duties compelled him to mix.

He felt that something must be done, to save himself from this sea of miseries, and the step he took in consequence was quite in keeping with the undauntable energy of his nature. He

resolved to write a great dramatic work, and in order to preclude any possibility of his longer remaining in the narrow sphere of provincial stage life, he fixed upon a subject the appropriate treatment of which would require an amount of scenic splendor, such as only the largest stages in Europe would have at their disposal. Rienzi, the last tribune, was chosen as the hero of his opera, and to Paris, at that time the musical as well as the social center of civilized Europe, the composer looked for a stage and a public.

It is evident, neither does Wagner try to conceal, that the chief purpose aimed at in "Rienzi" was to obtain the applause of the multitude. From a psychological point of view it therefore scarcely marks a step in advance, and, indeed, abounds with concessions of artistic consciousness to the taste of the vulgar. But amidst the platitudes of ordinary stage effects we distinctly see in the score of "Rienzi" the action of a tremendous dramatic force, scarcely conscious as yet, and clogged with earthy encumbrances, but capable of growth and purification. Wagner wrote the poetry, and finished the music of the first two acts of "Rienzi" at Riga, where he had conducted the opera for some time. In the summer of 1839 he embarked in a sailing vessel bound for London on his way to Paris. The voyage lasted more than three weeks. Three times they were caught in terrific storms, and on one occasion the captain had to seek shelter in a Norwegian harbor. Wagner's imagination was deeply struck with the wonders and terrors of the deep, and the impressions thus received he was soon to embody in a work to which we shall have to return. In September of the same year he arrived at Paris, supplied by Meyerbeer with introduction to theatrical managers and full of sanguine expectation. One slightly shudders in thinking of the possible consequences which a great Paris success might have had on Wagner's further career. Perhaps he might have been content to share with Meyerbeer, Rossini, and Halévy the lucrative laurels of a European reputation; but fortune, unlike herself, proved constant to him in her kind unkindness; all his attempts at obtaining publicity for his works were frustrated, and, to save himself from actual starvation, he had to go through the most degrading stages of musical drudgery, such as arranging tunes from popular operas for the cornet-a-piston.

Again the tide of despair was rising higher and higher—again something must be done and was done by Wagner to stem its destructive progress; but in what he did, and in how he did it, we see the process of purification which Wagner's artistic character had undergone during this second trial of "hope deferred." "Rienzi," as we said before, was written entirely with a view to outward success, to which the higher demands of art were to a great extent sacrificed; in the work which Wagner now began he scarcely hoped, nor even wished for this success. It was conceived and written entirely to supply a demand of his own nature—the demand, that is, of pouring out the anxieties and toilings of his soul in his inspired song. In this way music gave him help and comfort in his supreme need. The work we are referring to is "The Flying Dutchman." It was conceived during the eventful voyage to London; the music was written at Meudon, where Wagner had retired from Paris in the spring of 1841.

"Rienzi," finished in November, 1840, concludes the first period of Wagner's career. It was the time of his violent struggle for notoriety and self-assertion, without regard to the artistic purity of the means applied. The mode of his expression was confined to the forms of the French Grand Opera as established by Spontini, Meyerbeer, and others; hence this period may be described as his *operatic* period. With "The Flying Dutchman" Wagner enters a new stage of development. Henceforth he disregards the requirements of vulgar taste, or tastelessness. His works become the immediate effusion of his poetical inspiration, to which the forms of absolute music have gradually to give way. Ultimately he throws the whole apparatus of the opera, with its empty display of vocal skill and scenic *spectacle*, overboard. Even the name becomes odious [85] to him; he terms his new creations "Music-dramas." For the full appreciation of his vast schemes he looks to those to come rather than to the living generation. Hence the *sobriquet*—invented by his adversaries and adopted by him—"the Music of the

Future." A close analysis of the ideas and principles comprised in this name we must defer for a little while. In "The Flying Dutchman" these new tendencies appear as yet in an all but embryonic state; only one circumstance we will point out in connection with it. Wagner's adversaries boldly assert that his reformatory deeds were the result of previous deliberate speculation, although the comparative dates of his dramatic and his theoretical works clearly prove the contrary. If a further proof of the spontaneity of his efforts was required his mode of conceiving "The Flying Dutchman" would furnish it; for it was only the symbolic representation of his own personal sufferings at the time. Friendless and loveless amongst strangers, he could realize but too well the type of his hero, who, doomed to roam on the wild waves of the ocean, longs for home and the redeeming love of woman. This intensely subjective character of his poetry he involuntarily transferred to his music, and was thus ultimately led to the breaking of forms insufficient to contain his impassioned utterances.

In the meantime his worldly prospects had undergone an unexpected favorable change. His "Rienzi" had been accepted for performance by the Dresden theater, and in 1842 Wagner left Paris for that city in order to prepare his work for the stage. The first performance took place in October of the same year, and its brilliant success led to the composer's engagement as conductor of the Royal Opera at Dresden.

It was natural that this first smile of fortune after so much adversity should have filled Wagner with elation. But he was not the man to rest on his laurels. During his stay at Paris he had become acquainted with the old popular story of Tannhäuser, the knightly singer who tarried in the mountain of Venus. This story, in connection with an imaginary prize-singing at Wartburg, the residence of the Dukes of Thuringia, struck him at once as eminently adapted for dramatic purposes. The impression was increased when, on his way to Dresden, he visited the romantic old castle surrounded by the nimbus of both history and romance, and overlooking a wide and varied expanse of field and forest. The poem to "Tannhäuser" was written soon afterward, even before the first performance of "Rienzi;" the music he finished by the end of 1844. The fundamental idea strikes one as somewhat similar to that of "The Flying Dutchman." It is again the self-surrendering love of pure woman, which in death releases the hero; nay, to carry the parallel still further, the Venusberg itself with its lust, and the satiety following thereafter, is only another aspect of that same cruel world which in the prior opera was symbolized by the waves of the ocean. Both Senta and Elizabeth would in that case be the representations of that purest idea of art, which alone can save its worshiper from the world and its lures, "for music," as Wagner has expressed it on another occasion, "is a woman, whose nature is love, surrendering itself unconditionally." Of the opera itself our limited space will not allow us to speak at length. Compared with its predecessor, "Tannhäuser" marks a decided advance, both from a dramatic and musical point of view. The character of the hero, representing in its large typical features one of the deepest problems of human nature, stands boldly forth from the chiaroscuro of its romantic surroundings, and the abundance of melodious strains (some of them, as, for instance, the celebrated "March," of a popular character) in "Tannhäuser" has, perhaps, contributed more to the spreading of its author's name than any of his other works.

At the first performance at Dresden in 1845, the reception of "Tannhäuser" was, however, much less favorable than might have been expected. The public was evidently astonished and somewhat disappointed at this new language, so widely differing from the coarser accents of "Rienzi." Altogether the prospects of Wagner's popularity as an operatic writer seemed to dwindle more and more. The performance of his "Flying Dutchman" at Berlin had little more than a *succès d'estime*, while even that was scarcely obtained by "Rienzi" at Hamburg. The brief glimmer of hope was waning rapidly, and Wagner's disappointment was now all the more bitter for his previous experience of success. But even more than by his personal ill fortune he was disgusted by the rank spirit of narrow-minded coterie and inartistic humbug

with which the most prominent German theaters were infested. Neither the progress of his own, nor that of any other true art could be expected under such circumstances. As years advanced, Wagner's disappointment grew into a state of [86] morbid despondency, in which change at any price seemed a relief. In this mood, and more from a sense of antagonism to things existing than from any distinct political persuasion, Wagner took an active part in the revolutionary risings of 1848 and 1849. The dream of liberty in Saxony and its unpleasant interruption by Prussian bayonets are matters of history. Wagner personally had to pay dearly for his short illusion. As a matter of course he lost his official employment and was, moreover, compelled again to leave country and friends, a homeless exile. Before following him on his new wanderings, however, we must mention in a few words a work, which owes its existence to the period immediately before the outbreak of the revolution: I am speaking of "Lohengrin," the fourth of Wagner's acknowledged operas, the music of which was finished in March, 1843. The story of "The Knight of the Swan," originally founded on local traditions of the lower Rhine, Wagner owed to the same mediæval compilation which had been the source of "Tannhäuser." In his version it appears combined with the mystic tradition of the "Grael" and the spiritual order of knights guarding the holy vessel. Lohengrin, the son of Percival, king of the Graal, leaves his blissful abode, to save Elsa, Princess of Brabant, from a false accusation of having killed her young brother. The love of Elsa and her deliverer forms the main subject of the drama, the tragic key-note being touched when Elsa, despite her promise of implicit faith, asks the name and abode of the mystical knight. This wild craving of Elsa to pierce the mystery which seems to shroud her lover from the warm clasp of her hand, is a touch of intense psychological truth. The style of Wagner's music is quite in accordance with the elevated poetical intentions it serves to illustrate. The supernatural and natural elements are blended in his strains in the most marvelous manner, and rarely, if ever, is our impression marred by those purely theatrical effects which not unfrequently occur in "Tannhäuser."

The first performance of "Lohengrin" is connected with one of the most charming episodes of Wagner's life—his friendship with Franz Liszt. The intimate relations between these two great composers, subsisting at the present day and under circumstances which would have made jealousies and mutual animosities but too excusable, seem to claim our passing attention. I quote the following extracts from an autobiographical sketch by Wagner, published in 1851: "At Weimar I saw him," writes Wagner, "when I rested a few days in Thuringia, not yet certain whether the threatening prosecution would compel me to continue my flight from Germany. The very day when my personal danger became a certainty, I saw Liszt conducting a rehearsal of my 'Tannhäuser,' and was astonished at recognizing my second self in his achievement. What I had felt in inventing this music, he felt in performing it: what I wanted to express in writing it down, he said in making it sound. Strange to say, through the love of this rarest friend I gained, at the moment of becoming homeless, a real home for my art, which I had longed for and sought for always in the wrong place... At the end of my last stay at Paris, when, ill, miserable, and despairing, I sat brooding over my fate, my eye fell on the score of my 'Lohengrin,' totally forgotten by me. Suddenly I felt something like compassion, that this music should never sound from off the death-pale paper. Two words I wrote to Liszt; his answer was, that preparations for the performance were being made on the largest scale that the limited means of Weimar would permit. Everything that men and circumstances could do was done, in order to make the work understood... Errors and misconceptions impeded the desired success. What was to be done to supply the want so as to further the true understanding on all sides, and with it the ultimate success of the work? Liszt understood it at once, and *did* it. He gave to the public his own impressions of the work in a manner, the convincing eloquence and overpowering efficacy of which remain unequalled. Success was his reward, and with this success he now approaches me saying: 'Behold, we have come so far; now create us a new work, that we may go still further.'"

On his flight from his country Wagner turned first to Paris, where, as usual, disappointment lay in store for him. After a short stay in France he settled at Zurich, in Switzerland, and now, when the conductor's baton was wrenched from his hand, took up the pen of the critic to fight again the good fight of art in this new field of action. I must here again remind the reader that his great theoretical work, "Oper und Drama," was written after his first four operas had been finished, and after even the plan of his last and most advanced work, the "Nibelungen-trilogy" had been conceived and [87] partly executed. His dramas, so far from being fashioned according to a certain theory, were only, like the works of other composers, the foundation on which this theory was constructed. It will be my task in the succeeding paragraphs to sketch as concisely as possible the fundamental ideas of the new epoch in art ushered in by Wagner. A detailed account of how far these ideas are carried out in his dramatic works would be possible only by extensive musical illustrations. A few most essential points must suffice. Wagner's artistic deeds were of two-fold import—destructive and reconstructive. Destroy he did what may collectively be called the apparatus of the opera. In Italy the "Opera Seria" was considered from an exclusively musical or rather vocal point of view. The singer reigned supreme, and, to suit his convenience, certain forms of absolute music, such as aria, duo, etc., were bodily inserted into the opera, wherever the castrato or prima donna saw a fit opportunity of displaying their skill. Whoever has witnessed (and who has not?) a performance of Bellini's or of one of Rossini's early serious operas, will know from his own experience how every rule of dramatic consistency is grossly violated by such intrusions. The same applies, although in a very modified way, to the operas of Mozart and even of Weber, who always suffered the musical form to outweigh dramatic truth. Wagner wages a deadly feud against the virtuoso and his stronghold, the aria. His highest aim is the rendering of dramatic passion, and to this purpose the requirements of absolute music have to yield and become subservient. As to the spontaneous and entirely unpremeditated way in which Wagner arrived at this result we again borrow his own words. As he gradually emerged from the "grand historical" atmosphere of "Rienzi" into the purer regions of popular mythology, from which all his later dramas are derived, he in the same degree freed himself from the traditional fetters of the *drame musicale*. "The plastic unity and simplicity," he says, "of the mythical subject-matter allowed of the concentration of the action on certain important and decisive points of its development... The nature of the subject could, therefore, not induce me, in sketching my scenes, to consider in advance their adaptability to any particular musical form, the particular kind of musical treatment being necessitated by these scenes themselves. It could not enter my mind to engraft on this my musical form, growing, as it did, out of the nature of the scenes, the traditional forms of operatic music, which could only have marred and interrupted its organic development. I therefore never thought of contemplating on principle, and as a deliberate reformer, the destruction of the aria, the duet and other operatic forms; but the dropping of these forms followed consistently from the nature of my subjects."

The question remains, by what new mode of expression Wagner supplied the old forms thus eradicated? The answer is to some extent forestalled by the above quotation. It was from the innate, though latent melody of the spoken language, that Wagner evolved his musical *melos*, in the same manner as the poetic feeling expressed in his verses guided his musical inspirations. His music, in this way inseparably wedded to the dialogue, became in reality the legitimate exponent of the action, now no more interrupted by the *fioriture* of the virtuoso, or by the effusions of lyrical sentiment. The overplus of the latter was from the voice transferred to the orchestra, which, without interrupting it, accompanies the dialogue with an unceasing current of passion. The importance of this new function of the orchestra for the economy of the whole work of art is at once apparent. The vocal part becomes a kind of impassioned declamation, widely differing from the monotonous dryness of the old *recitativo secco* and developed, wherever the poetical situation requires it, into a stream of beautiful *cantilena*.

Melody, therefore, both vocal and instrumental, is the very essence of Wagner's art, and the accusations derived from its pretended absence by his adversaries can proceed only from a degree of blockheaded obstinacy, any further notice of which on our part would be waste of time.

From this short deviation on theoretical grounds, we return to our biographical sketch. After his settling down at Zurich, his connection with the public performance of his works ceases almost entirely for ten years, but, perhaps, no time of his life has been more fertile in lasting results than this period of involuntary eclipse. After the many excitements of his public career, the seclusion of exile could not but be of beneficial consequence to a nature so apt to be entirely absorbed by the excitement of life and action. The first fruit of his contemplative retirement was the just mentioned theoretical work, in which the vague aspirations of his earlier years came at last [88] to a distinct conscious expression. But how little his creative power was affected by these speculative exertions he soon proved by new dramatic works, wider in scope and deeper in conception than anything he had done before. We now touch upon that *opus magnum* of his life, the ultimate success of which will to a great extent determine his place in the history of his art. I am speaking of the gigantic trilogy, or more correctly tetralogy of the "Ring of the Nibelung," in which the oldest tradition of Teutonic lore is embodied, and which for that reason alone may justly aspire to the place of the national work of art of Germany. The performance of the whole work, the last part of which, "The Dusk of the Gods," is at present in the press, will take place at Bayreuth in 1876, under the master's own direction, and in a theater erected for the purpose. Perhaps I shall on that occasion have an opportunity of giving this magazine a full account of the great Nibelungen-drama. Before an actual test by means of a stage performance has taken place, it would be premature to decide upon the merits of a work so essentially dramatic. Moreover, its dimensions are so colossal that ever so short a sketch even of the story would by far exceed the limits of this essay. Wagner has been occupied with its completion for more than twenty years, the book in its present form having been begun about 1851, and the last note of the music written not many months ago. Twice, however, during this interval, his attention was diverted from the "Nibelungen" by other artistic plans of no less import and beauty. The first of these was his dramatic treatment of the old tragic story of "Tristan and Isolde," written and set to music between 1856-59. Barring the trilogy itself, Wagner's disciples see in it the highest efforts of his genius, and this importance placed on the work may be my excuse for quoting here some of the remarks made by me concerning "Tristan and Isolde" in the programme of our London Wagner Society last year, when a selection from it was performed at one of the Society's concerts.

"Tristan and Isolde" is the fifth of Wagner's acknowledged dramatic works, its first performance (at Munich, in 1865) following that of "Lohengrin," after an interval of fifteen years. The step in advance marked by it in its author's development, and in that of dramatic music in general, is proportionate to this lapse of time. According to his own assertion, Wagner wrote it with the full concentrated power of his inspiration, freed at last from the fetters of conventional operatic forms, with which he has broken here definitely and irrevocably. In "Tristan and Isolde" we hear for the first time the unimpaired language of dramatic passion, intensified by an uninterrupted flow of expressive melody, the stream of which is no longer obstructed or led into the artificial canals of aria, cavatina, etc. Here also the orchestra obtains that wide range of emotional expression which enables it, like the chorus of the antique tragedy, to discharge the dialogue of an overplus of lyrical elements, without weakening the intensity of the situation.

After the stated facts, it cannot surprise us that our music-drama (for opera would be a decided misnomer) has become a bone of contention between the adherents of the liberal and conservative schools of music, Many people who greatly admire "certain things" in

"Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin" draw the line at "Tristan and Isolde," which, on the other hand, is considered by the advanced party as the representative work of a new epoch in art. A musician's position to the present work may indeed be considered as decisive as to his general tendency toward the past or future.

About Wagner's treatment of the old story the following words must suffice. The subject of his tragedy is taken from the Celtic Mabinagi of "Tristrem and Iseult," which, at an early stage, became popular among different nations, and found its most perfect mediæval treatment in Gottfried von Strassburg's immortal epic. Our own modern poet has followed his original closely, pruning, however, and modifying where the economy of the drama seemed to require it. The scene opens on board the vessel destined to carry the unwilling Irish bride to old King Marke. Despair and love's disappointment, together with the insult inflicted upon her family by Tristan's victory over her kinsman, Morolt, rankle in Isolde's bosom, and drive her to the resolution of destroying her own life, together with that of her beloved enemy. Tristan is invited to drink with her the cup of atonement, but, without Isolde's knowledge, the prepared poisonous draught is changed by her faithful companion, Brangäne, for the love-philter.

The reader will perceive at once the immense dramatic force of this version, compared with the old story, where the fatal potion is taken by a pure mistake. This potion itself becomes in Wagner only the symbol of irresistible love, which, to speak [89] with the Psalmist, is "strong as death" and knows no fetter.

The other important work carried on at the same time with the "Nibelungen" is the comic opera of the "Meistersinger von Nürnberg," which was finished in October, 1869. The first draft of the book was written as early as 1845, immediately after the composition of "Tannhäuser," with an intention of parodying the romantic singers of the middle ages by their *bourgeoise* counterfeits, in the manner of the antique satyr-drama. The second version of the libretto, however, has been considerably modified. The worthy burghers of the beautiful German city appear in a more favorable light, the formal philistinism of their poetic doings being leavened by an admixture of true homely feeling. Hans Sachs, the poet and shoemaker, round whom, as their center figure, the numerous *dramatis personæ* are grouped, represents the rising citizen of the sixteenth century in his strength and justified pride of work. The character throughout is noble and grand in conception and ranks among the highest creations of Wagner's muse. A romantic love story of sweetest charm is interwoven with the scenes of busy citizen-life, and in the treatment of the latter Wagner displays throughout a power of humorous delineation for which his warmest admirers had scarcely given him credit. Wherever the "Meistersinger" has been adequately performed the success has been brilliant, and at the present day this last work of Wagner keeps its place on the *repertoires* of the great German theaters together with his first four operas. This is more than can be said of "Tristan," which, although received with enthusiasm on two or three special occasions, seems as yet too remote from the taste and understanding of ordinary amateurs to meet with general appreciation.

The remaining important facts of Wagner's biography up to the present day can be summed up in few words. In 1861, he went to Paris to superintend the performance of "Tannhäuser," which ended in the celebrated fiasco of the opera, owing perhaps more to political than to artistic prejudices. Previous to the fatal event three concerts at the "*Théâtre Italien*," consisting of Wagner's works, and conducted by himself, were received with enthusiasm, and amongst those who raised their voices in his defense against popular condemnation were men like Gautier, Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire—some small comfort to Wagner, perhaps, in his third and worst Parisian disappointment. In 1864, the art-loving King of Bavaria called Wagner to Munich, to assist in the re-organization of the theatrical and musical institutions of that city. Here he resided for two years and witnessed the excellent performance of "Tristan

and Isolde," under the direction of Dr. von Bülow. About two years ago he settled at Bayreuth, where he has been living ever since, occupied with the preparations for the performance of his last and greatest work. In 1870, he was married for the second time, to Cosima von Bülow, daughter of Franz Liszt.

Here I must close my remarks, brief and insufficient as they may appear. My purpose is attained, if by my calm, matter-of-fact statement, I have succeeded in drawing for the American reader a distinct though ever so bold outline of a man and a movement in art, both so important and both so peculiarly distorted by the party passions of friend and foe.

Franz Hueffer