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# *Richard Wagner, and his Theory of Music*

By Richard Grant White



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## About this Title

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## Richard Wagner, and his Theory of Music

FOURTEEN years ago the world began to hear something about "the music of the future"—began rather to be told something about it; for there are ears that hear not, and in all matters the speaker is one and the hearer is another. Really to hear, it is necessary to listen, and on this subject the world did very little listening. The man who thought that he had something to say about the coming music was Richard Wagner, a musician and composer by profession, who, although he had then attained the mature age of forty-seven years, and had been writing music for thirty of them, had not yet uttered a single strain that lived in the world's memory. Educated in his earlier years by a stepfather, who was a painter, in his own art, on the death of this semi-parental instructor he turned his attention to music, and studied the pianoforte; but unwilling to submit to the discipline of his teacher, he in turn soon gave up this study, and declaring himself a poet, set to work at writing tragedy. Ere long, however, a hearing of some of Beethoven's symphonies revealed to him, as it has to many another, that he was himself a musical composer and could write grand symphonies. So Wordsworth, as Lamb once said, could have written "Hamlet," "if he had a mind to." Wagner produced an overture which was performed at Leipsic, and received with some favor; but it revealed chiefly the need of the composer to give himself to the study of fugue and counterpoint, an elementary branch of his art to which he had thus far thought himself superior. Indeed, at no period of his life has he been able to see any noteworthy relation between small beer and Wagnerism; the existence of such an ism having been early established in his mind as an article of faith. One of its manifestations was, as might have been expected, a lack of reverence, and even of respect, for the work of men whom the world still persists in regarding as greater than he. At Dresden he produced with some success his "Rienzi" and "Der fliegende Holländer" ("The Flying Dutchman"); and soon after, bringing out there Gluck's immortal "Alceste," a work of the very highest grade in the musical drama, he had the hardihood to retouch it! In the words of a critic not ill disposed, Gasparini, an admirer of "Lohengrin" and "Tannhäuser," he suppressed certain airs, and in some airs and concerted pieces, even certain phrases which did not conform to his preconceived notions, and under the pretext of purifying and ennobling Gluck, he despoiled the work of some of its most delicate inspirations. So might that distinguished but not yet immortal dramatist, Mr. —, attempt the ennobling and purifying of one of Shakespeare's tragedies, just as Nahum Tate ennobled and purified "King Lear."

It is right to take into consideration these characteristic manifestations of Wagner's mental traits; but it would not be right to allow them to pervert our perception, or prejudicially to blunt our appreciation of the actual worth of anything that he has done. His theory of music, and what he has composed in illustration of that theory, should be judged upon their own merits, apart from his personal peculiarities. Criticism should not be deprived, even by just resentment, of its greatest privilege and highest function, the recognition [780] and the welcome of a new development of art, a fresh outpouring from the spring of beauty, exhaustless although intermittent.

And could there be a more alluring hope, a more seductive promise, to the lover of music who has not yet learned its place in art, than that held out by Wagner, that it shall become truly a poetic language, uttering thoughts and feelings in accents unmistakable by all mankind? For this is what Wagner does promise; and he adds more—that music and poetry, the poetry of musical sounds and the poetry of words, shall be complements and handmaidens to each other, that they shall be twins born of one divine conception, or rather, that beautiful

monster dreamed of by lovers, but never yet found, two bodies with one soul; This, indeed, would satisfy the longing which all men have felt, until they thought, and which found its expression in the line so often quoted, "Music married to immortal verse." But that wedding, often as its banns have been published, has never taken place. The immortality has been only on one side. Jupiter has consumed the ambitious Semele, or Dian has kissed Endymion, the unconscious shepherd. The words to which great music has been written have been of as little value or meaning as the music which has been written to noble words. I speak of lyric and dramatic themes, not of masses, oratorios, and other religious works. In songs and in the musical drama, the history of music shows but one or two exceptions to the rule that words and music are never of like worth; and without exception, it is true that the artist in language and the artist in inarticulate sound, although they may work together, never divide attention.

Wagner proposes to change all this. He declares that music thus far has been wronged by being unequally yoked; that Pegasus has been chained to the lyric car with a donkey, but that hereafter the muse of lyric drama shall rein a winged team, and water both at Hippocrene. He complains, too, not only of the meanness and lack of significance in the words to which music has been written, but of the formal and unmeaning character of the music itself. Its beauty is merely sensuous, and it has no higher function than that of giving the vocalist an opportunity of pleasing the ear, either by the simple and adequate utterance of symmetrical musical forms, or by the display of highly skilled vocalization which has no more meaning and is little more worthy of intelligent admiration than the leaping, whirling, and foot-twinkling of a ballet-dancer.

It must be confessed that there is good ground for this arraignment. Opera, by which we all generally mean Italian opera, can hardly be accused in this respect in terms too sweeping or too damnatory. Professing to be dramatic, its body and its spirit have been for the most part, and until very recently, formally and stupidly undramatic. Its melodic phrases have rarely had any dramatic meaning, and the forms into which they were worked were totally and inherently at variance with any true dramatic expression. To this general judgment of the opera of former years there is hardly any exception but that of such comic music, for instance, as Figaro's "Largo al factotum;" and after all there is but one "Largo al factotum." But what could be more dramatically inept and absurd than the formula upon which operas were rigorously constructed during the half century or more in which Rossini was prince of all operatic composers—was, because he deserved to be so, because he could do incomparably best what was required to be done? It was demanded that the libretto should be so written that there should be a grand air for the prima donna, a grand air for the primo tenore, a grand duet for those two, another grand duet for one of them and the primo basso, or a trio for [781] the three, or a quartet for the three and a contralto, with an opportunity for a grand concerted piece as a finale. Unless these occasions for display were given, great singers would not sing, the public would not go to hear; and composers were obliged to humor the great singers and the public. An eminent critic, Mr. Chorley I believe, once found fault with "Don Giovanni" itself, because it contained no grand arias worthy to be vocalized by great artists. But what could be plainer upon the face of it than that upon such a rigid pattern nothing of real dramatic significance could be constructed? Opera became a mere occasion for vocal display. And the violence done to the true dramatic spirit was made more flagrant and more outrageous by the structure of the duets and other concerted pieces. In these the stanzas given to the various characters were, of course, written in the same measure and consisted of the same number of lines; otherwise they could not be sung together in the same rhythmical musical cadence. One result of this system was that, however different the characters and the positions, and however various the emotions, of two personages who sang a duet, they expressed themselves in the same musical language. First one sang the air, then the other sang the same air, and then they sang together, if not the same strain, one which had of course but a single musical motive,

although one of the singers might be uttering words expressing love and hope and the other those of rage and despair. The structure of the grand aria or cavatina, which required always a slow movement to be followed by a brilliant allegro, was absurd enough, but the duets and trios were absolutely defiant of common sense. Look for example at the last movement of the duet between Othello and Iago in Rossini's opera "Otello." It is the scene in which the jealous and disappointed "ancient" completes his fiendish temptation of the Moor. Othello declares that he will no longer brave the anger of an adverse fate, and that he will die, but that he shall die avenged if he dies after Desdemona:

L'ira d'avverso fatto  
Io più non temero.  
Morro, ma vendicato,  
Si doppo lei morro.

Iago sings almost the same words, but with the variation that he *ought not* to brave, etc., "temer più non dovro," and that he shall finally triumph over Othello "di lui trionfero;" all which he is supposed to sing "aside," at the top of his voice, accompanied by the full blast of the orchestra. This idiotic contrivance— it cannot be called a conception—which hardly rises to the dignity of a burlesque of Shakespeare's scene, is merely for the purpose of making a grand duet. And here is the music for the sake of which this ridiculous violence is done to one of the most subtly wrought and moving scenes in dramatic literature:

*Allegro vivace.*

L'i - ra d'av-ver - so d'av-ver - so fat - to Io  
più no no non te - - - - me - ro mor-

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ro ma ven - di - ca - to si dop - po lei mor - ro mor -

ro ma ven - di - ca - to dop - po lei doppio lei mor -

ro si dop - po le - i si dop - po

lei si si mor - ro.

Both the men sing the same air, although their natures are as unlike as day to night, and their emotions as unlike as their natures. Nor is Othello allowed to complete the expression of his feeling as it is written out above; for after the first eight bars Iago takes up his parable and repeats the strain. Then Othello goes on; and after seesawing thus awhile, they end with a grand bawl in thirds. Dramatically this is ridiculous—ridiculous even beyond the essential monstrosity of opera; for in its very conception opera is inherently monstrous, although like some other monstrous things it has a fascination beyond that of simple nature. And what an air for such a dramatic situation! A flashy, shallow thing, well enough for a cornet-a-pistons at a promenade concert, but for emotional expression as empty as a blast upon a fish-horn. And yet this duet was never sung by a great tenor and a great baritone—say by Rubini and Tamburini—without calling forth extravagant demonstrations of delight from the most cultivated audiences in Europe. Their pleasure was not only unaffected, it was great and poignant; but it was purely sensuous, and had no relation whatever to the emotion proper to the dramatic situation. We need not, however, go to his operas for an example of the severance which Rossini could effect between the sentiment of the words to which he wrote and the music that he wrote for them. Of such violence his last important work, the "Stabat Mater," furnishes us with brutal examples, of which perhaps the "Cujus animam" most outrages all sentiment, all propriety, almost all decency. The grandeur of the Virgin mother's sorrow before the dead body of her divine Son is expressed by a series of phrases more suggestive of the leapings of a colossal kangaroo than of any human emotion, not to say of any mother's grief. Its every bar is an offence against common sense and good taste, and if music could express blasphemy, would, to a religious mind, be blasphemous.

*Allegro maestoso.*

Cu - - jus a - - ni - mam ge - men - tem



the way of really dramatic musical expression by an Italian composer who had no theory, nor dream of a theory—only inspiration, genius—and who wrote it, *motu proprio*, before Wagnerism was heard of, as unconscious that he was uttering the music of the future as M. Jourdain was that he had been speaking prose all his life.

But there is lamentably little of such writing in the operas that held the stage until within the last few years. Donizetti—not a man of genius, not a composer of the first class even among modern Italians, yet one who had musical intuitions and a gift of spontaneous melody, although not of a high order (he could not, for example, have written "Di tanti palpiti" any more than he could have taken to himself the wings of the morning)—was the first to break in upon the old formal meaningless style, and to give to modern operatic music some freedom and some dramatic force. His "Anna Bolena" marks a period in Italian opera, and his "Lucia di Lammermoor," by its famous quartet and its final air, took a long stride toward the real dramatization of opera. Verdi, coarse, blatant, strident, voice-destroying, yet with a gift of melody, advanced still further toward the same much-desired end. Verdi's elaborate finales are composed upon the model of the quartet in "Lucia"; his declamatory airs in andante or allegretto movement are worked out more or less upon that of Edgardo's dying scene. His allegros, always mean and vulgar, are peculiarly his own. But compare one of his operas with one of Rossini's, and it will be found that the essential difference between them (setting aside secondary traits, instrumentation, and the like) is that Rossini's are more or less a collection of airs, duets, trios, and concerted pieces, connected by recitative of more or less value, but that Verdi's are, however feebly, imperfectly, and coarsely, musical dramas. The model which Wagner sets up as his is one which other composers have, consciously or unconsciously, had in their minds, one toward which operatic music has long been tending. The point to be determined is how this end is to be reached, and with what degree or proportion of mere musical declamation, apart from formal melody, opera will be tolerable. What is the dramatic value of poetry in dramatic music? and can literature and music work together? All this must in the end be determined by experiment. If what is sought in the music of the future, and which has more or less been sought in the music of the past, be attainable, genius will attain it. Once attained, it is not to be disputed; for there is no reasoning with genius, no talking down accomplished fact. But Wagner has yet shown no evidence of musical genius, only of musical skill and constructiveness. He has uttered no musical thought that has any value in itself; and he is too old now for the day-spring of that beauty to dawn upon him. To consider, then, the nature of his experiments.

What dramatic music asks of the dramatist, if so we may call the writer of the words which are to be sung, is merely a plot which shall interest, situations striking, natural, and emotional, and verse the rhythm of which adapts itself easily to melodic forms and the utterance of singers. We need no [785] dramatic poem. Indeed, poetry is superfluous; except the fruit of that poetic imagination which creates dramatic situation and works out dramatic interest, progress, and climax. Fancy, richness of thought, beauty of illustration, and even fine discrimination of character, are more than thrown away. They are cumbrous surplusage which distract the attention of the composer of the music if he should give them any attention. His function is limited by the capacity of his art, which is only to express emotion, either that of the personages of the drama as it is elicited by action and situation, or (chiefly by means of the orchestra and the chorus) that of the audience as elicited by what passes before their eyes. All expression, all emotional effect, all decoration or illustration, should be, nay, must needs be, left to the music. The words of a musical drama are in themselves nothing; they are made to be hidden, the mere skeleton of the work; bones which the musician is to cover with the flesh and blood, the warmth, the strength, and the beauty of humanity. And yet if the hidden skeleton be not sound and naturally proportioned, the creature will be a dwarf, or a monster, or a cripple.

The notion that two arts are to join for one effect is the falsest that ever was evolved by the spirit of eclecticism—eclecticism which never did, nor ever can, create anything new, or strong, or beautiful. If the vehicle of dramatic or lyric expression is to be language, it must be language only; if music, then only music. Whether we would have it so or not, this must be; for words, as expressive of thought, distinguished from the suggestion of emotion, are almost undistinguishable in lyric music, and quite undistinguishable in the musical drama. Wagner insists upon and labors at a dramatic poem which shall share with the music to which it is sung in producing the dramatic effect of the performance. Vain effort. "Lohengrin," written in German, was translated into Italian; and except for such of the audience as defy common sense, and set at naught all dramatic illusion by glancing from the stage to those impertinent "Books of thoprun talian nenglish," and from the books to the stage, it might as well have been sung in Greek or in English itself. No crotchet more absurd was ever hatched than that the thoughts of a poet can engage the attention of those who are listening to the music which those very thoughts may have inspired. A few words suggestive of emotion may be heard, and have dramatic value, but than these no more. The impossibility is both physical and psychological.

This incapacity of mind and body to receive an impression from two mediums of expression at once conforms to and coöperates with the requirements of all art. Every art is sufficient unto itself. Every art has limits, in endeavoring to pass which it becomes not only powerless but ridiculous; but within those limits it admits no rival, no coworker. Hence it is that great music is not written to great poetry, that music is not married to immortal verse. A beautiful song, like one of those which Shakespeare has scattered through his plays, needs no music. By its inherent quality it attains its end. In itself it *is* a song. It sings itself, and is both words and music. What would "Take, O take those lips away" gain by being sung to any music? If the music were great, the poetic value of the thoughts would be lost, or sink out of sight for the time; if the music were inferior to the words, it could only provoke the resentment of impertinence. Hence it is that lyric writing not of the highest order, that which embodies the pleasant suggestion of emotion in flowing rhythm, without much strength or beauty of expression, is most frequently made the vehicle of fine musical thought. The composer expresses [786] that which the song has suggested *to him*. His is the passion, his its perfect utterance. Lyric expression may come from one soul, not from two. Words written for music should merely minister occasion, and be the humble, unseen nucleus of beauty, like a blade of grass made splendid by the jewels of the morning.

Not only is every art sufficient to itself, but all true art is superior to the substance in which it works. The value of a statue is in its form. It is as beautiful in clay as it is in marble; and if it were in gold, all its worth beyond its form might just as well be in the shape of ingots. Statues are put in marble or in bronze only that their beauty may endure. Moreover, the greatness of any work of art bears a certain proportion to the unlikeness of the substance in which it works to the object represented. The mastery of the art being equal, the greater this unlikeness the higher the pleasure received. The result must not be too like reality, or the skill which produces it ceases to be art, and becomes mere imitation; and nothing is worse than mere imitation except reality. It is a condition of the higher pleasures to be derived from art, that we should never be deceived, but that we should always see, and see very plainly, that we are not looking upon reality. And in proportion to the strength of this impression, combined with the vividness of the suggestion of the truth of nature, is the high quality of the pleasure we receive. Yet further, we must see that the artist did not strive to produce the effect of reality. It is a defiance of this last condition of beauty in art which makes wax figures repulsive and ridiculous. If it be true, as some have believed, that the great Greek statues were colored like nature (of which there does not appear to be sufficient evidence), and that their colorless condition is due merely to the lapse of time, then we owe to accident the attainment of the

highest effect of plastic art. If form is our medium of expression, let it be form only; if color, only color. True, painting essays to express both form and color. But it gives no actual form. It works upon a flat surface. You cannot get behind the figures in a picture. The only medium of expression in painting is color limited by outline, by which alone it expresses form. If a painter were, by moulding his canvas, to round out his figures, he would merely make them and himself ridiculous. He must express form, that is, surface and solidity, by modelling, which he does by varying the tint and the intensity of his color.

The pertinence of these considerations to the musical drama is in this: that if music is to be the medium of expression, it should be music only. Whatever is added, either of other arts or of imitation of real life, by so much does the result sink in the scale of art. Scene-painting when it passes the point of mere suggestiveness of situation, costume when it attracts attention to itself, show, pomp and procession, tinsel and banners, and the supernumeraries who bear them—all these are an offence and an abomination. So even the perceptible presence of the poet, the very dramatic poet, upon the lyric stage, is more than superfluity; it is intrusion; or it would be so if, as we have seen and heard, music did not assert itself and blow the poet and his pretensions into the air. For poetry expresses thought; true, it also expresses feeling, but feeling by means of words, which are only thought made audible. But music can express only emotion and moods of mind. It can express neither thought nor fact; and not more the one than the other. Wagner will have it, in his striving after the unattainable in art (and the undesirable), that music preaches, and teaches, and tells truths, and describes occurrences and objects. He thinks that in the second act of "Lohengrin" he has described [787] sunrise by an orchestral passage. What he has done, and he has done it very skilfully, is merely to write a strain which suits well with, perhaps even suggests, the mood of mind begotten in one who contemplates the breaking of the day. As to expressing sunrise by sound, as well attempt to express a quart of milk by a pastoral air, or a pair of brass tongs by a duet between two trumpets.

The radical fault in this notion of the capability of music is its failure to recognize the easily established fact that the same strain, if unexplained by words or accessories of some kind, will be interpreted in different ways by hearers of equal sensitiveness to music and of equal cultivation, and who derive from it equal pleasure. This is a fact of continual and of inevitable occurrence. In the second act of "Lohengrin" every scenic device is used to show that the day is breaking; whereupon we all expect to see the sun roll up out of the orchestra. But if the stage were to remain dark, and no one came to draw water, and we heard the same strain, no mortal creature who had not been told its meaning would ever think of sunrise.

There could not be a better illustration of this misapprehension of the function of music than Wagner himself furnishes in his monograph on Beethoven, a performance in which much knowledge and critical ability is sadly muddled with that sort of metaphysics in which "the party that's hearin' disna ken what the party that's speakin' means, and the party that's speakin' disna ken what he means himsel'". (1)

He [Beethoven] now understood the forest, the brook, the meadows. the blue æther, the merry throng, the pair of lovers, the song of birds, the flight of clouds, the roaring of the storm, the bliss of beatifically emoved repose. All his seeing and shaping now became permeated with that wondrous serenity which was first imparted to music through him. Even the lament, which is so inwardly original to all tone, hushes itself into smiles; the world regains its childish innocence. "To-day thou art with me in Paradise"—who does not hear the Redeemer's words call to him as he listens to the pastoral symphony? . . . Never has an earthly art created anything so serene as the symphonies in A and F major, with all of those works of the master, so intimately related to them, which date from that divine period of his complete deafness.

It would perhaps be harsh to say that this is mere lunatic maundering; but it is really little better. It is possible that there are some persons to whom the "Pastoral Symphony" says, "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise"; but to most of the sane who hear it, and who have

probably quite as keen an enjoyment and thorough understanding of it as Wagner, it no more says that than it says, "Go thou and do likewise," or, "Last of all the woman died also." To me that symphony, in its lovely simplicity, brings up by suggestion the moods of mind through which I pass in the course of a long, beautiful day in the later spring. The evanescent, emotional charm of such a day the composer has expressed by musical thoughts with which I have sympathy, and which therefore bring me into the mood in which he was when he conceived them. This is the power, and the only power of music. As to the fact, or what not, which is the occasion of the composer's mood, that music cannot express; and so it is possible that the "Pastoral Symphony," if performed before an audience who did not know that it was pastoral, might suggest to one class of hearers one thing, to another another, and to a third something quite different from either. But to all who could appreciate the music, including the composer, it would in one respect—that of mood of mind—be a [788] common resolvent. Yet further, as to this appreciation of Beethoven: to many, if not to most musical readers, the notion that through him music became serene, will seem, of all that has been said of him, the most unreasonable, the most extravagant. Of serenity there is only so much in Beethoven's music as goes with conscious strength. First, he is a Goth, like all the rest of us; and Gothic art, although grand, is not serene. Serenity belongs to ancient art. Moreover the man Beethoven was possessed by the demon of unrest. His utterance is oftenest a cry, a protest, a moan, or a menace. He is a Titan uttering the endless woes of the rock-bound, wronged Prometheus; and even his lighter strains seem to be only the laughing mockery of the waves that flash around the altar of sacrifice:

##### ##µ##### #####µ## #####µ#

He leaves to others the expression of the happy serenity that finds utterance in the sweet accords of ever-succeeding harmony, and seems in his greater and more characteristic works to be writing under a consciousness of past wrong and of coming retribution, of sad memory and of hope whose wondrous brightness is the brighter for being often clouded. He is in musical art like the discord of the sharp seventh in the scale—the wail of discontent and the clamor for resolution into the serenity of the undisturbed accordance of all things; which he sees before him, and yearns for, but cannot reach. Such is Beethoven to me, and I am sure to a large proportion of his dearest lovers; to whom Wagner's interpretation of the great master is mere fanciful misapprehension, the result of an effort to see in music more than is there to be seen. A similar effort—to do more with music than can be done—seems to be the guiding motive of his vocal compositions. Moreover, he lacks the one great gift, creative genius. For inspiration he substitutes labor. His mastery of means is great, his contrivance subtle, and his finish high; but he lacks ideas. Nor is there any novelty in his work, except in his method. It cannot be said that we must wait to understand him; for, stripped of their exterior and elaborate embroidery of instrumentation, his commonplace thoughts are as simple as old Father Haydn's "A B C." It is not that he is incomprehensible, but only that he is dull. Once in a while he presents us with a pleasing musical form, and this by contrast with the waste before it seems beautiful and is applauded, although it would hardly furnish a composer of genius with material for a cadence. Nor is he, aiming at a new dramatic style, peculiarly dramatic. His truly dramatic effects are rare, and not musically new. In "Lohengrin" the most emotional and impressive scene, that between Elsa and Ortud in the second act, attains its musically dramatic effect only by the same means which have been used by other composers. His operas depend for their success upon scenery, dresses, stage effect, acting, a large orchestra, superior artists. But musical ideas that have value impress their beauty if they are played upon an old spinnet. Wagner is too much a critic to be a great composer, even if not too much a composer to be a critic. He is a living proof that genius is never self-knowing as to its methods, even if as to its purposes. He may be preparing the way for such a genius; but he himself is only an

illustration in reverse of the truth conveyed in Emerson's immortal line,

They builded better than they knew.

Richard Grant White.

## Notes

### Note 1 on page 12

But can we not forgive the critic much metaphysics for saying, "What is the dramatic action of the text to the opera of 'Leonora' but an almost repulsive dilution of the drama presented in the overture, like perhaps a tedious explanatory commentary by Gervinus upon a scene of Shakespeare's"?