
The Work and Mission of my Life - Part II

By Hans von Wolzogen



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The Work and Mission of my Life

Part II

AMONG the larger German theatres that of Dresden at this time held the first rank, by the artistic value both of its capabilities and its performances. In opera, it is true that the traditions of Weber's leadership had been as good as forgotten by his successors; but they survived as inspiring memories among the artists on the stage itself. Among the singers was Schroeder-Devrient, a woman of true dramatic genius, and Tichatschek, the marvelous tenor-hero, from whose examples the younger gifted members of the troupe could learn with excellent profit. It was with keen pleasure that I enjoyed this new atmosphere during the rehearsal of my "Rienzi" —an atmosphere which, after my Paris experiences, seemed so free and so elevated—so full of hope for my own plans. The surprisingly great success of my work with the German public brought me the position of Kapellmeister at the theatre, and the goal of my wishes seemed attained.

It is true that, in the prevailing condition of art, I had already had enough experience to show me how much was false to true artistic principles, and dependent on interests that were wholly inartistic; but even at this time I had learned so little of the chief reason for this state of things as to imagine it was only a matter of details, which a single individual, armed with the true, strong ideal spirit, could do away with or reform. I had made up my mind to enter on this task. The direction which the prevailing dramatic art had taken in its recent manifestations must be abandoned, and the public led into a nobler, more serious, purer, and, above all, *more German* school. Led by this instinctive longing to inspire others with that desire which was so strong in my own mind, for something at once more ideal and more suited to the spirit [239] of the race, I finished the text of my "Tannhäuser," and brought forward my opera of "The Flying Dutchman."

Even thus early I was forced to realize that I stood utterly alone in my new path, and that the tendencies which had led the public to admire my "Rienzi" led to very different goals from that toward which my efforts were directed. People had hoped to find in me a new Meyerbeer, and found themselves thrust back by my "Flying Dutchman" into the old-fashioned realm of romantic opera. The world of legend, whose treasures were so newly unlocked for me, seemed to them only the same dull theme that had pleased a bygone phase of taste. But I was not to be driven back from the way I had once taken, even by such a disappointment of my hopes. When I accepted my Dresden position I had felt myself inspired and transported by an inexpressible longing for the happy enjoyment of full artistic activity which it seemed to promise me. Now I saw that this enjoyment was only to be gained, among the elements which surrounded me, by complete submission to the fashion which prevailed in the public favor. In the conflict between my hopes and their fulfillment, my longing grew still stronger for some higher, purer atmosphere, in which my thoroughly ideal tendency might at length have free scope. It was from this feverishly exalted mood that the composition of the music of "Tannhäuser" sprung.

In the mean time I had exerted myself with all my strength, and with all the influence my position could give, to effect a worthy revival of the masterpieces of our great past. The symphonies of Beethoven, the operas of Gluck, Mozart, and Weber, had degenerated into utter distortion in the hands of unintelligent directors. But this distortion had long become the habit of the time, and had the weight of authority upon its side. I, who had already presented myself as an advocate for new methods in my own works, had now to put myself in opposition to the prevailing taste by advocating changes in the traditional rendering of the

works of our great masters. It is true that, in my efforts for the restoration of a pure style in this rendering, I received abundant encouragement both from the musicians who took part in it and from the general public, which was really attracted by it. But a school of criticism which dominated taste and judgment in the public press seized upon my performances, and began the conflict which, for a score of years since then, has been kept up against my work and efforts, with all the bitterness and recklessness which still distinguish it. Through the influence of this criticism, often guided by the pettiest and most [240] doubtful motives, the public has been almost entirely prevented from exercising anything like a spontaneous, independent judgment; the good results which the individual secured could not, amid such trammels, have their effect upon the mass. The more I found that individuals were deeply affected by my own works, or by my rendering of older music, and ranked themselves among the number of my true friends, the more I was compelled to acknowledge that there was no general audience to which I could turn for sympathy with my aims. The German people had not yet rediscovered its own nature, although "German freedom" and "German unity" were becoming more and more the current phrases of its political enthusiasm.

It was in the ironical mood resulting from all this—that sense of irony that possesses the artist who sees himself and his ideals placed before a public that misunderstands him and a criticism utterly hostile—that the sketch of my "Meistersinger" first took shape, during a vacation which I spent at a Bohemian summer resort. But, almost at the same time, the yearning that still burned in my heart for that general appreciation, the absence of which I felt so deeply, led me to write the text of "Lohengrin." But the first production of "Tannhäuser," taking place in Dresden soon after this, with the utterly confused impression it produced, answered my longing by showing me decisively the impossibility of fulfilling it in the sphere in which I was then placed. Here, where the richest accessories of the grand opera were once more employed in the production of a great drama, the difference between what I had a right to expect and what was actually at my command became all the more distinctly visible. Those effects which people were accustomed to see brilliantly given in the "great historical opera" would not serve for a thoroughly earnest, ideal, legendary theme, romantic even to the verge of the marvelous, with which the public had no real sympathy—though it did not refuse its applause at the presentation of my work, and showed a remarkable interest in its peculiar newness and strangeness. Or, I should rather say, that even while the audience might have taken a general human interest in the acceptance of the drama *as* a drama, such an acceptance was from the beginning made impossible by the idea that it was *not* a *drama* they had made up their minds to see, but only an "opera," in which the chief point was only the gratification of the sense of hearing—in which it was especially the enjoyment of the all-dominating art of the aria-singer that they looked for. I saw that, in order really to [241] please this modern operatic public, I must be other than what I was, and could not be what I would; and I felt no less distinctly that my very position made it a necessity that here, as before, for the mere sake of earning my living, I should have to keep my true nature and opinions behind a detestable mask of hypocrisy and social conventionalism. A bitter scorn of such necessities came over me; and the more clearly I beheld the light of the ideal, the more distinctly I saw the course that I must take, the more keenly I realized that in the existing condition of the modern stage the trouble was not with details, but with the whole structure. I perceived that the character of theatrical art sprang from the character of the public; that the character of the public sprang from the whole social life of the modern world; and that I was utterly foreign to this world, both as an artist and as a German.

In the midst of this bitterness against the existing condition of things, I found myself amid the general revolutionary spirit which was growing stronger and stronger all around me, and which now enlisted my zealous sympathy. In my belief, it was only by a complete change in all those political and social relations, of which the degradation of art was a fitting

manifestation, that an artistic revival, and especially a revival of the drama, was to be brought about. In civilization, as it then existed, the stage only played the part of a pleasant source of enlivenment for social *ennui*; yet even thus it seemed to me that, if it were once under elevated and artistic guidance, it might have an elevating influence on a public which, by its means, might be gradually led away from all that was evil, commonplace, frivolous, and false. To prove that this was possible by a complete reformation, now became my task, as the possibility of a genuine change in the constitution of society suddenly seemed revealed to me. (1) As an artist, I felt myself impelled to represent, in this new aspect of affairs, the so easily forgotten or neglected rights of art. That my plan of reform, already thought out down to the smallest practical detail, would only be received in scornful silence by the existing government administration of art-matters was, of course, evident to me. I turned, therefore, to the new movement that was so full of promise for my scheme.

But, after a brief consideration of its methods, a feeling of doubt began to trouble me, as to whether the purely human element [242] that was at the foundation of the revolution would not be lost sight of amid the prevailing disputes of parties as to the value of different forms of government—the difference between which was, after all, only a matter of preference. It seemed to me that from this basis of general human interests a new civilization might spring which would make men truly free, and which might reach its noblest height in that pure and humanizing art which would be its natural outgrowth. The only element in history which had always attracted and inspired me had been this effort of the race to mutiny against the tyranny of a traditional and legalized formalism; and I could see no triumph of this impulse of the natural man in the mere victory of one party over another. When I saw that this idea of mine, as to what should be the essential motive of a revolution, was utterly misunderstood by the politicians, whose efforts were limited to the temporary interests of the moment only, I once more turned my back on the realities of things, and sought my ideal world again. I endeavored more earnestly than ever, in my art, to reach the only standard which I acknowledged—that of the free, strong, and noble man as Nature made him.

It is only in the pure *Mythos* that this true human element presents itself to the men of every age alike—in the simplest, clearest, most typical forms, and in an atmosphere of thoroughly natural feelings and sympathies, divested of every abstraction and conventionality. And the natural man, so figured, always the same and independent of the lapse of time, can only express himself in the language of *music*, whose utterance of absolute emotion may be limited and receive its application to some one individual object, by being joined to the poetry of a drama as simple and as entirely human as itself. A natural mythic drama of this kind, as it grew up in my mind from the study of our noblest national legend, the "Nibelungen," now began to occupy my thoughts—though it could only come into real existence in an atmosphere very different from that of any operatic stage that then existed. I imagined such a drama as an art-work which should embody the ideal spirit of the nation; which should present the purely natural human being in his state of absolute freedom; and for which the present revolutionary movement had certainly given me no suggestion whatever. At this moment when, in the midst of my effort to reach the highest realization of my art, I was turning away from the life around me, came the outbreak in Dresden itself, in the year 1849. It appealed to me more than ever in my capacity of *artist*—for with its political [243] side, as such, I had, really and in my inmost nature, nothing in common. The one thing for which I must ever thank this current of events, in which I suddenly found myself involved as in a wretched dream, was what I longed for both as a man and as an artist—liberty. The spirit in which I welcomed this period as the time which was to break my bonds for ever, led me out of the world of politics (though in the guise of a political refugee), and sent me into exile.

While in Germany the unsuccessful revolution yielded to a new reaction, I found at last, in the perfect freedom of my exile's home in Switzerland, full and undisturbed opportunity for

self-communion and for the uninterrupted contemplation of my ideals. Completely shut off from the atmosphere of the modern stage, I felt myself impelled to write—to set forth clearly and explain, if only for my own sake, that enigmatical law of my being which, in its efforts to formulate itself, had brought me into such a strange relation to the art and life of my time. In my first published work, "Kunst und Revolution" (Art and Revolution), I pointed out the connection I had recognized, between the state of art and the social and political condition of the modern world. The life of the Greeks served me as the most enduring and brilliant example of such a connection. It was with the union of all the different methods of artistic expression in the noble, finished art-work of its tragic drama, that this people had celebrated, in reverent concord, the divine rites of its strong and noble Hellenic nature. I followed the decline of art that accompanied the decline of Greek influence: I showed how, degenerating under Roman civilization and rejected by the spirit of Christianity, it could no longer, after its revival at the time of the Renaissance, be said to be the free and natural expression of the national life of any one great people—how it was forced to sacrifice its noblest value and its true popular spirit, first to the service of the caprices and the wealth of princes and aristocrats, and then to the influence of trade and the hypocrisies of modern society. It is true that, with the downfall of the old inhuman institution of slavery and the spread of the Christian idea of the equality of men, true art found a nobler and broader domain spread before it, in which it might for the first time have attained its highest success as an embodiment of the ideas of the free man in his true and untrammelled relations to his kind. But such a civilization, founded upon liberty, has never come fully into being. The modern man is neither a free nor a consistent being. A thousand [244] different interests divide his shifting life and fill him with perpetual unrest; and it is only in their common slavery to the power of social shams and social necessities that men are really equal. Only some great revolution of humanity at large could make the true liberty of the individual possible; and only a revolutionary movement in such a sense, with such a motive, could be of any saving worth to a true art.

But such an art, which should be the highest ideal expression of a universal and really human civilization, was only conceivable to me, again, in the form of that greatest artistic creation which portrays human life by the aid of all the lesser arts united—a work like the Greek tragedy. The division of it into independent and separately developing branches had been a process that had gone hand in hand with the breaking up of the whole fabric of the ancient state; and these separate branches, though their special capabilities be elaborated to the point of virtuosity, have never, by themselves, been able to attain the importance of that lost great national art. They became more and more a hot-house form of noble luxury for amateurs and *cognoscenti*; or at the most it was only from this beginning that they could reach the public as a form of enjoyment. And the public never recognized in them the embodiment of its own national or even its general human nature, but rather a method of making known its finer special and artistic "culture."

Yet, on the other hand, there seemed to me, in the freest and most vigorous branches of this system of special arts—in poetry and music—a strong tendency toward the reunion of their different methods of expression into a great united art-work, which should represent man at his best, and independent of times and fashions. I saw this in Beethoven's symphonies, in which a seeking for some distinct embodiment of their infinite expression in spoken language showed itself in the adoption of the singing of Schiller's "Hymn to Joy" (at the close of the "Ninth Symphony"). Opposed to this ideal development, on the other hand, I saw the *false* union of the two arts set forth in the opera. Here there was only a sort of artificial partnership (by contract, as it were), in order to produce, by the association of the properties of the two, an especially effective form of pleasure—something quite different from the united art-work I had in mind; yet the mass of the public understood by the word "opera" nothing more than this. I myself had started from this artificial, traditional operatic form; but I had grown more

and more [245] to make the *dramatic* aim the chief one, the perfect expression of which it was the part of all artistic forces to further; and I had sought more and more to give to this object its completest possible embodiment in music. And thus, through my own experience as a creative composer and poet, I had come to the unavoidable recognition of that ideal form of art in which alone the general human element, the greatest subject of all artistic effort, could most perfectly set forth its universal artistic meaning. It was true that in this I found myself in sharp opposition to the ordinary ideas held by the inartistic spirit of my time; but I felt myself involuntarily in inmost sympathy with the noblest beliefs and efforts of those artists of the past who had thus far been, in their noble isolation, the only true representatives of art in the higher sense. This recognition of my purpose I now set forth in two further publications—in "Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft" (the Art-Work of the Future) and "Oper und Drama" (Opera and Drama); and sought to reduce it, in my own consciousness, to completeness even in details.

My literary attempt to set myself right with the world, and to explain these ideals of mine, could only be looked upon in my own country as the outpourings of an eccentric opera-composer—performances to be as promptly as possible consigned to oblivion, and coming from a man whom the fever of the revolution had hurried into the wildest fancies, and whose exile, besides, had already put a complete end to his possibilities as an artist. And I was in a fair way to become utterly isolated in my new home, and to be driven back to absolute despair as to my own life, by that craving that is always active in the human mind for some possibility of communicating its feelings to a sympathetic intelligence, when suddenly the most brilliant hopes were rekindled in me by a miracle—by the discovery, at the same time that I had found a new home for my art, of a new—and only—artist-friend. In Weimar, the little poet-town of Thuringia, something had happened which was to have the most important and lasting effect upon my art-life. A great artist who understood me and my work fully and thoroughly—FRANZ LISZT—had for the first time produced my "Lohengrin," which I had already learned to lament over as a work the hope of whose appearance must be finally abandoned. His genius had supplied all that was lacking in means and fit surroundings, and had made the performance of my work a thoroughly spirited and just one. This bold venture was the beginning of the formation of an association of friends and co-workers which at first clustered around the honored [246] person of that great master. Taught and encouraged by him, a band of adherents sprang up to support my aims in art, neglected and despised though they were by the world at large. Though my writings might not be read in Germany, and my works never produced there, here was a true art-life for me; here was the foundation laid for a future; here was something beginning to develop which might give me a hopeful presage of my long-dreamed-of idea of a nation art-inspired. And from this circle there now came to me my friend's appeal to finish for him, and for this people gathered about him, my new work formed from the vast material of the Nibelungen legend—my tragedy of "Siegfried."

It was with new zest that I now carried out my plan of embodying in complete poetic form, in three dramas and a prelude, the whole wide-embracing scheme of the Nibelungen-myth. And thus the trilogy of the "Ring des Nibelungen" (the Ring of the Nibelungs) came into being, with its four parts—"Rheingold," the "Walküre," "Siegfried," and the "Götterdämmerung." And in the actual carrying out of my undertaking I became once more the true, untrammled artist, unfettered by any hesitation or questioning. Since I had freed my mind of all doubt and confusion by my theoretical writings, I was now once more able to go on in the way I had begun, with an artist's confidence, to embody my ideas in the form I had myself thought out. As I went on with the work itself, the way in which it must some time be presented also took shape in my mind. And when I thought of the one single possibility of an appreciative auditor offered by my friend, and imagined this expanded into a *general* appreciation, my boldly conceived plan of representation no longer seemed to me a mere

picture of fancy—even though at that time exactly the opposite of that general appreciation prevailed all around me, with the single exception of that little company of adherents. I went on to the musical composition with the consciousness that I was creating a work the actual performance of which could only take place entirely outside of the ordinary circle of stage capabilities. But for this very reason it seemed to me that it would be a true and normal example of what alone I understood by a truly *universal* dramatic art in its noblest form. This example should be free from all the inartistic influences and dependencies of the wretched conventional stage, which was only able day after day to offer its gaudy attractions to a public made up of the most diverse elements and utterly without artistic sense—and to present them in a transient shape that was [247] devoid of any artistic value. This example should stand by itself, completely independent; and its representations, in the form of great art festivals, should be undertaken without regard to any material reward, for the benefit of a multitude assembled only for the distinct purpose of artistic enjoyment. In this shape there appeared to my imagination an entirely new dramatic institution, designed for the perfect development and worthy presentation of *pure art*—by which the whole conception of art in general might be raised once more to the full dignity which belonged to it, through the fact that there alone its masterpieces, degraded in the every-day public service into mere styleless and tasteless performances, would be given in the form that truly befitted them, under the exercise of an undisturbed, earnest, intelligent, and careful supervision. If I found myself compelled to acknowledge that the free, universal culture that I had once dreamed of was unattainable, it seemed to me all the nobler thing to do, to strengthen or even to awaken, by such an example of a true art-work, a conception of the true meaning of art among all those who could comprehend it. Then, by the gradual winning over of the public who would be attracted by it, the richly gifted national mind might be aided to elevate its standards, to free itself from its fetters—that national intellect which now, amid its many trammels and the coarseness of the realistic influences that surrounded it, threatened only to sink into deeper and deeper degeneracy. With the announcement of the plan of such an art festival, which at that time could only seem as extraordinary and fantastic as my dreams of a revolution, I took my leave of my friends as a writer, and began the composition of the "Rheingold," finished the "Walküre," and went on to the completion of the music of the "Siegfried," undisturbed by the opinion which the multitude must have of an artist who believed that he had discovered, in his ideal world, the one possible way in which he could at last worthily unite it with the world of reality.

And indeed during this very period there seemed to me to be actually growing up in an oddly roundabout way, such a connection between the ideal and the real. While I was still at work on my "Nibelungen" composition, I heard that my earlier operas, in spite of all the hostile attempts that had been made to put them down, were making progress and spreading among the German theatres, and winning more and more the hearty friendship of the public. On the one hand, this served to fill me with new hopes that a generally sympathetic spirit might be growing up to aid in the carrying [248] out of my great plan. But, on the other hand, it could not but disquiet me to see this effect produced by performances of my works over which I had not exercised the least supervision. They had been brought out by Kapellmeisters altogether unpracticed in my style and methods, and had been rehearsed and performed in the ordinary transient course of their theatres' *répertoire*, with all manner of tasteless abridgment. What I had striven for—the development of a pure style of artistic presentation—was thus utterly neglected. It was evident that the confusion and misunderstanding would be all the greater when I should come before a public which had become accustomed to my compositions in such distorted shape, with such great demands as I proposed to make upon them for the true and fitting presentation of my new work. All this decided me to venture once more to bring my productions before a German audience, now that it at last looked upon me

in a more friendly spirit. And another feeling added its force to these motives. It was eight years since I had enjoyed the inspiriting excitement of hearing one of my own works produced. Indeed, shut out from Germany as I was, I had never yet heard my "Lohengrin." It was very natural, therefore, that I should long for the possibility of renewing, before too great an interval, the strengthening and inspiring enjoyment of listening to a really artistic and truthful performance of some sort. It was this motive that induced me, after long and uninterrupted labor on my "Nibelungen" composition, which seemed so little likely to gain an early hearing, to put together the scheme of my "Tristan und Isolde," which had long been in my mind. I could venture to hope that the peculiar style of this work, as soon as I should be in a position to exercise a direct supervision over its production, would give the public some idea of the nature of the greater effort which I had in prospect. But even now I could not succeed in securing permission to return to Germany for this purpose. I was still banished, with my art for a companion, and, if I would not be separated from this also, I felt that I must once more appeal to a public outside of my own country.

Thus, in the year 1860, I found myself once more in Paris. For the second time I believed that it was only there that I could find the atmosphere which was so necessary to the success of my art—that element which it so needed. I did not succeed in bringing out my works with the German troupe I had selected for them, and in giving a thoroughly excellent performance; but at the Emperor's special order the doors of the Grand Opera—once the goal of my desires— [249] were at last opened to my "Tannhäuser." The fate of this undertaking taught me, however, that the school which I was striving to introduce could only succeed where the modern theory had not gained so firm a footing as it had here in the very essence of French art. Here were traditions and conventions so fixed and firm that the attempt to give success to my entirely German work, which made no concessions to them, was a failure, in spite of the aid of talented French friends among the artists, and in spite, too, of the special sympathy of those in power, which for the first time in my life I now found upon my side—even to the imperial authority itself.

And now a limited and provisional permission was given me by the authorities at home to show myself again in Germany, and as a German. It was a matter of course that, with such a permission, it must be long before I could even approach the fulfillment of my wishes—that I had before me years of wandering in my own country, without being able to bring even so much as my new work "Tristan" to a performance upon any German stage; and after my experience in Paris I felt more than ever the special curse of the German artist—that of having no power behind him—of finding that his effort for the elevation of his art is taken only for personal ambition. On the publication of the text of my "Nibelungen" I made application to the authorities, who could alone make possible the realization of my dream. My application remained unanswered; and, abandoning all hope of succeeding in my art or my ideals, I sought only for some quiet place where I could set to work on a new composition—the "Meistersinger."

Suddenly, as though by a miracle, the very power I was longing for came to my help, and offered me the boon of the highest and the most ideal aid I could desire. In the year 1864 the young King of Bavaria gave me a new home in his capital at Munich. My anxious application had been answered better than I could have dreamed.

In North Germany, Prussia had gained from the "War of Liberation" one treasure which it looked upon as priceless—the formation of a German army—and this treasure it had preserved and developed. But, while all its care was devoted to this one precious possession, it saw only the material needs of its great state. Here in the south, on the other hand, the Bavarian Government seemed to have made it its special task to preserve and increase the *ideal* treasures of the nation. King Ludwig I. had devoted [250] his attention especially to the encouragement of the arts of painting and sculpture. His successor, King Max, had sought in

true princely fashion to promote a general high standard of culture among his officials, and to further in every way the progress of learning. And now that his brilliant young son took for his special province the encouragement of those most neglected yet most important branches of art—the drama and music—this effort to elevate æsthetic culture became more marked than ever; this attempt to aid one of the most characteristic and noblest powers of the German mind to develop freely and healthily. I pointed out these encouraging signs in a work of considerable length, which I published at this time—"Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik" (German Art and German Politics).

Great plans had been made and were to be realized in Munich. It had been determined that the festival I had thought of, as an example of a noble and pure performance of a representative art-work, should actually take place, and that my own "Nibelungen," designed especially for such an occasion, should be brought out. An architect, especially skilled in such matters, was applied to to construct an auditorium, in which the disturbing effect of *seeing* the orchestra at work should be as much as possible diminished, while the beauty and clearness of the music produced by it should be rather increased than lessened; and, further, to design a building in which a drama could be produced amid such accessories as should give it a true æsthetic value hitherto lacking in stage effects and decoration. More than this, I was to choose the best artists from the German operatic companies; and these were to assemble, at appointed times, to rehearse the work with the special object of this model performance in view, and to study it untrammelled by outside influences. The prospective repetition of such festivals would form the basis of a dramatic and musical institution whose influence must have a most favorable effect upon German art in general, hitherto entirely without such a standard as this would furnish.

In order that such an institution might have a really secure foundation, however, I had first to consider what was especially indispensable to its success—the ability of the artists whom I should bring together, to perform a task which had never yet been set before them in earnest. The proper training of the voices of such singers as possessed the necessary dramatic powers was, of course, the most important thing; for no branch of musical education is so [251] much neglected in Germany as dramatic singing—its development according to true art principles being made practically impossible by the confusion of styles inevitable to an ordinary operatic *répertoire*. In instrumental music, too, for which Germans have such a peculiar talent, a thorough reform was needed; for, though we undoubtedly possess the greatest classic works that exist in this branch of the art, we have as yet no truly classic *methods* in their production.

My first task, then, was to draw up a detailed plan for the foundation of a complete musical school, in which alone the proposed art institution could find its proper starting-point, and from which it could be continually renewed. It was only by such thorough preparation that music, our peculiarly German branch of art, and the drama which is naturally developed from it, could hope to find their highest realization in producing the works of the great masters, and those of such of their successors as preserved the German style in its purity—only by such means that they could secure a development which should truly represent them, and should be above all contingencies and beyond all limitations.

When I came forward with this project, it seemed as though all the influences represented in our press and our society united in the bitterest opposition to my work and to the plan I had joined with it for the permanent and worthy encouragement of German art. Amid the enmity thus let loose against me, none of all my schemes could be realized, save a single performance of my "Tristan"—a performance whose beauty I can never forget—when it had in the cast the great singer Schnorr, whose personal efforts in the work of developing German vocal music were felt to be indispensable. His sudden death was an omen of the early wreck of all our hopes and plans. Coming from those circles in which the genius of German art was so misunderstood that it seemed to have only the effect of a horrible phantom upon them, the

stream of malicious and envious intrigue rose higher and higher against our nobly-conceived and nobly-intended project. I was forced to acknowledge that it was impossible, under such circumstances, to work with what we had, and at the same time to create new material. After an admirable production, at the Munich court-theatre, of the "Meistersinger von Nürnberg," which I had finished in the mean time (1867), I retired from all attempts at public work, and once more returned to my lonely home in Switzerland, to finish my "Nibelungen" trilogy, which had now been laid aside for nearly ten years. Its completion [252] enabled me to dedicate it to the ever-faithful protector and patron of my art. The fact that by his care my material wants were now for the first time securely provided for, made it possible for me to leave it quietly to the fates whether they would ever bring the favorable moment for the realization of my scheme; when suddenly and unexpectedly this moment came—brought by the great events of Germany's successful war against the French, and by the national unity brought about by the great struggle in the year 1871.

What German was not roused into enthusiasm by the marvelous experiences of that year of war—into enthusiastic joy at the glorious revelation which they brought us of German courage, wisdom, dignity, and greatness! The almost despairing genius of the race saw at length a living bond grow up between the unconquered and nobly united strength of the people and the strength of its princes and leaders—a strength which showed itself nowhere more plainly than in the admirable military use it made of this abundant force which the people offered. Full of hope for the fruitful result of this new national life in the even more important work of peace, and so also in the work of a true national art, the German artist hastened back to his own country, which now seemed to him to represent for the first time the true ideal of a Fatherland. In the very midst of the newly-united empire, the kindly citizens of the beautiful and historically famous town of Baireuth offered me a perfect place for the carrying out of the great project of my life. Here, on the open hillside above the quiet old German town, and far from all the tumult of the world that could disturb the peaceful toil of art, my undertaking would be safe from the influences of inartistic surroundings, and could go on independently and safely to its completion. The corner-stone of the festival theatre (*Festspielhaus*) was laid there, on the hill in Baireuth, in the year 1872, amid hopeful and joyful anticipations, and surrounded by a large circle of my friends and adherents; and the day was celebrated by the rendering of Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony"—itself the ideal corner-stone of that national art which was here to give to the victorious German people the first actual example of a great festal presentation of its results—of a perfected dramatic-musical performance.

If it had happened in France, at the time of its greatest national glory, that, in a similar case, an artist already worthily known by his works had sought to found an institution of great national importance, for the preservation and encouragement of the noblest art of the great masters of his race, and had appealed for aid to the [253] assistance of his people—in such a case it can hardly be doubted that the *state* also would have done its best to help him. In France there would have been at least such a degree of intelligent understanding of his aims as would have made it clear that here was something designed to give a peculiarly characteristic exhibition of the nation's powers; and that the successful completion of such an undertaking would be a distinguished national honor. Nothing like that which I had planned, and at length, with the help of enthusiastic friends, had confidently begun, had ever been ventured upon before; and, it would have been amply worthy of the support of our young imperial Government, which could not have inaugurated its brilliant reign more gloriously than by such support freely given to a purely ideal object, and for a purely ideal motive. This might have been the more confidently looked for, inasmuch as the German people itself is poor, and never has large means at command for satisfying its ideal wants (in spite of the fact that the ideal side of the German character has always found among the people its greatest

representatives and apostles); while the Government, on the other hand, was at this moment rich even to superfluity by the terms of its treaty with its conquered neighbor.

But the powers that ruled in Germany, neglectful as ever of the interest of true art, saw in my efforts now, as they had always seen before, nothing but the expression of the most extreme personal ambition; and in the institution which I had planned nothing but the extravagant demands of an extraordinary and unusual presentation of my own works, for my own selfish aggrandizement. The attainment of my end was therefore left entirely to me and to my friends. It was only through the self-sacrificing efforts of these latter, who founded, in the different towns in which they lived, societies in aid of my purpose and known by my name, that, in the long four years that passed before its completion, enough money was raised to finish the theatre-building as it had been originally designed. And even then the great festival performance destined to take place there could never have been carried out had not my adherents, powerless as they were in this respect, received the assistance of that other noble friend, who now came personally and generously to the aid of an enterprise that had so often been upon the verge of failure. Never has such a work been carried out amid greater difficulties and anxieties, or amid more petty hindrances, than beset this "ideal theatre" at Baireuth, and the voluntary assembling in it of all that could be most carefully chosen from the best resources of the stage, [254] for the first production of a great German dramatic festival—a performance that, in spite of all its trammels, was essentially in accord with true art principles—the thrice-repeated presentation of the four parts of my "Ring des Nibelungen," in the summer of the year 1876.

The performance of the trilogy evidently produced upon its audience, which was made up of the most widely different elements, a more than ordinary effect. The exceptional circumstances under which it took place, giving it the air of a solemn festival; the two years' careful preparation of the chosen body of performers, for a unity of style in their performance which would have been impossible in the ordinary course of their occupation; the unusual and, in its general effect, imposing design of the theatre, in which the individual novel features all proved excellent parts of the whole; and especially the mystic and ideally pure tones of the invisible orchestra, and the perfectly unobstructed view of the stage from all sides of the broad amphitheatre—all these things united to produce a deep impression of something quite outside the ordinary course—an effect which showed itself distinctly in the call at once made for a repetition of the performance. It was noteworthy that this call was everywhere addressed to me personally, and referred only to the enjoyment given by my "Nibelungen." It was clear that my real more than *personal* object was even now not understood; and even now, not a single branch of government authority—even in view of this successful result—could be induced to make an effort to turn what had thus been shown to be entirely possible, to the lasting good of national art. That which individual German love of art had achieved in one isolated instance, found in the new empire no kindred soil where, despite all the political changes that had come about, there seemed to be the least thought of attempting to foster the revival of that German genius which had lain dormant for half a century. The public at large, too, seemed well content, as the "Nibelungen" passed from stage to stage of the German city theatres, played without the least conception of its true requirements. Here, generally disfigured by abridgment, and presented among surroundings for which it had never been designed, it soon won such hearty applause that it seemed incomprehensible why any one should think of repeating it, especially in Baireuth!

And now, precisely when it seemed to me most necessary to go on earnestly with the institution I had planned for giving regularly repeated model performances, I found myself saddled with a difficult [255] task, which, like everything else, I was left alone to carry out—I had personally to make up the considerable deficit which had remained after the production of the trilogy had been achieved with such difficulty. Once more concerts must be given,

concessions must be made, and agreements entered into, which spoiled for me the ideal pleasure I had had in my work, at the very moment when I was generally envied for the brilliant result of my energy, and when people, taking no account of the aims I had carefully explained to them so long before, were saying with surprise that *now*, at least, they should suppose I might be content with what I had achieved.

In the midst of all the evils which I have here only suggested, I had not for a moment lost sight of my ideal object. I would never have undertaken mere repetitions of extraordinary dramatic and musical festivals, such as the public called for, unless guarantees had been given me that such repetitions should form a part of that organized institution which I had in mind—which would make not only isolated performances possible, but would establish a regular system of training for the production of all the masterpieces of our art. Once more, therefore, I brought forward the plan of a kind of training-school, in which young musicians desirous of improvement should be invited to enroll themselves for practice under my leadership—at first in what was now so completely wanting, the true and artistic rendering of the symphonic works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. After the accomplishment of this pleasant task, they were, if possible, to go on, with the assistance of singers of merit, to take up the older dramatic works of our composers— now so wretchedly hurried over in our oddly-mixed operatic *répertoires*—and to rehearse them with the utmost care. By this natural and normal progress I hoped once more to attain, with rightly-developed strength, the point necessary for a truly great festival performance, for which I offered to finish my "Parsifal," a work which I had begun just after the production of the "Nibelungen," in accordance with a scheme I had for some time had in mind.

As the result of an appeal which I issued in the autumn of 1877, this much was finally accomplished: the different societies already formed were united into a general association, having its central point at Baireuth, whose members were to have, in consideration of a small yearly contribution (fifteen marks), the exclusive right to attend the rehearsals as well as the performances; while the greater voluntary contributions of friends of larger means were to establish a permanent fund as the lasting basis of the undertaking. [256] After my previous experience, all further attempt to secure aid from government sources was abandoned. To gain the assistance of the German public at large for the purposes of the association, I found it necessary to make the new festival-piece, my "Parsifal," a somewhat nearer object of expectation—to place it, in fact, in immediate prospect. And this new promise had so favorable an effect, that in the year since it was made our *Patronatsverein* has increased to the number of sixteen hundred members, in more than two hundred cities in Germany and elsewhere. In order to make it possible to carry out my ideas as I have just explained them, even this membership must be trebled; or else a considerable capital must be placed at our disposal from some source or other—a fund the interest of which would be sufficient to pay the expenses of yearly practice-meetings and of perhaps triennial performances, and which must be supplied without regard to any means received from the participation of the public.

Could this be had, the institution toward which all the efforts of my life have been given might be completely and permanently secured. But, though the sum needed is not relatively a large one, it must needs seem so to the powers who could grant it to us, for they have not learned the importance of the ideal element in the culture of their people. Perhaps the moment will come when some man of more than ordinary character, placed in a position of authority, will say to himself that after all it is an irresponsible way of using money, to spend enough of it every year to support dry seminaries which shut their doors, with the stolid obstinacy that is the cause of their own unfruitfulness, against all the influences of a living art—or to maintain court theatres which, unworthy of their name, are given over to commonplace rivalry with the lowest class of theatrical speculators; while those who do all this refuse to appropriate anything whatever toward a single attempt to secure a permanent institution, which has had its

origin in a true artistic purpose, which seeks to preserve forever a most characteristic manifestation of the German mind—to preserve the great, incomparable art of our great masters, that it may awaken a true appreciation of the nature and worth of that art in the nation that gave those masters being! At all events, the experience of a long life has taught me to my sorrow that the earnest support of such a purely ideal cause cannot be expected from the people at large, as it exists to-day in our united Germany. German art will never be placed in a position of security by the voluntary act of the German [257] nation, but will be led thither by the accident of some single, individual aid.

But I turn aside from these discouraging experiences, to find a pleasanter ending for my paper. A former esteemed representative of the United States at the German Court once assured me that, when the people of his country should find time to devote themselves seriously to æsthetic culture, my art would prove the first of all to appeal to the heart of the young nation. I was reminded of these words when, just before the centennial celebration of the foundation of the Republic, the request reached me from America that I would compose a festival march for the great jubilee. It was with special pleasure that I undertook the task—giving to the work the motto (from Goethe's "Faust") that seemed best to point to my ideal for the American Union:

"He only has true liberty—true life—
To whom they are the prize of daily strife."

And my composition seems to have been received with a thorough understanding of my aim; for in a notice of its performance, which was sent to me, it was pointed out that precisely that quality of *ideal energy*, which I had endeavored to express in my music, was the form of highest development which the American character should set before it as its goal.

Among the guests at the performance of my trilogy, too, were many from beyond the ocean, who came hoping to hear something which, it is true, they could not find presented to them at home, but which the atmosphere of a traditional system of false culture had not made it impossible for them to enjoy.

It is said that your famous General Grant once prophesied that all the world would some day speak one language. It would only seem possible, at first thought, to conceive of such a language as a kind of universal jargon made up of all manner of heterogeneous ingredients, and equivalent to the destruction of all strong idiomatic expression, and so of all that art which lives only in speech. But those who stood by, at the laying of the corner-stone of my theatre, and heard the singing of "Seid umschlungen, Millionen," in the closing chorus of Beethoven's symphony, could make a similar yet widely different prophecy. They could see that Grant's words might be fulfilled in another fashion than that which the distinguished American had in mind. Such a fulfillment, in fact, we see already: *German music* already unites the nations of the [258] world—even to those beyond the sea—by an ideal bond. Our great masters, by those noble works which have won the admiration of all lands, have made it certain that this alone can ever be the true, natural, living world-language. And let us, who look back to them with heartfelt reverence, see to it that we reach that ideal toward which I have striven unceasingly throughout my life. Let us see to it that the original, pure, vigorous style of this great German music—and of that visible form, the universal drama, in which its spirit is best revealed—shall be preserved to it; so that the influence of the German mind, upon a world which will always need that influence, shall not be perverted and false and therefore worthless, but true, noble, and vigorous, and therefore in the highest degree salutary, beneficent, and broadening in its effects.

Such is the wish and hope of the German artist who has here sought to give, to such sympathetic readers as he may find beyond the sea, the story of his ideal and the story of his life; and who now bids them farewell, in the hope that they and he may some time meet again, as earnest co-workers in the domain of ideal, spiritual progress.

Richard Wagner.

Notes

Note 1 on page 7

The reference here is to the revolutionary movement of 1848-'49, with its schemes of social reform, then just impending.