
The Work and Mission of my Life - Part I

By Hans von Wolzogen



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The Work and Mission of my Life

Part I

THE request which comes to me from America, that I will personally address the readers of a well-known New York review on the subject of my artistic opinions and methods, is one which cannot fail to move me greatly. Here, in my own country, I have long thought it best to refrain from all publication of my ideas, experiences, and plans to any general audience. Whatever a life of sixty years has shown me or taught me of the world—and especially of the art that has been produced or reproduced in it—I have recorded in occasional writings extending over half that period; and later, at an important epoch of my life, I brought these together in an edition of nine volumes of "collected works." This book I offered to the German people as the complete result of my experience as an artist, and as a German. Though my countrymen had begun to feel a growing and active interest in my art, they had been kept in the dark—and indeed involved in the most puzzling misconceptions—as to my special artistic aims, and the ideals after which I was striving above and beyond my own personal labors and achievements. This ignorance had been brought about by the continual influence of elements fundamentally hostile [108] to me; and these now proved powerful enough to prevent the German public almost entirely from reading my collected writings. It was still my actual artistic works which, even though most imperfectly presented and therefore often and widely misconceived, produced an undeniable effect upon the public at large; and, as far as what I wrote was concerned, people continued to hold the opinion which had been so instilled into their minds, that my "theory" comprised just that element which, in my compositions, had always seemed to them eccentric and displeasing.

In time, however, and in the very midst of the strife that went on over what were called my art principles, a little circle of friends grew up, who made a diligent study of my writings, and were led by the impression made by my artistic works more nearly to an understanding of my broader ideas—those which looked beyond what I could personally accomplish. And, finally, when I undertook, instead of ineffectual written explanations, actually to give a living example of what I had been striving for—undertook, amid extraordinary difficulties, the production of a German musical and dramatic art-work, in the magnificent manner befitting it, and in a place especially constructed for it at Bayreuth—these friends rallied about me with efficient aid. The occasion of the first great festival—the performance of my "Ring of the Nibelungen" in the year 1876—united them into an independent league or society, which especially set itself apart from the body of the nation, to further the continuance and development of my undertaking.

If I should wish in any way or at any time to give expression to my wishes in regard to our art, or to explain the reasons which had led me to hold these wishes, and which continually confirmed me in them, it was natural that such expression should be addressed only to the members of this society—the *Bayreuther Patronatsverein*. The journal published by the society for the special purpose of these—to a certain extent private—communications, and restricted exclusively to the use of its members—the "*Bayreuther Blätter*,"—seemed, of course, the only proper organ for me to use in all such cases. It required, therefore, an appeal from another world—from beyond the ocean, from the so-called "new" world of America—to induce me to allow my name once more to appear elsewhere, in a public periodical, and attached to a new explanation of my aims in art. The "old" world, and especially that part of it included in our new Germany, will hear no more from me directly on this subject.

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In my artistic efforts I did not have in mind myself and my own works alone, but a vital need of our whole noblest national art; nor was it simply the wretched condition of this latter which fixed my attention. That condition had early led me to look most seriously into the influences that controlled our whole civilization, and, from a critical examination of this civilization, to begin a most thorough discussion of the possibility of essentially changing the existing order of things. Only such a change seemed to me to promise a free field for the complete success and prosperity of art. I could not conceive of a national art entirely separated from the basis of our national culture; and this culture, the sum total of all the elements in Germany's political and social state, appeared to me, from an early point in my study of it, to be something unnatural, narrow, weak, incapable of producing the true realization of any great national idea—in a word, to be something altogether *un-German*.

Now and then my eyes turned from the saddening recognition of these surroundings in my own country, and were directed by some encouraging signs toward the land beyond the ocean. There it seemed as though the Germanic spirit, in untrammelled development, were about to open to us a new realm for the exercise of its unconquerable vigor and strength. The great overplus of this strength, as we see it there let loose for the vast untouched work of a civilization that has as yet no history behind it, may well make us often shrink back alarmed, and lead us to think that culture in our sense—culture which can only reach its ideal height in a great development of art—must be irreconcilable with such forces. Yet in spite of this such a glance toward the New World always awakened hope in me, as hope is always aroused when one looks at anything really strong. It may be that a long time must still pass in toil and care for the needs of the moment, before the great period of a fully rounded civilization will be reached; but how much is already gained in the single fact that the German mind can there develop in activity and freedom, unoppressed by the wretched burdens left upon it by a melancholy history! When, with the gradual establishment of the needful quiet in social and political relations, all the evils connected with the work of civilizing, but not inherited from the past, shall one by one drop away—then, it may be hoped, a new civilization will grow up upon the field so energetically and securely won. Such a civilization will then be able to turn with like strength and freedom, and with a greatness of spirit born of successfully gained and general material prosperity, [110] toward *ideal* aims also; so that it is there, perhaps, that the Germanic mind will once more attain to the full glory of an art that is all its own.

What serves to strengthen this daring and far-reaching hope is the recollection of a law of history that has often before been verified. If we look back into the remote past of our people, we shall see how precisely those Teutonic races which broke away from the soil of their own land, and emigrated beyond its borders into strange countries, were the ones to display most powerfully the incomparable strength and greatness of the Teutonic family, in unexampled conquests, brilliant and daring deeds, and all-important results. Even where their quickly-won rule over a foreign country has outwardly been overturned after a little time, or where their peculiar character has lost its independent and distinctive traits and expression by amalgamation with a foreign people—even there their immigration has had a decisive influence on the future development of the mind of that people and that country. At this day the two great civilized nations of England and France, and, in the three great Latin regions of Europe, the provinces of Normandy, Lombardy, and Andalusia, bear names derived from the first German emigrants—the Vandals, Lombards, Normans, Franks, and Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons especially, above and beyond all others, succeeded in founding, upon the wonderful Celtic islands which they conquered, a really Germanic civilization. Even now this civilization shows itself as the true development of the English *people*, though the Gallicized Norman nobility have ruled for nearly a thousand years over the Saxon race of England. Certainly it is a true Germanic race that has gone forth from its English home, and,

continually recruited by emigrants from the mother-country of Germany, is working out the future of America. It shows in this its old habit—it shows itself in its true strength and greatness on a foreign soil, thrown upon its own activity and energy, and compelled to build up a new self-sustaining community. On the other hand, that part of the race which has remained in Germany—that part which bore the special, distinctive name of Germans, and even in the old days staid quietly at home—has always represented the peculiar type of the German "Philistine." He lets himself be hampered and hemmed in on every side; and lives out his long tale of little woes, in pettiness and wretchedness, amid continual bickerings with neighbors like himself.

But there is one growth that has come again and again from this [111] marvelous mother-race; which has sprung from it like some mighty miraculous birth; and that is, the great *individual* German—the *Great Man*, standing alone in strange, majestic isolation, as only Germany has given him being—as she has brought him forth especially, to the amazement of the world, in the domain of *Art*—that art which otherwise has gained in Germany so small a foothold. Think of the line of mighty German poets and musicians! Though they lived all their lives as strangers amid the hostility of their countrymen, it was they, nevertheless, through whom the true German mind exercised an influence beyond the boundaries of its own land. Even there, in the outside world, it could act upon that old strain of German blood that runs through all the nations. The ideal strength of the Germanic spirit shows continually that it is a strength not national but *inter-national*; and it preserves for the great mother-stem of the race the esteem and honor of the countries of the world.

But those peaceful German world-conquerors who have migrated from Europe to the land beyond the sea, to found there a new civilization and to labor for its development—they at least can find their noble prototypes in the great masters in their native country, who fought their way successfully, amid evils and obstacles of every kind, to that ideal freedom in which only the genius of the Germanic race can be fully revealed. In this sense, a Goethe and a Beethoven should seem to the reverential gaze of the young Teutonic peoples, far away in the New World, like the figures of their national gods and heroes—to remind them that they must never fail to let the immortal spirit of these men work with them, in the necessary ideal completion of the civilization they are building up.

Whoever has given any attention to my own career, and has gathered from my occasional writings some idea of my character and its development, will easily understand that I was precisely the one, among my German countrymen, who must have felt most vehemently the longing for such a new birth of German civilization—somewhere and at some time. The longer I lived, the more I saw the fading away of that vivid memory of our true German culture, which, at the beginning of this century, it seemed that the mighty strength of our great artists was about to awaken and lead to great results. Wider and wider spread before my eyes the heterogeneous web of a civilization entirely foreign to the German race—a web that glittered with two changing colors, the sallow hue of the Restoration, in the old French sense of an oligarchy of [112] petty rulers, and the red hue of Revolution, in the new (and equally French) sense of "Liberty." The interweaving and arrangement of these two textures seemed to me to be undertaken by a third foreign constituent of our national life—that Jewish element whose influence was continually on the increase. How different had been the future of German culture as Young Germany might have imagined it at the period in which I was born! Until that period it had been possible to include all higher civilization within the meaning of the word "Renaissance"—a fresh awakening, by which reminiscences of the antique were revived and transformed, and clothed in new garments—most exquisitely and attractively, perhaps, in the form they took among the French. The German people, too, as it began to emerge from the long misery of the Thirty Years' War, saw, at the courts of its many princes, the great waste left by the death of its truly national life gradually hidden by an imitation of

the sumptuous splendors of Versailles. But all that was really German seemed utterly buried beneath it, when suddenly the genius of the German race awoke anew out of its stupor, in the persons and works of great poets and musicians. Suddenly there sprang up the heroes of the great German revival. This great reawakening is the only movement that can be placed on an equality with the European conception of the Renaissance, and through it our Goethe and Schiller, Mozart and Beethoven, once more revealed the great German element in their glorious art-creations. They found no great public, no nation, to which they could speak in its own language. But in themselves the great national spirit was aroused in renewed vigor, and only some important historical event was necessary, to make it take form in deeds amid some great popular need or popular enthusiasm, and to lay the most hopeful foundation for a truly national civilization. This condition seemed to be fulfilled in the great "War of Liberation" against the world-conquering French Cæsar, who was himself the representative of a foreign culture. In the year of my birth (1813) the spirit of the Germanic race fought the great battle of nations that occurred near my birthplace, Leipsic. It fought to sustain German rulers, who had hitherto only misunderstood and tyrannized over it. And now it stood—it, the misconceived and oppressed—suddenly revealed again as a power in the world; greater than the mighty conqueror, nobler than the civilization which at that day ruled the nations, and which had its highest type in that victorious emperor. It was the same spirit which, through our great masters, had already wonderfully [113] aroused the youth of that people which had so long forgotten it, and had inspired them for the great deed of liberating their country, frowned upon and opposed though they were by those about them. Upon this strong foundation of Germanism the German rulers could build their thrones as strongly and safely as though they built for all eternity; for it had the strength of absolute loyalty—of the true Germanic love of the people for its princes—a love which needs no mediators.

It was at this very time of the great struggle and victory, that the greatest of the masters lived—those in whom the spirit of this conquering force had shown itself anew. Goethe and Beethoven were still alive; and in Weber's pure and noble strains the young genius of Germany took possession of the stage in the inspiring sounds of music. Thus this revival of the Germanic spirit need not have lacked, at the moment of completing its work of founding an independent political civilization, the noble aid of being able to reveal itself in living energy in the domain of *art* also. Indeed, this artistic development would for the first time, upheld by political power, have taken on its most perfect *national* form, which before, isolated as it was, it had never been able to assume. It is only through the stage that a national art can become truly the property of the people; and only when the great part which belongs to the stage in popularizing and embodying art is properly secured to it, can this art attain to a full and free national life in other branches. A true, living, national drama, elevated to the height of an artistic ideal, is the real, pure, invigorating source of all other national art-life, and the most complete expression of national culture. Thus the wretched condition of the modern European stage, thoroughly unnational and inartistic, and supplied from the sweepings of the lower class French theatres, is one of the surest gauges of the spirit of modern European civilization in general.

Goethe and Schiller had also striven to develop the spirit of the people by means of the stage; but they were compelled to work far in advance of the theatre's capabilities, as it existed in their time; and it would have been the part of the stage to follow after them—just as the German princes had had to follow hurriedly after the political spirit that had run before them, in order to secure to themselves the element of strength that it furnished. But when at length German *music* succeeded in inspiring the stage to a complete revival by breathing into it the breath of a new life, this was the decisive moment when an intelligent support of native art, by a [114] power as truly national, should have given the surest confirmation of the victory of German culture over foreign civilization. That this *did* not happen and *could* not

happen, showed on the other hand that the regenerated German spirit, in a restored German state, had suffered a most disastrous defeat, from which it has never been able to recover.

The victorious end of the great conflict had preserved for the people its own rulers; and the youth of the country, purified by its baptism of brave deeds, now showed itself ready and filled with lofty enthusiasm, for a worthy work of peace—prepared to help the princes to whom its efforts had secured their thrones, in developing a true German life among their people. In the associations of these young men, returning from the turmoil of war to their studies at the universities, there lived the noble spirit of their beloved Schiller, now first accomplishing its real results—laboring everywhere to purify the morals of the people—to ennoble alike their inner and outward life. Up to this time the rough coarseness of the vagabond mercenaries of the Thirty Years' war had prevailed and been transmitted among the German students—their method, in the societies they called their "Landmannschaften," of protesting noisily against the Frenchified civilization of the Philistines. But now this barbaric spirit was banished from the more serious temper of a youth inspired by the great works of their country's classic writers, and hardened by the battles of the war of liberation—men in the old-German blouses of the Burschenschaft, under which beat pure and fiery German hearts. In the place of the old coarseness and brutality, were set a healthy vigor and the true enthusiasm of the new-born national life. The rescued princes, amid their own diplomatic peace-making, saw all this, and were alarmed at this new strength. They had thought of nothing but the restoration of the Bourbon system and of the spirit of despotism on the thrones of Europe, with which the light-hearted Congress of Vienna, after all the long terrors of the war, had thought it could easiest settle all the troubles of the day—at the same time securing for the ruling powers the return of all those pomps and pleasures which the end of the last century seemed to have buried for ever. And now all at once the terrible spirit of the great French Revolution, to which all those princely pleasures had fallen victim, seemed about to reappear in their own country: the "deutscher Jüngling" was looked upon as a Jacobin; and the *fear* of a national spirit thus misconceived and misinterpreted was the only thing which the rulers of [115] the time seemed to have learned from these hopeful beginnings of a national revival. The wretched, stupefying period of Reaction began; the hunting down of demagogues laid waste our country just as it was springing into fresh national life. At a time when Beethoven was composing his last and greatest works, when Weber's "Freischütz," "Euryanthe," and "Oberon" were coming into being, when Goethe was finishing his "Faust"—at such a time, just after the mightiest uprising of the national spirit for the liberation of the Fatherland, we are confronted with this picture of complete oppression of everything German, of the entire destruction of every living nucleus for the development of a domestic or political national life. The great manifestation of the national genius in the works of those mighty masters remains without a trace of influence upon the further history of the nation. Between the people and their art, as between the people and their princes, a mutual misunderstanding, the German's misunderstanding even of himself, kept alive by fear and repression, and continually growing greater and greater, has raised a barrier that shuts out light and air from both alike. From this time on there is no true German life, no real German history.

Precisely what the German rulers had been led to fear by their pitiable misconception of the noble aspirations of Young Germany, became, through their own policy, which cut the very ground from under their feet, a thing seriously to *be* feared. The German youth, mistaken for a "Jacobin," must of necessity be driven by this policy into a kind of counterfeit Jacobinism. The spirit of freedom was once for all aroused, and was striving to realize its aims. If it could not do this in a way befitting the genius of the nation and the nation's needs, there were the new *international* methods to offer it a welcome channel for its expression. Naturally and independently developed in true German fashion, out of the nobly enthusiastic heart of Young Germany, it might have helped the country to a true national culture,

embodying all that was best in it. The old beautiful loyalty between prince and people might have been revived in its full vigor. But the idea of liberty came with its foreign signification, as a *resistance* to something, and in this form secretly took more and more hold upon the minds of Germans, who no longer had a Fatherland in which they could feel themselves at home. The French idea of *revolution*, proclaiming itself as a kind of international panacea, began to seem the true way to be rid of every national evil, and was exchanged, in the minds of the German people, longing for an ideal freedom, for the significance—so shamefully [116] misunderstood— of the real revival of national feeling. If the normal and healthy influence of its own strength was repressed in Germany, this external foreign influence made its way the more easily. When the revolutionary tempests of 1830 broke out in the metropolis of the west—the city that still ruled the world—and among the restless, rebellious Slavic peoples of the east, this element began in earnest to threaten the ruling powers of Germany, hardly yet secure upon their thrones, with that dreaded destruction which, if successful, it must certainly have brought to the last vestiges of German thought, German life, and German art.

It was at this eventful time, at the beginning of the fourth decade of our century, that, as a boy of seventeen, I made my first real entry into life; to feel, with all the strength of a peculiarly receptive nature, all the wonderful impressions it conveyed. I was never a marvel of musical precocity; at a very early age a taste for poetry had struggled with a taste for music, for the mastery in my mind. It was only the knowledge of Beethoven's symphonies, gained when I was a boy of fifteen, that first decided me finally and passionately in favor of music; though it had always (especially through Weber's "Freischütz") had the strongest effect upon me. In my boyhood, which was passed in Dresden, I had seen the revered composer of this incomparable work (Weber was then a Kapellmeister in the city), and had even met him at our house; and the touching picture of his spiritual, shadowy figure, joined with the powerful, vivid effect of his composition as I had heard it on the stage, had left upon my mind an impression too deep to be forgotten. Beethoven's symphonies, to which, though entirely without any special musical study, I devoted myself with passionate enthusiasm, finally gave music in my eyes a fairly supernatural power (*eine ganz dämonische Macht*), which, it seemed to me, I could not measure by any ordinary outward standard. Their harmonies and movements appeared to me rather like ghostly, spiritual forces, which seemed to address themselves to me individually, and to take on the most fantastic shapes. The knowledge taught me as pedantically and dryly as possible at school was, of course, of no avail against a power of such strange fascinations. I had suddenly become a musician, though, at the same time, my instinct of poetic imitation, which I had even as a child practiced on Shakespeare and the antique tragedies, did not quite leave me. It sought rather to pay a tribute, however small, in the shape of some *libretti* which I composed, to the mighty Dæmon of music that had so taken possession of me.

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Returning to my native city of Leipsic, and for the first time really beginning life there, I saw with amazement how great had been the effects, even there, of the Paris Revolution of July, 1830—effects which showed themselves in students' insurrections and in riots among the working classes. My young blood, for the first time fully aroused, hurried me into the ranks of the students, whose society seemed to me a marvelous realization of my ideas of liberty and vigor, and among whom I soon had a right to count myself as a regularly professed student of music. At the same time the Polish insurrection also began to have its exciting effect upon me. Polish emigrants, haughty, handsome men, who fascinated me and filled me with the deepest sympathy for the sad fate of their country, came to Leipsic, and I became acquainted with numbers of them. All this wrought more and more upon my mind, both in fancy and reality.

Meanwhile I had ventured into the light of publicity as a composer. The impressions of Weber's and Beethoven's music, which were so vivid a part of my being, and stimulated me to attempts at imitation, were not, as I had soon to confess, so easily to be reproduced in any reasonably adequate way, without a regular study of musical *theory*. At length, therefore, I threw myself into this study with an ardor that in a relatively short time gave me complete self-reliance in the use of musical laws and forms. My first opera, "The Fairies," which I now composed, to a text written by myself from a legend by Gozzi, was entirely in the romantic style of Weber and Marschner. But the high art-ideals which I held were soon to receive an irresistible shock from the increasing influences of real life. The same elements which had only appealed to my fancy in the results of the revolutionary movements in the countries about me, now roused my over-fiery youthful blood as I found them again in the works of Heinse, which I had begun to read with great avidity. He was the apostle of a kind of unlimited æsthetic sensuousness; and I gained the same ideas from my acquaintance with that new school of "young German" literature, which attacked with fiery vehemence the life of *old* Germany, now exhausted and moribund under the weight of political oppression. One writer of this school, Heinrich Laube, the author of "Young Europe," was at that time my personal friend.

Added to all this came the impression made upon me by a benefit-performance given in Leipsic by the great dramatic artist Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, whose talents converted Bellini's [118] "Romeo"—a work in itself destitute of every trace of the strength which had attracted me in my favorite German composer—into a performance of the highest dramatic merit. Such experiences opened my eyes to the realities about me. I had been forced to the discovery that those works which had had such a wondrous, vivid existence in my own imagination, became, in the hands of the actual representatives of my art, mere dead, colorless, and lifeless ghosts, which were powerless to impress my ardent temperament, craving fresh, vigorous realities. This was hopelessly evident to me, and struck me with new force, at a performance which I heard of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, that mystic source of what had been my highest ecstasies—a performance given under the lead of a Kapellmeister of the famous Leipsic Gewandhaus concerts. But now at last I saw upon the stage, ranged in opposition to this pitiable state of serious German art in general, a new element, pulsating with new fire—an element such as I longed for, let its artistic value be what it might. In the form of a great artist this element possessed all the possibility of such artistic impressions as I had never seen produced in the spiritless performance of even our greatest masterpieces.

Under the influence of this storm of superabundant youthful vitality I passed into the period in which it may be said that I sowed my musical "wild oats"—a phase which I can not call a change in my character or even taste, but rather an awakening to the importance of what was living and vigorous. The result of this condition was the writing and composition of a second opera—this time entirely in the French and even in the Italian style—the "Love-Veto"—a wild, revolutionary, recklessly sensuous transformation of Shakespeare's serious "Measure for Measure." Music had now become a living thing to me, instead of a mystery; but how different a thing from what, in the days when it had seemed a mystery, I had imagined it! And yet this new life which it had assumed, by transferring it to the actual stage of a theatre, accomplished precisely what I had longed for in that earlier time. What I had still to attain was the true *ideal form* in which this new life, so indispensable to the perfection of my art, must be embodied.

I now began the practical professional life of a musician, as conductor at some of the city theatres, and had ample opportunity to revel at pleasure in my new element. I found myself ardently absorbing the fresh, light, and volatile art of the day, to reproduce it with equal ardor in my own work. Thus, even within the narrow [119] limits in which I then moved, I lived over again in my own person the history of the whole spirit of the time, as it found

characteristic expression in the art and literature around me. Modern literature had broken completely with all that was old, great, and venerable—elements which seemed to it to be part and parcel of that dishonored and despised Germany of the past which it was seeking to change so completely. The last vestiges of the true Germanic character, which, in a form full of idealism, art, and genius, had attempted, through the writings of the romantic school, to make an oasis in the great national desert, were scoffed at and rooted out by the revolutionary spirit of criticism that came to us from the West. It is particularly characteristic of this movement that the two most famous and talented writers of this period of destruction, Borne and Heine, were not of German origin, but came from that race of mediators and negotiators whose influence was from this time to spread its truly "international" power more and more widely over Germany. But not these writers alone furthered this tendency. The so-called "young Germans" also tried, in their many-volumed romances, to stamp the foreign element which brought this new, fresh movement into our moribund literature, as that veritable modern "international" spirit, whose chosen "champions" they so boldly declared themselves.

This movement was to have still greater successes and results in the domain of music. Here the foreign, un-German element had been a decided—even an unresisted—victor over the few imitative, distorted remnants of our great national art. The lively, sparkling compositions of Auber and Rossini, the best fruits of the French and Italian style, now ruled the German stage; works in which really national characteristics and great talents found most charming expression, and which culminated in the musical glorification of the idea of revolution, as in "La Muette de Portici" (*Masaniello*) and in "William Tell." But this was not enough. That race of go-betweens must once more, and at exactly the right moment, give us a man of peculiar talents, whose task it was to complete the estrangement of the Germans from the art that was peculiarly their own. This man—who put upon the stage, with every appliance of show and glitter, and with all the refinements of theatrical effect, the highest development of the most effective modern art-elements—a *Mischmasch* of all styles and methods in the form of the great "Historical Opera"—this man was Meyerbeer. From Beethoven's symphonies to Meyerbeer's opera—what a fearful stride is this! [120] But how could the German of that day fail to take it, even with enthusiasm, after his whole national character and being had been so utterly destroyed or taken away from him during those years that had passed since the war of liberation, that Beethoven's German music must seem to him something entirely foreign; something without effect upon him; something eccentric and repellent; the extreme extravagance of an isolated man overweighted by his genius; something the imitation or development of which was to be fearfully and carefully avoided? The German mind, losing more and more of its better self, fairly detested his latest artistic productions. It let Weber die in a foreign land among strangers; it laid away in the dusty corners of its libraries Goethe's now completed "Faust," as a dry, unintelligible jumble of mysteries written by a poet of the last century, grown old amid the atmosphere of courts; and now it deserted Beethoven, whom it pronounced a mere madman, for Meyerbeer, whom it declared the greatest of modern geniuses, and reveled amid the "revolutionary" music of "The Huguenots," in dreams of a coming day of freedom for itself—taking the doubtfully religious flavor of the work as a bit of piquant historic spice which the author had infused into it.

But though in this department of art there was now nothing but coarseness and triviality, there was another direction in which a finer taste and a real artistic talent revived among us, and did *its* best, also, to settle our account with the great past—a past which it found rather uncomfortable to look back upon. Here, too, a member of that ubiquitous, talented race took the lead. Mendelssohn undertook with his delicate hand—his exquisite special talent for a kind of musical landscape-painting—to lead the educated classes of Germany as far away from the dreaded and misunderstood extravagances of a Beethoven, and from the sublime prospect opened to national art by his later works, as from those rude theatrical orgies which

his more refined taste so detested in the historical opera of his fellow-Hebrew. He was the savior of music in the *salon*—and with him the concert-room, and now and then even the church, did duty as a *salon* also. Amid all the tempests of revolution he gave to his art a delicate, smooth, quiet, cool, and agreeably tranquil form that excited nobody, and had no aim but to please the modern cultivated taste, and to give it occasionally, amid the shifting and turmoil of the times, the consolation of a little pleasing and elegant entertainment. A new idea in art was developed—the embodiment in it of a graceful, good-society element, [121] quite foreign to the nation's character and social life. Soon, however, this kind of art, which had been received with a general and joyful welcome, ventured out of the narrow limits of that talent which was so well fitted to represent it, to attempt to assume the larger forms used by the great geniuses of an earlier period. It attracted to these aims that feebly defined yet really earnest and meditative kind of German talent that still existed; and Robert Schumann, a tasteful composer of little spirited and pleasant songs and pieces for the piano-forte—a *genre* painter to the other's landscape—now began to write symphonies, oratorios, and operas. The educated German—who no longer believed in a great living national art, but in his vague longing for political freedom was very fond of using empty phrases about the now forgotten "German element"—saw in these works the noble achievements of a truly reawakened "German art-spirit"; and, contrasting them with the prevailing crude realism and trivial sensuousness of the "international" art which he saw presented to the public, he felt himself bound to admire them enthusiastically when he heard them performed in the more exclusive concert-room. Thus the German intellect degenerated into a condition of complete unproductiveness in art, severing the living and active bonds that bound it to a great national past, and undertaking to create, unaided, an art intended only for "amateurs" and "connoisseurs."

I could not feel myself drawn toward such an art. The crudest realism that contained an element of true strength had more attraction for me—seemed more at one with my ideas. Even the "great historical opera," the culminating point of the foreign taste that had migrated into Germany, where it had been transformed into the very reverse of its original form, and had taken on much that was repulsive and unnatural—even this caught my attention for a time. I saw in it the greatest development that the rich accessories of art could attain, in the effort to produce a combined dramatic and musical effect; and even this was higher than mere tediousness and emptiness. I did not yet appreciate the fact that this whole school must, of necessity, be wanting in all *ideal* tendencies; I thought that this want resulted only from the erroneous method of one particular artist. I endeavored to elevate myself above the triviality and coarseness of this strangely attractive phase of art; and with this aim I wrote and composed my "Rienzi" in the same form—as an historic opera—and with an even greater use of all possible theatrical effects. The same revolutionary fire showed in [122] it that had blazed so fiercely and recklessly in my "Love-Veto"; but it had become a clearer flame, and my hero could really be considered an ideal personage, whom it was only necessary to compare with Meyerbeer's "Prophet" to see whither my artistic instincts were leading me. But, as they always led me toward something real and *living*, they necessarily led me *away* from my German fatherland. There I saw no possible chance for the production of my new work—only fitted, as it was, to be produced upon the largest scale, and with the most ample accessories. What was this Germany to me, whose most important and most vigorous works were, after all, only importations from abroad? The desire seized me to go myself into the outside world whence these things came; impelled me—and this is especially characteristic of my whole feeling—to go straight to the center of this modern life—to Paris itself. It was there that my eyes were to be opened to the sacrifice that I had made to the tendencies of the day; and there, too, that I was to become fully conscious of that longing for the *ideal* which was already awakening within me, and which was later to bring me to my home again, and to

bring my home to me.

Almost entirely without money, and with hardly even the necessary acquaintance with the French language, I started, under the impulse of my hasty decision, and reached my goal after an extraordinarily protracted voyage, in a sailing ship, from the Russian shore of the Baltic by way of England. How soon I had to realize that here in Paris it was literally impossible for a stranger, without means or introduction, to make himself known in any way! After countless vain attempts to gain a hearing from influential people, I was glad to barely support life by the most menial labor. My great opera, the goal of my wishes, still hovered before me, with all its seductive splendors, during this time of utter wretchedness and poverty; I saw about me the very rich and brilliant accessories I needed for it; but saw them thrown away on the enviably exact and correct production of petty and artificial art-works, and ruled by the useless dilettantism of spiritless music. Of any real living element of national feeling, such as is embodied in a truly noble art, I found nothing here any more than elsewhere; the spirit that had penetrated from abroad like a life-giving current into my own sadly lifeless country seemed here to be fenced about with conventional forms, to be inaccessible to every one who was not fortunate enough to belong among the *protégés* of the powers which alone controlled all art matters. It grew more and more obvious to me [123] that it was impossible to infuse any ideal element into institutions so encompassed with inartistic conventionalities; and the better spirit in me—which I could only think of as the spirit of our great German school of music—rebelled more and more against them. The revolutionary feeling of the time now took once for all a different turn, and changed into an uncontrollable spirit of revolt against the methods employed in the public administration of art matters. And in this—where, alone among strangers as I was, I must have given myself up for lost without some powerful help—the Fatherland I had left and forgotten came to my aid.

In this foreign land I heard for the first time, under Habeneck's admirable leadership at the Conservatoire, really finished performances of Beethoven's symphonies. The long-lost wonder-world of my youth opened again to my manhood, seeming once more like a blessed reality amid a maze of shifting, ghostly dreams. Inspired by such experiences, I again composed a serious symphonic work in the pure German style—"A Faust Overture" (*eine Faust Ouvertüre*), and began the writing and composition of a new and dramatic work—thoroughly romantic and thoroughly German in spirit—which I finished in an extraordinarily short time. On the voyage to England, along the Scandinavian coast, I had heard for the first time from the sailors the remarkable legend of the "Flying Dutchman"—that ghostly mariner, compelled by a terrible curse to wander over the seas, ever seeking for home, and seeking it in vain. I felt myself overcome by the same fearful loneliness in the midst of the great ocean of a foreign land, and filled with a mighty longing for the home that now seemed to me transformed and glorified. The adaptation of this romantic legend led me into a new direction in my artistic development—a direction which was truly German and truly ideal, and in which a singular stroke of fortune was soon to help me on still farther. For here, among strangers, I was for the first time to become acquainted with the great world of German legend. I read the story of "Tannhäuser," and this sympathetic, tragic figure made a powerful impression upon me, and showed me—especially when I connected it with the "Sängerkrieg" on the Wartburg—the possible material of a great, seriously-conceived musical drama. I also read the old German poem on this "Sängerkrieg," and found added to it the legend of Lohengrin. A new world opened before me. Here was the *ideal form* suddenly offered to me in all its glory—that form which, in the world about me, however brilliant and great it seemed, could have so little part [124] in the productions of that popular and only school of art which I saw prevailed both in the drama and in music. Here were suddenly revealed, in their true artistic form, the noblest, most characteristic, deepest, and strongest elements of the primal Germanic spirit.

The work which I conceived could never take its place, I knew, upon a stage controlled by the world-ruling "grand opera," could never find its production in this place to which my madness had brought me—this center of a modern life which was satisfied with the art it found there. It was on German soil, the soil of my own home, toward which I was now drawn by the most passionate longing, that the art I dreamed of could alone take root. I had yet to learn that this home was but an ideal which existed only in my imagination, and which the reality was very far from fulfilling.

And now a most miraculous thing happened. In the midst of my longing there actually came from Germany a summons—to me, the utterly unknown! My "Rienzi," which I had sent home in despair—my work that I had composed only with a view to its performance abroad, and that I had already given up—had brought me into notice in Germany. In Dresden, where my beloved master, Weber, had lived and labored, my opera had been accepted and was to be brought out at once. And the German artist, now a man of thirty, hastily gathered together the results of his experience in the foreign capital, and carrying with him "The Flying Dutchman" and the schemes of "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin," hurried back, filled with happy hopes, across the Rhine to his now regained Fatherland.

Richard Wagner.