
The Wagner Music-Drama

By Henry T. Finck



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The Wagner Music-Drama

WHETHER we admit or not the first dogma of the Wagner creed, that the individual arts have in past times reached their highest possible degree of development, and that the highest art-work of the future is to consist in a union of the arts, we must all agree that the occasion on which this doctrine was first brought to a fair trial at Bayreuth last summer, in full accordance with the ideal of its author, is to be regarded as the most important musical event in this age of festivals, if not in all the history of music.

It was evident that if the Bayreuth Festival should fail, it could not be because the composer did not have his own way in everything. The choice of the city for the performance of his stage-play, the situation, architecture, and internal arrangements of the theatre, the selection of the vocal and instrumental artists from the best that the German stage affords, and the supervision at the rehearsals of the whole performance, down to the smallest details, were all subject to his own will and control; and when we consider the character of the audience that had gathered from all quarters of the globe, from Egypt and St. Petersburg to New York and San Francisco,—Germany, America, England, France, Russia, and Italy being represented in the order given,—an audience headed by two emperors and one king, a whole host of dukes and grand dukes, about one hundred *capellmeisters*, and as many critics and authors, the list of *literati* and artists including such names as Mosenthal, Frenzel, Bodenstedt, Menzel, Leubach, Joseph and Nicolas Rubinstein, Marianne Brandt, Anna Mehlig, and so on, *ad libitum*, we must admit the truth of the remark of Hanslick, that this time the mountain had to go to the prophet.

Of the difficulties which stood in the way of the Bayreuth Festival we can form some idea from the fact that in 1862 Wagner had given up all hope of surviving the performance of his Tetralogy, as he tells us in the preface to the first edition of the poems of the Ring. Many were the hostile factors that had to be overcome, for he appeared in the character of a reformer; and next to religion art is the domain of human interests in which proposed reforms and innovations are most vigorously opposed and resented. To bring these reforms before the eyes of the public under the most favorable circumstances possible, or, in other words, to show the difference between the old opera and the new music-drama, may be regarded as the principal object of the Bayreuth Festival of last year. In consideration also of the incomplete manner in which Wagner's works had previously been brought on the stage, and of the defective style of their performance, it was desirable that of his *chef-d'œuvre*, at least, there should be a series of *model performances*. Not to speak of America and England, where Lohengrin and Tannhäuser are [604] simply reduced to farces by the Italian version of the text, in Germany, even, the almost universal faults of operatic performances are the defective articulation of the words by the singers, the barbaric cutting down and altering of the score by unconscientious capellmeisters, and the neglect of artistic and logical dramatic acting by the vocalist, who addresses his songs to the audience instead of endeavoring to keep up the illusions of the play. It was in these points that Bayreuth performances contrasted so favorably with ordinary performances. A special notice was put up behind the scenes, among other things requesting the vocalists never to address the public.

The festival of last year was not meant to be an isolated phenomenon in the history of music, but the first of a series of festivals, to recur at intervals of one or more years. Bayreuth is to become the Olympia of modern dramatic art, the rendezvous of the first artists in the country, who are to unite in the performance of works of art of sufficient originality and merit to justify their production in such a manner. The style of execution is to receive special attention, and thus a tradition of style will be gradually brought about, which cannot fail to

react favorably on the theatres represented. It is admitted that the German stage was corrupted by the opera; it can now be regenerated through the influence of the music-drama: thus the national theatre at Bayreuth will become a sort of musical university for advanced pupils, with the great composers as teachers, and the lovers of music of all nations as an audience at the annual public recitals. In details of dramatic action much improvement was made; at the rehearsals Wagner paid particular attention to this point, and was constantly active on the stage, showing by example how this or that ought to be done.

The rehearsals covered the space of three months, and, without counting frequent repetitions of individual scenes and passages, embraced twelve performances of the whole Ring,—a tremendous task for the vocalists and musicians; and it was a subject of general surprise that, with the exception of the case of Unger as Siegfried, scarcely any traces of fatigue were noticeable in the last series of performances. The enthusiasm for the work and cause must account for this. The genuine interest which all the distinguished performers took in the Tetralogy, apart from all selfish considerations, is something unique in the history of the stage. It led them to volunteer their services freely, and to sacrifice their whole summer vacation; and some of them compromised their dignity as soloists so far as to sing in the chorus of men, in the *Götterdämmerung*. The wild chorus of the Walküren owed much of its magical effect to the voices of the *prime donne* who took part in it behind the scenes. The members of the orchestra, almost all soloists, consented to give up all individuality and chance of being personally noticed, by burying themselves in the "mystic abyss," out of sight of the audience.

About the Wagner theatre, or *Bühnenfestspielhaus*, as it is officially called, so much has been written that I will not enter into a detailed description of it. If the expression be allowed, Wagner may be said to have a genius for originality. To attain that naturalness and perfect illusion which are necessary for the full enjoyment of a work of art, he introduced in his theatre a number of new and striking devices. Unanimous was the approval of the arrangement just referred to, by which the movements of the orchestra were made invisible; the advantages resulting from it were that it greatly aided the illusion, that the vocalists were not overpowered or "degraded into an inferior position," that the objection "too much brass" was done away with, and that the instruments blended much better with one another, while each one retained its individuality. Emperor William himself requested to be shown into the mystic abyss where "his court musicians had to sweat;" for the locality has the one disadvantage of being insufferably hot, so hot that some of the musicians have sworn they will not come another year unless arrangements are made for the introduction [605] of fresh air without a draught. A trumpet signal, consisting of a prominent "motive" of the drama for the evening, announces that the performance is to begin; a second signal, within, signifies that the seats must be taken at once, and simultaneously all the lights are turned down to prevent reading of text-books and scores, so that full attention is secured for the scenic impressions and dramatic actions which, Wagner insists, are as essential factors in the music-drama as the libretto and the music itself. The seats, arranged as in a segment of the Greek amphitheatre, are of almost equal excellence for seeing and hearing, and very commodious, so that when the curtain is divided in the middle, "as by invisible hands," and the scene is revealed, there is nothing to remind one of one's material existence, or of the fact that one is in a theatre. The illusion is complete. One more praiseworthy arrangement I will mention. The performances began at four in the afternoon, and after the trumpet signal five minutes' grace was allowed; then the twelve doors were closed against all, beyond appeal, so that the hearer might without disturbance enjoy the orchestral preludes so magnificently played, and so important as exponents of the prevailing sentiment of the coining act. On the first Walküre night, poor Rothschild arrived too late, either because he had found the price of a carriage beyond his means, or because he had been delayed by investing in the luxury of a ham sandwich; all his

wealth failed to procure him admission to the first act of the *Walküre*.

It is well known that Wagner, finding the old German *Nibelungenlied* insufficient for his purpose, gathered the material for the first three dramas of his Tetralogy from the *Edda*, a collection of Northern myths; the fourth drama, *Götterdämmerung* only, is based upon the *Nibelungenlied*. In skillfully tracing the lost connecting thread of the confused mass of legends, and uniting them into a continuous dramatic narrative, filling up lacunæ from his own imagination, and embellishing the whole with poetic fancies, he rendered a service to German mythology which the great German philologists have not been slow in acknowledging. The thread upon which the innumerable incidents of the plot of the *Ring des Nibelungen* are strung is, very briefly, as follows: the gold, the Rhine gold, originally rested on the bed of the Rhine, guarded by three water nymphs, the Rhine daughters. Three races, the gods, the giants, and the Nibelungen, contended for the possession of it, and through it for the mastery of the world. The Nibelungen were a race of dwarfs who dwelt in Nibelheim, in subterranean caves; they wrought in precious metals and amassed wonderful treasures. One of them, Alberich, obtained the gold, and made it into a ring, by means of which he became master of his race and of their inestimable treasures, the chief of which was the *Tarnhelm*, or magic helmet, which conferred upon its possessor the power of transforming himself into any shape he pleased. Wotan, king of the gods, made a contract with two giants, Fasolt and Fafner, that they should build a citadel from which the gods could safely rule the world, promising them as a reward Freia, the goddess of youth and beauty. But after the castle was finished, Wotan refused to give up Freia. The giants demanded the Nibelungen treasures as a substitute; these Wotan obtained from Alberich by strategy, and gave them to the giants. Fafner, in the shape of an immense dragon, henceforth guarded these treasures, including the ring and the *Tarnhelm*. Before Alberich parted with the ring, he laid a curse upon it: it should bring death to whomsoever should acquire it.

Then the gods took up their abode in their new citadel; but, having obtained their power through deceit, peace could not be insured until the crime should be expiated. The ring must be restored to its rightful owners, the Rhine daughters: But the gods could not take it from Fafner, since their contract with him was inviolable; this could be done only by one endowed with free will, who would take the fault upon himself and do penance for it. The gods saw the capacity [606] of such a free will in man, and they educated a race of mortals from which should spring one who would atone for their crime. At length the hero was born, Siegfried, who was to overcome the dragon and regain the ring. Born and brought up in the forest, he was wondrously strong and courageous, and easily slew the dragon and took possession of the treasure, the ring, and the *Tarnhelm*. After this transaction he was directed to go to a distant mountain, on the summit of which slept a beautiful maiden. This was Brünnhilde, one of the nine *Walküren*; they were daughters of Wotan, and their duty was to watch over conflicts, and convey the fallen heroes to *Walhalla*, the abode of the gods. Brünnhilde, for an act of disobedience to her father, had been shorn of her divinity, and doomed to marry a mortal. She was surrounded by fire, but Siegfried, who knew not the meaning of fear, penetrated the flames, awakened her, and the two plighted their troth; he placed the ring upon her finger, then left her on the rocky height, and went forth to seek new adventures. In the course of his travels, Siegfried came to the court of Gunther, king of the *Gibichungen*, on the banks of the Rhine. Gudrune, sister of Gunther, being enamored of Siegfried, gave him a love potion, which caused him to love her and forget Brünnhilde.

Gunther promised his sister to Siegfried on condition that the latter would aid him to gain Brünnhilde, of whose charms he had heard. Siegfried, by means of his *Tarnhelm*, assumed the form of Gunther, presented himself to Brünnhilde, forced the ring from her, and compelled her to go to the court of the *Gibichungen*. Hagen, a half-brother of Gunther and natural son of Alberich, knew the story of the ring, and determined to restore it to his father. Brünnhilde,

enraged at Siegfried's desertion of her, thirsting for vengeance, confided to Hagen that he was vulnerable in the back. At a hunting-party, the next day, Hagen watched his opportunity and stabbed Siegfried, mortally wounding him. The corpse was carried to the hall of the Gibichungen, and then Brünnhilde, having heard about the love potion and its effects, declared herself to be Siegfried's true wife. She caused a funeral pyre to be erected for him, and set fire to it herself; then, after restoring the ring to the Rhine daughters, she mounted her horse and rushed into the flames. Immediately the waters of the Rhine overflowed and rose to the very hall. The Rhine daughters came to the surface of the waves, seized Hagen, who tried to snatch the ring from them, and dragged him down into the deep.

That these poems abound in situations of unparalleled dramatic interest, no one need be told who has ever heard one of Wagner's music-dramas. His genius shows itself to fullest advantage in slowly developing a highly tragic climax, and in illustrating it with that passionate, energetic music which carries our feelings along like a mighty storm-wind. Another prominent characteristic of the poems under consideration is what a German would call their *Anschaulichkeit*; that is, the scenes and events are brought before the eyes in a direct, intuitive manner, almost without the aid, it seems, of abstract words and concepts. In general there is an uninterrupted flow of action which makes them well adapted to the stage. It is true that this very characteristic excludes and forbids similes and figures and the general poetic embellishments. But it must be remembered that these poems were not written as pure literary products. They are like a beautiful body to which only the added music supplies the real poetic soul, and only in connection with the music should they be judged. The poetic characterization of the *dramatis personæ* is for the most part excellent; but here, too, the poetry is greatly aided by the music, the main characterization being left to the orchestra, which with all its modern resources, the manifold combinations of strings, wood, and brass, can indicate shades of character and emotion much more perfectly than the human voice alone.

There is a poetic innovation in the Ring des Nibelungen, on which a vast amount of German sarcasm had been [607] expended previous to the Bayreuth performance. I mean the alliterative verse, which no one has ever used to such an extent as Wagner has in his Tetralogy, and in Tristan und Isolde. There are some passages where the alliteration is labored, and striving after it gives rise to a violence against the most natural way of expressing a thought; but generally the substitution of alliteration for the customary rhyme must be regarded as one of the great improvements introduced by Wagner on the operatic stage. Rhyme is useless in song, as it is not noticed by the ear, whereas by making several words in a line begin with the same consonant or vowel, Wagner has imparted to his verse something of the charm and flow of the Italian. One of the best instances of the charm of alliterative verse occurs in the introductory drama, Rheingold. It opens with a strangely impressive orchestral prelude, which begins with a colossal organ-point on E-flat, extending over nearly one hundred and fifty bars. First the bass is heard alone, then one after another the 'celli and other instruments come in, splitting the chord into its component harmonic intervals, always in a six-eighth wave-like motion, suggesting the waters of a river. The hearer is fairly intoxicated by the strange, never-heard sound-colors, if I may use the expression. Suddenly the chord changes to the subdominant; the curtain divides and shows us in faint twilight the three Rhine daughters in long blue robes, swimming about some rocks under the surface of the Rhine, gliding up and down, to and fro, with a free and easy movement. Their song opens with the following beautiful melody, to these words, which excited so much merriment in certain quarters that the Nibelungen music had come to be briefly called Wagalaweia music.

Wei - a wa - ga wo - ge du wel - le wal - le zur wei - ge,
 Wo - ga - la wei - a Wal - la - la, wei - a - la wei - a!

Rheingold is a drama in one act, and continues for more than two hours and a half without interruption. All this time the eyes and ears of the spectator are in constant demand, and for nerves unused to such incessant activity the effort is too great, and fatigue ensues. It would be too great for all were it not for the constant change of scene, and the rapidity with which the most extraordinary actions follow each other. The frolicking of the Rhine maidens in the water, their flirtation with Alberich the dwarf prince, the final rape of the gold, the scene between Wotan and Fricka, who scolds her husband for selling the goddess Freia to the two giants for the castle Walhalla, the appearance of the giants to claim their prey, the intervention of the gods Donner and Froh; the adventures of Wotan and Loge in the subterranean home of the dwarfs, where Alberich transforms himself into a monstrous snake and a toad successively, to show the power of his Tarnhelm or magic helmet; then the return of the gods, the ransom of Freia with the gold taken from the dwarf, and their final march across the Rhine on the rainbow bridge, while the laments of the Rhine daughters for their lost gold are heard below, to the sound of eight harps,—all these actions with their details and minor incidents are of such an absorbing nature, that at the first hearing one is apt to overlook a great portion of the music, and is afterwards inclined to ask if Wagner did not make a mistake in complicating the action of the drama so much as to endanger the music's losing its share of the spectator's attention. But this is the case only at the first hearing, and [608] only in Rheingold, which is musically far inferior to the other dramas.

After Rheingold comes Die Walküre, in which we are introduced to a wild chief named Hunding, his wife Sieglinde, and her brother Siegmund; also to the nine Walküren maidens, who carry on their steeds to Walhalla the heroes who fall in battle. They are maidens in warlike attire, with spear and helmet, and their song is of a wild character, and peculiarly impressive and characteristic. Die Walküre is the one of the four dramas which is perhaps destined soonest to attain popularity. This may be due partly to the fact that it contains several orchestral pieces well adapted to the concert stage, which have been frequently given to the public here and in America. Such are the Ride of the Walküren, Wotan's Farewell, Magic Fire Scene, and the Introduction to the third act, which are of great interest as purely instrumental pieces. These, with the Funeral March in the Götterdämmerung, the Introduction to the third act of Siegfried, to Lohengrin, and to Tristan und Isolde, raise serious doubts as to the truth of Wagner's own doctrine, that absolute music had reached its highest possible development before his time.

Siegfried, which comes next after Die Walküre, is musically and poetically the finest of the four dramas. It made the deepest impression of all, and made the most proselytes to the cause; its undisputed success marks a peculiar triumph of Wagner's theories, since it shares with Tristan und Isolde the honor of being the purest embodiment of his ideal. There is in Siegfried nothing approaching polyphonic song. At no time are there more than two persons on the stage, and in the first two acts not a woman is seen, although for a short time the song of the bird (sung by Lili Lehman) is heard from the tree tops.

A court pianist of some repute—entirely blind and therefore obliged at Bayreuth to

concentrate all his attention on the music—told me that, however much music one has heard before, in listening to Siegfried one feels as if it were the first time that one hears real music, such as Nature herself would make if she ever made music in our sense of the word. And indeed this is the feeling with which one leaves the theatre after each act of Siegfried. It is a rare revelation of the powers of human genius. One of the most important characteristics of Wagner's music is here brought into full light. When we make a general comparison of English and German poetry, we find that the best of the English has man for its central object; it is the poetry of man; whereas the greater part and the best of German poetry is the poetry of nature. But while we find in the music of Germany much of this poetry of nature reflected in her Folksongs, and in the lyric songs of Schubert, Franz, and other composers, on the dramatic stage, with few exceptions, this *Naturgefühl* had not been developed to any extent before Wagner's operas, particularly the Ring des Nibelungen, appeared. Beethoven has often, and justly, been compared with Shakespeare, because he has given to all the sentiments and emotions of the human heart their fullest and deepest expression in his music. But as an interpreter of the emotions inspired by nature, Wagner, with his fuller command of all the powers of the modern orchestra, stands above him, while in the portrayal of purely human feelings, especially of those that are sad, he is scarcely inferior to the composer of the Sonata Pathétique.

I will mention some of the scenes which the Ring des Nibelungen offers in such abundance to the music for illustration or interpretation. First, we are taken into the fairy-land under the waters of the Rhine, and are made to feel most vividly the poetry of the situation; then we are taken to the subterranean home of the dwarfs, which is lighted solely by the precious metals, or by the fire of Mime's smithy in which Siegfried forges his infallible sword. Anon we are on some

... "most steep fantastic pinnacle,
The fretwork of some earthquake, where the clouds
Pause to repose themselves in passing by."

Again we find ourselves on the banks of the romantic Rhine, bordered by wild rocks and inhabited by nymphs of the [609] Loreley type. In the first scene of Rheingold and the beginning of act second of the Götterdämmerung the orchestra renders most beautifully the feelings inspired by a gorgeous sunrise, which is also in scenic respects a perfect triumph of stage-mechanism. We are transported to the forest; we hear the sighing of the pines, the rustling of the leaves, and the sweet chirping of the birds. This entire scene, in which the violins are used so exquisitely to produce a dreamy forest feeling, evinces how well Wagner understands the use of this instrument, though he first showed how brass instruments can be used to best advantage in an orchestra. The judicious use of wind, wood, and brass gives to Wagnerian music a peculiar richness and emotional warmth, and it adds a powerful under-current which seems to supply bones and sinews to the music. In this department Wagner has enriched the art of music more than any other composer. The reintroduction of several antiquated instruments in the Nibelungen orchestra is of importance when viewed from this stand-point. In looking over the vast number of musical instruments used in the Middle Ages, but unknown now except as curiosities, in the Germanic museum of Nürnberg, one wonders what strange tones and effects may not be hidden in them, and whether one of the chief directions of musical development in the future is not to consist in the restitution of some more of these instruments, or in the invention of new ones.

Götterdämmerung, the last of the four dramas, may be briefly characterized as dramatically the most developed and perfect part of the Tetralogy. The mythological element is least prominent in it, and we are chiefly among human beings. King Gunther, his sister Gudrune, and his half-brother Hagen are the new characters. It seems that in this drama Wagner has for the moment returned to some of the old forms of musical expression; for in the second act is

introduced an eight-part chorus of Hagen's soldiers, which is a masterpiece of its kind; then there is a duet between Siegfried and Brünnhilde, a trio of the Rhine daughters, and something resembling a short ballet, in reality a wedding procession. In introducing these forms, Wagner did not by any means become untrue to his ideal. Here the dramatic situation naturally demands them, and he at once resorts to them; he objects to the introduction of choruses, etc., only when they interrupt the dramatic action. The *Götterdämmerung* is of extreme length, the score being almost twice as long as that of *Rheingold*; it was not finished until 1873, and is his latest product.

Among the many differences between the ordinary opera libretto and the text to Wagner's music-dramas, not the least is this, that in the latter the details of the scenery and action are minutely described. In reading the poems of the Ring, one often pauses at these descriptions, and wonders how such scenes can possibly be represented on the stage of any theatre. Much was demanded at Bayreuth, but uncommon means stood at the disposal of the machinist and stage manager. Two small steam-engines were in use, colored and uncolored steam being a conspicuous—in *Rheingold* rather too conspicuous—feature of the scenery. Electric lights of all colors were in constant demand, and other applicable discoveries of modern science were not overlooked. The immense size of the stage, which is larger than the auditorium, was also a great advantage. And yet, as a whole, the *mise en scène* was far less of a success than the musical and dramatic representation. In *Rheingold*, the transition from one scene to another, from the banks of the Rhine to the subterranean Nibelheim, and *vice versa*, so ingeniously plotted, was, through fault of the workmen, accomplished in a very unsatisfactory manner; and the metamorphosis of Alberich into a dragon might have been effected with more dexterity. The rainbow was not exactly of the form of those we ordinarily see, and there were some short-comings in the citadel of Walhalla. The scenic representation of the Ride of the Walküre was a perfect farce. A series of figures, intended to represent maidens on horseback, each with a fallen hero on her saddle, were [610] by means of a magic lantern made to pass across the storm clouds, but the execution was jerky, and without the aid of the text-book it would have been difficult to conjecture whether a given figure was meant for a "camel" or a "weasel." In Siegfried, the dragon departed itself very clumsily in its fight with the hero, and the conduct of the bear, which is brought in by the latter to terrify Mime, showed that the sight of an actual bruin is a rarity in Germany. Finally, the end of the last scene in *Götterdämmerung* was a complete failure and spoiled the effect of the magnificent music which concludes the drama. Brünnhilde did not mount her horse and dash into the burning funeral pyre of Siegfried, as the text gave us to expect she would, but she simply led her horse behind the scenes, whereupon the flames lighted up behind them; and the inflated green canvas creeping toward the front of the stage was very far from representing the overflowing waters of the Rhine. These were the most serious defects in the performance, and most of them occurred only in the first series of representations, the second and third series being in all respects superior to the first.

Out of place as such short-comings were in "model performances," they by no means seriously interfered with the enjoyment of the stage-play, and, without taking into consideration the faultless music and almost faultless acting, were far outweighed by the many extraordinary beauties and original features of the scenery. It was not the usual decorative scenery of operas, but mostly landscape of a wild, romantic character. At a fourth and fifth hearing of the Tetralogy, when the music and acting no longer required my undivided attention, I often found myself unconsciously studying the details of the scenery, just as one studies a real landscape, and the memory of those scenes is as vivid as the memory of similar scenes witnessed on the Rhine or the Columbia River. The phenomena of weather,—clouds, thunder, and lightning, even if once or twice the thunder came before the lightning,—were a wonderful success, and in many cases, literally speaking, not inferior to

nature.

Henry T. Finck.