
The New German School of Music

By J. K. Paine



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The New German School of Music

Gesammelte Schriften. Von RICHARD WAGNER.

4 Bde. Leipzig. 1872.

THE history of art has never witnessed a more bitter and protracted strife of opinion than now reigns in the musical world. There have been great epochs of reform in art, as in politics and religion, and the various schools of ancient and modern times represent the widely diverging types of style that follow the ever-changing current of civilized life; yet it would be difficult to find any parallel to the present musical struggle, with respect to the acrimony and intolerance displayed by the disputants, the universality of the discussion, and the importance which the movement has for the future: for the new school aims at the very foundations of musical art as it has been established in the minds of Europeans for more than two centuries.

The history of music, as of the other fine arts, teaches us that, notwithstanding the constant action and reaction in the ideals and styles of artistic representation, there are certain fundamental principles which cannot be subjected to change and fashion without violating natural laws; thus the building must conform to the law of statics, the painting to the law of perspective, and the poem to the rules of prosody.

The maxims of art are not contradictory and destructive, but cumulative. If we believe in human progress, as men [218] mount upward, a higher revelation of beauty and truth will be manifested in all forms of art. Hidden principles will come to light; the emotional power of music will be more profoundly expressed and felt, and poetry will give utterance to loftier flights of thought and imagination. Nevertheless, not every so-called revolution or reform is a sign of progress. Art may have, as it has had, its vagaries and wanderings from the right path; and a new departure from the noblest models, instead of bringing us nearer to Parnassus, may lead into the wilderness.

The present revolutionary epoch in German music may be considered as the outgrowth of the political Revolution of 1848; for at that significant moment, Richard Wagner, who took an active part in the movement, published his first polemical writings, which were destined to cause a greater commotion in the musical world than even his music, except perhaps his very recent operas. The political movement of 1848 may have been a necessary link in the chain of modern development; yet the Utopia which the ardent and sanguine democrats imagined they descried in the distance, on drawing nearer, proved to be the spiked helmet of Bismarck. Whether the musical revolution will prove equally delusive has not yet been fully decided. Year by year the war of opinion has grown more fierce and general, and finally has divided the musical world into two hostile camps; and though there are many rational and moderate-minded people who have not espoused the cause of either party, and would fain cry to the combatants, "Hold, enough!" still the contest must go on until the principal actors on the scene have passed away. Any arguments, therefore, which might be presented on this subject, though based on a thorough examination and criticism of the theories and music of this new epoch, would weigh but little with its most determined friends or foes; the following review will be addressed to less prejudiced readers, who may desire to gain some intimacy with the subject, and to whom a brief analysis and criticism of the theories and music of Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz may be acceptable.

Richard Wagner, the most prominent figure in this group of musicians, was born at Leipsic in 1813. His early youth was spent under the influence of different artistic impressions, [219]

without showing a strong inclination for any particular art. In this respect his childhood stood in marked contrast to that of the great masters, or even of musicians of ordinary ability, who have generally evinced a decided aptitude and inclination for music in early life. We read in Wagner's Autobiography that his piano teacher declared that nothing good would ever come of him in music. "He was right," admits Wagner, "for I could never learn to play the piano well. I was writing dramas, when, at the age of fifteen years, I learned to know Beethoven's symphonies; this decided my exclusive passion for the study of music, which had acted powerfully on my organization ever since I first heard the opera of 'Der Freischütz.'" Henceforth, in spite of the determined opposition of his relatives, he devoted himself to music; but not so much to thorough drill under his teachers as to independent efforts. The fruits of this period were an overture and symphony for the orchestra, and a romantic opera entitled "The Fairies."

At the age of twenty-one years Wagner began his career as a practical music director. He was engaged successively at the theatres at Magdeburg, Königsberg, and Riga; but after a few years abandoned this occupation and went to Paris, where he hoped to gain honor and position by the production of a new opera, "Rienzi," which he had already sketched out.

But success did not attend him; he was obliged to earn his bread by arranging melodies from favorite operas for the cornet à piston. Perhaps the drudgery of work like this may have developed his latent hatred for all operatic melodies, which comes so fully to light in his subsequent writings.

Three years in Paris convinced Wagner that it was no place for the employment of his talents, so in 1842 he shook the dust off his feet and returned to Germany. At Dresden he succeeded in bringing "Rienzi" before the public, and the author found himself suddenly the favorite of the hour. In this opera Wagner had not broken away from the traditional style of music; and this fact, together with the pomp and display of the stage, an element which he borrowed from the French, insured the favorable reception of his work. This was speedily followed by the production of "The Flying Dutchman" and "Tannhäuser"; but neither of these operas was well received [220] by the public. The composer had wandered too far away from the path marked out by his predecessors. Wagner was overwhelmed for a time by this reverse. "I saw that only a few friends comprehended me," were his words. Nevertheless he set about the composition of his "Lohengrin," which was completed near the commencement of the Revolution of 1848.

Wagner, as a violent radical in politics and religion as well as in music, took an active part in the Revolution, and in consequence was obliged to flee from the country. In his exile he first published his peculiar ideas on art and politics. They did not attract immediate notice, however, and it was not until Liszt had published an able analysis and eulogy of "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin," and these operas had been performed at Weimar, that public attention was fixed on Wagner. His name and works soon became universally known, either to be honored and admired, questioned or criticised by the more wary, or despised and execrated by still another class of the inharmonious devotees of music. Wagner's subsequent history is so well known, that we may pass on to the consideration of his theories as set forth in his writings, and to the brief examination of the chief characteristics of his dramatic music.

The modest aim of Wagner's writings is a complete revolution in art, society, politics, and religion. The general features of this scheme were announced in his first pamphlet, "Art and Revolution." The theory was developed as a whole in a succeeding pamphlet, "The Future Work of Art," and its special discussion and application to poetry and music formed the subject of a third pamphlet, "Opera and Drama."

In "Art and Revolution" the author draws a picture of modern civilization the reverse of flattering, for he says it is founded on hypocrisy. He draws a parallel between the artistic life of the ancient Greeks and that of the present age, to the total denial, of course, of the existence

of true art in modern times. Ancient art was the expression of national life; our art and literature are matters of luxury. He maintains that the development of genuine art is incompatible with Christian belief and consciousness. The past two thousand [221] years belong to philosophy, and not to art. "Christianity," he declares, "justifies an ignominious and miserable existence of man upon earth, out of the wonderful love of God, who has created him, not for a joyful life on earth, as the æsthetic Greeks erroneously believed, but has imprisoned him here, as it were, in a loathsome dungeon, in order that after his death, as a reward for his self-abasement, he shall have prepared for him an endless state of unoccupied and indolent glory."

"The Christian cannot turn to nature or the senses, for is not sensuous beauty to him a vision of the Devil?" Therefore Christianity is incapable of true art, which in Wagner's eyes is the highest activity of man in harmony with himself, as a sensuous being, and with nature.

"Hypocrisy," he continues, "is the most prominent feature,—nay, the true physiognomy of all the Christian centuries up to the present day; and this vice stands out more and more glaringly and shamelessly as mankind, out of an unconquerable, inward source, and in spite of Christianity, refreshes and reinvigorates itself and moves onward to the true solution of the problem of life." Moreover, he asserts that the industry of modern nations is perverted, being a worse enemy to art than the Church. "Art has been betrayed into the hands of the god of the modern world, the high-born god of five per cent."

"Modern art draws its strength from money speculations; its moral object is the pursuit of wealth, its æsthetic excuse, entertainment for the victims of ennui."

"The public art of the Greeks, as it reached its apex in the tragedy, was the expression of the deepest and noblest thoughts and sentiments of the whole people; the deepest and noblest of our modern consciousness is just the reverse, the denial of our public art."

"The ancients, then, had real art, the moderns have mere *artistic handicraft*. With the fall of Greek tragedy the drama no longer embraced a union of the fine arts; but, henceforth, each art went on its own separate way, and though great and noble minds have for centuries raised their voices in the wilderness, yet we have not listened to them; we tremble before their fame, yet laugh in the presence of their art; for a great and genuine work of art could not be created by them alone; [222] our co-operation with them was essential. The tragedy of Æschylus and Sophocles was the work of Athens."

"Only a great revolution of mankind can prepare the ground for a new art, such as the Greeks had." This is the substance of Wagner's first pamphlet.

In his next pamphlet, "The Future Work of Art," the author is no longer destructive, but, on the contrary, eminently and ingeniously constructive. He teaches that man is his own god and stands above nature, and in his inward and outward life, as an observing and impressionable creature, corresponds perfectly to that grand and complete art which is the result of a combination of all the separate branches or modes of art. Each of the arts, poetry, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and dancing, contributes its share to the result, in a measure corresponding to the several artistic faculties of man. Thus the emotional nature is expressed by music, the understanding by poetry, and the bodily man by dancing. The union of these three "purely human" expressions of art pre-exists in the drama, in which man represents himself, personally, in the highest degree of completeness, with the assistance of the imitative arts of painting and sculpture. Painting supplies the landscape or natural scene, in the midst of which man moves; sculpture lives in man himself, and architecture furnishes the place in which the artistic representation takes place. The object, in a word, is to reunite the various branches of art as they were united in ancient Greece, but on a higher plane and with infinitely richer materials.

In his longest writing, "The Opera and Drama," Wagner proceeds to make a special application of these principles. He reviews the opera and drama of the past with sharp,

unsparing criticism. He announces his brief formula, which appears to him so self-evident that it seems as though the world would have adopted it long ago. It is as follows: "The opera was an error, since in that species of art the means of expression (music) has been made the object, while the true object of expression (the drama) has been made the means." This is the key-note of the first part of the succeeding discussion, in the course of which he draws an historical sketch of the opera as a branch of art [223] which has been developed in two directions: first, "in a serious direction, through Gluck, Mozart, Cherubini, Méhul, Spontini, and all those masters who felt the weight of responsibility which fell to music when it announced for itself alone the aim of the drama; second, in a *frivolous* direction, through all those musicians like Rossini, Meyerbeer, and others, who, impelled by the instinct of the impossibility of solving an unnatural problem, turned their backs upon it, and, thinking only of enjoying the advantages that opera has gained from its extended publicity, gave themselves up to an unmixed system of musical experimentalizing." At the close of this lengthy discussion, the author fancifully, though not altogether tastefully, compares the modern Italian opera to a courtesan, the French opera to a coquette, the new romantic German opera to a prude, Mozart's opera to a lovely and beautiful woman,—having previously stated that music is a woman. And now he stops to ask, Who is the man that shall implicitly love this woman? It is the poet. In other words, poetry and music must be equally and happily wedded, in order to constitute the ideal work of art. In the next part, Wagner examines the causes why we have had no true theatre. The English drama of Shakespeare is drawn from real life, but represents it in an incomplete form. Shakespeare did not feel the necessity of giving a representation wholly true to the surrounding scene; he therefore condensed and sifted the manifold materials of the romance, and treated them dramatically simply in the degree required for the necessities of a contracted stage and a limited plot.

Neither his, nor the Italian and French drama which seeks to reproduce the finished forms of ancient classical tragedy, but has nothing in common with modern life, nor the vacillation between these extremes that characterizes the German drama of Goethe and Schiller, fulfils the highest mission of dramatic art.

Wagner consequently would abolish the literary drama as well as the opera, and substitute for them a work of art addressed to our sensuous nature. "In the drama," are his words "we are made wise by feeling." He wholly rejects the literary stand-point, and will have only a "direct, living art of representation." He addresses not the reason and imagination, [224] but the totality of the senses. We must not be educated to understand a work of art, but to enjoy it.

The third part of "Opera and Drama" is devoted to a statement of the true relation of music to poetry. Wagner denounces what is commonly termed melody, or the traditional form of the air, that is, the rising and falling musical phrases whose motives or subdivisions are repeated in certain modified imitations, in order to establish a necessary identity or individuality in the musical thought, and preserve a unity of design, without which the æsthetic sense of proportion and beauty cannot be gratified and the emotions powerfully affected. This form of melody must be done away with, and what he calls *infinite melody*, hinted at vaguely in Beethoven's last compositions, must be substituted. The only genuine melody, he asserts, is that which arises from the heartfelt delivery of the language,—melody that does not attract any attention on its own account except as the sensuous expression of a sentiment that is clearly manifest in the language.

Such an infinite melody is, or should be, the creation of the poet; and within it exists the germ of the accompanying harmony, though unexpressed.

Through the medium of the orchestra the harmony knows no arbitrary limits. The family of keys must be made one in spirit and agreement. The independent members of the whole round of keys must be permitted to move here and there with perfect freedom.

As regards the employment of the chorus, Wagner will not give any place to *polyphony*;

and the traditional style of opera chorus, as a mass of united voices, he would also dispense with. "A mass of people can never interest, but merely confuse the hearer; only distinctly distinguishable individualities can gain his attention and sympathy."

The actions and gestures of the personages of the play hold the same relation to the language of the drama as the flexible movements of the orchestra do to the melody,—as a powerful agency for enhancing the effect and meaning of the vocal part. The orchestra gives powerful expression to all the utterances of the actor, and sustains and explains him in every way. As far as the expression of emotion is concerned, the modern orchestra [225] will occupy a position in the future drama similar to that held by the ancient chorus in the Greek tragedy.

It would lead us too far to enter further into the details of this remarkable theory. I have stated the principal points of the arguments that Wagner has sought to illustrate more or less completely in his operas. He did not attempt, however, to apply these principles to their full extent at the outset. He was too shrewd for this. In the operas of "Rienzi" and "The Flying Dutchman" he approached his aim only at a remote distance. In "Tannhäuser" he advanced nearer, but still retained the air, concerted pieces, and other traditional forms. He drew closer to the ultimate goal of his desires in the opera of "Lohengrin," since he selected for the first time a mythical subject: it being his creed that the myth is the beginning and end of all true poesy. As Greek art sprang from Greek mythology, so must future German art be founded on the German myths. Such is the Wagnerian logic. The characters of mythology being endowed with superhuman qualities, miracle is indispensable to the future drama; not, however, with the object of making us *believe*, but *feel* directly the inner connection of actions, without the aid of imagination or reflection.

The opera of "Tristan and Isolde," which was brought out at Munich a few years since, was the first complete attainment of Wagner's ideal. Since then he has composed the Nibelungen drama, a series of four operas entitled "Rheingold," "Die Walküre," "Siegfried," and "Götter-Dämmerung." This crowning work of his life has not yet been performed, but will be offered to the public next year at Bayreuth, if the proposed Wagner festival takes place.

The "Mastersingers of Nuremberg" ought to be mentioned as a somewhat earlier work; it is Wagner's only comic opera.

We may now ask what are the counter-views and criticisms which these theories and works have evoked.

Wagner's wholesale denunciation of modern civilization, his declaration that our present religion and social and political life must be completely revolutionized before his ideal work of art can be appreciated, is so far removed from any possibility of realization, that we may dismiss the subject as the vagary of a wild dreamer. "This dream of a reform of the [226] world," observes Ambros, "can never be realized, because it contains irreconcilable contradictions, such as absolute freedom in single details, and conformity to law as a whole. So that Wagner is like one who would expect to see the magic castle of a *fata morgana* converted into a real architectural pile, resting on a firm foundation, and built of solid, hard stone." These "irreconcilable contradictions" distinguish Wagner's writings throughout; for they are a strange mixture of truth and error, in which the error predominates. His total and irreverent denial of the inestimable good which Christianity has done and will continue to do for humanity; his vain attempt to persuade men to return to the naturalism of earlier times, at least to a conduct of life in which nature and the senses are to be the chief guide; his arrogant attitude towards the art of mediæval and modern times, the true spirit of which he ignores when he asserts that it is not the outgrowth of Christianity and the Renaissance, and that it is not art, but artistic handicraft; these and other statements are errors which demonstrate to every rational and sober-minded reader that the author's judgment is partial and warped, and that he is to be classed with other violent agitators and enthusiasts with heated imaginations

who seem out of joint with the world. Wagner's scheme of uniting all the fine arts in order to constitute a grand, comprehensive art or drama, such as the Greeks are supposed to have had, looks promising enough for the moment, but reflection does not lend wings to our faith. There is in truth nothing eminently new or original in the idea.

Music, poetry, and dancing have from time immemorial appeared conjointly in the drama, in one form or another, accompanied to some extent by the other fine arts. As regards the triple alliance of poetry, music, and dancing, the latter, which hitherto, in all the higher forms of dramatic representation, has deservedly held a subordinate place, finds itself in Wagner's *scheme* suddenly raised to an equality with the two most spiritual of arts; a position which in Wagner's *operas* it does not and cannot maintain.

As far as the place which painting, sculpture, and architecture shall occupy in the drama, the first cannot amount to anything more than mere decorative painting; and, unless [227] statues are placed in niches or grouped on the stage, sculpture will have to be left out of the account; for it is absurd to talk of the actors representing this art by their figures and attitudes. The very idea of sculpture is a perfect physical form and action in repose; and unless the actors are models of physical beauty, and can be grouped so as to assume attitudes perfectly statuesque, it cannot be acknowledged that plastic art has anything to do with the future drama. In the Greek tragedy this was possible. The actors wore huge masks, which, according to ancient ideas, were absolutely essential; for the fidelity of the representation was of less consequence than its beauty. "The Greeks," says Schlegel, "would with justice have considered it a make-shift to allow an actor with common, ignoble, or strongly marked individual features to represent an Apollo or Hercules; nay, this they would have esteemed an actual profanation. In the mimetic art their first idea was to exhibit their personages with heroic grandeur, a dignity more than human, and an ideal beauty; their second was character; and the last of all, passion, which had to give way in the collision."

"The entire appearance of the tragic figures it is not easy to represent to ourselves with sufficient beauty and dignity, and it will be well to keep the ancient sculpture present to the mind."

As to the share which architecture is to have in the future drama, can it do more than furnish an appropriate surrounding in which the action is to take place? Architecture requires forms that imply solidity of structure. The material thrusts itself upon our attention, and the sham show of the stage columns, arches, walls, etc. does not merit the name of architectural art.

No one can deny the intimate relation which the arts hold to each other, but it is quite another matter to accept the theory of a grand unity of all the fine arts. Even the Greeks did not combine them equally. "In the tragedy," says Schlegel, "the poetry was the chief object, and everything else was held strictly subservient to it. Their dancing and music had nothing common with ours but the name." We have neither the spirit nor object of such a drama. The modern play concerns itself chiefly with the representation of [228] the actions of human life, while the ancient drama had a supernatural and religious aim. Moreover, the modern way of speaking or reciting poetry is wholly unlike the ancient musical declamation, which is foreign to the genius of modern speech. Music, consequently, will henceforth be employed as an artifice introduced into the drama for its own ends. If the time ever comes in real life when men shall make love, quarrel, or die in vocal melody or declamation, as they do at present on the operatic stage, then music will cease to be an artifice; but until then it will not be introduced into the play merely to serve a subordinate place in clothing or coloring the words. Music will be kept out of the way altogether, or else made to realize its highest object, which is to express, in accordance with the principles of musical art, the various moods of feeling prompted by the conflict of the play, without laying particular stress on its essential *naturalness* in the drama. This is what Mozart accomplished more perfectly than any other

master before or since his time.

Perhaps the nearest approach to a grand *ensemble* of the fine arts was afforded in the Middle Ages by the dramatic representations of the Passion of Christ, which were sometimes given within the lofty arches of the cathedrals, where painting and sculpture had their appropriate places on the walls and in the niches, and sacred poetry and music were wedded harmoniously, to express the heartfelt devotion of the worshippers. This was a grand and impressive drama, more comprehensive in its means and object than any modern dreamer has conceived, and it sprang out of the very soul of Christianity itself,—a religion incapable of the future art, according to Wagner's creed.

Every fine art is complete in itself. "A complete dramatic poem and an equally independent and artistically developed musical composition do not blend, but on the contrary *conflict* with each other, for each follows its own peculiar laws."

A great play like "Hamlet," teeming with profound thought and philosophy, or "Macbeth," with its predominance of terror and rapidity of action, must sacrifice its most characteristic scenes and passages in order to meet the requirements of the musical drama. On the other hand, if music were made subservient to the words of a poem, it would lose the very essence [229] of its being; it would degenerate from its present free position among the foremost arts; it would no longer be the powerful language of the emotions, but, like Greek music, would have no higher object than merely to color the declamation.

Now Wagner aims to strike a middle course. Poetry must concede pure, reflective thought and all superfluous imagery; in other words, the literary stand-point must be resigned, and *feeling* made the object of the drama, which music must enhance without enjoying any real independence of its own. It is evident that such an equal concession must rob each art of its highest prerogative, and just in the degree with which the combination of the various materials grows more manifold, so will the intellectual conception lose its clearness and force. The conception of a universal art interests us on account of its superficiality rather than its profundity. It provides a greater variety, but less warmth of inspiration; it is less artistic than abstract.

One statue like the Venus of Milo, one picture like the Dresden Madonna, one poem like Faust, or one musical composition like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, will singly outweigh and outlive the representative drama of Wagner, as realized in his last operas, simply for the reason that each art appears to complete advantage only when it is unshackled, or left entirely free to work out its highest object by itself. The only exception is the union of music and poetry, as it has been employed traditionally in church and secular music; in this case the words, however beautiful and significant they may be as poetry, resign their prominence in order that the structural form and lyric flow of the music may not be impeded. It matters not how intimate the modern alliance of poetry with music may be, the real interest of a mass, oratorio, or opera centres in the music. Such is the case even with the wonderful text of the Mass, which has been associated with music ever since the foundation of the Church, and grew up, as it were, in a musical form. The words of Handel's "Messiah" were selected and arranged for musical treatment; and however sublime or beautiful many of the Scriptural passages may be as poetry, they necessarily take a place subordinate to the music in the mind of the listener.

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Gluck and Wagner have sought to wed poetry and music in perfect equality; but the result is not satisfactory, for the reason that the movement of the feelings, through the agency of music, is far more expanded in duration than the motive supplied by the words. A dramatic text cannot content itself with a repetition of the same thought, but must proceed from one thought to another, in order to sustain the progress of the action. Now if the music follows the poem strictly, syllable after syllable, word after word, without the privilege of dwelling here

and there upon the sense of a passage, it cannot fulfil its highest object, which is to express the emotional principle to the utmost; and the orchestra cannot provide for this want by the rhythmical flow and coloring of the instrumental accompaniment.

The so-called "infinite melody" is a falsity. As exemplified by Wagner in his latest operas, it is nothing more or less than a kind of accompanied *recitative* or *arioso* style.

If this is destined to take the place of the *air*, real melody must disappear. The æsthetic significance of the air, or song, is to give musical expression to a state of intense feeling called into action by some thought, sentiment, or deed; on this account it is unjustifiable to banish it from the opera. The air is indispensable as the highest means of representing a culmination in the series of emotions which are developed through the action and conflict of the play. It is the moment when the actor pours out his whole soul in the utterance of his feelings, in consequence of preceding events in the action. On similar grounds the chorus and concerted movements, when several personages appear together on the scene, are fully authorized, even though they may arrest the progress of the action for the time.

I have previously stated that melody, in order to give the sense of form and proportion to the ear and move the feelings powerfully, must conform to the laws of symmetry and design, by a certain imitative progression of the phrases. The mind, or æsthetic faculty, requires a definite musical motive or theme, which must be expanded, imitated, and varied, for the purpose of intensifying the particular mood of feeling which the motive has awakened. But the "infinite melody" frequently disregards [231] all these essentials; and though the passions may be aroused by the mere physical or sensuous play of sounds, by the accents and rhythm of the vocal part, heightened by the rich and manifold effects of orchestration, and in combination with the dramatic scene, yet the deeper moods of feeling, such as awe, solemnity, and sorrow, which the purest and noblest music alone can sway, are not touched by Wagner. What a contrast to Mozart and Beethoven, who in this respect have fulfilled the highest ideal of the art!

The dramatic music of Mozart is endowed with the greatest energy and precision of expression. In his opera airs this master has delineated character with wonderful clearness. His musical personages are living creations; "they think, feel, and act in tones," and appear as true to life as those of Shakespeare. "Every character remains true to his musical individuality in all the changes of circumstances and passion." These sharp outlines of character are determined by the musical style, by the peculiar turn of the phrases, by the tempo, rhythm, range of voice, melodic inflections, accompaniment, and other signs which combine to individualize the music, just as character itself is the sum of certain peculiar marks.

We search in vain for similar attributes in Wagner's dramatic music, though it is a mannerism with him to repeat the same phrase or passage with the same instruments whenever a personage reappears on the stage; as, for instance, in the opera of "Tannhäuser" the high chromatic violin tremolo and rhythmical figure of the wind instruments are repeated whenever Venus appears on the scene. Other characters of his operas, as, for example, Tannhäuser, The Pilgrims, Lohengrin, King Henry, Elsa, and others, are likewise announced individually by a particular motive, or rhythmical figure, which is supposed to characterize the person. This substitute for real delineation of character may be used sparingly, but when carried to an extreme it must be termed pedantic and tiresome.

There is a vast difference between slavish imitation and the adherence to certain melodic and harmonic features that establish by modified repetition the unity of form, as essential in music as in the other fine arts. This device is not original with Wagner; it may be traced back to Von Weber and other [232] predecessors of Wagner in the opera; but they did not exaggerate its importance.

The ground taken by Wagner, that the genuine source of the "ideal drama" must be the *myth*, will not stand the test of criticism. "The true nature of the drama," says Otto Jahn, in his

able criticism of the operas of "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin," "demands actions that spring from moral motives, and which our modern knowledge and belief recognize as such, although the poet may have free scope allowed him as regards the events. No matter how vividly the artist may reproduce the picture of other times, though it were so vivid that we might believe ourselves transported to them, if the action and sentiments of the play do not agree with our ideas of truth and reality we feel the contradiction, and the dramatic illusion is dispelled. A conflict can never be tragic, no matter how sad and thrilling its consequences may be, if its premises are incomprehensible or absurd to our minds. It is evident that it is an exceedingly difficult task to state the motive of Lohengrin's denial of the knowledge of his name to the maiden whom he marries; for the mystery of the Graal is no longer believed; nay, it is not even well known, and it appears so foreign to our conceptions, even to the mysticism of the present day, that it is no longer available as a poetical subject, or, at the most, it can be used merely as a decorative, external subject which the poet must first endow with soul, in a measure, to render effective." Wagner has sought to invest this myth with modern significance; but he has not succeeded in overcoming the obstacle that stood in the way at the outset; and the character of Lohengrin is not made clear to our comprehension by the symbolical attributes he possesses in the mind of Wagner. The subject of "Tannhäuser," as presented by Wagner, is still less satisfactory to the cultivated mind. "A gifted poet," continues Jahn, "proud in the feeling of his strength even to insolence, and in consequence of this very poetical gift, gives himself up to sensual pleasure, and becomes so enslaved by its demoniacal fascinations that his struggles are all in vain. He makes an effort, it is true, to free himself; he musters up his moral strength and religious faith; the blessed assurance of the pure love of Elizabeth raises his [233] courage, but all to no purpose. At every decisive moment the uneasy demon holds him firmly in his grasp, and finally he dies without the certainty of atonement. Here certainly were the elements of a poetical, a truly tragical representation; but Wagner has dwelt on the characteristics of the lower, sensual element, while the opposite power of morality has certainly been treated hesitatingly; consequently Tannhäuser never seems like a living individuality; the struggle of opposite elements on which the tragic interest rests cannot be developed, and the true solution of the whole—his expiation—cannot take place."

"When Tannhäuser had torn himself from the arms of Venus and had recognized in Elizabeth the nature of true and pure love, yet inwardly was governed by the fascinations of Venus, at that moment the struggle of his moral and sensual nature was decided. It is true that such a struggle might be renewed and overcome with new strength by every man; still this will not hold good for the dramatic poet, whose business it is to concentrate the struggle into one decisive moment. According to the antique conception, Tannhäuser would have perished physically through his moral defeat; according to the mediæval idea, whoever tarried on the Venusberg was doomed to burn eternally in hell; the modern author, to whom these judgments are too harsh, according to the present view of the subject, should give the moral strength of the man free scope to struggle and overcome the evil which threatens him."

"After Tannhäuser's pilgrimage to Rome and failure to gain the Pope's absolution, his repentance comes to a sudden end; he knows no other refuge than to return to Venus, to whom he properly belongs. But after all this, that pure love for Elizabeth should inspire him again, through her prayers, suffering, and death, has as little poetical truth as the supplementary narration of the wonder (of the pilgrim's staff shooting forth green leaves) which was bound up with the conditions of his forgiveness by the Pope."

Wagner's crowning work—the series of four operas under the general name of the Ring of the Nibelungen—is open to similar objections; for the subject, as he has treated it, must remain, as a whole, foreign to modern taste and understanding. [234] The Nibelungen Song cannot be too highly prized, when considered from a literary or philological stand-point, and

the Germans are justly proud of their great epic; but it is a difficult if not an impossible matter to convert its principal incidents into a permanent dramatic form for the modern stage; and this is especially the case as Wagner has conceived the subject. He has thrown over it the glamour of sensuality, the true expression, it may be, of his own subjective nature, yet not of the mythological characters in general. He has interwoven with the natural, human element of the German myth the more Northern or Scandinavian features, the preternatural world of gods, Nibelungen, Valkyrias, giants, dwarfs, and water-sprites, with their wild manners and freakish actions, in such a way that the human element is rendered unnatural, if not almost unrecognizable, and we long for a return to the society of every-day men. These ancient Northern myths seem far less in harmony with, modern civilization than even the gods and demigods of Greek mythology, or the heroes of the Iliad. And who wishes to revive these personages on the modern stage? Neither will the allegorical or symbolical significance with which Wagner has sought to invest these characters suffice to convince us of the real need of such a drama. How can we accept his or any other theory as to the origin and meaning of these myths, when there reigns so complete a difference of opinion concerning them in the minds of modern scholars? It is otherwise with the supernatural element in Shakespeare's plays. The basis of his most imaginative comedies, as, for instance, "The Tempest," and "Midsummer Night's Dream," is laid in real life. The world of fairies and spirits is subordinated to the struggle and play of human passions. The rich imagination of the poet has clothed the real and natural with the air of the wonderful, without mystifying the beholder. The action and sentiments of the characters of his plays can be comprehended, because they do not appear in contradiction to the moral and social ideas of the present age. "These singing beings, are they to be men?" says Marx of Wagner's earlier operas. "These melodies, enveloped in the clang and roar of the instruments, which often drown the word or make it unintelligible, are these to be their language? The [235] bodily appearance of the singers, in the action of the drama, is of itself sufficient to make their singing speech a myth and an unreal sport of fantasy. What no one ever believed, what no one would have ever dared to persuade us of, or attempted to demonstrate, all that is fabulous, every impossible adventure, every storm of unjustifiable or exaggerated feelings, every description of licentiousness and voluptuous intoxication of the senses, is here unhesitatingly put forward as a representation of reality."

If the texts of Wagner's operas are open to grave criticism as dramatic subjects, they deserve severe censure with respect to their rhetoric and versification. Even Wagner's most determined admirers cannot maintain that he possesses a good literary style; for he has dispensed with this. It would be absurd to compare the words of his operas with the dramatic poetry of Goethe, Schiller, or any illustrious name of German literature. According to Wagner's intention, neither the words nor the music can be separated from the scene and action. In the portrayal of character Wagner fails to display any great originality or power. His personages generally lack those individual traits that distinguish one dramatic character from another. As a dramatic poet, therefore, Wagner cannot be classed with the great masters of the art; nor as a musician will he ever occupy an equal rank with Bach, Handel, or Beethoven. What, then, is the secret of Wagner's present popularity and ascendancy?

Wagner is a consummate master of all the externals of the stage. He has made the splendid show and brilliant pomp of the theatrical spectacle an indispensable adjunct to his operas. One grand effect succeeds another in logical and natural sequence; yet nothing, apparently, is introduced for the sake of mere effect. In this respect Wagner is much the superior of Spontini, Meyerbeer, and his other predecessors of the modern French stage, who introduce magnificence and splendor into the play without any real cause, merely to dazzle and astonish the beholder. But the action and substance of the play are obscured and injured instead of enhanced by such a jumble of accessories. In Wagner's operas the rich variety and contrast of

the scenes make a vivid impression upon the [236] spectator, because nothing appears to be superfluous, or to be introduced without the object of benefiting the play. The principal scenes of any one of his operas will illustrate this theatrical talent. Let us cite merely the written descriptions of the opening scenes in "Tannhäuser":

"The stage represents the interior of the hill of Venus,—a wide cave, bending at the back towards the right side, where it appears to be indefinitely prolonged. In the farthest visible background a bluish lake is seen, in which naiads are bathing; on its undulating banks sirens are reclining. In the extreme foreground Venus is extended on a couch; before her, in a half-kneeling attitude, is Tannhäuser, his head sunk on her knees. The whole cave is illuminated by a rosy light. The centre of the stage is occupied by a group of dancing nymphs." This scene suddenly vanishes when Tannhäuser, in his long and desperate struggle to free himself from the fascinations of Venus, calls upon the name of the Virgin Mary, and suddenly finds himself in a beautiful, sunlit vale. "At the back is seen the Wartburg against the blue sky; through an opening in the valley the Hürselberg is seen; half-way up the ascent a path leads down into the valley from the direction of the Wartburg, where the path turns aside. In the foreground is a shrine of the Virgin on a small eminence. From the heights the sound of sheep-bells is heard; on a rocky eminence a young shepherd is reclining, playing on his pipe. The penitential chant of the Pilgrims who come from the direction of the Wartburg towards the hill path is heard. The Pilgrims pass by and disappear; their chant and the sound of the shepherd's pipe on the heights grow fainter and fainter, then die away, while Tannhäuser, on his knees, is sunk in fervent prayer. The bells are heard far away, while the sound of hunting-bugles has come nearer and nearer from the heights, and soon the landgrave and his minstrels, in hunting array, are seen to descend from a forest path."

These well-contrasted scenes are succeeded by others equally striking; and we have abundant proof in this, as in all Wagner's operas, of his masterly skill in the management of the stage, and of his fertile imagination as a decorative artist. Many of these scene-pictures are truly poetical; and it is worth while for [237] those who are unacquainted with his talent in this branch to read the scenic descriptions given in the editions of his works.

Wagner has displayed equal skill and originality in the treatment of the action of the play. He is true to the dramatic object in all points of detail. In a word, the action, scenic display, words, and music are combined, so as to produce a remarkable unity of effect, though not without the sacrifice of the real independence of each of the several arts thus combined. Although his later music is not formed on a vocal style, and is difficult to sing, and lacks real beauty in the absence of melody, yet it is declamatory in a powerful degree; it is true to the metrical accents of the verse, and expresses vividly the meaning of the words. In this respect he stands out prominently as a progressive master, and will exercise a decided influence on the dramatic music of the future. The orchestra in Wagner's operas not only plays an important *rôle* in heightening the dramatic expression of the vocal part, but is also employed in a decorative sense to paint the scene in tones. Wagner has exhibited a wonderful technical command of the orchestra. He has planned new and remarkable effects of instrumentation. Some of his pieces, like the Overture to "Tannhäuser," or the Vorspiel to "Lohengrin," are universally popular. Many of the themes and melodies of his earlier operas are noble, characteristic, and pleasing, though, with some notable exceptions, compared with similar compositions of the greatest masters, they appear to disadvantage and seem somewhat coarse and formal. If we compare his music composed in the *free thematic form* with similar works by recent masters like Mendelssohn or Schumann, we are struck by the want of refined beauty in the music of Wagner. This is not compensated for by a real grandeur of style.

Any roughness that may appear here and there in the music of Beethoven does not seem out of keeping with his intention; the grand outlines of form correspond perfectly with his manly character and elevated ideas. Wagner's powerful and brilliant instrumentation,—noisy

and brazen at times,—and his rich effects of instrumental coloring do not impress us as the spontaneous and sincere utterance of a profound musical nature.

He wears garments that do not fit him, for they are borrowed. [238] True grandeur of style cannot be attained by force or energy alone, nor can the mere sensuous effects of instrumental combination, or the imaginative play of sounds, as illustrated by orchestral pieces of Wagner like the "Introduction to Rheingold" or the "Ride of the Valkyrias," take the place of the emotional element in music. This master may arouse our passions, gratify our musical sense, and act upon our imagination, but he rarely reaches the source of our deeper and purer emotions. His music, like that of Liszt and other masters of the present epoch, is realistic. The orchestral description of the "Ride of the Valkyrias," or Maidens of Odin, through the air, or the representation of the "Battle of the Huns," by Liszt, in which the composer follows Kaulbach's celebrated fresco on that subject, are examples of this sensational, realistic tendency of the times, which is not confined to music, but distinguishes some other forms of modern art.

The spiritual or religious element—I do not refer to the ecclesiastical style—is almost wholly wanting in the music of Wagner and his school, and on this account they have no real affinity with Beethoven, whom they are so fond of associating with the dawn of the new era. This great poet has vindicated the true spirituality of music. His sad life, the trial of faith and love, through which he passed so triumphantly, kindled an undying flame of truth and beauty in his music. A deep religious feeling and moral tone pervade his compositions. The solemn mood takes possession of us when we listen to the grand openings of the Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Symphonies; and at moments the feeling of awe and grandeur reaches a sublime height, to be changed to sadness or calm happiness in the *adagio*, and to vivacity, humor, or jocoseness in the *scherzo*; and this alternation of mood may reach a climax of triumphant joy in the *finale*. In a word, all the profound and varied emotions of the artist, whether sad or joyful, humorous or gloomy, playful or grotesque, elevated or subdued, act directly and powerfully upon the eager listener, who feels conscious that he is in the presence of a great spirit.

In the present dearth of musical genius in Germany Wagner has produced, in spite of his defective theory, a theatrical and musical combination which stands out prominently before the [239] present generation. Whether the contemplated production of his representative work, the "Ring of the Nibelungen," will augment or diminish his future influence cannot be predicted. It may be said on the negative side of this question that his first "ideal work," "Tristan and Isold," from which airs and concerted melodies were banished, has not survived its production at Munich in 1865.

His most *musical* operas, "The Flying Dutchman," "Tannhäuser," "Lohengrin," and the "Mastersingers of Nuremberg," are popular in all the principal cities of Germany and the Netherlands, and do not fail to draw full houses. But were Wagner's theory correct and its application convincing, the older operas would appear to such a disadvantage in being performed alternately with his operas, during the past fifteen years, that they would gradually have suffered neglect and withdrawal from the stage. Such, however, is not the case. "Fidelio," "Don Juan," "Der Freischütz," and contemporaneous operas, like the "Huguenots," "L'Africaine," and "Faust," are the popular rivals of Wagner's, and never fail to draw the public. The truth is simply this: the general operatic public is not distinguished anywhere, not even in Germany, for a cultivated and discriminating taste. The audience wishes, above everything, to be amused, and this is afforded by the spectacular as much as by the musical element of Wagner's and Meyerbeer's brilliant operas.

There is no branch of music so subject to the caprices of fashion as the opera; this is proved by the fate of hundreds of once popular and now forgotten works.

Time alone will decide the question of Wagner's place in musical history, and how much

truth and merit belong to his works. Meanwhile the unprejudiced critic must acknowledge that Wagner is a man of wonderful energy and talent,—at the same time one whose head and heart are not entirely right. His erroneous theory has marred all his recent music. He has tried to institute a reform or revolution through the intellect rather than by the spontaneous and gradual growth of concrete musical thoughts, the offspring of real musical genius.

Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were true reformers, or progressive spirits, because they worked out their mission [240] slowly and almost instinctively, without cutting themselves off from tradition and historical sequence. They built on the massive foundations already laid, and did not tear down the walls, when nearly erected, to begin over again on the ruins. The future opera, or musical drama, must necessarily fulfil its highest destiny through the *musician* who recognizes the moral and spiritual significance of the art, and its inestimable worth as pure music, independent in its means and object.

It is a fatal sign of degeneracy when an art has departed so far away from true simplicity of expression as is the case with the music of this new epoch. If we compare the vocal scores of Wagner and Liszt with the scores of Handel and Mozart, we perceive how far the masters of the new school have wandered away from a good vocal method, from clearness of musical form, from the symmetry of melodic design, and simplicity and directness of expression. It is the mark of greatness with an artist to accomplish important results by simple means. This is easier of accomplishment with the other fine arts than with music, for music labors under one disadvantage; it has no external guide in nature to keep it within bounds. "The architect," says Ambros, "has to obey the laws of statics, or his building will fall to pieces. The painter must remain faithful to the forms and colors of natural objects and the law of perspective. The poet must observe the rules of grammar and syntax as they are regulated by the nature of the language he has not to trouble himself about its historical development. But before the grammar and syntax of music could become clear and regulated many centuries must have elapsed"; and no sooner do they seem well established than bold innovators seek to overthrow them. The technics of music with Wagner, Liszt, and their adherents have become so extremely complicated, both in composition, instrumentation, and performance, that the limits must soon be reached. These differ from the technics of Bach and Beethoven—the two greatest masters of form—in this respect; they fail to convey to the musical understanding the clearness and beauty of design through the organic development of motives, without which the sense of proportion, as addressed to the ear, cannot be gratified, and the deep moods of feeling awakened in the soul of the hearer. [241] The play of form in Bach's music is always prominent; yet his fugues, toccatas, and fantasias abound with rich characteristics of style and expression that reach the heart as well as the head. Every note has its clear and logical meaning; in his most intricate polyphony not a tone is lost in obscurity or half-expressed utterance. In the compositions of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, the form and spiritual contents of music are equally balanced, appearing as a perfect unity; this, therefore, has been termed the *classical* period of music. Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and others adhered to the historical forms, and at the same time stamped their works with the seal of their own peculiar individuality, without contradicting the past.

Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz have abandoned the historical forms for the sake of the poetic ideas, as they claim. Form is placed in the background, poetic fancies or feelings in the foreground.

Berlioz's idea or problem of art was to make poetry the basis of instrumental music. He was not satisfied that music should suggest or characterize in a general way a poetic thought, but sought to make it take the place of words, or paint the meaning of the words, even in points of detail. This led Paganini to observe to Berlioz, on hearing his music for the first time, "Vous commencez par où les autres ont fini." Thus in his *Symphonie Fantastique* he represents a young musician (Berlioz himself) suffering with the torments of his supposed

unrequited love; and in one phase of the struggle he determines to put an end to his unhappiness by poisoning himself with opium. But the narcotic is too weak to have the desired effect, and he sinks into a sleep haunted by the most frightful visions. He dreams that he has murdered the object of his love; that lie is sentenced to death, and is obliged to witness his own execution. All this, including the march to the scaffold and his decapitation, is supposed to be represented unmistakably by the orchestra. So likewise he paints in music a number of scenes from "Romeo and Juliet," "Faust," and other poems. In such dramatic tone-pictures Berlioz has aimed to make music subordinate to pure mental conceptions by means of a programme of the poetic contents. Liszt, in his Symphonic Poems, has also [242] tried to express poetical thoughts by music alone. He differs from Berlioz, however, in not requiring a written programme or poem for the purpose of explaining his musical ideas. The poetic intention is embodied in the music. He has selected such subjects as Tasso, Hamlet, Faust, Prometheus, The Divine Comedy, and the Battle of the Huns; but although many fine touches of imagination come to light through the brilliant instrumentation and original rhythmical effects of these compositions, as of Berlioz's, still they have not found universal acceptance and success.

Wagner has not recognized pure instrumental music beyond Beethoven, whose Choral Symphony set the art at liberty. Unlike Liszt and Berlioz, he has not sought to place music and poetry side by side, but rather to blend them completely. Instrumental music should have no independence of the drama. Neither Liszt nor Berlioz has attained a title of Wagner's success, for Wagner has the advantage of the eye as well as the ear. In order rightly to estimate the historical position of these masters, let us take, in conclusion, a momentary survey of the principal epochs in the development of modern music. Through the genius of the Netherland masters of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, music, for the first time in history, became an independent art; for the introduction and development of counterpoint, or music in several simultaneous voices or parts, emancipated music from strict bondage to poetry and the sacred text. The ancient unison Gregorian song was soon hidden in the maze of florid counterpoint, woven around it by able masters like Josquin, Gombert, and Orlando Lasso. The true ideal of this first great epoch of musical art was reached by Palestrina, whose compositions note the reaction in church music from extravagances in technical skill and the abuse and neglect of the sacred words to more reasonable limits. Palestrina's elevated style, chaste counterpoint, and careful treatment of the words rendered him a true reformer, or conservator, of music. He averted the threatened abolishment of counterpoint from the Church, as contemplated by the Papal government, and thus prevented what would have been a retrogression in musical art.

About the beginning of the seventeenth century another [243] movement was directed against mediæval counterpoint. It was not the Church that threatened it this time, but scholars, enthusiasts, and *dilettanti*. They denounced counterpoint in unsparing terms, and painted in glowing colors the splendors of Greek tragedy and music. They believed that counterpoint could not be compared with ancient music, either with respect to the simple beauty of the melody or the comprehensive clearness and rhetorical expression of the words. Their attempt was unsuccessful as far as the abandonment of counterpoint and the restoration, or the faithful imitation, of ancient dramatic music are concerned, but the founders of the musical drama or opera were instrumental in unfolding a new element in music, namely, the monodic *recitative* and *air*, and the orchestral accompaniment, which soon led to the establishment of secular music as a separate branch of the art. Original masters, like Monteverde, Carissimi, Scarlatti, now arose to reap the harvest which the Florentine *dilettanti* had prepared for them. This first epoch in modern secular music furnishes a striking example of the unsuccessful attempt of men of mere reflection and theory to establish an arbitrary equality between music and poetry at the expense of both. Scarlatti and his successors of the Neapolitan school took advantage of

the materials thus placed at their disposal, and, instead of trying to carry out the original idea of the opera, developed the air, until the reign of beautiful and sensuous melody became absolute. The words and the play were now wholly disregarded, and everything was sacrificed to the melodious sway of the singer. It was a farce to call the opera a musical drama. During the eighteenth century the Italian opera commanded the world; but under the frivolous influence of the *castrati* of the stage, whose trills and *roulades* held the public in subjection, the opera was degraded from the position held by Scarlatti and the best of his school. Then a champion stood forth to oppose these abuses. Gluck devoted his life to a reform of the musical drama. He would not give up his ideal for the sensuous charm of melody, or the executive display of the singer, but sought to place the recitative in the foreground, to render his music declamatory, and, above all, to express vividly the sense and meaning of the words.

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He believed dramatic truth to be far more important to the opera than musical beauty. His own words were, that he aspired to be a poet and painter more than a musician. Gluck, like Wagner, published his theory, or principles of art, and divided the musical world into two parties. The limitations which he theoretically and practically set on the music of the drama limited him in turn. His aim was not perfectly accomplished, but he prepared the way for a greater master, whose universal genius adopted many of Gluck's improvements without depriving music of its beauty and freedom.

Mozart was able to express the full force and truth of the diction, and to define the clear outlines of the characters of the play. He adopted the melodious style of the Italians; but while he allowed the singer his full rights, he did not rob the opera of its dramatic action. The relation of Mozart to Gluck and the Italian opera of the eighteenth century proves conclusively that the would-be reformers, or men of theories, do not live in musical history as the representatives of the epoch in which they flourished. Mozart reached the culmination of the older style of Italian opera, including Gluck's improvements, just as Palestrina fulfilled the ideal of mediæval church music.

If we turn to other branches we witness parallel cases. Sebastian Bach, in his Cantatas and Passion Music, represents the highest attainment of Protestant church music, having his forerunner in Henry Schütz in the seventeenth century. Bach also completed the older forms of instrumental music, the prelude and fugue, toccata, suite, etc., which were in vogue for over a century before his mastery of them. The new style of instrumental music developed by Emanuel Bach and Haydn reached its climax in the sonatas and symphonies of Beethoven. *In none of these instances do we find that a reform, or adoption of a new style of music, has had its commencement, development, and culmination represented by one and the same master.* Simply because this would be contrary to the law of growth. Will not this prove true of Wagner's case? He has opened a new epoch in dramatic music; but if we read the lesson of history aright, a reaction will come, as in similar instances in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Some musical genius—perhaps several—may arise to lead the opera back into [245] a more fruitful musical field. All that is truthful in Wagner's principles of art, and all that is worthy of imitation in his operas, will not be thrown away. But history does not stand still; and, unless this natural reaction sets in, we may live to see the former musical productiveness and pre-eminence of Germany succeeded by a period of sterility, as witnessed to-day in Italy, both in music and painting. Who knows but that the musical sceptre may pass into the hands of another and a younger people? As art-loving Americans let us hope that it will be the mission of our own country to rejuvenate the life of music; may it be vouchsafed to her to lift the veil that now shrouds the future of this beautiful art!

J. K. Paine.

