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# *How Wagner makes Operas*

By John R. G. Hassard



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## How Wagner makes Operas

AT the close of the first performance of "The Ring of the Nibelung," in 1876, Richard Wagner made a short address to the audience in the theater at Bayreuth. He spoke of the result which he expected from the successful experiment just finished. From this beginning the German people might date a new birth of German art. The speech was little relished by those who believed that Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber had already done something for the lyric stage which this arrogant master was unwilling to acknowledge. Wagner was misunderstood. It was not the beginning of German art that he spoke of but the beginning of a new form of art. "Fidelio" and "Der Freyschütz" are solitary works of genius to which nobody has ever produced a parallel—not even Beethoven or Weber; and Mozart's operas are in that Italian manner which never was quite naturalized in Germany, and now has plainly passed its prime everywhere. One might hope to found a new school without injustice to the masters of the old. But Wagner's speech was characteristic of this man of genius, of whom we may say that he has been distinguished from youth to old age by his colossal impudence.

When he was a boy he resolved to write poetry like Shakspeare's and marry it to music like Beethoven's. Of all the composers since Beethoven the two who have made the deepest impression upon the art of their time are Wagner and Berlioz, and it is a curious fact that both trace to Shakspeare their earliest directing impulse. Both appeared at a time when a sudden ardor for the English poet blazed in France and Germany. It was the era of revolt against periwigs and red heels, when Dumas and Victor Hugo were disturbing Paris with the first dramas of the romantic school, and the plays of Shakspeare were acted amid transports of delight before the audiences of the Boulevards. Berlioz, feeling his soul in arms, wrote his "Romeo and Juliet," and married an Irish *Ophelia*. Wagner bought an English dictionary, and, falling furiously upon "Lear" and "Hamlet," compounded a tragedy in which forty-two personages were slaughtered, and some of them had to come back as ghosts because there were not enough left alive to finish the story. To supply this play with music like Beethoven's he borrowed a treatise on thorough-bass, and gave himself a week to learn the art of composition. Nothing came of this boyish nonsense, nor have some early overtures and operas survived, though he pushed them—heaven knows how—to the doubtful honor of performance; but the union of the poetry of Shakspeare with the music of Beethoven is precisely what he says that he has accomplished in his mature years.

When he conceived his opera of "Rienzi," no theater was grand enough for it except the first theater of the world. He went to Paris at the age of twenty-six, without money or friends or reputation, and indeed without having done anything to deserve a reputation; and he believed that the Grande Opéra, then resounding with the fresh triumphs of Meyerbeer, would open its doors to him at the first display of his unfinished score. Everybody knows the story of his four years of suffering in the French capital. But this miserable period cannot have been altogether without its consolations to one in whom the exercise of the creative faculty was accompanied by such sublime assurance. From one failure he went on complacently to another. When Paris would not have his "Rienzi" he proceeded [620] to compose his "Faust," which to the Parisian taste was an incomprehensible outrage. When the orchestra of the Conservatoire threw aside the "Faust" in despair, he wrote "The Flying Dutchman." When that failed in Germany, he went still farther from the received patterns and produced "Tannhäuser"; and the failure of "Tannhäuser" only inspired him to break other canons of opera by composing "Lohengrin." An attempt of the Emperor Napoleon III. to secure a hearing for the persistent innovator in Paris led to a disaster which is historical; and his answer to that signal defeat was "Tristram and Iseult," a work of such a daring character that

the artists of the Vienna opera, after forty-seven rehearsals, declared it to be impossible, and gave it up. Not content with composing unpopular music, he aroused bitter personal resentment by the rancor of his literary writings. He savagely denounced the works of this generation which current opinion held most precious. He wrote of Rossini with a contempt and of Meyerbeer with a violence which cannot be justified; and he coupled his disparagement of Mendelssohn with an indecent discourse upon Jews in general and "Judaism in Music" in particular which, even in these days of Jew-baiting, we read with astonishment. He had made himself one of the best-hated men in Germany; he had not secured the general acceptance of any of his works; he was a proscribed revolutionist, a wanderer in strange countries—when he put the climax to his audacity by proposing to write an opera four nights long, inviting the world to build a theater expressly for its representation, and calling upon the foremost artists of the German stage, which he had been abusing for so many years, to come and sing in it for nothing. With difficulty he had persuaded the German public to listen to him now and then in the intervals of other amusement; and now he asked them to travel to one of the most remote and inconvenient towns of Bavaria, for the purpose of hearing his music at a price about one hundred and fifty times as great as they were accustomed to pay for their favorite operas. Truly it may be said that his impudence was colossal.

But he succeeded. He has compelled people to listen to his operas and to like them. He has found powerful supporters among the Jews, who hate him. He has half-conquered the English, who are deeply affronted by his criticism of Mendelssohn; and at last he is forcing his music even into the ears of unwilling Paris. If it is too soon to say that he has destroyed the old form of opera and established another, we can at least affirm that he has profoundly affected the methods of all serious lyric composers of the day, even against their will. Since "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin" it has been out of the question to write any more operas of the Bellini pattern. It is true that the reforms of Wagner were pre-figured by Gluck a hundred years ago; but Gluck founded no school, nor could his majestic works keep the stage. It is true also that Wagnerism is only a manifestation of the tendency observable in all music since Beethoven to sacrifice mere beauty of form for the sake of the free expression of emotion; but Wagner has fixed that tendency, defined it, intensified it, and applied it to the music which appeals most forcibly to popular feeling—the music of the stage. His theories have been so often explained that it cannot be necessary to review them here; but it may be interesting, now that we are summoned to wait upon him again at Bayreuth, to examine some of the devices by which he has made his strange and—as men used to call it—his abstruse music intelligible and effective.

His first rule is that, as the poem and the melody ought to express the same feeling and proceed together from a common creative impulse, neither should be asked to give way to the other. A tune which is independent of the text is as much out of place in his music-drama as declamation which is not musical. Now, of course, it is often a matter of opinion whether a given musical phrase fits a given verse or not; but there are many practices of the Italian composers which are hardly open to discussion. We tolerate them because we are used to them; but nobody denies that they are flagrant offenses against dramatic propriety and destructive of poetical sentiment. Convention established for the old composers a set pattern of airs and *ensemble* pieces, and prescribed a certain distribution of these pieces at intervals which had no connection with the progress of the drama; and convention also decreed that the formal tunes in an opera should be separated and kept in shape by the interposition of intervals of rubbish, or musical noise, just as eggs are kept from knocking against one another by a packing of straw. For an example of the ruinous effect of such abuses we can do no better than refer to the greatest of all composers of Italian opera,—Mozart,—almost the only musician, except Beethoven, of whom Wagner habitually speaks with reverence. In "Don Giovanni" there is a famous tragic scene for *Donna Anna*. Her lover has deserted her and has

slain her father. But it happens that the crisis of her agony comes on just at that mid-period of the opera when convention exacts that the prima-donna shall have what is called a dramatic scena and aria, made [621] upon a certain model, so as to exhibit, first, the breadth of her style in a slow movement, and then the agility of her execution in a florid allegro. *Donna Anna* accordingly laments her misfortunes in the tender strains of the *Non mi dir*, until suddenly, without any dramatic reason, but only because it is time for the quick second part, she steps briskly to the footlights, dries her eyes, and with the exclamation, "*Forse un giorno il cielo ancora sentirà pietà di me*" (Well, perhaps it will be all right some day), she rushes into the *allegretto*. On the last syllable of *sentirà* she performs a series of ascending and descending runs, embracing no fewer than one hundred and five notes and covering nine bars of the score. Somebody—was it not Rousseau?—defended the introduction of roulades in emotional passages, on the plea that the effect of intense feeling was to choke the voice and retard articulation. In the stress of feeling *Donna Anna* seems to become phenomenally voluble, without saying anything. The result of Mozart's complaisance to fashion has been most unfortunate. The air is beautiful, but it does not charm. It has become mere prima-donna music. It stirs no sentiment of pity. In listening, we forget the drama, we forget the heroine, we forget the melody, we forget Mozart; we think only of the skill of the singer, and watch for the dangerous passages with uneasy interest, just as we await the supreme moment of a trapeze performance when the gymnast is to hang by the toes. Here, then, is a superb piece of music ruined by incongruity; and the author is that illustrious and exquisite genius whose taste is usually so elegant, whose tenderness is so natural, and whose sentiment is so pure and deep. Is it not principally because this famous scene has fallen to the level of a showpiece that *Donna Anna* is one of the least sympathetic of all the great soprano rôles?

Now contrast the chief emotional scene of "Don Giovanni" with the chief emotional scene of "Lohengrin"—the long duo in the bridal chamber, which touches so wide a range of feeling, from the quiet of newly wedded bliss to the tragedy of the eternal separation. It is full of soft and graceful melody which springs naturally out of the text. Not a measure is added for the sake of ornament, or to give a pretty turn to a phrase, or to indulge the vanity of the singers. And how perfectly the music illustrates and enforces the dramatic situation; how profoundly it moves our sympathies; how dear *Elsa* becomes to us as it proceeds; how little we care about her vocalization and how much we are concerned by her happiness, her temptation, her fault, and her punishment. What a shock a cavatina would be in that scene; how rudely it would dispell our illusions and chill our hearts!

The second of Wagner's devices for increasing the effect of his music is the employment of "leading motives," short melodic phrases or harmonic combinations which symbolize the principal springs of action in the drama, and recur from time to time as the ideas or the personages associated with them enter into the development of the poem. That music constructed in accordance with this plan is capable of extraordinary suggestiveness, and is therefore especially fitted to arouse the imagination and the feelings, is obvious; but it needs a master to prevent the motives from interfering with the flow of the song or wearying the ear by repetition. The first of these dangers Wagner escapes by placing the illustrative phrases rather in the orchestral accompaniment than in the vocal parts; and he avoids monotony by the ingenuity with which he modifies, combines, and develops the motives, in harmony with the varying impulses of the play. An industrious German musician, Herr von Wolzogen, has published a table of all the leading motives in the quadruple drama of "The Ring of the Nibelung." He finds that there are ninety, and that they diminish progressively in number as the work goes on, the first division having thirty-five and the last only thirteen of its own. "Thus," says an English critic, "the 'Götterdämmerung' has, with small relief, to bear the burden of repeating themes heard over and over again." But most of those who have listened to the opera probably regard this repetition as a great advantage; it revives for them the image

of previous scenes; it recalls the remote causes of the impending dramatic catastrophe; it accompanies the story with vivid illustrations, yet never interrupts it; and it is managed so artfully that the recurring motives constantly present themselves in a new dress or a new relation. Probably nobody ever thought of objecting to the funeral march of Siegfried in the "Götterdämmerung" that it repeats themes heard over and over again; and yet this imposing composition, which is both musically and dramatically one of the most effective of all Wagner's creations, is built entirely upon twelve of the chief leading motives—most of them very familiar—which occur in the various divisions of the work. The march contains hardly a new phrase, and yet the whole effect is novel.

A third and highly important feature of Wagner's reform is the stress which he lays upon poetic and picturesque effect in the decoration and business of the stage. This has no relation to the Crummles theory of the real [622] pump and wash-tubs. It is the antithesis of vulgar realism. Regarding the opera as an extremely complex work of art, in which the poet, the musician, the actor, the painter, ought to unite in an equal partnership for the production of a certain result, Wagner insists that nothing which any of these agents can do to heighten the illusion shall ever be neglected. The countless absurdities of the lyric stage, over which wits have so long made merry, are unnecessary, and they are unpardonable. That the poet may well leave something to the imagination of his listener is no doubt true; even Wagner is not successful with Fricka's rams or with Siegfried's dragon; but to arouse our sense of the ridiculous, when the object is to touch our serious emotions, is quite another thing. Why do the chorus-singers in "Faust" always stand motionless in opposed ranks while they cry, "We are dancing like the wind"? Why do the revelers in the house of *Violetta* sup hilariously at a table loaded with empty dishes? If we cannot sympathize with the personages in the "Ballo in Maschera," is it not because we are laughing at Verdi's astonishing picture of the manners and customs of the solid men of Massachusetts Bay, in the days when "Richard, Count of Warwick, and Governor of Boston, in America," gave fancy-dress balls to the Puritan colonists, went about attended by a blonde young woman in tights, consulted a sorceress living in a cut granite cabin, with ceilings at least twenty feet high, and was dogged by two ferocious conspirators named Sam and Tom, who notified their nefarious purpose by wearing slouched hats at all times, and conversing apart in bass voices, with eyes aslant and black cloaks thrown over their shoulders, regardless of the place, the company, or the weather? Not long ago, when one of Wagner's own operas, "The Flying Dutchman," was presented in New York, the stage-manager was not ashamed to decorate the cottage of the Norwegian skipper with a colored map of the United States, having pictures of our principal curiosities of nature and architecture displayed around the border, and a table of population snugly bestowed in the belly of the Gulf of Mexico. As none of Wagner's theatrical devices have ever been carried out in America according to his instructions, it may be worth while to examine them a little, and especially to see how he manages one of the most striking of stage effects, namely, a sudden and complete change of landscape, light, color, and accessories, to meet a corresponding change in the sentiment of the music and the progress of the story.

The central idea of "Tannhäuser" is the contrast between a degrading sensual passion and the saving love of a pure, noble, and devout woman. The first scene sets the key for the whole opera. When the curtain rises, showing the minstrel knight reclining at the knee of *Venus*, the stage represents the interior of that mountain of lawless delights, where the goddess, surviving the destruction of the other pagan divinities, still tempts men to everlasting ruin. It is a garden bathed in rosy light and hung with soft-tinted clouds. Mysterious vistas open in the background, where naiads are floating on a distant lake, and lovers wander arm in arm, or rest with the nymphs on grassy banks. A chorus far away chants gentle songs of invitation. Everything suggests the specious allurements of luxurious languor. A troop of bacchantes are summoned forth to flog drowsy delight into life, and as they dart hither and thither in a

tumultuous dance the music quickens into frenzy. But the pleasures of the Venusberg are fleeting; weariness creeps upon the dancers; a mist gathers over the bowers, and only *Venus* and *Tannhäuser* are left in the foreground. There are objections to this scene; but of its dramatic force, its importance as an element in the story, and its necessity as an explanation of the accompanying music there can hardly be two opinions. Yet the last time the opera was performed in New York, the whole of this poetical introduction was played by the orchestra with the curtain down; and of course it was incomprehensible and tiresome. The scene between *Tannhäuser* and *Venus*, which follows the melting away of the vision of nymphs and bacchantes, depends largely for its effect upon the recollection of the preceding scene. Suddenly, when the passion of the duo is at its height, the goddess disappears with a cry, the clouds break away, and *Tannhäuser* lies alone in a smiling pastoral valley. The landscape glows with honest sunlight. Sheep-bells are heard in the distance. A shepherd on the hill-side pipes a rustic song of May. There is a shrine by the path; and from the castle seen on the heights far off a train of pilgrims approach, singing a hymn. The beauty and significance of this sharp contrast of effects and the suddenness of the change are characteristic of Wagner; and the reader will not forget that the two pictures represent the two contending principles of good and evil, between which the fate of the knight is to be suspended until the close of the drama.

"Lohengrin" contains a similar effect, of which we have seen in our opera-house only a faint suggestion. *Ortrud* is the evil principle of that drama, and the fatal plot is woven by her in a remarkable night-scene under [623] *Elsa's* window. Wagner manages the transition from the night of treachery and foreboding to the splendor and rejoicings of the wedding day with consummate art. We see the first flush of dawn followed by the glow of sunrise; the trumpets sound on the castle-walls, and there is something in their bright tones that suggests the freshness of the morning air; the courtyard gradually fills with bustle; the women pass from the bride's chamber toward the church, and presently broad gates are flung wide and the royal pageant comes forth. We have never seen this as it ought to be, for on our stage the business has been neglected and the music has been curtailed. "The Ring of the Nibelung" is so filled with picturesque and suggestive changes that one is at a loss which to choose for illustration. Perhaps one of the most delicate and purely romantic occurs in the duo of *Siegmond* and *Sieglinde*—or "Siegmond's Love Song," as it is generally called—in "The Valkyrie." The hero, wounded and lost in the forest on a stormy night, takes refuge in a rude dwelling, where the trunk of a mighty ash penetrates and supports the roof; skins are spread upon the floor and barbaric trophies of the chase decorate the walls. Here he is tended and revived by a beautiful woman. The room is lighted only by a fire which smolders and flickers on an open, raised hearth; and to realize the effect of this scene we must remember that not only is the stage obscured, but the auditorium is absolutely dark. The love of *Siegmond* and *Sieglinde* is weighted with mystery, fear, and portents of tragedy; and it begins aptly in the uncertain gloom, as the noise of the tempest outside is dying away. But passion rises; the music becomes more animated, more rhythmical, and more sensuous; suddenly a gust of wind bursts open the wide doors at the back of the scene, and the room is flooded with moonlight. The storm has passed. There is a vista of the woods bathed in silvery glory. It is a night made for love and romance. The hero draws the woman to his side and begins the well-known song:

"Winter storms have waned  
At the wakening May,  
And mildly spreads  
His splendor the spring."

And so the scene quickens to its rapturous climax. The effect is entrancing; and it is not easy to say whether it is more by the beauty of the picture, or the charm of the music, or close coincidence, or artful contrast, that Wagner inflames the imagination.

Probably the boldest of all his devices for heightening a change of sentiment in the drama, by a simultaneous change in the character of the music and the aspect of the stage, occurs in the new opera of "Parsifal." It is used twice: first in the beginning of the work, and again, with a fuller development, in the *finale*. As in "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin," there is a conflict here between good and evil, and *Parsifal* must triumph over the magician, *Klingsor*, and the temptress, *Kundry*, before he can enter upon the illustrious function of guardian of the Holy Grail. He has passed through the trial; he has repelled the seductions of enchantment and sensuality; he has reached the wood which lies outside Monsalvat, the castle of the Grail, and there he is clad in the armor and mantle which distinguish the knights of the Cup of the Lord's Supper. Then he ascends toward the castle, guided by an aged knight and followed by the penitent *Kundry*. At this moment the landscape begins slowly to change. The lake, the thicket, and the grove disappear. We see a succession of rocky slopes, with *Parsifal* still climbing upward, and arched passages traversed by processions of knights. Certain musical themes, which have been associated all through the opera with the worship of the Grail and with its miraculous power, are treated now in an extended and most imposing form. The solemn march is accompanied by soft harmonies of trombones, distant peals of bells, and the chant of the knights; and as the religious strains increase in grandeur and intensity, faint at first and swelling as we seem to come nearer, the stage gradually assumes the appearance of a splendid hall, lighted from a lofty dome and filled with parade. Here the opera ends with an act of worship; as the curtain falls the orchestra ceases, and the hymn of the Grail is softly chanted by boys' voices from the invisible height of the dome.

It is only necessary to describe a few scenes like this to vindicate Wagner's title to lasting renown. To invent such a combination of music, poetry, painting, machinery, and action is the achievement of a genius. Other composers have adroitly enhanced the effect of their music by occasional ingenuity in the arrangement of the stage; but Wagner is the first to understand the higher functions of the scene-painter, the carpenter, and the gas man.

The foregoing pages have been confined to an attempt to illustrate Wagner's method of making operas, and have had little to do with the quality of his texts or his plots. This is an independent subject. He holds that the only fit themes for the composer are the myth and the popular legend. Few poets will be impelled to agree with him by the study of his example; for while he seems to be always growing greater [624] in the brilliancy and beauty of his musical ideas, the strength and magnificence of his musical treatment, and the originality of his musical and pictorial combinations, there is too much reason to fear that his poetical faculty is becoming more and more distorted. This is easily accounted for by his persistent adherence to certain forms of the myth. The supernatural is effective in poetry only when it comes into contact with the life of our world. Wagner remembered this important truth when he connected the doom of his *Flying Dutchman* with the simple trust and sacrifice of *Senta*; when he saved *Tannhäuser* through the womanly devotion of *Elizabeth*, and placed by the white figure of *Lohengrin* the loving and purely human *Elsa*. "Tristram and Iseult," with its pivotal idea of a love-philter, marked the first serious divergence into a lonely path which he has since pursued to such bad purpose that now, in his splendid maturity, he separates himself from human sympathies and creates a series of characters whose thoughts and passions are not those of the race to which we belong. In the four-fold opera of the "Nibelung" there is nobody except *Brünhilde* in whom we can take a personal interest, and we care for her only because she is such a magnificent creature when she is mad. In "Parsifal," the remoteness of the personages from whatever touches the heart of mankind is absolute. They are the vaporous symbols of a mystical and ill-defined idea. That an opera should be unsympathetic is, according to Wagner's own principles, a terrible blemish. But this is not the only evil consequence of his devotion to the myth. As he has gradually withdrawn himself from the atmosphere of reality to muse over gods and volsongs and abstractions, he has lost a great

deal of that perception of the existing conditions of society—in other words, that common-sense—which the dramatist must preserve if his works are to be acted. Some of the very scenes we have described as illustrations of his wonderful art of doing things might just as well be taken to illustrate his deplorable lack of judgment as to the things that ought to be done. In dim legendary periods certain actions were tolerable which our civilization does not willingly look at. Wagner has always been prone to forget this. Some of the stage directions in "Tannhäuser" could not be obeyed, at least in their spirit, in any American or English theater. As for the gross divinities and incestuous heroes of the "Nibelung," they are now and then unfit for decent company. But the most appalling example of Wagner's growing insensibility to causes of offense is seen in "Parsifal." We have there a ceremony of baptism; we have a Magdalen wiping *Parsifal's* feet with her hair; but the dramatic motive and culminating scene of the work is the celebration of the eucharist. The knight, as has been already observed, is not installed until he has been tempted. So the dances of disheveled wantons lead up to the most solemn act of divine worship; the can-can and the holy communion are represented on the same boards, without a thought that there can be an impropriety in acting either.

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