
Wagner and the pianist Bülow

By Alice Asbury



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Wagner and the pianist Bülow

WITH the advent of Meyerbeer and Berlioz a new era was inaugurated in the musical world.

The extravagant bantling which they may justly be accused of fathering has produced a wilder offspring, and in the effusions of the Wagner and of the Offenbach brain—widely differing as they do—the legitimate heirs of the first unnatural creation may be recognized. In his old age Meyerbeer attended with anxious interest the representation of Offenbach's operas. Leaning forward, sunk in profound thought, he listened with almost painful intentness; occasionally he admired, but the suspicion of the approaching fact seems to have dawned upon him,—that it was the triumph of a school destined in the short space of half a decade to corrupt public morals and public taste, to debase the stage, and leave the opera in a state of almost irretrievable decay.

In Meyerbeer's music there is a passion, a mystic gloom and voluptuousness, an instrumentation often picturesque, frequently overcharged, and generally in the highest degree romantic. The instrumentation of Berlioz is often monstrously grotesque, brilliant and imaginative, but too generally the unmistakable offspring of a distempered mind. Though the former is a giant compared to the latter, it is undeniable they both had an influence upon Wagner at the beginning of his career. It was impossible for Berlioz long to maintain his hold upon the public; it is a curious fact that even Meyerbeer, once the idol of the Parisian world, became almost wearisome to it. The old classical masters had been too surely undermined, and the road paved for more dangerous innovations. When once it had been established by Meyerbeer that a union of the Italian, German, and French schools was to constitute the new opera, the successors of that composer went still farther in defiance of a pure style, casting off all decent limitations, and, under the plea of originality, sought to minister in absurdly extravagant fashion to an already depraved public taste. That the composition of the opera is at a lower grade than at any previous time during the century, no one closely conversant with the stage will have the boldness to deny.

Wagner and Bülow! Two celebrities and two fantastic characters, once sworn friends each to the other. One need not go to Munich to conceive an idea of the "Music of the Future," but one must go there to learn thoroughly the vagaries of the one and the peculiarities of the other,—Wagner, the royal composer to the music-mad young king; Bülow, the much applauded operatic conductor. Wagner, it is asserted by zealous admirers, was a sort of chaotically talented boy, the descendant of an ordinary burgher family, who at school and during his student life dabbled in the sciences, wrote tolerable rhyme, daubed worse pictures, and, —what is more extraordinary,—composed the music to a tragedy written by himself while attending the Nicolia school in Leipsic, without having ever acquired a theoretic knowledge of the art of musical composition. Report intimates also that his teachers at the school had cause for dissatisfaction though he passed through their classes and entered the university as a student of philosophy at the age of eighteen. By this time, however, he had become convinced of his own musical genius and of the necessity for a systematic foundation, should he hope to gain a reputation as composer. The noted Cantor of the Thomas school, Weinlig, became his instructor for a time, and from this period various compositions of no special merit date,—among them a symphony which had the honor of being performed at a *Gewandhaus* concert. [141] Three little operas, "The Wedding," "The Fairies," and "Love's Prohibition," are now, happily, quite forgotten. He wrote the text for these operas, as he continues to do for all his compositions of this class, being firmly convinced of his native talent as a dramatic author. In truth, if he had devoted himself to literature instead of music,

he might have won a greater reputation. A few concert pieces date from this early period; but he has never since composed music of this character.

But the man was irretrievably obstinate, and would not study: he failed to acquire the solid principles of art, claiming, with a most bombastic impudence, to possess the genius not amenable to scholastic law. In this respect Bülow is an extraordinary contrast, his whole life having been distinguished by an untiring diligence and energetic study of the art to which he is devoted. He displayed great musical talent much earlier than Wagner, and was so carefully instructed that at eleven years of age he could play Beethoven's C Minor trio with accompaniment. He is the son of a noted courtier and literary man, the friend of Ludwig Tieck, and the representative of one of the oldest aristocratic families of Mecklenburg and Germany. Born in Dresden in 1830, he has had the advantage of such instruction as could be given by Wieck, the father of Clara Schumann; and during a temporary stay of Litolff, the noted pupil of Moscheles, in that city, he was intrusted to his care. The result was to infuse into the boy a passionate love for the new romantic school.

But we are forgetting Wagner, and the lives of the two men do not yet unite.

At twenty-one Wagner was already disgusted with philosophy, and became musical director of the theatre of Magdeburg, where he remained two or three years,—until 1836,—and then removed to Königsberg, filling the same position; later he repaired to Riga, where he began his "Rienzi," afterwards completed in Paris. In the summer of 1839 he suddenly determined to try his fortune in the French capital. Here, in the following year, Meyerbeer found him in the greatest pecuniary distress, and, by introducing him to the French publisher, Schlesinger, supplied him with literary and musical work sufficient at least to relieve him from his present difficulties. It was Meyerbeer, also, who by unwearied effort finally succeeded in procuring permission for the performance of "Rienzi" in Berlin, some seven years after. The opera failed, but it was by reason of its own inherent defects, not because of careless presentation. In later years Wagner rewarded his benefactor by attacking him in some of his numerous pamphlets as "the most miserable of music-makers," which rather grieved that sensitive old soul, though upon his own side not a single harsh criticism of the ungrateful composer ever passed his lips.

In the midst of his privations he completed "Rienzi," and composed "The Flying Dutchman," having been inspired to undertake the latter by a seavoyage from London to Calais. It was Meyerbeer who introduced this work to the Berlin public, its failure there retarding the presentation of "Rienzi" until in 1847. Through Meyerbeer's persistent effort "Rienzi" was first performed (at Dresden) 1842, Wagner himself superintending its performance. It was a great success, though a musical monstrosity, a bombastic mass of chaotic ideas. The success secured his appointment to the position of assistant royal operatic conductor, in connection with Reissiger,—an office similar to that now held by Rietz, the assistant of Kochs. It was Reissiger, by the way, who really composed the delightful waltz known in England and this country as "Weber's Last Thought," the original melody being borrowed from an Austrian national song, and arranged by this composer in its present form.

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That was the Golden Age of music in Dresden; the time, too, when Bülow was growing up, and already, boy as he was, attracting public attention as pianist. Madame Schroeder-Devrient, who for pathos, passion, originality, and liquid flexibility of voice was scarce second to Pasta and Malibran; Johanna Wagner, that rather harsh but talented and powerful contralto; Tichatschek, the tender, wonderful tenor, who still sings on the same stage, the advance of age taking somewhat from his power, but unable to wean from him the love of the public;—were all at the zenith of their astonishing influence.

It was the brilliant period of the Gluck and Weber operas, when the ninth symphony of Beethoven won a position in the opinion of German critics equal to the one in C Minor, the

Pastorale, and the *Eroica*.

At this time began Bülow's acquaintance with Wagner; a short acquaintance, however, as Bülow's father soon removed to Stuttgart, taking the boy with him. Wagner had encouraged the young *virtuoso* with unusual warmth, and Bülow still prizes above most earthly treasures a leaf from an old album upon which the newly famous composer wrote the following sentence: "Glow there a pure, bright spark of passion for art within your soul, it will one time surely burst into a brilliant flame. Remember, it is knowledge only which will fan this spark into a burning fire, and thereafter keep it alive."

Strange that the man had not himself laid this truth to heart!

During this Dresden life "*Tannhäuser*" was created, producing when presented a greater sensation among critics than either of the previous works. In the extravagant instrumentation the influence of Berlioz is perceptible, and the whole opera, like its successor, "*Lohengrin*," is a fair sample of Wagner's meretricious style. The two legends forming the foundation for these texts are so wildly romantic as to pardon some unusual resort to dramatic effect, but it is questionable whether a correct taste ought not to revolt from the absurd means used by the composer to bewilder his hearers. I have never seen either opera in this country, but on their native soil I have had occasion to shudder at the introduction into the instrumentalism, as part and parcel of it, of the banging of huge pieces of wood and the actual grinding of dry bones.

It is undeniable that among so much that is disquieting to a classically trained ear there is occasionally found an extraordinarily beautiful aria, or a succession of delightful melodies in perfection like a string of pearls; but that inalienable right of music, as of art in general, to produce its effects by contrast,—after moments of passion to introduce an instant of repose, and by well-calculated arrangement of parts to give the opportunity for reflection and self-collection,—Wagner has violated repeatedly.

In the composer's conception of the new school which is to command the admiration of the future; if that of the present is denied, the dramatic portion, or text proper, is to be so closely allied with the music, that upon the actual words, alternately with the thread of the musical idea, the effect to be produced depends; consequently an intimate acquaintance with the libretto is absolutely necessary if one would not be lost in a chaos of sound.

Perhaps, under these circumstances, a repetition of the legends of *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* may be pardoned.

The noble *Tannhäuser*, a German knight, had traversed many lands in search of adventure, having visited among other noted regions the Hörselberg, the abiding-place of Frau Hulda (the Venus of Northern mythology). Though leading there a joyous, luxurious life, his conscience at last troubled him sorely, and tearing himself from the arms of the goddess he declared his repentance, calling loudly upon the Virgin to deliver him from her clutches and the temptations she in wily fashion threw in his way. Mourning his sins, he set out for Rome to beg absolution of Pope Urban.

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When he, however, there confessed that he had remained a whole year in the mountain with Hulda, the Pope angrily exclaimed, "When this withered stock I hold in my hand shall put forth leaves and blossom, thy sins shall be forgiven thee, and not sooner."

Then answered *Tannhäuser* sorrowfully, "Had I lived but one year longer upon earth I would have done such penance for my sins that God himself would have had compassion." Then, because of his misery and condemnation by the Pope, he withdrew from the town, and returned to the mountain, there to remain so long as this world shall stand. Frau Hulda welcomed him joyfully as an erring man should be greeted. On the third day after *Tannhäuser's* disappearance the stick began to put forth leaves and to blossom, and the Pope sent messengers through all the world to search for the brave knight. It was too late; he was already in the mountain where he will remain until the Day of Judgment, when perhaps the

merciful God will remove him thence.

It is a highly poetic, dramatic foundation, and has been filled out most artistically by the composer. Lohengrin, from the character of the legend, affords greater opportunity for the romantic element. Indeed, there are more beautiful melodies in the latter than in Tannhäuser, the famous songs of the Swan and of the Evening Star being hardly equalled by any other compositions of similar character.

The Duke of Brabant and Limburg, being at the point of death, petitioned his faithful follower, Frederick of Telramund, to protect his young daughter Else, his only child, and the inheritor of his vast possessions.

Frederick solemnly swore to obey his master; but, being a famous hero who at Stockholm had killed a fearful dragon, he became in time presumptuous, and sued for the hand of the young Duchess.

As she steadfastly refused his love, Frederick complained to the Emperor, Henry the Fowler, asserting that Else had long since promised to become his wife, and now refused to fulfil her vow. The Emperor decided that she must defend herself through her champion in open combat. As no knight appeared in her defence, the poor Duchess appealed to God for rescue.

Thereupon, in a certain remote region, the kingdom of the Grail, the bells were rung as a signal that some one was in pressing need of help; and at once it was determined to send Lohengrin, the son of Percival, to the damsel's assistance. Lohengrin was about to spring into his saddle, when a swan came gliding to the shore drawing a tiny boat. Then cried the young knight joyfully, "Take the beast back to his stable; I will trust myself to this bird, whatever region it may bring me unto."

Having faith in God, he took no store of food with him; when he was hungry the swan dipped its beak into the sea, drew out a fish, and divided the same with the knight. Five days he thus spent upon the broad ocean.

In the mean time Else had called a council of her princes and knights to meet in Antwerp. On the day of the assembly a swan appeared on the Scheldt drawing a small boat in which lay Lohengrin asleep upon his shield.

The swan landed, and the stranger was joyfully received, especially as he at once proclaimed himself the champion so much desired. In great splendor, knights and ladies then repaired to Mayence, where the combat took place in the presence of the Emperor and a notable company.

The hero of the Grail was conqueror; Frederick confessed his falsehood, and was condemned to death. Else became the wife of Lohengrin, who, however, required of her never to inquire of his origin; for in such case he must immediately desert her.

Long did the pair live happily together, and two children were born to them. Wisely and powerfully did Lohengrin rule the land, doing good service likewise to the Emperor against the Huns and heathen. But it chanced [144] one time that in gallant practice in the lists, he pierced the arm of the Duke of Cleves and broke it. Devoured by rage and envy, the wife of the wounded Duke cried tauntingly among the women: "A brave knight is Lohengrin, perchance, and for aught I know, a Christian! It is a pity not being of noble blood his fame is not great; for no one knows from whence he swam to us."

The Duchess of Brabant reddened with mortification. That night she wept bitterly, and when Lohengrin inquired the cause she replied, "The Duchess of Cleves has troubled me greatly." But Lohengrin inquired no further. The second and the third nights she attempted to ask the fatal question, but Lohengrin silenced her. At last, as dawn broke on the third day, she could no longer hold her peace.

"Lord, blame me not!" she cried; "I have faith you are of noble blood."

That day Lohengrin acknowledged his parentage; that Percival was his father, and that God

had sent him hither. Then calling his children he took them in his arms and kissed them, commanding them to preserve sacredly the horn and sword he left them; to the duchess he gave the ring his own mother had once presented him. Then came in haste his friend the swan, drawing the little boat into which the prince stepped, and sailing sadly away left his consort to mourn her folly for the rest of her days.

With as fine poetical as musical sense, Wagner has shown exquisite taste in choosing for the text of all his later operas tales from the ancient German mythology; or, as in the case of the "Master Singers," has made use of a remarkable era in German literature and history. Think of such a libretto, and of a composer who dares strive to make his art akin to mind itself by not only giving musical-pictorial delineation of every variation in the plot, but also depicting every thought that disturbed the breast of each individual character!

Since thought is lightning-like, a bewildering chaos of musical ideas is thus presented to the mind, and no one concentrated expression is ever realized. Overflowing with musical conceptions as Wagner's works undoubtedly are, they seldom lead one to a resting-point from which we may grasp the preceding motive. While "Rienzi" reminds us of Meyerbeer's sensational French operas, the "Flying Dutchman" is conceived more in the spirit of Weber, and is therefore, by many, held to be his best work. But in Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, although as before intimated the influence of Berlioz is perceptible in a portion of the instrumentation, still the whole new tendency of the composer's ideal "Drama of the Future" is developed.

When Tannhäuser was first given in Leipsic, Liszt, who had written much to attract the public mind to the new light in the musical world, repaired thither to superintend the preparations for it. Neither then nor later did Wagner's works acquire favor there; in fact, Mendelssohn is the god of that classic city, and no favor can be expected for anything which his pure taste would not applaud. The "hyper-sentimental Advocate S-," the husband of a noted lady of the time, was almost the sole devoted ally of the new school, winning the above descriptive title and adjective by his zeal then displayed.

The plan for Lohengrin was conceived in Dresden, the opera was completed in Zurich. The May Revolution of 1849 found Wagner fighting behind the barricades of Dresden, and flight became a necessity. Not the lightest of the charges now brought up against the composer is the assertion that he has become as violent a monarchist as he was in his purer days a republican and democrat. In his exile he was unusually industrious. He then drew up his programme of the "Music of the Future," writing the well-known pamphlets, "Art and the Revolution," "The Artistic Work of the Future," and "The Opera and the Drama." At this epoch, also, he wrote and partially [145] composed the "Nibelungenring" a trilogy of operas, "The Walkyrie," "The Young Siegfried," and "Siegfried's Death,"—these to be preceded in their performance by an introductory opera "Rheingold," so that four nights would be consumed in the presentation of the quartette. "Tristan and Isolde" was composed about this time also. In Switzerland Wagner remained until 1858, when he repaired to Venice, returning to Paris in 1860, where Tannhäuser a year later was presented to the French public. It is sufficiently well known how scornfully it was received. Disgusted he returned to Germany, where his triumph began. King John of Saxony pardoned the old political offence, and Wagner began a concert tour, extending his travels to St. Petersburg. It was his custom to superintend the orchestral performance of his compositions. It was 1864 or 1869, I believe, before he took up his residence in Munich under the patronage of the young king.

In the mean time Bülow had developed into one of the first pianists of the age. In truth he has but two rivals, Rubinstein and, of late years, Tausig.

After a short time spent in Stuttgart, he was sent to Leipsic, and entered the university as a student of jurisprudence, it being the desire of his family that he should prepare himself for the diplomatic service. Thrown into the finest musical circle of Europe, and still studying

under the best masters, inspired by personal acquaintance with Mendelssohn, Maurice Hauptmann, Franz Brendel, the famous critic and editor of the "New Journal of Music," Robert Schumann, and, later, with Liszt also, it can readily be imagined that the law suffered somewhat. Still, unwilling to grieve his mother, he went from Leipsic to Berlin, entering the university there; but though he attended the lectures punctually, he did not study, devoting his time to intercourse with a circle of ultra-radicals, and soon beginning to make a stir in musical cliques by his published criticisms, favorable of course, upon the new school inaugurated by Wagner. When the vacation came, he set out for Weimar, and, yielding to the urgency of Liszt, determined upon his future career.

The breach with his parents seemed irreparable, and he set out for Zurich to gather what comfort he could from Wagner, who appears to have had the greatest confidence in his powers from the first.

The young man began his professional career by undertaking, at Wagner's suggestion, the directorship of the Zurich theatre, the necessary instruction being given him by the composer himself,—a remarkable piece of self-sacrifice the like of which that not especially generous musician has not often been guilty of. But he soon advised his young director to return to Weimar, where he was for some time carefully instructed by Liszt, and in the midst of an exciting artistic life wrote those famous musical criticisms for Brendel's "Journal of Music" which excited controversy enough at the time.

In 1853 he made his first tour, creating a perfect furor throughout Germany, so that when Dr. Kullak retired, a few years later, from his position in the School of Music at Berlin, Bülow was immediately invited to fill the place. Here he remained until 1864, making an occasional artistic tour and establishing himself as the greatest pianist of the time. When Wagner was invited to Munich he remembered his friend, sent for him and presented him to the young king, who shortly thereafter appointed him court pianist.

A rare friendship had for years united the two musicians, and they were at last happy in being together. Wagner seems always to have had greater confidence in Bülow's justice of conception of his operas than in that of any other director.

The war of 1866 caused both men to retire from Munich, but the next year found them back again, Bülow being appointed director of the new conservatory just established, and operatic conductor. His genius in this latter position is wonderful; the quick, artistic [146] sense with which he grasps newly-presented musical ideas has produced the remarkable result, that no composer quarrels with his rendition.

It was under his supervision that the "Master Singers" was presented in 1867. Already he has made the Munich Music School, especially as regards the piano, one of the first in Germany; his literary activity is unceasing, and his musical compositions have been numerous. These are of course in the newest style of the romantic school, that portion intended for the piano being after the manner of Liszt, whilst his orchestral combinations are similar to those of Berlioz. There is a certain originality about his music, but in general he follows his masters too closely in style to leave much room for individual thought. I have not had the opportunity of hearing the "Master Singers," so that as a whole I shall not venture to refer to it. Portions are, however, familiar, and especially the song of Walther,—

"Fanget an, fanget an, rief der Lenz in den Wald,"—

a perfect gem of melody, followed and accompanied by the most delicious instrumentation. A joyous greeting of spring, rousing even the birds to unite in it,—no wonder the audience on that first night arose in a body to greet with wildest applause the haughty composer looking down from the king's box. It is mentioned as an extraordinary circumstance, that Wagner was so surprised by the ovation as actually to bow in return.

That the composer is exceedingly disliked personally is well known, and his favor with the

king, who is almost inaccessible to nearly every one else, does not add to his popularity. The most absurd stories are told of his pretension, and so impressed is he with his own extraordinary genius that he scorns the apparel of ordinary human beings. He wears generally upon the street a long green velvet robe-like affair reaching to the knees, and a mantle of the same color and material, of the style of the Middle Ages over that. There are slanderous whispers of exceeding lankness of limb, the reason for his detestation of the present fashion. One day he was striding with his melo-dramatic air along the street when a strong gust of wind carried off his mantle and dropped it at the feet of a young lady passing in a carriage. She ordered the driver to stop, and courteously handed it to the bowing musician; who came stately, though panting, to the carriage door. To her consternation, with a gracious wave of the hand he patronizingly exclaimed, "Retain it, my Fräulein!"

With his usual distinguished lack of tact, and recklessness of the experience of the past, he has roused a storm of indignation by his "Judaism in Music," which has been wittily said to amount to two propositions: First, a Jew is incapable of understanding or composing music; secondly, as no one understands or can compose my music, therefore all mankind are Jews.

The new opera "Rheingold" was performed for the first time in Munich on the 27th of August, 1869. As in the case of the "Master Singers" the king donated an extraordinary amount to defray the expense of preparation. Wagner conceived the idea that his Rhine should not be personated by rolling, painted canvas, but that a veritable stream of water must flow across the stage. Then came a dubious thought; as the scene requires a nymph to swim from one rocky shore to the other by the light of a setting sun, who was to do it? The part was to be taken by Fräulein Mellinger, and Wagner hit upon the brilliant idea of causing the king to order the lady to take swimming lessons.

Finally, there is but one conclusion, after the study of Wagner's arrogant new school. A reformer he is not, in the particular he asserts, for the theory he calls his own was shared by Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber. He carries out the principle, however, in his own perverted and extravagant fashion, which must almost make those venerated fathers turn in their graves.

Alice Asbury.