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# *The Abuse of Applause*

By Philip G. Hubert



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## About this Title

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By Philip G. Hubert

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## The Abuse of Applause

ONE of the canons of art insisted upon by Richard Wagner as an essential reform was that all applause during the acting of a drama or an opera was to be censured as interfering with the purpose of the representation. [159] Take any one of our performances of Italian opera in recent years and consider for a moment the absurdities of the audience heaped upon the absurdities of the stage. We have each act interrupted by applause half a dozen times, and for the most frivolous reasons. When the chief singers of the evening come upon the stage for the first time the house breaks out into applause, no matter what is going on at the time; when the soprano shrieks out her highest note and the ushers trot down the aisle burdened with floral harps, ships, anchors, and other devices of the kind known in newspaper vernacular as trophies, the *Juliet*, *Lucia*, or *Amina* of the evening forgets her despair long enough to receive the flowers with an expression of counterfeit amazement and many smiles of gratitude. The same performance is gone through by the tenor, and perhaps by the baritone. Viewed seriously, it is a farce, for which nothing can be said. Thanks to Wagner's protests, many attempts have been made to remedy these absurdities; but, outside of the notable performances at Baireuth and some other German towns, little has been effected. In New York, until recently, we have had to suffer under the worst of such abuses. Under Mr. Mapleson's régime we had the flowers, the applause right in the middle of an act, the ten or twelve recalls after the performance.

This winter, in the course of the French plays at Palmer's Theater, the same thing was observed. Possibly in the case of a theatrical performance there is less to be said in excuse than where an opera is concerned, for music implies something peculiarly artificial. Think of the absurdity of it all. Take, for instance, Dumas's "Camille." Here we have a dramatist striving to create an illusion. We have a young woman who dies of grief and consumption after a stormy career. The play traces her life through some of its most stirring and pathetic passages. Every act closes with a dramatic incident. Notwithstanding that the whole work of the dramatist and the actors is intended to produce in the audience an illusion, the curtain is raised after every act, and *Camille* appears bowing and smiling, evidently in the best of spirits and full of good-will towards every one. In other words, what has just been built up with so much care and hard work is knocked down again. If we take the case of opera, the same criticism holds good. The singers work hard to fill us with sympathy for some unfortunate person who goes mad and dies, as does *Lucia*, or who stabs himself, as does *Edgardo*. But after harrowing up the feelings of the audience, these people come forward and virtually say that it is all a joke, and that *Lucia* is going forth to refresh herself with beer.

Against such absurdity Wagner inveighed. He tried to the best of his ability to make his art a serious one. That he succeeded no better is no proof of the fallacy of his position, but rather of the persistent wrong-headedness of the Philistines. I take it that any one who goes to the Metropolitan Opera House and hears such noble masterpieces as "Tristan," "Die Walküre," or "Die Götterdämmerung" goes away profoundly impressed with the dramatic story. There, at least, no singer is allowed to notice the audience while the act is going on, and not one of the noted German artists whom we have had among us of late years—Frau Lehmann, Herr Niemann, Herr Fischer, and others—pays the slightest attention to the indiscreet applause which greets their entrance upon the stage for the first time during the evening. Nevertheless the practice of allowing the singers to come forward at the end of an act in order to bow their thanks to the audience still obtains. It seems to me that this also should be done away with. If we object to the audience breaking in upon the music and drowning it out with their applause, it is because such vicious practices destroy the illusion which the poet and the composer are

striving to produce. Does not the appearance of the singer between the acts destroy this illusion? Take any one of Wagner's dramas. We have persons supposed to be in love with each other, or in deadly enmity, coming forward hand in hand between the acts; and in the case of many of the master's works we have, at the end of the opera, a lot of dead persons waking up in order to bow their thanks again and again.

In order to maintain the poetic illusion, there ought to be no appearance of the singers or actors of the evening except during the acts and in their characters. Neither between the acts nor after the final fall of the curtain ought the singers to be seen; they ought never to remind us that we have not been listening to *Wotan*, to *Siegfried*, and to *Brunnhilda*. We ought not to be compelled to take into consideration Herr Fischer, Herr Niemann, or Frau Lehmann. I admit that many persons will cry out that this is unfair to the public and to the artists. How are these admirers of Wagner's operas and of the work done by these great singers to testify their admiration? This is very true; and yet the public ought to be trained to rest satisfied with applause at the end of an act or at the end of a performance. In the case of an opera the conductor may be considered as the representative of the performers, and Herr Seidl may bow his thanks. In the case of a symphony concert the members of the orchestra do not rise to answer the applause. If any one can make out a valid defense for such sins against art as the appearance of the dead *Siegfried* and *Brunnhilda* bowing and smiling at the end of "Die Götterdämmerung," I should like to hear it.

Philip G. Hubert, Jr.