Wagner And Scenic Art

By William F. Apthorp

The Wagner Library

Edition 1.0
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With illustrations from the original designs for the setting of the Bayreuth stage, secured for the publishers by the Freiherr von Wollzogen.

AT a performance of "Lohengrin," given in Italian at the Globe Theatre, in Boston, some years ago, I was struck with a, to me, rather ludicrous incident. It happened at the close of the second act. The squabble between Elsa and Ortrud was well over for the nonce, the chorus had once more taken up its song of homage to the young bridal couple, who were now slowly passing up the churchsteps with the king; just as they were entering the great Gothic portal, the assembled crowd stopped its singing, the orchestra was silent, and the only sound heard was the solemn peals of the organ, coming from the interior of the church. All of a sudden a terrific blast came from the three trombones. Elsa turned round as if in fright; Ortrud, catching her eye, raised her right arm in threatening gesture, as the curtain fell slowly. Being accustomed to look for a special significance in everything that happens in an opera of Wagner's, I naturally tried to account for this sudden affrighted turning round of Elsa's; the only explanation that lay on the surface was that the trombones had startled her, and that she turned round to see what was the matter. Yet, for a Wagnerian heroine to be so startled by anything trombones could do, seemed strange. When I got home I looked up the passage in the score, and found the following stage-direction:

At this point the king and the bridal couple have reached the top step leading to the cathedral; Elsa turns in great emotion to Lohengrin; he receives her in his arms. From this embrace she glances in timid apprehension down the steps to the right, and sees Ortrud raising her arm against her, as if sure of victory; Elsa turns away her face in terror.

Tunc manifesta fides! The actors had made nonsense of the situation. Elsa should not turn round suddenly, as if startled, but slowly, shyly, to take one last timid look at her old enemy, who answers her glance with a threatening gesture. And the trombone blast? That, too, has its meaning: it is the motive of Lohengrin's solemn injunction to Elsa in the first act:

Nie sollst du mich befragen,  
noch Wissen's Sorge tragen,  
woher ich kam der Fahrt,  
noch wie mein Nam' und Art!

(Never shalt thou ask me, nor have a care to know, whence I am come, nor what my name and condition!)

This trombone blast is to the ear what Ortrud's uplifted arm is to the eye: a reminder to Elsa of her promise to Lohengrin, which she is only too surely destined to break, and in breaking which she falls into Ortrud's snare. The trombone blast tells the meaning of Ortrud's gesture, and blast and gesture should come exactly together at the same moment. In this way, and in this [516]
Now, all this may seem very trivial, a mere insignificant detail—an actress's turning round hurriedly instead of slowly, a gesture coming a few seconds after a trombone passage instead of together with it. But it is of such seemingly insignificant details that Wagner's peculiar art is made up; and it is by an enforced care for such details that the Bayreuth festival-performances of his music-dramas still maintain their reason of being. If the only mission of Bayreuth had been to bring the "Nibelungen" and "Parsifal" before the world, that mission would have been fulfilled long ago. Wagner's operas and music-dramas, from "Rienzi" to "Götterdämmerung," have worked their way into the regular repertory of nearly every important opera-house in Germany, and with the death of Wagner's widow "Parsifal" will probably cease to be the exclusive property of Bayreuth. As for the popularity of Wagner's works in almost every part of the world where opera can be given with due splendor, the Bayreuth festivals may have hastened its growth, but they assuredly did not cause it. It was in Munich, not at Bayreuth, that "Das Rheingold" and "Die Walküre" first saw the light; and Munich stood ready to bring out the rest, to the end of the list, only Wagner declined the offer with thanks. The importance of Bayreuth in the art-history of this century lies far less in the fact that Wagner's greater music-dramas are performed there than in the peculiar style and conditions in which they are given. Bayreuth is no longer the headquarters of Wagnerian music-drama; but it is distinctly the headquarters of Wagnerianism, of those ideas relating to musico-dramatic performance in general which we find set forth in Wagner's writings, and which, although they apply with especial force to his own works, are also
applicable to the dramatic works of other composers. [517]

(Götterdämmerung. Act III., Scene 1.

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by J.Hoffmann.)

Last summer I got a letter from a competent judge of such matters, then travelling in Germany; the following sentence struck me as peculiarly noteworthy—doubly so, perhaps, because it confirmed my own experience: "I heard 'Lohengrin' in Vienna, and was disgusted—singers rushing up to the footlights and holding high notes as long as they could, just like old-fashioned Italian opera. My experience in several cities here has led me to the conclusion that Bayreuth and Munich are the only places where Wagner is given as he should be." Here we have the true present and, it is to be hoped, future mission of Bayreuth—to preserve intact the Wagnerian traditions of musico-dramatic performance.

The leading principle of the Wagnerian music-drama is, briefly, this: That, the text—what in old-fashioned dialect was called the *libretto*—once written by the poet, all other persons who have to do with the work—composer, stage-architect, scene-painter, costumer, stage-manager, conductor, and singing actors—should aim at one thing, and at one thing only: the most exact, perfect, and life-like expression and embodiment of the poet's thought. Of Wagner's ideas concerning the function of the composer, and of his own style of dramatic composition, much has been written, both in explanation and criticism. It is with his ideas on the proper functions of the other co-operators in the work of bringing the music-drama into complete being—that is, his ideas on the matter of musico-dramatic performance—that I have especially to do here. That these ideas of Wagner's have been so almost universally misunderstood, or only partially understood, and so incompletely carried out, is to be attributed to two things: in the first place, to a general lack of appreciation of the unexampled seriousness with which Wagner took every detail in a form of art which producers and

**Articles related to Richard Wagner**
performers—and the public, too, for matter of that—had been wont to treat with a certain cavalier nonchalance; in the next place, to that force of inertia which makes it so difficult for the human mind to free itself from the influence of long-acquired habit and leave the beaten path of familiar routine. That the Wagnerian system of musico-dramatic performance has been understood and practically carried out, in a certain wholesale way, by many a manager, conductor, and actor is true enough. The general artistic tendency of this system has been, as a rule, pretty accurately grasped. It is in the inadequate appreciation of the importance of, often insignificant seeming, details that performances of Wagner's music-dramas too frequently fall short of the true mark.

Let us, then, consider together some of the details in this system of Wagner's, for, as I have said already, the whole system is made up of details; and consider especially such details as are most commonly slighted in the ordinary run of performances. For the sake of the greatest possible clearness, I will take up, successively, these four points:

1. SCENERY and STAGE-SETTING.
2. STAGE-MANAGEMENT.
3. ACTING.
4. MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, which includes the singing of the actors and the playing of the orchestra.

In Wagner's treatment of each one of these several items one thorough-going guiding principle is to be noticed—the utter and absolute sinking of the performer in the work. Everything is done to prevent the attention and interest of the audience from being taken up with the performer's individuality, or with his personal vocal, or dramatic, talent. In the palmy days of Italian opera the stage was, by its whole construction and arrangement, an arena in which the protagonists should display their powers, and it was tacitly accepted as such by the public. With Wagner the
Mimes Hut. Siegfried, Act I., Scene 3.

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by J.Hoffmann.)

stage is simply the scene of a dramatic story. The scenery must be at once realistic and poetically significant; its merely picturesque value is of secondary moment. Its chief aim is to produce the illusion of reality. From Shakspere's placards, hung up in sight of the audience in the Globe Theatre, that the spectators might know what scene to picture in their imagination, to the elaborate scenes presented directly to the eye on the stage at Bayreuth, can be traced the whole evolution of scenery on the modern stage. And probably few of us, such is the force of convention, have taken the trouble to think how much of the Shaksperean explanatory placard still remains in the scenery of ordinary opera. Many, even of the best painted interiors, but more especially the out-of-door scenes, in conventional opera, go only one step farther than Shakspere's placards. The

Das Rheingold, Scene 1.

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by J.Hoffmann.) placard told the spectator what the scene was supposed to be; our more modern scenery suggests it to him, but does not do much more than that. If, for instance, the scene is a virgin forest, this is by no means what the stage shows our eye; what we actually see is not a virgin forest, but a rectangular or trapezoidal clearing in a virgin forest, and planked over at that. The scene may suggest a forest to the imagination, but it does not show it to the eye; there is no real illusion. The plank floor (or, perhaps, the green carpet), the regular rows of trees on each side of the stage, the flaps of blue canvas that do duty for sky, often encroaching upon the tree-tops and but ill-joined to the background—these are things to which custom has inured
us, and the meaning of which we understand; but the illusion produced by them is slight, or null. And it is not

(From a photograph from life, by Hans Brand.) merely the habit of long seeing such scenes as this on the stage that leads us to accept them; that other habit of instinctively looking upon the stage as an "arena for protagonists" counts for much in our readiness to accept the partial suggestion for the complete picture. But compare such a stage-picture as I have just described with the scene in the third act of "Siegfried" as it is staged at Bayreuth [see the illustration on p. 516], and you see at a glance the superior illusion produced by Wagner's method of stage-setting. Here the natural wildness of the picture is lessened by no compromise with stage-conventions—the rocks do not stop short at the background, but cover the stage; the stormy sky is one great cloud-mass, not a series of overhanging arches of canvas; the dark cavern seems to reach down into the very bowels of the earth. The stage is no longer a smoothed "arena for protagonists," but the scene of a real-seeming dramatic action. The stage-pictures of Mime's Hut, in "Siegfried" [p. 518], and of the first scene in "Das Rheingold" [p. 519], show an equal loving care for complete visual representation. In some fantastic scenes which play in the region of the supernatural, and with which exact realism has, consequently, little to do, Wagner shows how perfectly willing he is to sacrifice pictorial beauty to more purely dramatic considerations. The scenery of Klingsor's Magic Garden, in the second act of "Parsifal" [p. 522], came in for not a little pretty sharp criticism when that drama was first brought out at Bayreuth. The coloring (running mostly on violent reds and yellows, with some very vivid greens, if I remember aright) was declared to be garish and vulgar, and the extraordinary size of the flowers was much objected to. Indeed, this scene, as it first meets the eye, does not seem wholly a thing of beauty. But all this garish color, this Brobdignagian vegetation, have their allotted function to perform—a very useful illusion is produced. The flaunting hugeness of the surroundings dwarfs the figures of the Flower-Girls—the vivified flowers who try their seductions upon Parsifal—to elfin smallness; those full-grown young women appear like tiny fairies, and all
that might seem gross and earthly in the seduction-scene is cured by this dainty prettiness. When I first saw *Parsifal* clambering over the wall at the back I could not, for some moments, believe that it was really Herr Winkelmann, who stands a good six-foot-two-or-three in his stockings. I took the apparition to be a mock *Parsifal in perspective*—on the principle of the little pasteboard Lohengrin that hitches its way across the back-flat at our theatres before the real *Lohengrin* appears. It was only when he began to sing that I saw that the *Parsifal in perspective* and the real *Parsifal* were one; and then he immediately looked a mile off.

One of the great triumphs of Wagner's system of stage-setting is his method of shifting scenery. In general, he shows himself averse to frequent changes of scene, especially to those sudden changes before the eyes of the spectator of which Shakspeare's plays are full. Indeed, he deprecated anything that interrupted the continuity of the dramatic action. In most of his operas and music-dramas one set of scenery does for a whole act. Still, he sometimes found himself forced to shift the scenery *during* an act, and it is his manner of managing such *changements à vue* that is especially novel and poetic in its effect. Such changes as that from *Sachs*’s *Work-shop* to the *Field on the Banks of the Pegnitz*, in the third act of "Die Meistersinger," or from the Hall of the *Gibichungen* to the Top of the *Brunnhildenstein*, in the first act of "Götterdämmerung," do not properly come under this head, for a curtain is dropped during the scene-shifting. All that distinguishes these changes of scenery from the usual ones that are made between two acts is that the orchestra continues playing until the new scene is set, and there is no real wait, or *entr'acte*. But the changes I now speak of especially are those which go on with the curtain raised. Such are all the changes in "Das Rheingold" (the curtain remains raised during the whole of this drama), the changes from the Mountain Pass to the Top of the *Brunnhildenstein*, in the third act of "Siegfried;" from the Banks of the [522] Rhine to the Hall of the *Gibichungen*, in the third act of "Götterdämmerung;" the changes from the Forest to the Sanctuary of the *Grail*, in the first and third acts of "Parsifal". These changes of scene are of two kinds—either the scenery is shifted gradually, in sight of the spectator, as in the Descent into Nibelheim, in "Das Rheingold," and the passage from the Forest to the Sanctuary, in "Parsifal," or else the setting of the new scene is hidden behind clouds, as in the change from the Bottom to the Banks of the Rhine, in "Das Rheingold," and some of the changes in "Siegfried" and "Götterdämmerung." Infinitely the most impressive of the changes of the first kind are those in "Parsifal." The cut [p. 523] represents the beginning of the transformation in the first act as Wagner originally meant to have it; but as this change was somewhat modified at the performances, at the instigation of Scaria, I prefer to describe the, in every way similar, transformation in

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by the brothers Brückner and F. Joukovsky.)

Act III. The scenery, which represents a flowery meadow, begins to move slowly from left to right, and a gradually shifting picture thus passes slowly before the spectator's eyes. The field, little by little, becomes dense, and ever denser, forest; the forest, in its turn, changes to rocky gulch or cañon. Soon there appear traces of man's handiwork—the rock appears roughly hewn, and, in almost total darkness, the spectator seems to find himself led through a subterranean passage cut in the solid rock. The change goes on—the rough-hewn rock becomes masonry, and soon we pass into a colonnade, through which we seem to be led until, at last, this underground corridor is seen to issue into the Sanctuary of the Grail itself [p. 524], which appears before us deserted, dark, almost awful in its solemn architectural grandeur. The impressiveness of this gradual transformation, heightened, as it is, by the ever-increasing and, at last, almost total darkness and the unearthly [523]
Parsifal, Act I., Scene 2.

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by the brothers Brückner and F. Joukovsky.)

music of the orchestra, is something of which words are impotent to convey an adequate idea. The truc (as the French have it) of a gradually shifting back-flat is by no means new, and has been employed more than once before, notably in spectacular fairy-pieces; but never, surely, has it been used to such majestic solemnity of effect as by Wagner in "Parsifal." And note here that, if any smallest detail had been lacking, if any merely conventional theatrical item had obtruded itself upon the seemingly real scene, the completeness of the illusion would have vanished, and, with it, the unspeakably grand and solemn impression. As an equally impressive example of the second sort of change of scene, let me take the one in the third act of "Götterdämmerung," which takes place after Siegfried's death. The stage-setting is shown in the illustration on page 517, which represents an earlier scene in the same act. The men place Siegfried's dead body upon his shield and bear it on their shoulders, in sad procession, up the rocky path at the right, to the alternately solemn and martial strains of the now familiar Dead-March. Twilight has set in. As the procession rounds the corner, and gradually disappears from sight, exhalations of evening mist begin to rise from the surface of the Rhine. The mist thickens into fog, and gradually covers the whole ground of the scene; little by little it rises into clouds, which at length hide the whole scene from view, pushing their way up into the nearest foreground. Then, after awhile, the clouds begin to rise, and dissipate themselves into finer and finer mist, which, in gradually vanishing, reveals to us the Hall of the Gibichungen at night, the rays of the moon falling upon the scene through the opening at the back. These mist- and cloud-effects are produced, as is now well known, by jets of steam, at last by steam and a series of gauze curtains combined. Practically the clouds serve as a curtain...
behind [524]

Parsifal, Act III. Scene 3.

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by the brothers Brückner and F. Joukovsky.)

which the scene-shifters can ply their craft unseen by the audience. But the dramatico-poetic superiority of this natural-seeming curtain of cloud over the conventional act-drop, or over the still worse process of shifting scenery piecemeal in full sight of the spectator, can be seen at a glance.

It is impossible to leave this subject of Wagner's system of stage-setting without touching upon his equally noteworthy system of lighting the stage. That he presupposes that the auditorium shall be in as complete darkness as possible, so that all the effects of light shall be confined to the stage alone, and that the scene and what goes forward thereon shall be the only visible objects to the spectator, need hardly be said. The darkened auditorium is with him a sine qua non. But, beyond this, his method of lighting the stage itself presents points of especial interest. Wagner's management of light is in quite as strong contrast to old-time theatrical convention as his management of scenery. Here we find another example of his fundamental principle of dramatic performance—that the stage is not to be an "arena for protagonists," but the scene of a real, or real-seeming, dramatic action. The old method was so to arrange the means of lighting the stage—foot-lights, side-lights, and head-lights—that the greatest possible intensity of light should be shed upon the performer, especially upon his face. Where the public was, with reason, supposed to come to the theatre to judge and, if possible, enjoy the performance of certain artists, the point of paramount importance was that these artists should be distinctly seen. No smallest detail of their gesture or play of facial
expression must be lost upon the spectator. The actor carried the drama on his shoulders, and
the actor must be plainly visible. To what lengths of absurdity stage-convention carried this
principle I hardly need say here. The [525] midnight murders that have been committed on the
stage amid a blaze of light fit only for instantaneous photography must be ever-present to the
memory of habitual theatre-goers. But with Wagner the play is the thing, not the actor. As his
scenery is realistic, or romantically poetic, so also is his stage-lighting. His first principle is to
light the stage that the scene shall seem real. With him night is night, and day is day;
evening and morning twilight are themselves, and nothing else. Shadows are cast from the sun
and moon, and not toward them. If in some of the interiors at Bayreuth the light on the stage
differs little from that at ordinary theatres, the out-of-door scenes are lighted in a manner
utterly at variance with theatrical convention. The imitation of direct or diffused sunlight or
moonlight is wonderfully perfect. The light seems all to come from one point; not from a
point twenty, or thirty, or forty feet distant, but from the very sun or moon itself. Trees cast
their proper shade. Then the illusion of out-of-door atmosphere is complete. One of the worst
results of the crude glare cast upon the stage by the old method of lighting, especially in
out-of-door scenes, was that the atmosphere seemed, so to speak, burnt up, and the dramatic
action had too much the appearance of going on in a vacuum. With Wagner's often brilliant,
but never garish, stage-lighting, effects of atmosphere are possible. These effects are produced
by large curtains, not of gauze, as has sometimes been reported, but of coarse twine netting.
These net-curtains are so hung that little or no direct light is shed upon them, and they are
practically invisible to the spectator; but they produce just that effect of a denser atmosphere
on the horizon which is noticeable in the real landscape, and also aid greatly in producing
effects of atmospheric perspective. The range of hills at the back of the stage in the third act
of "Parsifal" looks a good ten or twelve miles off. In the last few years I have seen similar
net-curtains used for the same purpose at some of our theatres, but never with equally good
results. The netting itself is too plainly visible, and no illusion is produced. The nets are, in
the first place, made of too white a twine, and, as they are generally hung bias, the diagonal
lines formed by the rhomboidal, or diamond-shaped, meshes are exceedingly liable to catch
the light. The Bayreuth atmosphere-nets are of the natural écrue-color of the hemp, and, unless
my memory plays me foul, are hung so that
the mesh-lines run vertically and horizontally, instead of obliquely. Quite as noteworthy as Wagner's imitations of sunlight and moonlight, and of natural out-of-door atmosphere, are his effects of partial or total darkness. As, practically, no light comes from the auditorium, he can throw his stage into complete darkness whenever the nature of the scene requires it. As the curtain rises on the second act of "Götterdämmerung", [526] Hagen and Alberich are, at first, absolutely invisible, so dark is the stage; and, throughout the first scene, their figures are to be seen distinctly only at moments when the thick clouds part and the moon casts its light upon the couple. Of course, old-school stage-managers will object here that this darkness of the stage nullifies at once one of the actor's most valuable means of dramatic effect—it renders his play of feature invisible. But Wagner takes his effects where he can find them strongest; and if he can obtain greater dramatic force from the elements than from the actor, he does not hesitate to do so. Surely no gesture or facial expression that any actor ever had at command could produce an effect commensurate with that feeling of terror, in face of the supernatural, which seizes upon the awe-struck listener as Alberich's

Sei treu, Hagen, mein Sohn!
Trauter Helde, sei treu!
Sei treu!—treu!
rings out, as from the very throat of black night itself, as the fell Nibelung gradually vanishes from sight.

Having shown the fundamental guiding principle, and some of the more important details of Wagner's stage-setting, let me now consider some of the characteristic points in his system of stage-management. Here we find him even more at variance with old methods than before. In the old opera the chief, if not the only, business of the chorus was to sing; the manner in which they were grouped on the stage was determined by certain practical considerations, which were, indeed, of some weight. They must enter upon the scene in the way least likely to create confusion; once on the stage, they must be so grouped as to leave a sufficient space free for the principal singers, and also so as to insure the best possible musical effect. The now familiar conventional placing of the chorus in two double lines, one on each side of the stage—sopranos and tenors on the left, contraltos and basses on the right—was the result. This was quite as much a piece of stage-convention as the "trapezoidal clearing in a virgin forest;" as we saw, in the one case, a regular line of painted trees on each side of the clearing, conventionally suggestive of a forest, so do we here see two corresponding rows of singers, conventionally suggestive of a crowd. In one case, as in the other, the smoothed arena is left free for the protagonists. Now, Wagner overthrew this military precision of arrangement completely. With him the chorus, together with the non-singing supernumeraries, have but two functions—either they are passive, but always more or less interested, spectators of the dramatic action, or else they take actual part in the action itself. In both cases the manner of their coming upon the stage, their grouping and their action thereon, are to be regulated by one principle, and by one only—they must produce the illusion of reality. I am here tempted to make two citations from Wagner's own writings, which, although they have to do especially with scenes in "Tannhäuser," an opera not yet given at Bayreuth, give a clearer idea of his management of masses on the stage than anything else I can think of. He writes:

Let the stage-manager see to it that the processions in "Tannhäuser" be not conducted on the customary marching plan that has become so stereotyped in our opera-performances. Marches, in the accustomed sense, are not to be found in my later operas; and, accordingly, if the entrance of the guests into the Singers' Hall (Act II., Scene 4) is to be so managed that chorus and supernumeraries march on in couples, make the favorite serpentine procession round the stage, and then place themselves in two military rows along the side-scenes, expectant of further operatic occurrences, I only beg that the orchestra play to this some march from "Norma" or "Belisario," but not my music. On the other hand, if it is thought good to retain my music, the entrance of the guests must be so ordered as to imitate real life, and this, too, in its noblest and freest forms; away with that painful regularity of the traditional marching drill; the more manifold and unconstrained are the groups of arriving guests, as of separate families and parties of friends, the more captivating will be the effect of the whole entry.

Again he writes, in another place:

For the performance of my "Tannhäuser" in Paris I had rewritten the first scene in the Venus Mountain, and carried out on a larger plan what had previously been only cursorily indicated. I called the ballet-master's attention to how very nonsensically the wretched, mincing little pas of his mænads and bacchantes contrasted with my music, and asked [527] him to invent instead, and have performed by his corps, something daring and wildly sublime, that should correspond to the bacchanalian groups represented on famous antique bas-reliefs. The man whistled on his fingers, and said: "Ah, I understand you; but for that sort of business I should have to have all premiers sujets; if I were to breathe a word of this to my people, and show them the attitude you mean, we should have the can-can on the spot, and we should be lost."

This last is particularly suggestive, for it has to do with the one scene in all Wagner's works, since "Rienzi," in which the corps de ballet is brought into play—a scene which seems to bear considerable external resemblance to the conventional operatic ballet divertissement, but which differs therefrom utterly in its real character. I have seen this scene most sumptuously mounted in Munich, but with no better artistic results than those which Wagner
probably had to put up with in Paris. The "wretched, mincing little pas" of the dancers—not to speak of the quite conventional short skirts

Parsifal, Act II. Scene 1.

(From the original sketch for the scenery used at Bayreuth, by the brothers Brückner and F. Joukovsky.)

of the premières—contrasted violently enough with the otherwise Hellenic character of the scene. It is highly probable that this scene will never be correctly mounted until "Tannhäuser" is given at Bayreuth. But a visible example, or suggestion, of what Wagner demanded in scenes of this description is to be found in the seduction-scene in the second act of "Parsifal," as it is given at Bayreuth. There is, to be sure, no dancing in this scene, but its general dramatic character is very similar to that of many operatic ballet-scenes; indeed, it recalls vividly the scene between Robert and the Nuns, in Meyerbeer's "Robert le Diable," and any dramatic composer but Wagner would undoubtedly have turned it into a ballet. Here the Flower-Girls (vivified flowers) who ply Parsifal with their fascinations run about the stage in absolute disorder; what little grouping there is seems purely accidental. Each girl wants Parsifal for herself; and the way they all flock around him, and pull [528] one another this way and that, in order to get at him, gives no suggestion of concerted or preconcerted action. The accompanying cut [p. 525] gives some notion of the lawless freedom of the scene, only it is to be noted that something of the original vivacity of pose has been lost under the fire of the photographer's camera. Still the group shows plainly enough that nothing remains here of that military precision which marks the evolutions of figurantes or chorus-singers in conventional opera.

The style of acting which Wagner demands is, essentially, that which the best modern taste requires in heroic spoken drama. The meaningless, merely conventional gesticulation of the
traditional opera-singer is to be replaced by all the subtile, natural-seeming, and dramatically effective histrionism which has hitherto been more especially associated with the non-lyric stage in its best estate. The actors are not to address themselves to the front benches, or to the chandelier—that time-honored repository of heroic aspirations—but to one another. There is, however, one point which actors of Wagner's music-dramas are, almost everywhere, too prone to overlook, and which is of the most vital importance. This is the intimate and indissoluble connection, which exists throughout, between the music in the orchestra and the dramatic action on the stage. The anecdote about "Lohengrin," that I told at the beginning of this article, is a fair example of what I mean. It is not enough for the singing actor to know the text and music of his own part in a scene; not enough, even, for him to know the parts of those who play with him; he must know the orchestral score of the scene—or, at worst, the piano-forte transcription thereof—by heart. The Wagnerian actor who does not know the score of all the scenes in which he takes part is in as bad a case as the pianist who knows only the solo part in the concerto he is to play. This complete knowledge is necessary not merely to insure the perfection of certain realistic details, as when Wagner wrote, as a foot-note to Tannhäuser's song to Venus, in the first act of the opera: "This harp accompaniment must be copied into the part given to the singer, that he may learn it, and seem to play it on the mock instrument he carries on the stage." It is necessary for a far more important purpose—the actor's by-play is often to be regulated by what music is going on in the orchestra. In the spoken drama an actor's by-play is conditioned by one of two things—by what goes on around him, or by the emotions that arise in the breast of the character he impersonates. The same is true in Wagnerian music-drama, only that here the actor is less free to put in what by-play he chooses and, especially, when he chooses. In Wagner's music-dramas there is not a little dumb-show, and this dumb-show is, in every case, accompanied by appropriately expressive and illustrative orchestral music. The actor is in duty bound, not only to assume the required expression of face, and perform the proper pantomimic action, but, also, so to regulate his acting that every change of facial expression, every gesture and movement, shall fall pat with the corresponding musical phrase or accent in the orchestra. There must be this quasi-Leibnitzian harmonia præstabilita between the orchestral music and the histrionic act if the illusion is to be produced that both music and act are essentially one, only apprehended by us simultaneously through two different senses. Without such "pre-established agreement" the full realization of Wagner's dramatic ideal is impossible; and to what minutiae of detail he wished it carried can be appreciated only after a very careful study of certain scenes in his works. Here is one of the points where the average actor of Wagnerian music-drama is weakest; and, it must be admitted, even the Bayreuth performances leave much to be desired in this respect. I remember saying to a high authority on matters Wagnerian, after first seeing "Parsifal," at Bayreuth, in 1884, that, of all the members of the double cast of the drama, Frau Materna and Herr Scaria seemed to me the only ones who had completely grasped, digested, and assimilated Wagner's idea. The answer was: "Na! between you and me, you are perfectly right!" (Sie haben vollkommen recht.) And, if Bayreuth [529] is not quite perfect in this matter, what shall be said of performances of Wagner's works elsewhere? If any of my readers should have the curiosity to see for themselves (in their mind's eye, of course) what effect can be produced by this accurate agreement between the actor's pantomime and the music in the orchestra, let them turn to "Die Meistersinger," Act III., beginning of Scene 3, (1) and to "Die Walküre," Act I, Scene 1, (2) and compare the elaborate stage-directions with the music. A pretty accurate knowledge of the various leading motives is to be presupposed.

If the too common lapses in the matters of stage-setting, stage-management, and acting, that are to be deplored in most performances of Wagner's works, give the unguarded spectator an incomplete idea of the character of these works themselves, and enable him to form only an approximate notion of their dramatic beauty and power, the equally frequent lapses from
correctness of style in the matter of musical performance (singing and playing) place him in a still more helpless predicament, for they give him an absolutely wrong idea. Few of Wagner's ideas on the subject of musico-dramatic performance have been so generally misunderstood, it seems to me, as his ideas on the art of singing, and the demands he made upon singers, as such. Many critics, even of acknowledged Wagnerian proclivities, seem to have the haziest notions on this head. That there is a certain excuse for this must be admitted. In reading such theoretical works as "Oper und Drama," and others that came from Wagner's pen, it is, perhaps, not unnatural to hold fast by that upon which he threw the greatest stress, and to forget, or undervalue, that which he emphasized less strongly. Again, it is natural for the average art-lover, who does not, as a rule, care to dabble in theoretical reading, to get his ideas of Wagnerian performance from the practical examples that have come within the scope of his own experience. But it should be remembered that, because this or that singer is famous in Wagnerian rôles, and has been highly praised by the master himself, it does not necessarily follow that he is a model of all the artistic virtues that Wagner prized. No more does it necessarily follow, because Wagner valued a fine stage-presence, good acting, distinct enunciation, and correctness of rhetorical accent more than he did singing, in its purely musical aspect, that he did not value fine singing at all. Wagner, like the rest of us, had to put up with the best he could get; the artists he had to do with were Germans, who, as he himself admitted, "have, as a rule, but little talent for singing." The notion that Wagner cared nothing for fine singing, and was willing, and even glad, to dispense with it in performances of his works, seems to me utterly without foundation. That he strongly deprecated that somewhat foppish preciosity of style which belongs to "Bellini-and-Donizetti opera," and of which Bubini was probably the most perfect exponent, is true enough. But between this and the almost total absence of musical phrasing, the mere declamatory shouting that we have heard from some loudly acclaimed singers in Wagnerian rôles, there lies a considerable distance; and it is, to me at least, indubitable that Wagner's ideal lay somewhere between these two limits. Frau Materna once told me that Wagner's own singing of passages in the "Nibelungen" and "Parsifal," when he showed his singers how this or that phrase ought to go, as he often had occasion to do at the Bayreuth rehearsals, was literally the despair of all the artists present. She said that his voice was bad and his vocalization very defective, but that the lyric purity, perfection, and poignant expressiveness of his musical phrasing were simply astounding. If, for the Bayreuth festivals, he chose some artists because they had a fine stage-presence and were good actors, apparently overlooking the fact that they were poor singers and often sang out of tune, it was simply because, with him, good acting was a sine qua non; and eye-witnesses at the rehearsals report, quite credibly, that he, more than once, expressed himself in no measured terms about the singing of these very artists. Indeed, it is said that, after the first "Nibelungen" festival, in 1876, Wagner was sorry that he had given the part of Siegfried to Georg Unger, with all his superb stage-presence, instead of to Heinrich Vogl, who would have sung it better. Whether this be true or not, it may safely be asserted that, in general, the often ungainly singing, false intonation, and poor vocal phrasing of some, even of the famous singers of Wagnerian rôles, were things that Wagner had, perforce, to put up with, but which neither pleased nor satisfied him.

And, upon the whole, it should be said, emphatically, that good singing and musical phrasing are of importance in the Wagnerian music-drama; of less importance than good acting and a distinct enunciation of the text, but by no means valueless for all that. What Wagner did deprecate in singing was anything that tended merely to display the singer's voice; the prolonged sustaining of high notes, after the Italian fashion, was his pet abhorrence. Many a Lohengrin has come in for a sound rating from him for dwelling too long on "Elsa, ich liebe dich!" He abominated all those "heroic" vocal effects with which Italian singers are wont to bring down the house. His first demand was that every word and syllable of the text
should be distinctly heard by the listener. And this brings me to a point in which almost all performances of Wagner's dramatic works that I have heard, in Germany, England, and America, agree in being sadly incorrect. The orchestra almost everywhere plays too loud, either drowning the singers' voices or else forcing them to inordinate vocal exertions to make themselves heard. Nothing could have been more un-Wagnerish than the almost continual shouting that marred the otherwise fine performances of "Tristan" at the Metropolitan Opera House last winter; and what was worst of all was that this strenuous vocal effort was necessary. The reckless way in which Herr Seidl threw the reins upon the neck of his orchestra made it so; and Herr Seidl is not alone in this—it is done almost everywhere where Wagner's operas and music-dramas are given. It may possibly be objected here, that if Wagnerian opera is given "almost everywhere" in this way, in the most famous opera-houses and by the most noted conductors and singers, is it not likely that this way is right? A thousand times No! Hear what Wagner himself says about the manner in which his works are usually given in Germany. I may change the phraseology, for I quote from memory, but of the purport I am sure. Some years ago, when the proposed scheme of giving the complete cyclus of Wagner's works at Bayreuth had to be abandoned for lack of the needful funds, Wagner wrote to a friend: "Perhaps it is, after all, better as it is. It is quite possible for me to mount the 'Nibelungen' and 'Parsifal' at Bayreuth; these works are new. But for the 'Holländer,' 'Tannhäuser,' 'Lohengrin,' and 'Die Meistersinger'—perhaps even for 'Tristan'—I should have to employ absolutely green hands, who, as such, might be unable to cope with their task. For there is hardly a singer of any experience or eminence, in Germany, who has not repeatedly sung in these works; and as such singers I have thus become accustomed to doing almost everything wrong, it would be hopeless for me to try to lead them into the right path." But the best reply is furnished by Bayreuth itself. There you hear little or no shouting; the beautifully moderate playing of the orchestra makes it possible for the singers to use the mezza voce almost everywhere, except in passages of extreme passionate violence. Hardly a word is lost; and the singers sing easily and humanly, without excessive exertion. Even for the "Ride of the Valkyrior" (in "Die Walküre"), which we know here as a rather striking example of powerful orchestration, Wagner said to the orchestra, at one of the Bayreuth rehearsals, in 1876: "Gentlemen, I want a great deal of accent here, but little noise" (sehr viel Accent, aber wenig Lärm). Indeed, not a little of the bad singing we too often hear in Wagner's operas is quite sufficiently accounted for by the fact that the singers are too hard pushed by the orchestra. Of the specifically un-Wagnerian singing, of which we hear not a little, much comes, doubtless, from an ingrained and inveterate operatic habit. The effective "final cadence that brings down the house" is something that few singers can be prevailed upon to forego. I wonder how many habitual opera-goers, who are familiar with "Die Walküre," are aware [531] that Siegmund's love-song, in the first act, really ends piano; I, for one, have never heard it sung so. Upon the whole, it may be said that just those vocal effects which are so telling, stirring, and perfectly in place in operas like "Aïda," or the "Prophète," are precisely the ones Wagner did not wish for in his own works. But it is not merely the ordinary "heroic" effects, and the "final cadence that brings down the house," so dear to the hearts of case-hardened opera-singers, that Wagner deprecated. Foreign as such things are to the spirit of his music, there is still another thing which he held in equal abhorrence. This is the rhythmic liberties habitually taken by opera-singers—the whole unrhythmic style of singing prevalent on the operatic stage.

In the old, traditional Italian opera the lyrical numbers had, as a rule, so simple, strongly marked, and perspicuous a rhythm that no irregularity in the singing, no rubato phrasing, could very well make it incomprehensible, if the singer was only possessed of a decent rhythmic sense. Retarding here, and hurrying there, imparted a certain expressive vivacity to the phrase, besides allowing the singer to make play with his voice at effective points. And this was all the more legitimate that the phrase itself was usually so simple in outline that this
quasi-distortion did not hinder its being readily grasped by the listener. In the recitatives, on the other hand, there was no question of any rhythm at all; the singer was free to give the notes what value he pleased.

Now, what Wagner wrote for his singers, especially in his later works, is equally far removed from the regular rhythmic *carrure* of the lyrical numbers, and from the absolutely unrhythmic character of the recitatives, in Italian opera. No doubt there is not a little in his music-dramas that might be called recitative without an inordinate stretching of terms. But he was far from intending the singer to take any marked rhythmic liberties even here. As far back as "Tannhäuser," Wagner writes:

> In my opera no distinction holds good between those passages which are to be "sung," as the phrase goes, and those which are to be "declaimed;" on the contrary, my declamation is, at the same time, singing, and my singing, declamation. The definite cessation of singing," and the definite beginning of the customary "recitative," by which the singer's performance in opera is divided into two wholly different styles, does not exist in my works. I do not recognize at all the real Italian recitative, in which the composer hardly indicates the rhythmic element in performance, but leaves it to the singer's discretion; in passages where the poetry sinks from the more impassioned lyrical plane to the homelier level of mere emotional speech I have never forfeited my right to determine the style of performance quite as precisely as in outbursts of lyric song. Therefore, he who confounds such passages with the customary recitatives, and alters and transforms their rhythmic character accordingly, distorts my music quite as much as if he added new notes and harmonies to my lyric melody.

If this principle holds good in "Tannhäuser," it is of threelfold weight in the later music-dramas. At the beginning of *Wotan*'s long narrative: "*Als junger Liebe Lust mir verblich,* etc.," in the second act of "Die Walküre," we accordingly find the direction, "*streng im Zeitmaass*" (in strict time)—a direction which probably recurs oftener in Wagner's scores than in those of any other dramatic composer. Shamefully as this principle is disregarded by most singers who have to do with Wagner's music-dramas, we have had here at least one noteworthy example of its complete application—Albert Niemann. Whatever this distinguished artist's singing may not be, it is thoroughly Wagnerian in its persistently rhythmic quality.

I have shown here what seem to me the most important elements of correct musico-dramatic performance according to Wagner's ideas, laying especial stress upon such principles and details as are oftenest neglected, and in the practical following-out of which the Bayreuth Theatre stands, as yet, solitarily alone. And, as I have said, it is by this faithful adherence to Wagnerian principles that the importance of Bayreuth, as the headquarters of Wagner's art, still maintains itself.
Notes

Note 1 on page 19

Tausig's pianoforte-score, pp. 273-276.

Note 2 on page 19

Klindworth's pianoforte-score, pp. 8-16.