
French and German Books: Wagner

By Charles Welford



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Edition 1.0

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About this Title

Source

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Scribner's Monthly
Volume 13 Issue 5
Pages 727-729
Published in 1877

Original [Page Images](http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABP7664-0013-125) at Cornell University Library
(<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABP7664-0013-125>)

Reading Information

This title contains 1382 words.
Estimated reading time between 4 and 7 minutes.

Page numbers of the original source are indicated
using square-bracketed parentheses, like [62].

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French and German Books: Wagner

Richard Wagner, eine musikalische Reise in das Reich der Zukunft.

Dr. Filippo Filippi. New York: Schmidt, 24 Barclay street, or Stechert, 2 Bond street.

THE noise that Richard Wagner is making in the musical world has been the moving cause of a number of books and pamphlets on the Music of the Future and its doughty apostle. Perhaps as good an introduction as any to the profession of Wagnerism are the letters written by a very clever Italian musical critic, Dr. Filippi, to the unbelieving compatriots of Rossini. They speak from the standpoint of an admirer of Wagner's genius, but one as yet uncontaminated by the extreme fury of the noisy sect. They seek to persuade with gentleness rather than to insist with blind dogmatism. This was indeed imperative in view of the prejudices of his Italian audience, who objected strongly to German music in general and Wagner's music in particular; and although he wrote in 1870, when [728] Weimar instead of Bayreuth was the trysting-place of the long-haired clans, yet the present German translation of his letters affords an agreeable review of Wagner's relation to modern music. Naturally enough, he makes the most of the outward appearance of the melodious throng at Weimar. He feels quite bald-headed from seeing such crowds of true-blue Wagnerians, who, he says, are at once distinguishable from their lion-like manes of hair. The genuine unalloyed Wagnerian wears long and rather matted locks, a long, spare, and untrimmed beard, and long untrimmed nails. The followers of Liszt, on the other hand, have their long hair carefully combed and brushed behind their ears, "with a touch of vanity." Moreover, these latter endeavor to remove every hair of beard from their faces, in order to do justice to the priestly connections of the illustrious *abbé*. "These seraphic countenances are so smooth, so clean, so trim, that one feels they must make acquaintance with a razor at least twice a day." Liszt's worshipers also pay great attention to their hands, and, like the maestro, are fond of showing them, and from time to time raise them as if in blessing.

Nüchterne Briefe aus Bayreuth.

Paul Lindau. New York: Schmidt, 24 Barclay street, or Stechert, 2 Bond street.

PAUL LINDAU is of a humor not unlike his Italian brother critic above mentioned. But he shows more signs of a heathenish unbelief, and a more abandoned purpose of making free with the "master" and his adoring crowds. This may arise from a difference in temperament; but it must also be remembered that six years intervened between the visits of Philippi and Lindau. Philippi went to Weimar to hear a number of Wagner's operas which had already won their way to public favor; Lindau goes to Bayreuth to hear the far-famed trilogy given in an opera-house erected for the special purpose, and rendered by a devoted band of musical artists collected together from all parts of Germany. Yet the verdict of the German critic on the supreme effort of Wagnerian genius is not as favorable as that of the Italian on the earlier operas, "Tannhäuser," "Lohengrin," "Fliegende Holländer" and "Meistersinger." And Lindau is no trifler who turns the trilogy into ridicule in order to raise a laugh, nor is there any sign of prejudice on his part against Wagner or his work. Higher praise could not be awarded than some that he bestows on certain portions of the work. He always speaks earnestly of the powerful talent of Wagner, and dwells lovingly on the beautiful passages of his trilogy. When he does find a melody he bursts forth in uncontrollable delight. But he is also fearless in speaking of the puerilities and absurdities, the terrible spaces of drawn-out *ennui* which Wagner has insisted upon giving to the world. He makes a strong point of the fact that the passages which were most applauded by the foreigners present—that is to say, those not in the Wagner kingdom—were those in which some melody was vouchsafed their thirsty ears. Another point is the criticism of a lawyer, who finds in the drama all the crimes on the calendar, from those unmentionable in polite society down to violations of municipal ordinances. Such a view may have a touch of humor. As to the morality of the music, however, in the sense of its effect on the nerves, Lindau distinctly denies any bad tendency or inherent naughtiness,—a verdict to which attention should be paid just now, while musical people are disputing whether Wagner is a sensualist or not. It would be indeed very strange if Germany should produce a composer of just that quality. He might be coarse and possessed of unlimited bad taste, but hardly a voluptuary.

The general verdict Lindau allows one to receive is that the trilogy was as a spectacle a decided fiasco; as a chain of operas far from a success; but in respect to certain acts and certain passages, the work of a powerful and fresh genius, who has done things with the orchestra that no one else has ever attempted. As to the famous performance of Wagner himself,—the ungenerous and vainglorious speech he made before the curtain,—of that he speaks with the severity it deserved.

Über die Dichtung der ersten Scene des "Rheingold" von Richard Wagner.

E. von Hagen. New York: Schmidt, 24 Barclay street; or Stechert, 2 Bond street.

IF there ever was a man who needed to be saved from his friends it is Wagner. Edmond von Hagen puts no bounds to his adoration, and succeeds in writing a book on the first scene of "Rheingold," so ridiculous that no one should be without a copy to laugh over. Folly can no farther go. His elaborate quotations from Aristotle, his parade of Schopenhauer's and Kant's philosophy, and his wild efforts at the etymology of some of the extraordinary words of Wagner's libretto, only make his silliness more apparent. It is an awful thought that a man can write a book of 170 pages on one scene from one part of Wagner's operatic series; what will become of us if he goes on? But if he can vary the treatment each time, and make all as absurdly burlesque as this one, we shall need no comic literature for a long time. Von Hagen starts with the assumption that Wagner is not only a musical genius so transcendent that it is an impertinence to question it, but also a poet by whose side Goethe pales and Shakspeare would do well to look to his laurels. The quotations given from the libretto of "Rheingold" he explains, annotates and ponderously praises, just as a professor might treat the inspired words of a Greek poet whom the centuries have crowned with glory. The strange mixture of mythology from the Norse Edda and the German Nibelungen song, which forms the skeleton around which Wagner has built his opera, he treats as if original with the recent hero of Bayreuth; while he goes into ecstasies over the most grotesque and absurd expressions which Wagner has hunted up from the old German or deliberately made out of whole cloth to suit his music. Poor Paul Lindau, whose pamphlet is noticed above, is demolished in a footnote, and the world in general is treated as ignorant, [729] slow-witted, envious and malicious, when it dares to be indifferent to the chosen god. Wonderful beauty and deep mystic significance are discovered in such imbecile noises as Wagner puts in the mouths of his Rhine nymphs, like *Weia, Waga! Wagalaweia! Wallala weila weja!* These are held up for admiration with a dull persistency worthy of Dogberry. Colossal indeed must be Wagner's conceit if he does not blush to read such balderdash as this wherewith his doating disciple closes his book:

"Look up, dust-born race, to the sunlit height! There in blessed solitude stands Plato, there stands Kant, there stands Schopenhauer! See, there they stand, the solitary geniuses of mankind,—all-powerful, giant-like, great,—but, towering over all, the genius, Richard Wagner!"

It is talk of this kind that prejudices some people so strongly against the Music of the Future that they have no patience to select the lovely or stirring musical passages out of Wagner's strangely beautiful but sometimes tiresome operas.