
Boucicault and Wagner

By Edgar J. Levey



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life on the stage. One must alternately condense, elaborate, transpose, suggest, and magnify, as occasion requires, in order to construct a work of art. But the amount of divergence from Nature differs in each art-form. Thus, the methods of novel-writing are peculiarly favorable to the greatest possible amount of realism, and permit an attention to details and delicate psychological analysis that would be impossible in the drama, where quick action is indispensable. Novel-writing stands at what may be called the *realistic pole* of all art that has for its subject-matter human action. Next in order comes the drama, further removed from reality, somewhat more idealized, but still eminently natural. What is called the realistic form of drama, joins hands with the novel on common ground, and then stretches on towards the *ideal pole*, where, as we shall soon see, stands the music-drama.

Regarding the romantic drama as a part of what Mr. Boucicault calls the transcendental drama, and accepting his definition of the latter, we find that it is the highest form, in which the personages are grander than Nature, their acts more important, their sufferings more heroic." Commencing where the realistic drama leaves off, the transcendental form pushes on towards the limit permitted by purely natural means of expression. Here the proper realm of the music-drama has been reached. We have been getting farther and farther away from the mere imitation of Nature, so that now we seek for some means of expression more powerful than human speech, even of the most exalted kind. At this point Music comes to the aid of Tragedy.

But is it permissible thus to utilize such an unreal thing as music? This suggests another question, the answer to which is the keystone of the foundation on which the music-drama rests its claims to legitimacy.

What is the first object of all dramatic art?

To arouse the emotions.

In doing this what art has a title of the power of music?

It is a legitimate union then, this of music and drama, if thereby an art-form [652] is produced which shall excel all others in arousing the emotions. The drama must give up still more of its realism, if it is to be wedded to music. Is it worth it? Will more be gained than lost? That is the only question.

In the Italian operatic form, more was lost than gained. The libretto was, as Mr. Boucicault says, a mere skeleton, the situations unnatural, the action mutilated, and even the music generally vulgar, inappropriate, and undramatic. It had no right to exist as a species of dramatic art-form, because what should be common to all such forms, illusion, was never present. The distortion of the drama was so complete that if one thought about the situation at all it could only be to laugh. In the Wagnerian music-drama, more has been gained than lost. The texts, finished before a note of the music had been composed, are complete in themselves, and admirable merely as dramatic poetry. The absurdity of having several characters shouting at the same time has been removed by the abolition of concerted music. Where Wagner's true style is cultivated, the strictest attention is paid to distinctness in enunciation; the vocal score is really only the musical embodiment of emotional speech, moving with perfect melodic independence of the orchestra, and the action moves rapidly and naturally. In short, music has been made to give up all those artificial forms which would tend to injure dramatic propriety, and yield itself to the exigencies of the action. In Italian opera, the libretto was a mere excuse—a peg upon which to hang musical raiment. With Wagner the drama is the fountain source of inspiration for the music, and his later works are well able to stand the test of a critical analysis from a purely dramatic standpoint.

Mr. Boucicault has expressly denied his intention of concerning himself with the musical element in opera, and I have consequently been constrained to speak only of the dramatic side

of this art-form. But my protest would manifestly be incomplete if I did not point out at least one legitimate means of powerful emotional expression that springs directly from the union of drama and music, and *which could not exist in any other way*. Concrete examples are always best, so let us take a scene from the second act of "Tristan and Isolde."

In the garden of her castle, *Isolde*, consumed with love, is awaiting with feverish impatience the coming of her lover. By extinguishing a torch, she has thrown prudence to the winds, and given the signal for his approach. The whole act has led up to this point as to a climax, and everything combines to make the few moments preceding his entrance a situation of the greatest emotional excitement. How force the spectators to sympathize fully with this? If possible, they must be made to feel somewhat as *Isolde* feels, her heart beating wildly in expectation, her blood aglow, her senses strained to the utmost. The mere existence of the situation will not suffice. It must be elaborated by art. Drama alone cannot do this, for nothing would be more absurd or unnatural than to make *Isolde* indulge in a soliloquy descriptive of her own excitement. The feeling is too subjective—too purely emotional to find expression in words. It needs some collateral commentary. The Greeks might have attempted it by means of their chorus. We accomplish it *by means of music*. While *Isolde*, mounting the steps of the castle, waves her scarf impatiently at the approaching *Tristan*, her agitation is reflected by the headlong, hurrying stream of sound that wells up from the orchestra. And how reflected? Its intensity is magnified tenfold, and the audience, carried away by its resistless sweep, merge their identity in that of the lovers. Nor could music alone have produced this effect; for unless the mind be directed to the dramatic situation and the feelings thus predisposed to emotional receptivity, half the significance and power of the music will be lost. As it is, music, laying hold of what the drama suggests, elaborates subjectively its [653] emotional contents with a force peculiarly and exclusively its own. Moreover, all the opportunities for acting, *per se*, that would have existed in a drama, are present to an *Isolde* in this scene. There is nothing to sing, so the *artiste* is free to cultivate facial expression and "stage business" with as perfect freedom from restraint as though a musical accompaniment did not exist. Here, then, by the union of drama and music, a peculiar and perfectly legitimate instrument of dramatic expression has been created, without which Art would be distinctly poorer.

The mere presence of music as a factor in the construction of a music-drama must, to a great extent, determine its dramatic form. Music is emotional, not demonstrative. It reflects great passions, but will not lend itself to the emphasis of trifles. Hence the music-drama must give up all attempts at that delicate characterization which is so successfully accomplished in the realistic drama. Even more than the transcendental drama its outlines must be bold, strong, and simple; its figures, motives, and results of heroic mold; its delineation broad and noble, rather than refined. Adding music to a fine play will not make a good opera. Music and drama must be created together, each with a view to the requirements of the other. For this reason every attempt to make operas out of Shakspeare's tragedies has failed. The music-drama is something by itself and requires different methods of construction.

Wagner understood this perfectly. He chose his subjects from mythology. His characters are ideal, inasmuch as they are prototypes; they are natural, inasmuch as their actions are never motivated by conventionalities as they would be in modern life. Their passions are the very opposite of what we find in the plays of contemporary French dramatists. Instead of being involved, mixed, and conflicting, they are as simple, direct, and unalloyed as is the fear or anger of a child. In construction the same principle has ruled. To find a parallel for the simplicity with which the action of "Tristan and Isolde" is developed, one must seek as far back as the Greek tragedies. The intensity and directness of its dramatic motives lend themselves perfectly to musical treatment, and the whole work becomes a finished harmonious production in which one looks in vain for traces of joinery.

I trust I have now made clear what was meant by saying that the music-drama stands at the

ideal pole of those arts that illustrate human action. Its very limitations are the measure of its nobility, and its claims to dramatic legitimacy can no more be questioned than the power of its emotional effects can be rivaled.

Concerning Mr. Boucicault's condemnation of operatic artists for their alleged inability to act, I can only believe that his impressions must be the result of inadequate observation. Had he seen Malten's *Kundry*, Lehmann's *Isolde*, Fischer's *Hans Sachs*, Scaria's *Wotan*, or Albert Niemann in any rôle, he could not have said that "operatic acting is ridiculous sound and fury, signifying nothing." It is almost a saying among German actors—not, as a rule, given to too great admiration of their operatic brethren—"from Niemann we can all learn something." I will not say that Mr. Boucicault might also find this true. But in his case, as with many others, a little time spent in examining the best German operatic methods of to-day might help to infuse into the dramatic profession a certain spirit of tolerance—tempered even with something of admiration—for a sister art.

Edgar J. Levey.