
German Opera and Every-Day Life

By Walter Damrosch



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Contents

About this Title	4
German Opera and every-day Life.	5

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[699]

German Opera and every-day Life.

By Walter Damrosch.

FIVE years ago the German opera was founded by Dr. Leopold Damrosch at the Metropolitan Opera-House, in New York, and these five years have witnessed one of the most remarkable phenomena in the art-history of America. A people descended from all the nationalities of the globe, with no mythological past of their own, have received with enthusiasm and growing appreciation a series of musical dramas by Richard Wagner, based on the old German mythology, played in a world absolutely foreign to their own, and governed by certain art-laws which revolutionized all preconceived ideas on this subject. It seems remarkable that it should be possible for a people occupied almost exclusively with material things to understand a world so unreal and ideal as this; to appreciate a work based on the mythology of a past age,—as if they, too, had heard the tales of the Edda in childhood, and had grown up among the remains of a past which stretches into the dim prehistoric ages.

It is interesting to look for the causes that led to this artistic awakening of our people. These are not far to seek.

Wagner, perhaps the greatest universal genius since Shakespeare, has given his works a translation which should make them intelligible to all. There is one universal language, and that is music, for as an art it has no nationality. Its germs, the folk-song and dance, are national, but its developments take it out of the narrow limitations of race or geography, and in its highest forms, its purest manifestations, it speaks and belongs to all the world.

Realizing this great power, and developing its possibilities in this direction to a hitherto unheard-of extent, Wagner translated every character on the stage, every emotion, the dramatic action, [700] even the great symbolic ideas underlying his poems, by a music composed of a series of most characteristic phrases or motives. This system was but the natural result of his constant striving for dramatic truth, and his works show the gradual evolution of this idea. Already in the "Flying Dutchman" do we find a musical motive expressive of the central character of the opera, but the full development of the system was reached in the "Nibelungen Trilogy," where motive is joined to motive, developed with marvellous artistic skill, forming a musical current rolling along in the orchestra, and accompanying and amplifying every word as the drama progresses.

Americans were quick to appreciate all this. Here was something tangible, something that appealed to the intellect as well as to the imagination, and even before the names and significance of these motives were fully understood, the mind half-unconsciously associated certain actions on the stage with certain harmonies or melodies which accompanied them. Through the musical interpretation, the various vague and mystic characters of the old Sagas are made to stand clearly before us. Their characterization is complete and intelligible to all, and more clearly than ever before do we feel the great power of music to disclose to us subtle and delicate shades of meaning, which words alone could never hope to express.

Such a union of words and music, such a completion of one by the other, could only have been accomplished where both poet and musician were combined in one, as in Wagner, for even as he wrote the words of his dramas, their musical significance and expression were almost simultaneously created, and the writing of them down became simply a mechanical act.

Wagner loved to choose the subjects for his dramas from the old mythologies and legends of the people, because in these their strivings and ideals found form with greater clearness and naïve simplicity than in any actual historical event. The emotions and passions displayed in

the earliest myths are common to all the world, but as the centuries rolled by their characters became encrusted with local additions, and, from general human types, were narrowed down to national characters. In many instances different versions, as developed by different nations, existed, and it was only by divesting them of these local additions and mere externals that Wagner brought out and gave to us the original elements, the mother-types which contain [701] the germs of all human emotions within them. And these must appeal to us all, for no matter how far from the mother-race we may have wandered, there is something in these grand old heroic types of men and women which speaks to us as some half-forgotten song of our childhood, as something that we, too, once possessed and called ours. They are far removed from the conventionalities of the "modern," and the symbolisms in which they are clothed are for all times and all men.

Wagner touches on this in his essay, "[Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde](#)," as follows:

"Since my return from Paris to Germany I had made the German past ages my favorite study. I have mentioned before the deep longing for my country which filled me at that time. This country in its present reality could not requite my longings in any way, and I felt that a deeper yearning must be at the bottom of my desires, which found nourishment in another than the mere longing for my *modern* home. As if to sound its depths, I penetrated down to the original home element (*das urheimische Element*) that appears to us in the poetry of the past, which draws us nearer and closer, as the present with inimical coldness rejects us. All our wishes and burning desires, which in reality carry us into the *future*, we seek to realize from the pictures of the *past*, in order to create a form for them which the modern *present* cannot give.

"In the effort to give artistic form to the wishes of my heart, and in the desire to learn what it was that drew me so unresistingly to the fount of the old Sagas, I arrived step by step into the realm of the remote past, where, to my great joy, and even there, in the *remotest* past, I found at last the youthfully beautiful *man* in the pristine freshness of his strength.

"My studies thus carried me through the poems of the mediæval ages back to the beginning of the old German mythology; one garment after the other, that the later versions had thrown about him, I succeeded in taking off, to behold him at last in his purest beauty. What I here saw was no longer the historic, conventional figure, on which the garment must interest us more than the person; but the real naked man on whom I could perceive every throbbing of the heart, every play of the strong muscles, in untrammelled freest motion; in short, the *true man*. . . . If the glorious figure of *Siegfried* had already attracted me for a long time, it really only began to enthuse me when I had succeeded in freeing it from later additions, and seeing it before me in its purest human form. Only now did I recognize the possibility of making him the hero of a drama, which never occurred to me, as long as I knew him solely from the mediæval *Nibelungen-lied*."

Although Americans, as a race, are young, the veneration for the immediate past, the childhood of its people, existed already in a marked degree. Old family histories, miniatures, and heirlooms are preserved with religious veneration, and many an American is proud to be able to trace the birth of his family to some little spot in old Europe, glad that he, too, is connected with the past, although his work is to conquer the new. But of the prehistoric past, the mythology of the people from whom he is descended, the American knew little or nothing. He was not in touch with it, and, at best, its characters were but so many [702] curious and perhaps interesting figures of a world with which he had nothing in common.

It would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, for him to assimilate the spirit of the Norse Sagas and legendary lore, but music, that great universalist, spoke, and translated them for him in a language which he, too, can understand; and thus the miracle has been accomplished, and *Siegfried* and *Brunhilde*, *Lohengrin* and *Tanhäuser*, belong to-day as much to the musical people of America as to Germany.

It is interesting to note that, of the many musical motives employed by Wagner in the "Nibelungen Trilogy," those descriptive or symbolic of the elements of nature found their way first to the understanding of our people. They appreciated at once the grand portrayal of water, the mighty element, in the introduction to "Rheingold," the remarkable development of the Water Motive on one and the same chord surging onward and upward in constant and

increasing motion; also the motive of "*Loki*," the element of fire, the scheming, deceitful god. They were quick to perceive its symbolic character, its chromatic figures seeming to dart hither and thither in restless activity, like so many tongues of flickering flame, and then again the steady glow, so wonderfully expressed in the orchestra, as *Wotan* binds this restless element to burn in a circle of fire around the sleeping *Brunhilde*. At the first performance of this scene at the Metropolitan Opera-House the audience were aroused to a wild pitch of enthusiasm which has since been equalled only by other performances of the same master's works. A strange and interesting fact in this connection is the enthusiastic reception which the "Ride of the Valkyries" received in *concert* performances before it was ever given in connection with a dramatic performance. So great is the descriptive power of music in this that it pictured to our imagination, without the help of a scenic background or stage performance, the glorious *Valkyries* as they ride through the air, bearing the slain heroes to *Walhall*. The unbridled freedom and trembling excitement, the elemental force of the music, were appreciated by none sooner than by Americans. How our nerves tingle and our hearts beat, as the first rush of the Ride Motive comes to our ears, and what a stupendous climax is reached when the *Valkyries'* Battle Motive breaks forth in its rude strength and rhythmic daring. We hear [703] the whinnying of the horses, the battle-cry of the great warmaidens, and above all the thunderous hoofbeat of the gigantic wild chargers as they rush through the clouds. The picture thus conveyed to our mind is complete, and far more perfect than scenic art or stage machinery can as yet accomplish.

Americans are great lovers of nature, but perhaps never before had the poetry of the forest been brought so near to them as in the second act of "*Siegfried*," where the sacred quiet of the forest, the rustling of the leaves, the flickering sunlight as it filters through them, throwing its bright patches on the green moss, the chirping of the birds, the hum of insects, are all reproduced in a music which defies description, but which speaks with a directness and truth, a fidelity to the most delicate phases of poetry in nature, that must appeal to all. The whole scene forms a fitting background to the boy *Siegfried*, who, outstretched beneath the wide-branching linden-tree, gives vent to his longing for a being like himself; for this child of the forest has seen that all the beasts, the birds, and the fishes find mates, and only he is all alone, an ugly dwarf his sole companion.

These portrayals of nature, as well as the motives expressive of the fundamental passions or emotions, were the first to be felt by our audience; but gradually the more symbolic motives and their deeper meanings were appreciated as they became more and more familiar—the motive of the "Curse on the Ring," with its grating dissonances, the sharp-cutting, flashing Sword Motive, symbolic of the heroic race created by *Wotan*, and from these to the motives of *Siegfried*, the boy, with its merry hunting fanfare, and *Siegfried*, the man, with its more sustained, heroic character, down to *Siegfried's* death and the accompanying funeral music, which gives us in grand succession the whole tragic history of the *Volsungen* race—a veritable funeral oration in music.

At the first performance of the "*Götterdämmerung*" in New York, the opinion was quite generally expressed that Wagner had here reached his greatest musical and dramatic climax, and that the drama should have ended here; but gradually the still higher climax revealed by him in the end of the last act dawned upon the audience, as the significance of the "Atonement through Love" Motive, the most exalted of all, became apparent, for it is through *Brunhilde's* self-sacrifice that the curse is lifted from the ring and [704] the world; and with this idea the trilogy ends, the deeply symbolic motive foreshadowing the Christian religion—the idea of self-sacrifice through love. Many among the audience realized perhaps for the first time the close connection which always must exist, directly or indirectly, between art and religion—that the two are inseparable, serving the same purpose and striving for the same ends.

The interest among musical people to learn more about these wonderful creations and their deeper symbolic significance became intense. The performances in New York and other cities were crowded from pit to dome, and the better acquainted the people became with the music, the greater became their enthusiasm. The frivolity which characterized the behavior of a portion of our people during the period when a "amusement operas" were principally performed at our opera-houses grew less and less with the founding of the German opera, and finally ceased altogether as the idea gained ground that music and the drama had also other purposes than the mere amusement of an idle hour, and that even on weekdays some time could be spent with nobler things in a building formerly considered to exist only as a gathering-place for the idle world.

All this means more than a mere craze or fashion ; it means an awakening of the masses to the ideal, to things beyond the material, which nothing else had been able to accomplish to such a degree before. Wagner has drawn the people into his magic circle, and even the unmusical are beginning to see the possibilities of music as a refining and chastening influence over our emotions. With its help he has given to Americans the past. It is theirs to hold and to keep, if they will but stretch out their hands for this rich treasure; for this is necessary to the development of an artistic spirit in our race. Art cannot live on the present, which is ever too much entangled with the material, and the conventionalities of life, but must draw its sustenance from the remote past, where our imagination, our poetic spirit, can be kindled, and we can behold the heroic type as developed in all its original strength in the mythology of the people. True art should spring from the people and speak to the people. It can never take a firm foothold as long as it remains a luxury instead of becoming a necessity. Wagner has done much to show us the way from the material to the ideal, where our spirit can find refuge and sustenance. It [705] had almost become strangled under the universal greed for the material; the "*Curse of the Gold*" was upon it, and it needed such a popular uprising as was produced by the "*Nibelungen Trilogy*" to prove that it was not dead, and that a little care and nursing would bring it to healthful life and strength. Much has been done, but more remains. It was natural that American women should have preceded the sterner sex in the development of the artistic temperament. Their greater freedom from the material spirit of the country, and the exalted position accorded them by men,—far above that of the women of any other country,—gave them opportunities for the development of heart and mind of which they availed themselves to the fullest extent.

The time is not far distant when it was thought inadvisable to teach boys anything of music for fear that it might take their minds too much from business interests, and it is only lately that a healthy reaction has set in and they, too, are permitted to learn what will prove to them in after years the greatest rest and relaxation from the prose of every-day affairs. That this reaction is due to a great extent to the influence of American mothers there can be no doubt, and now that a more even artistic development is going on among both sexes greater results may be expected from the future. The children of to-day are the men and women of to-morrow. Let their imagination be kindled by the old fairy tales, and as they grow older let them read the stories of the heroes of the Greek and Norse mythologies, told in a simple way that they can understand. And, above all, let music, and only good music, be around and about them always. The days of the hard prose of life come soon enough; and they will be better able to meet and conquer these if they have the memory of a poetic childhood to strengthen and to sustain them. Let the church also examine with more interest the possibilities of art as a factor in religion, although not of sectarianism. While some ministers are enthusiastic devotees of music, a great majority have but vague ideas on the subject, many having labored under the great disadvantage of not having had proper opportunities for self-development. Good musicians are scarce in this country, if we take into consideration its enormous area and its 65,000,000 of people. Cities like New York and Boston are already well supplied, but fifty

good leaders could be placed to advantage in fifty different [706] cities of the Union. The signs are auspicious. Never was there such an awakening to art; never such a grand field for musicians to work in. There is room for all who may come, and as the country is as yet too young to supply all its needs in this respect, let us welcome gladly all foreign musicians who come to these shores to assist in our country's development.

The next great musical genius of the world should be an American; but he can only come after generations of musicians have prepared our soil and sown the seed which, under the warmth of his sacred fire, shall ripen to a rich harvest.

Walter Damrosch.