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*Concert of the London Wagner Society*

By W. F. A.



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## About this Title

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## Concert of the London Wagner Society

FRIDAY evening, May 9, the Wagner Society gave their last concert for the present season at St. James's Hall in London. The occasion was a peculiarly interesting one, if only from the fact that Dr. Hans v. Bülow led some of the numbers himself, Mr. Edward Dannreuther, the regular conductor of the society, having generously given up the *bâton* for the second half of the concert. The selections were taken entirely from the works of Richard Wagner, with the single exception of Beethoven's twenty-five variations and fugue on the theme of the finale of the Eroica Symphony, for piano-forte, played by Dr. v. Bülow. How especially these variations came to form part of the programme might be a not unnatural question, unless indeed it was to give the public a chance of hearing the great pianist in one of his pet specialties. The other selections in the programme were the Overture to *Der Fliegende Holländer*; the Procession Music and Elsa's Song to the Night Breeze from the second act of *Lohengrin*, and the introduction to the third act (ball-room music) of the same opera; Elisabeth's Prayer to the Virgin, from the third act of *Tannhäuser*, and the Overture to the same; Introduction and Finale to the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*; and the *Huldigungs-marsch*. Elsa's song and the prayer from *Tannhäuser* were sung by Madame Otto-Alvsleben, formerly of the Royal Opera at Dresden.

The object of the society is to create an interest in the works and art-theories of Richard Wagner, and to raise funds to help defray the expenses of the coming festival performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at Bayreuth. That there was no great need of creating in London an interest in Wagner has been abundantly shown by the crowded audiences at each of the present society's concerts. The persistent, violent denunciation of the composer by the late Mr. Chorley and some other critical writers had already done more than enough towards creating an interest, if nothing more, in Wagner's works; and those to whom Mr. Chorley's almost unbounded admiration for Meyerbeer and Gounod was familiar (not to speak of his flattering estimation of Sir Michael Costa's oratorios) may have had a suspicion that all this wholesale denunciation was, perhaps, after all to be taken as not entirely uncomplimentary to Wagner's genius. The great difficulty in hearing any of Wagner's music, that existed for many years in England, acted only as oil to the fire. Add to this the popularity of the *Tannhäuser* Overture,—almost the only work of the composer with which the English public were at all familiar,—and we have causes enough for a widely extended and lively interest in Wagner and all his doings. The musical success of *Der Fliegende Holländer*, when performed at her Majesty's some three years ago, served to give this interest rather a favorable than an unfavorable direction; and the quickly promulgated warning of the anti-Wagnerites that the "Dutchman" could not be considered as a fair example of the composer's style, and that even the composer himself looked upon the opera as an immature production of callow youth, only added to the desire to know Wagner as he really is. That the "Dutchman" was not a financial success was by no means surprising, for the opera is hardly calculated to make its fortune as a mere after-dinner keep-awake, and the most discriminating applause and hisses do not always come from the stalls. Finally, the Nibelungen Festival at Bayreuth having brought all Wagner excitement, either pro or con, wellnigh to the culminating point, the Wagner Society was formed in London, just as similar societies have been [380] formed in more of the principal cities in Europe; one of its prime objects being, as we have already said, to help in raising funds to meet the expenses of the festival. Another object, undoubtedly, was the furthering the artistic ends of the school of the "Future," and the practical exemplification, by public performances, of the musical ideas of Richard Wagner. Both of these objects are more praiseworthy. Whatever may be the opinion of many musicians concerning the genius of

Richard Wagner, or the validity of his art-theories, there can be little doubt as to the important part the festival performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* will play in the history of musico-dramatic art. Whatever of mere personal vanity may be mixed up or seem to be mixed up in the motives which have led Wagner to bring himself before the world in this unusual manner, however much the Bayreuth Festival may seem to be a mere glorification of the projector's art-theories, heralded by a cry of *Adeste fideles*, to the tune of three hundred thousand thalers, it must be borne in mind that one of the projector's prime objects in these performances is, not to show the world how operas, or musical dramas if you will, should be written, but how they should be performed. It is an attempt to bring before the world certain improvements in musico-dramatic performances, in the mere details of the Thespian art,—which improvement can be applied as well to the performances of Gluck, Mozart, or Weber operas as to those of the projector's own composition,—an attempt, in fine, to sweep from the operatic stage a host of conventional absurdities, which the world has hitherto sluggishly regarded as inseparable from all musico-dramatic art. Such an attempt should excite the sympathy of all true art-lovers. How well the London Wagner Society have succeeded in the financial part of their undertaking we do not know; but to judge from the crowded audiences at their concerts, they cannot have been wholly unsuccessful. As to the society's other object —the artistic one —of bringing the English public to a better understanding and appreciation of Wagner's music, much more doubt may be felt. For our own part, we cannot but think that the means employed were utterly inadequate to the task. To appreciate the æsthetic value of Wagner's music from hearing the music alone requires the sagacity of an expert. We have already said something to this effect, when noticing Theodore Thomas's performances of selections from Wagner operas; and the more we hear of such performances, the more firmly are we convinced of their inability to give the public an adequate idea of the composer's works. The temptation for any admirer of Wagner who may have a fine orchestra at his command, to indulge in such partial presentation of his music is necessarily great, almost irresistible; he probably knows the work, of which he gives the public this imperfect sketch, by heart; not only every note of it, but every line and word of it, has very likely seen it actually performed, and is familiar with every situation, with every dramatic intention. He has identified every musical phrase with some corresponding bit of dramatic action or poetic imagery, and when, afterwards, he hears the music alone, it calls up before his mind's eye the whole scene in all its original intensity: the music makes him *see* the drama. How hard, then, for him to realize that the music which, to him, means so much, may mean to others so little! Nay, that it may mean little to others, just in the exact ratio that it means much to him; for the dramatic quality in the music, its powers of definitely expressing or portraying certain emotions are often exactly in an inverse ratio to its purely musical perfection of form, and the self-dependent vitality of its structural development. Much may, indeed, be done by elaborate descriptions of the dramatic situations of which the music forms a part; and the Wagner Society have evidently spared no pains in making the public as much as possible acquainted with the *meaning* of the music. Neatly bound little pamphlets, containing an analysis of all the music performed, together with a thematic index of the principal phrases, are distributed among the audience at sixpence apiece. Not wholly worthless as a make-shift in lack of something better, but yet how far from helping the audience to *enjoy* the music! To *understand* Wagner's music is one thing, but to *feel* it as a vital and inseparable part of the drama is another; and we imagine that Wagner is the last man in the world to wish to have his compositions presented to the world as a theme for purely philosophical investigation. In short, Wagner's music, divorced from the drama, is worse than the "statue without its pedestal"; it is the vertebrate without a spinal column, a superstructure without a foundation, an effect with no discoverable cause. Even the instrumental [381] introductions to his dramas, his overtures, with the exception of those to *Tannhäuser*,

*Lohengrin*, and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, (1) lose by far the greater part of their significance when separated from the dramas to which they belong.

Such compositions as the Overture to *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and the Introductions to *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Nibelungen* dramas are really nothing more than a preparation for the drama that is to follow, a sort of æsthetic appetizer, as it were, to prepare the mind for the appreciation of the rest. Performed by themselves in the concert-room, they are but a question without an answer, leaving the hearer in a state of most unsatisfied perplexity.

But in spite of the many serious and unavoidable imperfections of such performances, the Wagner Society concert was still most enjoyable, especially to any one who, like the leader, was thoroughly acquainted with the numbers performed.

The society's orchestra is excellent, and large enough to do full justice to any modern orchestral music. A great want of proper preparation, probably arising from the impossibility of having the requisite number of rehearsals, was in some passages plainly perceptible. Many mistakes in the performance were evidently due to typographical errors in the orchestral parts, which more thorough rehearsing might have discovered and corrected. In addition to this, we cannot but feel that Mr. Dannreuther is not as yet an accomplished orchestral conductor. His command over his orchestral forces was at times very small, and the audience could not feel that positive security in everything going right that is indispensable to the thorough enjoyment of music. The difference between his conducting and that of Dr. Von Bülow was as that between day and night. Although Von Bülow's acquaintance with the London orchestra must necessarily have been very slight, and the number of rehearsals very limited, his command over the orchestra was as perfect and easy as his command over the keyboard of the piano-forte. To fully appreciate how much is meant by this, one must bear in mind the immense difficulty of conducting Wagner's later music at all, where the *tempo* is continually changing, and where the orchestra have often no other indication of a change in *tempo* than the sudden movement of the conductor's *bâton*. The manner in which the extremely difficult and intricate movements from *Tristan und Isolde* were played was, under the circumstances, a positive triumph. Orchestra and conductor seemed animated by one great impulse, and the glorious Finale left an impression on all who heard it not soon to be effaced. The only thing to be regretted was, that with such an excellent artist as Madame Otto-Alvsleben at hand, the voice part in the Finale should not have been *sung*. With such an Isolde, nothing, or next to nothing, would have been wanting to the completeness of the performance. As it was, however, the orchestra did so well as to leave little to be desired; only the presence of Madame Alvsleben at the concert and her actually taking part in the programme made her silence in the most important number rather tantalizing, the more so as her rendering of the allotted selections from *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* was so fine as to make us want to hear her more. The Introduction was played with the ending added by Wagner for concert performance, and thus had a more satisfying effect than when played in Boston by Theodore Thomas's orchestra, and the large body of violins gave the strong passages with their rapid, ascending runs with intense effect.

As to Dr. Von Bülow's piano-forte playing, it is difficult to form any very definite opinion after hearing him only once or twice. We have never heard a player who apparently more completely forgot himself in playing than he, though there is this difference between him and Anton Rubinstein, that v. Bülow never for a moment seems to forget that he is playing to an audience. He makes the impression of standing as a conscious interpreter between the music and his hearers; the habit he has of looking at his audience in passages of especial beauty, as if to see whether they have fully caught his meaning, makes this the more striking. His playing of Chopin is really wonderful, and to our mind more satisfying than Rubinstein's, although a comparison between the two men is hardly fair, they presenting but few points of similarity. But Von Bülow's acknowledged *forte* is Beethoven, and it is about his playing of

the great piano-forte sonatas that we find the greatest difficulty in forming any judgment, if such a word is to be used in talking [382] of a man like Von Bülow. We heard him play two of the later sonatas, and felt of astonishment and delight not a little, but yet not entire satisfaction. What the disturbing element was in his performance we are wholly unable to determine, but a certain something there was that prevented that perfect, spontaneous enjoyment of the music, that unbroken magnetic communication between composer and hearer, that we have felt while listening to some other players. Yet there was not a single point in the whole performance that we would have had changed, the relation of every part to the well-organized whole was perfect. Von Bülow's playing of Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli* was positively astounding in brilliancy, strength, and graceful poetic sentiment; in this style of music, now that Carl Tausig is dead, Von Bülow stands easily pre-eminent and without a rival.

## Notes

### Note 1 on page 7

We leave the Overture to *Rienzi* entirely out of the question, as being written upon a wholly different plan from any of the composer's other works, and, in fact, in no way characteristic of his peculiar genius.