
Richard Wagner

By George B. Miles



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Richard Wagner

SO much has been said of "the music of the future" that it will doubtless interest many to learn something of the man who is its principal exponent, and who, if not the greatest of living composers, as some assert, enjoys certainly the widest notoriety of any.

RICHARD WAGNER was born at Leipsic, the 22d of May, 1813. When but six months old he had the misfortune to lose his father; and his mother, marrying again some time after, removed to Dresden, where young Richard entered upon a course of studies, in which music was included—showing, however, no special aptitude or taste for the divine art. For poetry and the drama, on the contrary, he evinced a very decided inclination, amounting, in fact, almost to a passion, the fruits of which were numerous plays and poems, admired in the circle of his friends, but never known beyond its limits. The profound impression that a first hearing of some of Beethoven's symphonies made on Wagner, seems to have awakened him to a sense of his true power, and inspired him with the idea of becoming a composer.

His early studies in harmony and counterpoint were irregular and by no means thorough, owing doubtless to that natural impatience of ambitious youth to grasp at once at a coveted whole, without mastering the disagreeable details absolutely necessary to its value as an acquisition.

At the age of nineteen he composed a symphony, which was performed at Leipsic, and met with a certain success. It was not until after the production of this work, laboriously written, that the young composer realized how much was still wanting to make him at home, so to speak, in his profession; and he then spared no effort until a thorough knowledge of fugue and counterpoint was acquired.

Contemporary in composition with the symphony were numerous pieces of minor importance—piano-forte sonatas, études, fantasias, etc.—essays of the composer with his talent, and, as such, not of sufficient consequence to deserve special mention. In 1833, or thereabouts, Wagner, then residing in Wurzburg, felt a strong desire to write for the stage, influenced, no doubt, as was all Germany at that time, by the grand dramatic conceptions of Von Weber. As the result of this influence came Wagner's first opera, entitled "Les Fées," in many points a flagrant imitation of Weber's style, and, for this reason, perhaps, never represented.

Widely differing from this was his second lyric drama, composed two years later, when he occupied the position of orchestral director at Magdeburg. This work, entitled "Le Novice de Palerme," of which the words and music are both his own, shows unmistakable evidences of the influence of Auber, whose "La Muette de Portici" had just won an almost unparalleled success, and whose melodious, flowing style, our ambitious composer studied, until it had become, as we might say, his own. But every thing seemed to conspire to render the effort unsuccessful. The resources of the theatre were meagre, the season late, the vocalists unmanageable, and "Le Novice" was "shelved" after one representation.

In the course of the following year Wagner was chosen *chef d'orchestre* to the theatre at Königsberg. The duties here he found much more arduous than those at Magdeburg, and, worse still, infinitely more disagreeable and antipathetical to his nature. To conduct inferior and uninteresting operas, and to twist those operas into all sorts of distorted shapes, at the pleasure of an unreasonable manager and capricious artists, was a work which he, as a composer, found positively revolting. For some months he endured this, chafing under the restraints put upon him, but acquiring, from the very repugnance that these offences created, a new strength to carry out the reforms he contemplated. The only important event occurring at Königsberg was his marriage to the *prima donna* of the theatre, a person of fine disposition and with great natural talent, who, in the many trials and misfortunes of the years that

followed, showed herself a loving and devoted companion until her decease, in the latter part of 1865.

Some few months after his marriage, Wagner was offered a position as capelmeister at Riga, and accepted it. But here, finding only a continuance of many disagreeable duties encountered at Königsberg, and at last despairing of ever rescuing German taste from its depraved condition, he concluded to seek a field of action more favorable to the development of his peculiar ideas. He naturally turned to Paris, just then lavishing its favors on Auber, Meyerbeer, and Rossini—Paris, so liberal in its support of the fine arts, so ready to recognize and reward the true and the great. There, and there only, could success be found. Quickened by the idea, he already sees the resources of the Grand Opera placed at his disposal, with an opportunity to compose a work full of those dramatic effects that have made "Les Huguenots" and "Guillaume Tell" so acceptable to the Parisians. The subject of Rienzi, the last of the Roman tribunes, suggesting itself as favorable to the purpose, he hesitates no longer, writes a libretto for the opera, arranges his affairs, and is soon on his way to the French capital.

In the voyage from Riga to Boulogne-sur-Mer, the vessel was overtaken by a terrible storm, and narrowly escaped shipwreck. Through the fiercest of the gale Wagner remained upon deck, fascinated and awed by the wild surging of the waves, and the weird, ominous moaning of the wind through the cordage. This scene made a lasting impression on his mind; and, in the overture to the "Flying Dutchman," written some years later, he has well conveyed the idea of a tempest at sea.

Boulogne once reached, the financial condition was such as not to warrant a continuance of the journey. Wagner took lodgings at a short distance from the town, and set bravely to work, confident that Paris was soon to make amends for his many disappointments. One day, happening to meet with Meyerbeer, he showed him some pages of the "Rienzi" score, and spoke with enthusiasm of his hopes and plans for the future. Although the composer of "Les Huguenots" well knew the many disheartening rebuffs that enthusiasm must encounter, he did not discourage the young man, but gave him letters of introduction to Joly, Pillet, and Habeuck, musical directors, and to Schlesinger, editor of the *Gazette Musicale*.

Armed with these, Wagner hurried on to Paris, where, for a time, they secured him certain attentions and abundant offers of service; but the genuineness of these last, when put to the test, was found sadly wanting. After repeatedly suffering the disappointment of promises broken and engagements unfulfilled on the part of his newly-found friends, he awoke at length to a sense of his situation—plainly worse than ever before. It was a severe blow, but he had strength to meet it, and an unflinching energy to bear him up.

Suddenly through the cloud of trouble came a ray of hope. Joly, director of the Théâtre de la Renaissance, consented to produce "Rienzi." The affairs of the theatre being in an embarrassed condition, a bold stroke, it was thought, might possibly set them right. Wagner, encouraged, bent to the work with spirit, but to no purpose; the theatre was bankrupt before the opera could be brought out. This was a *coup-de-grâce*. Misery now stared him in the face.

In those dark days Schlesinger was the one friend who remained faithful. He accepted for the *Gazette Musicale* several articles on musical topics, and through his efforts Wagner was commissioned to write an overture for the Société des Concerts. "Faust" was chosen as the subject of this overture, which, on rehearsal, was deemed not sufficiently interesting or meritorious to warrant its public performance. Driven to new efforts by this failure, the future composer of "Tannhauser" was, for a time, engaged in arranging for flute, cornet, and other instruments, the popular airs of the day. He also prepared piano-forte editions of at least two complete operas. But matters grew even more desperate, creditors still more importunate; and at last finding it desirable to effect a change of base, he decided to locate at Meudon, a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of the great city.

It is well known that Wagner regards the piano as the most despicable of all instruments;

he hates its very presence, its most dulcet tones have no power to soothe his savage breast. Meudon, he thought, would surely be free from the tormentor, and for that reason, if for no other, desirable as a place of residence.

Hardly was he settled in the new lodgings when—horror of horrors!—from some deep recess of the house came sounds resembling those of a superannuated piano, but a thousand times more aggravating. Wagner, furious at this unexpected infliction, rushed frantically from room to room, up-stairs and then down, down, down to the uttermost depths, some twenty feet under ground. There was his sedate landlord, the person whom he least suspected, seated before the offending instrument, and enraptured, apparently, with its marvellous power. And such an instrument—harp, piano, and organ, combined— [662] forming stupendous whole, capable of most unearthly sounds. The place, the man, the instruments, were too much for our composer, who burst into a hearty laugh, which brought the performance to a sudden close.

Peace was restored by the immediate removal of the nondescript, and Wagner, suffering no further interruption, worked on in the composition of a new opera, "Der Fliegende Holländer," determined to return to Germany if Dresden should decide in favor of "Rienzi," which had been sent there for consideration. Meanwhile, matters went from worse to worse, and, when the new opera was completed, the composer was actually without money to buy paper upon which to write the overture. Fortunately, at this crisis came a letter from Dresden, announcing the acceptance of "Rienzi," and requiring the composer's immediate presence. But the necessary means for the journey were wanting. In a frenzy of haste Wagner again composes and transcribes all sorts of airs for all sorts of instruments, until a sum sufficient for the immediate purpose is acquired. Dresden once reached, "Rienzi" is carefully prepared and enthusiastically received.

This success was soon followed by Wagner's appointment as orchestral director at the Dresden Opera-House, and as capelmeister to the king. This last honor had been conferred on no one since the death of Morlacchi, Weber's successor.

At Dresden Wagner found a fine theatre, excellent orchestra, and an intelligent and refined public. Here he remained until 1848, producing, in 1843, "Der Fliegende Holländer," and, two years later, "Tannhauser," which then received only two representations, owing probably to the fact that, in this opera, the composer first abandoned the accepted forms and style of operatic composition, to give place to his own peculiar ideas, since more fully developed and more strikingly presented.

Led by his republican sympathies to participate in the Revolution of 1848, Wagner, at the end of its short career, was forced to fly the country, and chose Zurich as a place of residence. While there, he published his most important literary work, entitled "Opera and Drama," the leading idea of which is shown in the following extract from its preface:

"I claim," he says, "herein to prove the possibility and necessity of a system of artistic creation in music and poetry (considered together) superior to that universally adopted at the present time."

This book severely criticises the works of Meyerbeer, who is accused of neglecting the true interests of art to satisfy his desire for popularity—an accusation that raised up against Wagner a host of enemies, and which he afterward deeply regretted.

Shortly before the appearance of this volume, he published two *brochures*, "Art and Revolution," and "The Artistic Mission of the Future," both of which excited much comment in literary and musical circles from their clear and forcible language, and from the boldness and originality of thought they displayed.

Wagner's fourth grand opera, "Lohengrin," was, through the efforts of the pianist Liszt, produced in Weimar, in 1850, with considerable success, and is now regarded by many as the composer's most pleasing work. In 1855 we find him in London, directing the concerts of the Philharmonic Society; and, by endeavoring to change some of their long-established customs and accepted interpretations of standard works, creating much illfeeling and a strong party of

opposition to his innovations. While there, he gave exhibitions of wonderful powers of memory, frequently conducting the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, without a score.

Determined, at any cost, to introduce his music to the Parisians, Wagner, in the autumn of 1859, returned to the French capital, and made every effort to secure a representation of "Tannhauser," but for a long time without success. At length the emperor, at the urgent solicitation of Madame de Metternich, ordered "Tannhauser" to be put in rehearsal. Every means were placed at the disposal of the composer to insure the best possible performance of the opera, and so anxious was he to obtain this result, that four months were occupied in its preparation.

The Parisians were not disposed to recognize favorably the efforts of a declared enemy to their worshipped Meyerbeer, and so it happened that "Tannhauser" was withdrawn after three representations, at the last of which opposition to the piece raged so fiercely that scarcely a note of the music was heard. Shortly after this terrible failure, Wagner, broken down in health and spirits, left Paris, craving, above all things, the repose of mind denied him in the harassing excitement of the previous six months.

After some time spent in travel, he made efforts to produce his opera, "Tristan and Isolde," composed in 1857; but, meeting with little or no encouragement, he gave up the attempt in very disgust, and proposed returning to Zurich, intending for the future to lead a retired life. Before this purpose could be carried out, however, he was invited to Munich by the young King of Bavaria, who offered him, as an inducement, entire control of the music of the Court Theatre and every facility for the production of his operas. Here was an opportunity too good to be lost. Wagner, accepting the offer, went immediately to Munich, where he received a royal welcome, and where he has since resided principally, admired and favored by the king, who, it is said, even sacrifices the interests of state to his love of music—music of the future, that is.

"Tristan" was first performed in June, 1865, the greatest care being exercised in its preparation; but it failed to make any marked impression. Since then Wagner has written three operas—"Die Meistersänger von Nuremberg," first represented in 1868; "Das Rheingold," in 1869; and "Die Walküre," in the past year—besides this, publishing, from time to time, *brochures* on matters relating to his art, which have attracted more or less attention. The later operas have not been, and can never be, as successful as "Tannhauser" and "Der Fliegende Holländer," principally for the reason that each succeeding work departs more than its predecessor from accepted precedents, and just in the proportion of that departure are the elements of popularity wanting. Both of the last-named operas have been favorably received in the principal European capitals, and represent the composer's real successes.

A thorough and careful analysis of Wagner's work cannot be given within the limits of a magazine article, and we must, therefore, be content to notice briefly his leading ideas and the peculiarities of his style as influenced by those ideas.

Looking at the operas of the last generation of composers—those of Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini, for instance—we find the *libretto* and the music to be two entirely distinct portions of the work, the *librettist* patching up some sort of a story that should offer the composer opportunities for the display of musical *effects* and for an average number of *scenas*—solos, choruses, and concerted pieces.

We see also that the music and story have often but little in common as regards characteristic color—that is, they are not appropriate to each other; and from this results a want of unity in the opera, as realized, fatal to any true dramatic expression. This is not only evident in the music rendered by the orchestra, but is still more noticeable in the vocal parts, often written with no regard to their situation, and with the sole and express design of showing off the voices to advantage.

If we compare, now, the old system with the new, it becomes plain that the latter embodies many true principles which must eventually prevail.

In the first place, Wagner holds that the composer should be his own *librettist*, choosing some poetic legend that he feels is capable of inspiring both the words and music. The legend he considers peculiarly well adapted for a musical setting, since it deals not with mere external incidents, but with the emotions and passions, to the expression of which music so admirably lends itself.

By the new system, the music and story should not only be conceived together, but should be so intimately connected and harmoniously blended as to be almost indispensable to each other. As Wagner insists that nothing must interrupt the smooth and natural progress of the dramatic action, he carefully avoids any approach to the old system of dividing the opera into set pieces—so many *arias*, choruses, etc.—these occurring only when absolutely required by the situation. Hence arises the complaint from many that he is not melodious. If we understand melody to be a *limited* musical phrase of marked rhythm, and one that is easily caught, then the accusation is just. But this absolute melody that exists of itself, independent of any idea or sentiment, this, according to Wagner, has no merit, and is entitled to no place in the musical drama.

In the entire opera of "Tristan" not five well-defined airs can be found. This is not so much because Wagner is wanting in melody, as that his melodic ideas, from their peculiar shape, are not always to be recognized by those listening eagerly for a "tune." Every melody, he says, is made up of many melodic phrases, each having a distinct value of its own; and these being combined with [663] the original theme, and presented in many different ways, go to make up a whole of noble proportions—the true melodic idea.

On the appearance of any principal character, or at the first manifestation of a sentiment to be developed later in the course of the drama, he gives out a *motif*—that is, not precisely what would be called an air, but a phrase, having some melodic significance, and the rhythm of which is well defined. Here we see the use of the true melodic idea. This *motif*, once clearly given, recurs at every re-appearance of the character or fresh development of the sentiment it represents, and is always presented in some new way, yet is always recognizable. And not only are all the resources of the phrase employed, but by many delicate processes of modulation, and by many niceties of harmony and instrumentation, is that phrase colored, to best adapt it to the accompanying situation.

The grand idea of all this is, that the music must at all times reflect the drama, and, as far as possible, reveal those shades of sentiment and passion which mere words fail to express.

One great reason why Wagner's music is not more generally acceptable, lies in the fact that he makes frequent use of the hardest and most dissonant chords, and treats these with the utmost freedom; that is to say, where, with other composers, these harmonies occur only at rare intervals, and their entrance is then carefully prepared, with Wagner we find them piled upon each other, regardless, apparently, of all laws of harmonic connection. In the whole introduction to "Tristan," there is not a single consonant chord; hardly one recognizable form in a chaos of strange combinations. Notwithstanding these facts, Wagner's mastery of the science of harmony is beyond question, as may be proved by a single glance at his noble choruses, often written in six and eight parts, and arranged with a cleverness that compels admiration.

Whether the world can ever accept his theory of tone-combination and chord-connection as the true one, is a matter which time alone can decide. But when we remember that many harmonies employed by Beethoven and Schumann, now accepted without a question, and even admired for their originality, were at first declared harsh and disagreeable, it seems quite possible that these Wagnerian extravagances may, at no distant day, be regarded as perfectly legitimate, if not actually pleasing.

It is, perhaps, in the vocal portion of Wagner's operas that we find the widest departures from established precedent. There it is by no means the design to show off the vocalist advantageously, but to express, in the most appropriate way, the idea to be conveyed. In order to accomplish this, Wagner makes the most extraordinary demands on the voice, which he appears to regard simply as an instrument, capable of enduring to any extent and of overcoming any difficulty whatsoever. He has, in fact, written for voices purely instrumental passages, which it is folly to suppose can ever be perfectly or decently executed by a human organ; and even were artists found ready to accept *rôles* rendered formidable by these difficulties, it is still a question whether such a distortion of the vocal powers can be made acceptable to civilized ears.

To Wagner are we indebted for at least one great reform—that of raising the orchestra to a place of first importance in the interpretation of the lyric drama. In the operas of Bellini, Donizetti, and even of Rossini, the orchestra seldom reflected the character of the dramatic situation, often serving simply as a support and accompaniment to the voices; not until the advent of Weber's genius did it assume any thing like its true position.

Wagner holds that the orchestra should not only share equally with the voices in the development of the drama, but that each prominent character and prevailing sentiment, besides being represented by some striking musical phrase, should have in the orchestra a tone-color appropriate and peculiar to itself. Whatever may be the merits of this theory, no one certainly is better qualified to display them than Wagner himself, for his knowledge and command of orchestral resources are unsurpassed. In the instrumentation of no other composer, save that of Beethoven, do we find such a marvellous power of expression, such wonderful effects of light and shade; and to this power principally must we attribute not only the success already won, but whatever may be reserved for him in the future. Familiarity with Wagner's productions cannot but lead to a more expressive and eloquent orchestration; and indeed, in Gounod's "Faust" and "Romeo," and in the latest operas by Italian composers, are ample evidences of the influence of the new school in this direction.

To conclude, Wagner is a composer of undoubted talent, whose ideas, although sometimes carried to extremes, will eventually have a beneficial effect on music, from their very boldness and vigor, if from nothing else. Again, he is a poet of great dramatic power, and a writer possessing literary abilities of no common order. Last, but by no means least, he is a man thoroughly in earnest; and, whatever may be his other claims to our consideration, this one, at least, should be recognized and honored.

George B. Miles.