
Wagner at Home

By John Parrott



The Wagner Library

Edition 1.0

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Source

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Overland monthly, devoted to the development of the country.

Volume 2 Issue 7

Pages 108-110

Published in 1883

Reading Information

This title contains 2177 words.

Estimated reading time between 6 and 11 minutes.

Notes are indicated using parenthesis, like (1).

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

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[The following letter was sent last summer from Bayreuth to a member of the writer's family in San Francisco. Written without thought of publication, it records the impressions of the writer with a frankness which gives them a peculiar value; and in view of the lamented death of the great master, it is believed that this vivid personal account of him may now be printed without indecorum.]

BAYREUTH, August 25, 1882.

I have seen and shaken hands with the great Wagner. I will give you the whole story. Yesterday afternoon I left the hotel about three o'clock, and after a ten minutes' walk, arrived at "Wahnfried," Wagner's villa. I sent in my card and Wheeler's letter by the servant, and after waiting a few minutes Wagner's little boy, Siegfried, appeared, and said that his father asked if I would be kind enough to call in the evening at half-past eight. Little Siegfried is an intelligent boy with a high, pale forehead and large blue eyes, by no means stronglooking, as precocious children never are. I shook the little fellow by the hand, saying I should be delighted to return.

It was a long time to wait, but of course the appointed hour came at last, and I set out again for "Wahnfried." This time there was no occasion to ring for admittance—the door was wide open, and through the half-closed curtains I saw a gay assemblage of men and women, brightly dressed and talking merrily. I made my entrance into the gorgeous reception-room, which serves also as a library when social duties cease. Siegfried notified his mother of my presence, and immediately she came forward to receive me with all the grace and dignified cordiality of a queen. Madam Wagner is a tall, extremely handsome woman, with abundant gray hair thrown flowingly back from her forehead and caught in the usual knot behind. She is slender, or, I should say, *svelte*, and has something in common with Sarah Bernhardt in her appearance, only with a much more imposing presence. She greeted me fluently in English, and then introduced me to one of her daughters. She came again to me in order to present me to her father. For the moment my senses were too much scattered to realize who and what her father was, and it was only when I approached him that all hesitation as to his greatness fled; for I found myself, for the first time in my life, face to face with Liszt! As you can well imagine, my profoundest bow accompanied Madam Wagner's introductory words—"Mr. Parrott of San Francisco." Liszt made a low utterance of agreeable surprise, and began to speak of the many artists who had visited San Francisco, and we had a short conversation on the subject as well as my French would permit. I could not realize that I was in the presence of one whose name had been foremost in the ranks of musical men of genius for so many years; whose music had so entranced us all; whose Second Rhapsody had so taxed the rusty *technique* of our little orchestra at home; whose proficiency at the piano still stands unrivaled after long years of triumph; and I gazed, overpowered by the greatness before me.

Liszt is not a tall man—a man, rather, of medium height. The one conspicuous part of him is his head; it is really all one sees of his person. His countenance is very large and heavy—in fact, it struck me as being extremely so. His face is certainly not handsome, but expressive and genial. Three very prominent and obtrusive warts tend still less to render it comely. His eyes are so set in as to be hardly visible. His nose is a very noticeable feature, as is shown in his familiar picture we all have seen for years. His mouth is large, but the lips are thin and well spread. Over this strange countenance falls on either side, from a part in the middle, the straight, sleek hair, now almost white, but very plentiful. It is cut off at right angles a few

inches above the shoulders, just as his picture represents. His dress is decidedly clerical, and his air is so much that of a priest that I felt impelled at times to call him "Mon Père." His appearance is not particularly neat, and over his whole person, face, and form there is that dusty, musty indistinctness common [109] both to old leather volumes and inveterate snuff-takers. So much for Liszt's person. As to his voice and manner of speaking, I can simply say they are charming; perhaps a little *distract* in talking, but of course I was not the one to rivet his whole attention, nor was I so egotistic as to expect it. In fact, the *accueil* he gave me was far more genial than I should have looked forward to.

On the presentation of others to this great *maestro* I withdrew and remained some time apart, gazing upon the scene, watching the enraptured women, and examining the bric-à-brac, draperies, and antiquities about the room, not unapprehensive the while over the tardy appearance of him whom I most longed to see—Richard Wagner. With that charming solicitude for her guests which I little expected to find in so marked a degree in my admired hostess, Madam Wagner again introduced me to an Englishman and his daughter—I forget the name—and with them I conversed rapturously on, of, and about Wagner and his art-principles. The old gentleman was one of those confiding characters so often met with, and he confessed to me, almost in a whisper, that he had heard "The Mastersingers of Nuremberg" seventeen times, and that his friends began to think him crazy; that, in fact, he was audacious enough to admire "Rienzi," "Tannhäuser," and "Lohengrin." His daughter was one of the more advanced Wagnerians. She founded her admiration upon "Tristan and Isolde," the most Wagnerian perhaps of Wagner's operas, and I may say, one of incomparable beauty. Next came the Nibelung Trilogy, and now "Parsifal."

My old English friend became of some use to me after all, for Hans Richter, the great Wagnerian leader, and one of Germany's best conductors, had during our conversation entered the room. Often had M—— and I enjoyed his operas and concerts in London, and basked in the rich tone and color of his orchestra. My old Englishman introduced me to Richter. Richter speaks but little English. We talked a few seconds about the music in London. I then asked him for some information about orchestras in general, and his London one in particular. Why, for instance, he had placed his horns with his bassoons, instead of with the rest of the brass, which is commonly done. "Oh," he said, "my orchestra was so small, I thought they would be heard to best advantage where I placed them—that was all." "So small," thought I—his orchestra must have numbered over a hundred men; and our little orchestra of barely fifty at home! Ah, me! ah, me! Through Hans Richter I made the acquaintance of the chorus-master of "Parsifal." I shall pass him by, as he was not particularly remarkable.

Where is Wagner all this time? I think I hear you ask. That is just the question I asked Hans Richter, as the great master had not yet put in an appearance. Richter pointed to an adjoining apartment, adorned with marble statues of Wagner's heroes and heroines, and said he saw him there as he passed through. I immediately started in the direction named, and at the very threshold my eyes fell on Richard Wagner. I say, purposely, *fell* on Richard Wagner; for oh, how our ideals tumble with a crash before the stern reality! How prone we are to invest the person of a genius with a presence befitting the immensity and power of his mind! Must he not possess the high stature of dignity and command, with countenance calm and mobile, with eye flashing the bright, creative light within the unfurrowed brow, which we know exists there? In the natural order of things, given a great genius whose face alone is familiar, in its calmest aspect and enhanced in power by overanxious artists, and is it not to be expected that the fired imagination will supply the deficit of person and form on a scale in keeping with the revealed countenance? So our minds are cruelly led to build their ideals, which invariably fall, "never to rise again."

Therefore it was that I drew your attention to the expression, "fell on," for so my eyes literally did when they beheld Richard Wagner's small, diminutive form. I could have wished

it any one's presence but his. But no, the familiar face, so well known, which had hung in our concert-hall giant-like in its proportions, was set upon the shoulders of the master reduced—ah! sadly reduced in its dimensions—to suit the small form which nature—unhappily not my imagination—had wrought to support it. When my eyes "fell on" him, he was dancing about and talking excitedly, much to the enjoyment of a group of young girls who clustered around him. He seemed to have given himself completely up to frivolity and enjoyment (after his own fashion) of kissing all and everybody who came in his way, young and pretty women especially. His little, full stomach, Punch-like in shape, was clothed in a white waistcoat, and was borne about by two very short and excessively bow-shaped legs. On his feet he wore two alpaca shoes. You cannot imagine how this affected me. The consoling thought, however, remained, never to be impaired: henceforth let us judge of Wagner by his works, by the powerful and immense genius he there displays, not from what he appears in real life.

Once or twice his quick but not very visible eye caught sight of me, and seemed to stamp me as one unknown to him. I took up a position where I could best be introduced to him, and next, by chance, to the old Englishman and his daughter on one side and the celebrated Frau Materna, the Wagnerian singer, on the other. Madam Wagner presented me to him. "Ah! San Francisco," he said, as he shook me by the hand. Then quickly, "Ich kann nicht Englisch." But I knew he spoke French, so said something, I know not what, in that language. One cannot say much under such circumstances. The daughter of the old Englishman beside me assured him of the success of his operas in London last season. Wagner [110] responded, not without a little shade of sarcasm in his reply, "Qu' est-ce que ça me fait?" His operas there, you must know, were a financial failure, not owing to a want of appreciation and patronage, but to bad management and dishonesty. A very young American girl was next presented, who blushing offered her hand. On being told she had come all the way from America to see him, he answered more originally than elegantly or considerately for the girl's feelings: "Vous auriez pu tomber dans l'eau." And repeating again, "Ich kann nicht Englisch," he grasped Materna by the hand, kissed her fervently on the mouth, and suddenly jerked her arm in his and walked off to show her something. Frau Materna is a huge woman, so little Wagner was lost to sight.

I staid but a few moments more, then left "Wahnfried" to return to M—— and impart my impressions. I soon became reconciled to the remembrance of Wagner's diminutive size; and the thought of having spoken to so great and so admired a genius, to have exchanged a few words with Liszt, and to have beheld the sweet smile of Madam Wagner, will remain with me all my life, a subject often to be dwelt upon with pleasure. As for "Parsifal," that is a prolific subject for another letter. I have seen it once, and intend witnessing it again twice. The last occasion of its presentation will, I have no doubt, be memorable. I am very lucky in being able to be present at it next Tuesday. I have no room for incidental news. Bayreuth is very full, but we were fortunate in securing a large apartment. The hotel proprietor thought that after seeing "Parsifal" once we ought to go—a strange proceeding on his part, but which came to nothing, thanks to my servant, Grymer, who set things aright. "Nous y sommes, nous y restons!"

John Parrott, Jun'r.