
On German Opera

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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[55]

On German Opera

When we talk of German Music, and especially when we listen to talk about it, the same confusion of ideas always appears to prevail as in the conception of freedom by those old-German black-frocked demagogues who curled their noses at the results of modern reforms abroad with just as much contempt as our Teutomaniac music-savants now shrug their shoulders. By all means, we have a field of music which belongs to us by right,—and that is Instrumental-music;—but a German Opera we have not, and for the selfsame reason that we own no national Drama. We are too intellectual and much too learned, to create warm human figures. *Mozart* could do it; but it was the beauty of Italian Song, that he breathed into his human beings. Since the time when we began to despise that beauty again, we have departed more and more from the path which *Mozart* struck for the weal of our dramatic music. *Weber* never understood the management of Song, and *Spohr* wellnigh as little. But Song, after all, is the organ whereby a man may musically express himself; and so long as it is not fully developed, he is wanting in true speech. In this respect the Italians have an immeasurable advantage over us; vocal beauty with them is a second nature, and their creations are just as sensuously warm as poor, for the rest, in individual import. Certainly, in the last decad or two the Italians have played as many pranks with this second nature-speech as the Germans with their learning,—and yet, I shall never forget the impression lately made on me by a Bellinian opera, after I had grown heartily sick of the eternally [56] allegorising orchestral bustle, and at last a simple noble Song shewed forth again. (1)

French music acquired its tendency from *Gluck*, who, albeit a German, has had far less influence on ourselves than on the Frenchmen. He felt and saw what the Italians lacked, namely an individuality in their figures and characters, which they sacrificed to vocal beauty. He created Dramatic Music, and bequeathed it to the French as their possession. They have pursued its cultivation, and from *Grétry* to *Auber* dramatic truth has remained a first principle of the Frenchmen.

The talents of the good German opera-composers of modern times, of *Weber* and *Spohr* are unequal to the dramatic province. *Weber*'s talent was purely lyrical, *Spohr*'s elegiac; and where those bounds were overstepped, art and the expenditure of abnormal means had to supplement what their nature failed in. Thus *Weber*'s best work is in any case his "Freischütz," since he here could move in his appointed sphere; the mystic weirdness of Romanticism, and that charm of the Folk-melody, belong peculiarly to the domain of Lyrics. But turn to his *Euryanthe*! What splitting of hairs in the declamation, what fussy use of this or that instrument to emphasise a single word! Instead of throwing off a whole emotion with one bold freehand stroke, he minces the impression into little details and detailed littlenesses. How hard it comes to him, to give life to his Ensembles; how he drags the second Finale! Here an instrument, there a voice, would fain say something downright clever, and none at last knows what it says. And since the audience is bound to admit in the end that it hasn't understood a note of it, people have to find their consolation in dubbing it astoundingly *learned*, and therefore paying it a great respect.—O this wretched erudition—the source of every German ill!

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There was a time in Germany when folk knew Music from no other side than Erudition—it was the age of *Sebastian Bach*. But it then was the form wherein one looked at things in general, and in his deeply-pondered fugues *Bach* told a tale as vigorous as *Beethoven* now tells us in the freest symphony. The difference was this: those people knew no other forms,

and the composers of that time were truly learned. To-day both sides have changed. The forms have become freer, kindlier, we have learnt to live,—and our composers no longer are learned: the ridiculous part of it, however, is that they want to pose as learned. In the genuine scholar one never marks his learning. Mozart, to whom the hardest feat in counterpoint had become a second nature, simply gained thereby his giant self-dependence;—who thinks of his learning, when listening to his Figaro? But the difference, as said, is this: Mozart *was* learned, whilst nowadays men want to *seem* so. There can be nothing wronger-headed than this craze. Every hearer enjoys a clear, melodious thought,—the more seizable the whole to him, the more will he be seized by it;—the composer knows this himself,—he sees by what he makes an effect, and what obtains applause;—in fact it comes much easier to him, for he has only to let himself go; but no! he is plagued by the German devil, and must shew the people his *learning* too! He hasn't learnt quite so much, however, as to bring anything really learned to light; so that nothing comes of it but turgid bombast. But if it is ridiculous of the composer to clothe himself in this nimbus of scholarship, it is equally absurd for the public to give itself the air of understanding and liking it; it ends in people being ashamed of their fondness for a merry French opera, and avowing with Germanomaniac embarrassment that it would be all the better for a little learning.

This is an evil which, however ingrained in the character of our nation, must needs be rooted out; in fact it will annul itself, as it is nothing but a self-deception. Not that I wish French or Italian music to oust our own;—that [58] would be a fresh evil to be on our guard against—but we ought to recognise the *true* in both, and keep ourselves from all self-satisfied hypocrisy. We should clear ourselves a breathing-space in the rubble that threatens to choke us, rid our necks of a good load of affected counterpoint, hug no visions of forbidden fifths and superfluous ninths, and become men at last. Only by a lighter and freer touch can we hope to shake off an incubus that has held our music by the throat, and especially our operatic music, for many a year. For why has no German opera-composer come to the front since so long? Because none knew how to gain the voice [?ear] of the people,—that is to say, because none has seized true warm Life as it is.

For is it not plainly to misconstrue the present age, to go on writing Oratorios when no one believes any longer in either their contents or their forms? Who believes in the mendacious stiffness of a Schneiderian fugue, and simply because it was composed *to-day* by *Friedrich Schneider* ? [1786-1853.] What with Bach and Händel seems worshipful to us in virtue of its truth, necessarily must sound ridiculous with Fr. Schneider of our day; for, to repeat it, no one *believes* him, since it cannot be his own conviction. We must take the era by the ears, and honestly try to cultivate its modern forms; and he will be master, who neither writes Italian, nor French—nor even German.

Notes

Note 1 on page 5

In March 1834 the young man had heard Frau Schröder-Devrient as "Romeo" in Bellini's *Montecchi e Capuleti* at Leipzig. It should be remarked that the term "Song" (*Gesang*) is used by Richard Wagner throughout to signify the whole manner both of writing for, and of using the singing-voice.—Tr.

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Summary

The Germans too learned to create warm human figures. Mozart v. Weber and Spohr. Bellini and Italian Song. Gluck's influence on the French; Grétry and Auber. Weber's *Freischütz* and his *Euryanthe*. Bach's vigour; Mozart's command of counterpoint. In the truly learned one never marks his learning. Modern pretence of erudition: none has seized warm life as it is. He will be master, who writes neither French, nor Italian, nor even German (58).