
Pasticcio

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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By Richard Wagner

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[59]

Pasticcio

by CANTO SPIANATO.

(1)

The old Italian mode of Song was based on so-called *sostenuto* singing, demanding a *formare*, *fermare* and *finire* of the vocal tone. It certainly allowed much elasticity, but every passage must conform to the character of the human voice itself. The modern method, on the contrary, only secondarily consists of melodious phrases, whose cut has been so uniformly made upon one last, that we recognise it instantly, for all its trimmings. This odious mania for copying the instruments shews a misunderstanding of both Song and human Voice. Erewhile men deemed the voice the noblest of all instruments and, rightly to enjoy its charm, accompanied it as discreetly as possible; now they bury it beneath a load of senseless instrumenting, and, without regard to the dramatic situation, they make it gurgle arabesques that tell us nothing. These gurglings, sure enough, are often mastered, but they rebel against the throat as obstinately as a hard nut against a worn-out tooth.

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That the Singing-voice, like every other instrument, needs schooling, and indeed a very careful schooling, in which the *production* of the voice is dealt with quite apart from the *rendering* (taste and expression), no connoisseur [60] will deny; but where, in all our German fatherland, are there training-schools for higher vocal culture?—True, we have Singakademieen, Gesangvereine, Seminaries, and may boldly assert that Chorus-singing in Germany and Switzerland has reached a technical perfection to be sought in vain in Italy itself, the land of song; but the higher vocal art, of solo-singing, is in manifest decline, and many a mile might we journey before we could assemble a couple of dozen good singers really worthy of the name, singers who should possess not only a *well-trained organ*, but also a *good delivery*, *correct declamation*, *pure enunciation*, *sympathetic expression* and *thorough knowledge of music*. Merely gauge the majority of our celebrated singers male and female by *this* standard!—Certain highly important endowments must be set to the credit of certain individuals, but nowadays we could but rarely and exceptionally convene a whole such as not only our fancy might dream of, and our higher aspirations wish for, but also is humanly realisable, and in former times has actually been realised. To-day one hardly ever hears a truly beautiful and finished *trillo*; very rarely a perfect *mordente*; very seldom a well-rounded *coloratura*, a genuine unaffected, soul-stirring *portamento*, a complete equalisation of the vocal register and perfect maintenance of intonation throughout the varying nuances of increase and diminution in the volume of sound. Most of our singers, so soon as they attempt the noble art of *portamento*, fall out of tune; and the public, accustomed to imperfect execution, overlooks the defects of the singer if he only is an able actor and versed in stage-routine.

"The tricky roulade, be it neat or a smear,

Will draw sure applause, as the onion the tear."

C. M. VON WEBER. (2)

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[61]

The German singer gladly sinks himself in the character he has to represent. That deserves all praise, but has its own grave dangers. If the singer lets himself be carried away by his rôle; if he does not stand absolute master *over* the whole of his portrayal: then all, as a rule, is lost. He forgets himself, he no longer sings, but screams and moans. Then Nature none too seldom fleeces Art, and the hearer has the unpleasant surprise of suddenly finding himself in the gutter. If in addition to this, each performer tries to set *his* part in the best and most striking light, without regard for his companions, it is all over with the harmony of play and song. Hence it comes, that our ordinary stage-performances in Germany pitch down from the height of rapt emotion to the depths of fussy dulness, and lack the outward stimulus of sustained artistic charm.

Many German singers regard it, in a certain sense, as a point of honour to be willing to sing *anything*, no matter if it suit their voice or not. The Italian does not hesitate to say right out that such and such a part he cannot sing, since it is ungrateful to his voice through height or depth, its trick of ornament, or other qualities. In this he often goes too far, and as good as demands that all his parts shall be written expressly for him: but the German, whether from free will or force of circumstances, too often and too readily accommodates himself to every rôle, thereby ruining both it and his voice as well. The singer should never attempt a part for which he is not qualified

- a. *physically*—in respect of vocal compass, timbre, and power of lung;
- b. *technically*—in respect of throat-dexterity; and
- c. *psychically*—in respect of expression.

[62]

German dramaturgists say: "The actor should accommodate himself to the rôle, not the rôle itself to the actor." The maxim—as it stands—may be true; but unreservedly applied to the stage-singer, it is downright false: for the human voice is no lifeless instrument, like the pianoforte, and our German vocal composers, alas! too often are very sorry lords of Song.—Every sterling Instrumental composer must have studied the character of the various instruments, before he can produce true instrumental effects. Let a composer write for any instrument in the orchestra a passage against its nature; let him assign it notes the player can but bring out badly, or which do not lie in its register—his condemnation is pronounced at once, and rightly. "The man," so the verdict goes, "is a musical bungler; he presumes to compose, and knows nothing of instrumentation! These are pianoforte, not clarinet passages; that cantilena is in the compass of the violin, but not of the violoncello." In short, let the composition breathe never so much life and spirit, it is thrown aside; for the man has not learnt his business—"He writes things that nobody could execute!" Hand on your heart, ye song-composers of our latter days, have ye zealously studied the peculiarities of the human voice? Know ye what it is, to write singably? I will answer:—Ye behold the mote that is in your brother's eye, but consider not the beam that is in your own eye; therefore shall ye be doubly judged.



Most truly does C. M. v. Weber say: The singer's individuality is the actual unconscious colorist of every rôle. The possessor of an agile and flexible throat, and he of a volume of tone, will render one and the same rôle quite differently. The first will be several degrees more animated than the second, and yet the composer may be satisfied with both, insofar as each according to his measure has rightly grasped and reproduced the gradations of passion prescribed.

[63]

It will always remain the hardest of tasks, so to combine the vocal and instrumental parts of a rhythmic composition that they shall melt into each other, and the last not only carry and relieve the first, but also help its utterance of passion; for Song and Instrument stand opposed. Breathtaking and articulation of the words enjoin on Song a certain undulation in the bar, not unlike the uniform swell of the waves. The Instrument, especially the stringed instrument, divides the time into sharp-cut sections, like the strokes of a pendulum. Truth of expression demands the blending of these opposite peculiarities. The beat, the Tempo, must never resemble a mill-clack in its tyrannical slowing or speeding, but to the piece of music it must be what the pulse-beat is to the life of man. Yet most of our modern vocal composers in Germany appear to regard the human voice as a mere portion of the instrumental mass, and misconceive the distinctive properties of Song. The instruments should form a guard of honour to the voice: with us they have become the singer's catch-polls, gagging him and casting him into chains at his first sign of free expression of feeling.

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Mozart has irrefutably proved that, with the most complex, ingenious, and even massive orchestration, one still may leave the singer in full exercise of his rights; nowadays the human voice is degraded to an instrument. What has been gained?—Nothing!—The efforts of the human voice, even that of a Sontag, are outdone by instrumental virtuosi; a whole choir of bravura singers would never be able to bring out a thousandth of the tone-figures which have sprung up in our instrumental music since the time of *Bach*; and with this expansion of the art of instrumenting the inventiveness of our tone-artists has shot heaven-high above the bounds of Song.—The genuine art of Song depends on a Cantabile in keeping with the text and a Bravura in keeping with the voice. [64] But since we fell into a depreciation of true Italian vocal beauty, we have departed more and more from the path which Mozart struck for the weal of our dramatic music. With the revival of the, in many respects, classical music of the period of Bach, much too little attention is paid to a really singable cantabile. All the masterworks of Sebastian Bach are as rich in invention as possible within the form of Fugue and Double Counterpoint in general. His inexhaustible creative-force ever drove him on to introduce into each of his products the highest and richest of specific tonal figures, forms, and combinations. But with this super-abundance of purely musical, or rather, instrumental contents, the word must needs be often thrust into its place beneath the note by force; the human voice, as a special organ of tone, was not at all considered by him; its peculiar office he never sufficiently appraised: and as a vocal composer of Cantabile he is nothing less than classical, however much the blind adorers of this master may cry out "Fie!"

Our worthy opera-composers must take a course of lessons in the good Italian cantabile style, guarding themselves against its modern outgrowths, and, with their superior artistic faculty, turn out good work in a style as good. Then will Vocal art bear fruit anew; then a man will some-day come, who in this good style shall re-establish on the stage the shattered unity of Poetry and Song.

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Among us there is an archipatriarchal sect which refuses the name of beauty to any but quite simple singing, and utterly condemns all art of ornament. Let these judges turn back from their wretched one-sidedness, their taking of the choice of *means* as sole object for consideration, praise or blame, often blinding them to the *effect* itself! Art should be free. No school, no sect, must arrogate the title of the only bliss-purveyor. The simple, smooth and metric song has its great value—provided its setter is really [65] a good vocal composer: only,

it is not the sole true path of salvation, and the goal—the expression and communication of feeling—may be reached on other roads as well. The solo-singer ought to be an *artist* of song; as such, he may also give vent to his feelings in an enhanced and ornate art-form. Is that passion less true, forsooth, which takes the air with a volley of words, than that which breathes itself in few? Is not now this, now that, included in the individuality of this or that subject? Should not a speech in Parliament be different in form, to boot, from a sermon to a village parish? May not a sumptuous mould of periods, a flowery, decorative diction, a complex and ingenious scheme of verse, a rare but effective rhythm, be conditioned by aesthetic necessity?—We in nowise are opening the door to those meaningless flourishes by which unthinking singers too often, alas! betray their poverty of proper feeling, either to display their nimbleness of throat, or to mask their lack of portamento; but the nobler art of ornament has not yet reached with us its actual bloom; in our modern operatic singing we have merely the stereotyped *volutes of song*, which our singers and composers slavishly copy from the Italians, and wedge in everywhere without taste or psychological necessity.



The Public is at sea with Art, and the Artists have lost touch with the People. Why is it, that no German opera-composer has come to the front of late?—Because none has known how to gain the voice of the Folk,—in other words, *because none has seized true warm Life as it is*. The essence of dramatic art does not consist in the specific subject or point of view, but in this: that the inner kernel of all human life and action, the Idea, be grasped and brought to show. (3) By this standard alone should dramatic [66] works be judged, their special points of view and subjects being simply regarded as special varieties of this Idea. Criticism makes a radically false demand on Art, when it requires the art of the Beautiful to do nothing else than idealise. For without all Ideality, so-called, Dramatico-musical art can take many a form. If the librettist has the true poetic spirit, in him there lies the universe of human moulds and forces, his figures have an organic core of life; let him unroll the heavenly, or the earthly chart of human characters, we shall always find them lifelike, even though we never may have met their like in actual life. But our modern Romantic manikins are nothing but lay-figures. Away with them all—give us *passion!* Only in what is human, does man feel interest; only the humanly-feelable, can the dramatic singer represent. You have been often enough told, but refuse to believe it, that *one* thing alone is needful for Opera—namely *Poesy!*—Words and tones are simply its expression. And yet the most of our operas are a mere string of musical numbers without all psychologic union, whilst our singers ye have degraded into musical-boxes set to a series of tunes, dragged on to the stage, and started by the wave of the conductor's baton. The public no longer believes the opera-singer, since it knows that he is only singing it a thing no heart of man can feel. Mark the age, ye composers, and diligently seek to cultivate new forms; for he will be master, who writes neither Italian nor French—nor even German. But would ye warm, and purify, and train yourselves by models; would ye make shapes instinct with musical life: then take the masterly declamation and dramatic power of *Gluck* and combine it with *Mozart's* contrasted melody, his art of orchestration and ensemble; and ye will produce dramatic works to satisfy the strictest criticism.

Notes

Note 1 on page 5

Pasticcio means a "pasty," an "olla podrida"; it is a term applied to a curious form of entertainment, somewhat common in earlier days, consisting of arias, duets etc., selected from different operas and served up almost at random.

Canto spianato, the pseudonym adopted by the author, is the Italian for "smooth singing."—Tr.

Note 2 on page 5

"Auf die Roulade, gut oder übel,

Folgt das Geklatsch wie die Thrän' auf die Zwiebel."—

Wagner would appear to have quoted the couplet from memory, for he has substituted "*die Roulade*" for "*den Laufer*" (runs, or scales), and "*Geklatsch*" for "*Gepatsch*" (clapping, or slapping)—unless the latter be a misprint in the *N.Z.f.M.*, repeated in the *Bayr. Bl.* of Nov. 1884. The original lines appeared in a half humorous, half serious sketch contained in certain fragmentary chapters of a "A Tone-artist's Life" posthumously published in Weber's *Hintergelassene Schriften* (Dresden 1828) and edited by C. G. T. Winkler, the "Councillor Winkler" referred to in Wagner's *Letters to Uhlig*. In the same collection of Weber's 'remains' occurs the following epigram upon "Bravura-singeress" Tembila: "Man muss es gesteh'n, dass ihr Trillern gelingt, Nur Schade, dass sie vor Singen nicht singt."—"One must freely admit that her trills are the thing; Yet with all her fine singing, 'tis sad she can't sing."—Tr.

Note 3 on page 8

It is somewhat remarkable to find the author thus early propounding the Platonic "Idea" as a basis of Æsthetics, and in fact of Life itself. As may be seen upon turning to [Vol. VII. p. 134](#), the thought recurs to him in 1841, with special reference to Music. Therefore we are perfectly justified in chiming for Wagner an independent insight into one of Schopenhauer's main principles fully twenty years before he made acquaintance with that philosopher's system.—Tr.

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Summary

Merits of old Italian mode of writing for the voice, and singing. In Germany good chorus-singing, but dearth of soloists with a well-trained organ, good delivery, correct declamation, pure enunciation, sympathetic expression, and thorough knowledge of music (60). Necessity of dramatic singer's exercising self-control; ensemble to be considered. Italians decline rôles unsuited to their voice etc.; Germans undertake anything, suitable or not. Human voice no lifeless instrument; must be studied by composers (62). Liberty accorded to singer; modifying tempo; the instruments should be a guard of honour to the voice, not its catch-polls. Mozart's orchestration: cantabile and bravura. Bach treats voice as an instrument. Take a lesson from the Italians, and then a man will some day come to re-establish the lost unity of Poetry and Song (64). Pedantic onesidedness of the sect which abjures all ornament. A parliamentary speech should differ from a village sermon; a sumptuous mould etc. may be demanded by æsthetic necessity. Composers have lost touch with the people: essence of dramatic art the Idea behind all human actions; give us passion! One thing needful for Opera—*poesy*: words and tones are simply its expression. The future master (66).