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# *The Artist and Publicity*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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Edition 1.0

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## About this Title

### Source

*The Artist and Publicity*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis

*In Paris and Dresden*

Richard Wagner's Prose Works

Volume 7

Pages 134-141

Published in 1898

### Original Title Information

*Der Künstler und die Öffentlichkeit*

Published in 1841

Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen : Volume I

Pages 180-186

### Reading Information

This title contains 3138 words.

Estimated reading time between 9 and 16 minutes.

Notes are indicated using parenthesis, like (1).

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

[134]

## The Artist and Publicity

(1)

WHEN I am alone, and the musical strings begin to stir within me, strange whirling sounds take shape of chords, until at last a melody springs forth, revealing to me the idea of my whole being; when the heart beats time thereto in loud impatient strokes, and inspiration streams in tears immortal through the mortal eye, no longer seeing,—I often tell myself: Fool that thou art, not to bide forever by thyself, to live for these unequalled blisses, in lieu of rushing out to face that awful mass yclept the Public, to earn thee by its nothing-saying nod the fatuous authority to go on practising thy gift of composition! (2) What can the most brilliant welcome of this public give thee worth a hundredth fraction of that hallowed joy which wells from thine own heart? Why do mortals fired with a spark divine forsake their sanctuary, run breathless through the city's muddy streets, and seek in hottest haste for dull and sated men on whom to force a happiness indelible? And what exertions, turmoils and illusions, before they can even arrive at compassing the sacrifice! What plots and [135] artifices must they ply, for a good part of their life, to bring to the ears of the crowd what it can never understand! Is it for fear the history of Music might one fine day stand still? Is it for that, they pluck the fairest pages from the secret history of their heart, and snap the magic chain that fastens sympathetic souls to one another throughout the centuries, whilst here the only talk can be of schools and manners? (3)

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There must be some inexplicable force at work: who feels himself subjected to its power, must hold it ruinous. Certainly the first assumption to occur to one, would be that it was the bent of Genius to impart itself without regard to consequences: loud does it sound in thyself, aloud let it ring out to others! Eh, folk say 'tis the *duty* of Genius, to live for Man's pleasure; who imposed it, God alone knows! Merely it so happens that this duty never comes to consciousness, and least of all when Genius is engaged in its ownest function, of creation. But that perhaps is not the question; when it has created, it is then to feel the obligation to divest itself of the immense advantage it has above all other mortals, by surrendering its creation to them. In respect of Duty, however, Genius is the most conscienceless of beings: nothing does it bring to birth thereby, and I believe it neither regulates by that its traffic with the world. No, it abides by its nature for ever and ever: in its most foolish act it still stays Genius, and I rather fancy that at bottom of its bent to gain publicity there lies a motive of ill moral import, which again does not come to clear consciousness, but yet is serious enough to expose the very greatest artist to contemptuous treatment. In any case this passion for publicity is hard to comprehend: each experience teaches it that it is in an evil sphere, and can only hope to move a little smoothly by putting on an evil look itself. Genius,—would not all men run away from it, were it once to shew itself in its god-like nakedness as it is? Perhaps this really is its saving instinct; for nursed it not the knowledge of its purest chastity, how might it not be ravished by a ribald self-delight in its own fashionings? But the first contact with the outer world compels all genius to clothe itself. Here reads the rule: the Public wills to be amused, and thou must seek to smuggle in thine Own beneath the mantle of Amusement. Very well, we will say that Genius draws the needful act of self-denial from a feeling of duty: for Duty holds alike the command and compulsion to self-denial, self-sacrifice. Yet what duty bids a man to sacrifice his [137] honour, a woman her shame? For sake of these they ought to offer up all personal welfare, if need so be. But more than to man his honour, to woman her shame, to Genius is itself; and if it bears the smallest wound in its own essence, compact of shame and honour in

the very highest measure, then is it nothing, absolutely nothing more.

Impossible, that Duty urges Genius to the fearful act of self-denial whereby it makes itself away to public life. Some dæmonic secret must lie hidden here. He, the blest, the over-joyed, the over-rich,—goes begging. He begs for your favour, ye victims of boredom, ye seekers after amusement, ye vain presumptuous, ye ignorant all-wise, bad-hearted, venal, envious reporters,—and God knows of what else thou mayst consist, thou modern Art-public, thou institute of Public Opinion! And what humiliations he endures! The tortured Saint can smile transfigured: for what no rack can ever reach, is just the hallowed soul; the wounded warrior dragging through the shades of night may smile, for what stays whole is his honour, his courage; the woman smiles, who suffers shame and scorn for sake of love: for the soul's salvation, honour, love, now first shine all transfigured in a higher glory. But Genius, that gives itself a mark for scorn when it gives itself the air of *pleasing*?—Happy may the world regard itself, that to it the pains of Genius can be so relatively little known!

No! These sufferings no one seeks from sense-of-duty, and whoever could imagine it, his duty necessarily rises from a very different source. One's daily bread, the maintenance of a family: most weighty motors. Only, they do not operate in the genius. They prompt the journeyman, the hand-worker; they may even move the man of genius to handiwork, but they cannot spur him to create, nor even to bring his creations to market. Yet that's the point we are discussing, namely how to explain the impulse that drives a man with demon force to carry just his noblest, ownest good to open market.

Certainly a mixture of the most mysterious sort here comes to pass, and could we ever clearly see it, 'twould [138] shew the spirit of the highly-gifted artist quite strictly hovering 'twixt heaven and hell. Undoubtedly the god-like longing to impart an own interior bliss to human hearts, is the predominant motive, and in hours of awful stress the only strength-giver. This impulse feeds at all times on the genius's belief in self, to which no other can compare in vigour, and this faith again informs the artist with that very pride which works his fall in commerce with the miseries of earthly squalor. He feels himself free, and in life, too, will he be it: he will have nothing in common with his want; he will be wafted, light and quit of every care. This may happen in fact when his genius is generally recognised, and so the object is to bring it to acknowledgment. Though he thus appear to be ambitious (*ehrgeizig*), he yet is not; for he wants no honour (*Ehre*) paid him; but its fruit he wants, in Freedom. He only meets ambitious men, or such as dwell content with fruits apart from honour. How mark himself from these? He falls into a throng midst which he necessarily must pass for other than he truly is. What exceptional prudence, what cautiousness in every tiniest step, would it need for him to always walk securely here, and ward off all misapprehension! But he is awkwardness personified; confronted with the meannesses of Life, he can only use the privilege of Genius to get entangled in a constant contradiction with himself: and so, a prey for every springe, his own prodigious gift he casts before the swine, and squanders on the aimlessest of objects.—In truth he merely longs for freedom to give full play to his beneficence. To him it seems so natural a claim, that he can never fathom why its due should be denied him: is it not a mere question of manifesting Genius clearly to the world? That, he never ceases thinking, he is bound to bring about, if not to-morrow, assuredly the next day after. As if death were nothing! And Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Weber?—Nay, but it yet might happen!—A sad, sad tale!—

And with it all to be so laughable!—

Could he only see himself, as we now see him, he must [139] end by laughing at his very self. And that laughter is perhaps his direst danger, for it alone can move him to begin the frantic dance again. Yet his laughter is quite another thing from yours: the latter is mockery, the former Pride. For he just sees himself; and his self-recognition, in this infamous *quid-pro-quo* that he has tumbled into, attunes him to that monstrous merriment of which no other man is capable. So levity rescues him, to bear him to yet more fearful pains. Now he

credits himself with the strength to play with even Evil: he knows that, lie as much as he will, his truthfulness will ne'er be sullied, for he feels with every gnaw of grief that Truth is his very soul; and he finds a curious consolation in the fact that not one of his lies is believed, that he can dupe no man. Who would take him for a jester?—But why does he give himself the look? The world leaves him no other road to freedom: and this latter (as dressed for the world's understanding) resembles little else than—*money*. That is to win him recognition of his genius, and for that is the whole mad game laid out. Then he dreams: "God, if only I were so-and-so, for instance *Meyerbeer!*" So *Berlioz* lately dreamt of what he would do, were he one of those unfortunates who pay five hundred francs for the singing of a Romance not worth five sous: then would he take the finest orchestra in the world to the ruins of Troy, to play him the "*Sinfonia eroica.*" (4) —You see, what heights the genius-beggar's [140] phantasy can climb!—But such a thing seems possible. Now and then there really passes something quite unusual. *Berlioz* himself experienced it, when the marvellously stingy *Paganini* paid him the homage of a handsome present. That kind of thing is the beginning. To everyone there once comes such an omen: 'tis the wages of Hell; you now have conjured Envy up for good: now the world won't any longer give you even pity, for "You have already had more than you deserved."—

Happy the genius that Fortune ne'er has smiled on!—It is so wondrous precious to itself: what more could Fortune give it?

And that's what he tells himself, smiles and—laughs, renews his strength; it glimmers and leaps up in him: anew it rings from him, brighter and fairer than ever. A work, such as he himself had ne'er yet dreamt of, is growing up in silent solitude. This is it! That's the right thing! All the world must be entranced by this: to hear it once, and then—! Look how the madman is running! 'Tis the old, old road, that seems to him so new and glorious: mud splashes him; here he bumps against a lackey, whose finery he takes for a General's, and bows respectfully; there against a no less worshipful bank-porter, whose heavy gold-bag slung across the shoulders makes his nose bleed. They are all good omens. He runs and trips, until at last he stands once more within the temple of his shame! And everything comes back again: for, as *Schiller* sings, "each crime itself on earth avenges."

And yet a good spirit protects him, apparently his own: for he is spared fulfilment of his wishes. If he once succeeded in gaining welcome to that wondrous sanctuary, what else than a stupendous misunderstanding could have helped him thither? What Hell could compare with the slow torture of its dissolution day by day? We took you for a sensible fellow who would accommodate yourself, as you really were so anxious for "success": here it is, all guaranteed; only set this and that to rights; there is the prima donna, there the ballerina, here the great virtuoso: [141] arrange affairs with them! There they stand, and group themselves into that strangely curtained porch through which you travel to the one Supreme, the great Public itself. Why! everyone who passed through here to the realms of bliss, had to make his little sacrifice. What the devil! do you think the "grand" Opera could have ever held on, had it raised such a fuss about trifles?—

Can you lie?—

No!— —

Then you are done for, dismissed, as in England the "Atheists." No respectable person will talk to you again.—Well, well: still hope that thy good genius will spare thee that.—Laugh, be light-minded,—but have patience and suffer: then all will be well.—

Dream! 'Tis the best thing!—



## Notes

### Note 1 on page 5

"Der Künstler und die Öffentlichkeit" appeared in the *Gazette Musicale* of April 1, 1841, under the title "Caprices esthétiques extraits du journal d'un musicien défunt. Le Musicien et la Publicité." After the first paragraph, however, the French again materially differs, besides bearing marks of the editorial scissors, for it is reduced to about a quarter of the usual length. In the first sentence "die als Idee mir mein ganzes Wesen offenbart" so strikingly resembles Schopenhauer's philosophy of Music that one might have taken it for an interpolation of 1871, did not the French of 1841 (i.e. thirteen years before the master read a line of Schopenhauer) give us its counterpart in "et que j'en sens jaillir enfin l'idée qui révèle tout mon être."—Tr.

### Note 2 on page 5

From "to earn," to the end of the sentence, did not appear in the French.—Tr.

### Note 3 on page 5

As said, from this point the French diverges: "Il y a là quelque puissance occulte et inexplicable, dont moi-même, hélas ! je subis l'influence funeste. Plus j'y songe, moins je puis me rendre compte des motifs qui poussent les artistes à rechercher le grand jour de la publicité. Est-ce l'ambition, le désir du bien-être? motifs bien puissants sans doute; mais quel est l'homme sur lequel ils aient prise à l'heure de l'enthousiasme on dont ils puissent émouvoir le génie? Dans la vie ordinaire, je conçois qu'on cède à ces motifs, quand il est question d'un bon dîner, d'un article louangeur dans les journaux; mais jamais quand il s'agit de sacrifier les plus hautes jouissances qu'il soit donné à l'homme de goûter. Pour les cœurs aimants, ce pourrait bien être le désir irrésistible de laisser s'épancher le surplus de l'enthousiasme qui les enivre et de faire participer le monde entier leur extase. Malheureusement l'artiste ne voit point le monde tel qu'il est ; il se le représente comme étant à sa hauteur, il oublie qu'il n'est composé que de gens en fracs à la dernière mode et en mantilles de soie.

"Ce désir immodéré et funeste de la publicité paraît être tellement vivace, que même aux heures où l'inspiration a cessé, il continue à nous travailler le cerveau, et c'est dans ces heures qu'il faut lui donner le nom d'ambition. O ambition pernicieuse, à qui nous devons tous les airs, airs variés, etc., c'est toi qui nous enseignes à ravager systématiquement le sanctuaire de la poésie que nous portons en nous! c'est toi qui dans ton ironie démoniaque nous pousses à souiller de roulades impudiques un chaste et pur accord ; à resserrer une pensée vigoureuse et large dans un lit étroit de cadences et de niaiseries!

"O vous, *heureux infortunés*, aux joues creuses et pâles, aux yeux usés, vous vous êtes flétris au souffle brûlant de l'étude et du travail, afin que le public vous criât bravo! pour l'enveloppe mensongère dont vous entouriez votre poésie dans les moments de calcul et de réflexion prosaïque, et que vous lui arracheriez avec joie si vous ne craigniez que votre création, si elle se montrait dans sa nudité, ne fût obligée de fuir honteuse et éperdue devant les railleries du vulgaire. Oh ! si vous étiez tous mes frères et mes amis, je vous ferais une proposition à l'aimable: je vous engagerais faire de la musique pour votre compte, et à exercer en même temps quelque bon métier ou à spéculer à la Bourse. Vous seriez alors tout-à-fait heureux et vous pourriez mener bonne et joyeuse vie. Je veux vous donner l'exemple; deux heures sonnent, je vais à la Bourse; si j'échoue dans mes opérations, j'écrirai des quadrilles; c'est un bon métier, qui fort heureusement n'a rien de commun avec la musique."

With that the article ends : it was signed "Werner," but a note to the Index of the *Gaz. Mus.*

corrects the error.—Tr.

[Note 4 on page 7](#)

Proof positive that at least this portion of the article was contained in the original M. S. for the *Gazette Musicale*, as it was only two months previously (Jan. 28, 1841) that Berlioz had written in that journal: "Si j'étais riche, bien riche, riche comme ces malheureux du siècle qui donnent cinq cents francs à un chanteur pour une cavatine de cinq sous, . . . je partirais pour la Troade . . . j'en ferais à peu près une solitude . . . je bâtirais un temple sonore au pied de mont Ida, deux statues en décoreraient seules l'intérieur, et un soir, au soleil couchant, après avoir lu Homère et parcouru les lieux qu'immortalisa son génie, je me ferais réciter par le roi des orchestres l'autre poème du roi des musiciens, la symphonie héroïque de Beethoven." Is it too much to fancy that this passage of Berlioz may have sown in Wagner's mind the first seed of the "Bayreuth idea," which came to its earliest recorded expression just ten years later, and twenty-one years after that, again, was celebrated by the crowning of a certain foundation-stone ceremony with the performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony?—Tr.

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## Summary

Solitude and the inner chords vibrating into melody. What drives the genius to bring to the ears of the crowd what it can never understand? It cannot be Duty; for all men would run away from Genius, did it shew itself naked. The saint, the wounded soldier, the taunted woman, bear less humiliation than the genius: happy the world, that knows so little of his pains! (137). Duty of supporting one's family can never prompt a work of genius. Freedom he wants, not honour or money. Laughter his only salvation (139). Happy the genius whom Fortune ne'er has smiled on! His awkwardness in dealing with the world; concessions asked of him. Wait and dream; 'tis the best! (141).