
A Happy Evening

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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[70]

A Happy Evening

IT was a fine Spring evening; the heat of Summer had already sent its messengers before, delicious breaths that thronged the air like sighs of love and fired our senses. We had followed the stream of people pouring toward a public garden; here an excellent orchestra was to give the first of its annual series of summer-evening concerts. It was a red-letter day. My friend R . . . , not dead in Paris yet, (1) was in the seventh heaven; even before the concert began, he was drunk with music: he said it was the inner harmonies that always sang and rang within him when he felt the happiness of a beautiful Spring evening.

We arrived, and took our usual places at a table beneath a great oak-tree; for careful comparison had taught us, not only that this spot was farthest from the buzzing crowd, but that here one heard the music best and most distinctly. We had always pitied the poor creatures who were compelled, or actually preferred to stay in the immediate vicinity of the orchestra, whether in or out of doors; we could never understand how they found any pleasure in *seeing* music, instead of hearing it; and yet we could account no otherwise for their rapt attention to the various movements of the band, their enthusiastic interest in the kettle-drummer when, after an anxious counting of his bars of rest, he came in at last with a rousing thwack. We were agreed that nothing is more prosaic and upsetting, than the hideous aspect of the swollen cheeks and puckered features of the wind-players, the unæsthetic grabbings of the double-bass and violoncelli, ay, even the wearisome sawing of the violin-bows, when it is a question of listening to the [71] performance of fine instrumental music. For this reason we had taken our seats where we could hear the lightest nuance of the orchestra, without being pained by its appearance.

The concert began: grand things were played; among others, Mozart's Symphony in E flat, and Beethoven's in A.

The concert was over. Dumb, but delighted and smiling, my friend sat facing me with folded arms. The crowd departed, group by group, with pleasant chatter; here and there a few tables still were occupied. The evening's genial warmth began to yield to the colder breath of night.

"Let's have some punch!" cried R . . . , suddenly changing his attitude to look for a waiter.

Moods like that in which we found ourselves, are too precious not to be maintained as long as possible. I knew how comforting the punch would be, and eagerly chimed in with my friend's proposition. A decent-sized bowl soon steamed on our table, and we emptied our first glasses.

"How did you like the performance of the symphonies?" I asked.

"Eh? Performance!" exclaimed R "There are moods in which, however critical at other times, the worst execution of one of my favourite works would transport me. These moods, 'tis true, are rare, and only exercise their sweet dominion over me when my whole inner being stands in blissful harmony with my bodily health. Then it needs but the faintest intimation, to sound in me at once the whole piece that answers to my full conception; and in so ideal a completeness, as the best orchestra in the world can never bring it to my outward sense. In such moods my else so scrupulous musical ear is complaisant enough to allow even the quack of an oboe to cause me but a momentary twinge; with an indulgent smile I let the false note of a trumpet graze my ear, without being torn from the blessed feeling that cheats me into the belief that I am hearing the most consummate execution of my favourite work. In such [72] a mood nothing irritates me more, than to see a well-combed dandy airing high-bred indignation at one of those musical slips that wound his pampered ear, when I know that to-morrow he will be applauding the most excruciating scale with which a popular prima

donna does violence to nerves alike and soul. Music merely ambles past the ear of these super-subtle fools; nay, often merely past their eye: for I remember noticing people who never stirred a muscle when a brass instrument really went wrong, but stopped their ears the instant they saw the wretched bandsman shake his head in shame and confusion."

"What?"—I interposed—"Must I hear you girding at people of delicate ear? How often have I seen you raging like a madman at the faulty intonation of a singer?"

"My friend," cried R . . . , "I simply was speaking of now, of to-night. God knows how often I have been nearly driven mad by the mistakes of a famous violinist; how often have I cursed the first of prima-donnas when she thought her tone so pure in vocalising somewhere between *mi fa sol*; eh! how often I have been unable to find the smallest consonance among the instruments of the very best-tuned orchestra. But look you! that is on the countless days when my good spirit has departed from me, when I put on my Sunday coat and squeeze between the perfumed dames and frizzled sirs to woo back happiness into my soul through these ears of mine. O you should feel the pains with which I then weigh every note and measure each vibration! When my heart is dumb I'm as subtle as any of the prigs who vexed me to-day, and there are hours when a Beethoven Sonata with violin or 'cello will put me to flight.—Blessed be the god who made the Spring and Music: to-night I'm happy, I can tell you." With that he filled our glasses again, and we drained them to the dregs.

"Need I declare,"—I began in turn,—"that I feel as happy as yourself? Who would not be, after listening in peace and comfort to the performance of two works which seem created by the very god of high æsthetic joy? [73] I thought the conjunction of the Mozartian and the Beethovenian Symphony a most apt idea; I seemed to find a marked relationship between the two compositions; in both the clear human consciousness of an existence meant for rejoicing, is beautifully transfigured by the presage of a higher world beyond. The only distinction I would make, is that in Mozart's music the language of the heart is shaped to graceful longing, whereas in Beethoven's conception this longing reaches out a bolder hand to seize the Infinite. In Mozart's symphony the fulness of Feeling predominates, in Beethoven's the manly consciousness of Strength."

"It does me good to hear such views expressed about the character and meaning of such sublime instrumental works," replied my friend. "Not that I believe you have anything like exhausted their nature with your brief description; but to get to the bottom of that, to say nothing of defining it, lies just as little within the power of human speech as it resides in the nature of Music to express in clear and definite terms what belongs to no organ save the Poet's. 'Tis a great misfortune that so many people take the useless trouble to confound the musical with the poetic tongue, and endeavour to make good or replace by the one what in their narrow minds remains imperfect in the other. It is a truth for ever, that where the speech of man stops short there Music's reign begins. Nothing is more intolerable, than the mawkish scenes and anecdotes they foist upon those instrumental works. What poverty of mind and feeling it betrays, when the listener to a performance of one of Beethoven's symphonies has to keep his interest awake by imagining that the torrent of musical sounds is meant to reproduce the plot of some romance! These gentry then presume to grumble at the lofty master, when an unexpected stroke disturbs the even tenour of their little tale; they tax the composer with unclearness and inconsequence, and deplore his lack of continuity!—The idiots!"

[74]

"Never mind!" said I. "Let each man trump up scenes and fancies according to the strength of his imagination; by their aid he perhaps acquires a taste for these great musical revelations, which many would be quite unable to enjoy for themselves. At least you must admit that the number of Beethoven's admirers has gained a large accession this way, eh! that it is to be hoped the great musician's works will thereby reach a popularity they could never have attained if left to none but an ideal understanding."

"Preserve us Heaven!" R . . . exclaimed.—"Even for these sublimest sanctities of Art you ask that banal Popularity, the curse of every grand and noble thing? For *them* you would also claim the honour of their inspiring rhythms—their only temporal manifestation—being danced-to in a village-tavern?"

"You exaggerate," I calmly answered: "I do not claim for Beethovenas symphonies the vogue of street and tavern. But would you not count it a merit the more, were they in a position to give a gladder pulse to the blood in the cribbed and cabined heart of the ordinary man of the world ?,"

"They shall have no merit, these Symphonies!"—my friend replied, in a huff "They exist for themselves and their own sake, not to flip the circulation of a philistine's blood. Who *can*, for his eternal welfare let him earn the merit of understanding those revelations; on them there rests no obligation to force themselves upon the understanding of cold hearts."

I filled up, and exclaimed with a laugh: "You're the same old phantast, who declines to understand me on the very point where we both are certainly agreed at bottom! So let's drop the Popularity question. But give me the pleasure of learning your own sensations when you heard the two symphonies to-night."

Like a passing cloud, the shade of irritation cleared from my friend's lowered brow. He watched the steam ascending from our punch, and smiled. "My sensations?—I felt [75] the soft warmth of a lovely Spring evening, and imagined I was sitting with you beneath a great oak and looking up between its branches to the star-strewn heavens. I felt a thousand things besides, but them I cannot tell you (2): there you have all."

"Not bad!" I remarked.—"Perhaps one of our neighbours imagined he was smoking a cigar, drinking coffee, and making eyes at a young lady in a blue dress."

"Without a doubt," R . . . pursued the sarcasm, "and the drummer apparently thought he was beating his ill-behaved children, for not having brought him his supper from town.—Capital! At the gate I saw a peasant listening in wonder and delight to the Symphony in A:—I would wager my head he understood it best of all, for you will have read in one of our musical journals a short while ago that Beethoven had nothing else in mind, when he composed this symphony, than to describe a peasant's wedding. The honest rustic will thus at once have called his wedding-day to memory, and revived its every incident: the guests' arrival and the feast, the march to church and blessing, the dance and finally the crowning joy, what bride and bridegroom shared alone."

"A good idea!" I cried, when I had finished laughing.—"But for heaven's sake tell me why you would prevent this symphony from affording the good peasant a happy hour of his own kind? Did he not feel, proportionately, the same delight as yourself when you sat beneath the oak and watched the stars of heaven through its branches?"

"There I am with you,"—my friend complacently replied,—"I would gladly let the worthy yokel recall his wedding-day when listening to the Symphony in A. But the civilised townsfolk who write in musical journals, I should like to tear the hair from their stupid heads when they foist such fudge on honest people, and rob them of all the ingenuousness [76] with which they would otherwise have settled down to hear Beethoven's symphony.—Instead of abandoning themselves to their natural sensations, the poor deluded people of full heart but feeble brain feel obliged to look out for a peasant's wedding, a thing they probably have never attended, and in lieu of which they would have been far more disposed to imagine something quite within the circle of their own experience."

"So you agree with me," I said, "that the nature of those creations does not forbid their being variously interpreted, according to the individual ? On the contrary," was the answer, "I consider a stereotype interpretation altogether inadmissible. Definitely as the musical fabric of a Beethovenian Symphony stands rounded and complete in all artistic proportions, perfect and indivisible as it appears to the higher sense,—just as impossible is it to reduce its effects on

the human heart to one authoritative type. This is more or less the case with the creations of every other art: how differently will one and the same picture or drama affect two different human beings, nay, the heart of one and the same individual at different times! Yet how much more definitely and sharply the painter or poet is bound to draw his figures, than the instrumental composer, who, unlike them, is not compelled to model his shapes by the features of the daily world, but has a boundless realm at his disposal in the kingdom of the supramundane, and to whose hand is given the most spiritual of substances in that of Tone! It would be to drag the musician from this high estate, if one tried to make him fit his inspiration to the semblance of that daily world; and still more would that instrumental composer disown his mission, or expose his weakness, who should aim at carrying the cramped proportions of purely worldly things into the province of his art."

"So you reject all tone-painting," I asked?

"Everywhere," answered R . . . , "save where it either is employed in jest, or reproduces purely musical phenomena. In the province of Jest all things are allowed, [77] for its nature is a certain purposed angularity, and to laugh and let laugh is a capital thing. But where tone-painting quits this region, it becomes absurd. The inspirations and incitements to an instrumental composition must be of such a kind, that they can arise in the soul of none save a musician."

"You have just said something you will have a difficulty in proving," I objected. "At bottom, I am of your opinion; only I doubt if it is quite compatible with our unqualified admiration for the works of our great masters. Don't you think that this maxim of yours flatly contradicts a part of Beethoven's revelations?"

"Not in the slightest: on the contrary, I hope to found my proof on Beethoven."

"Before we descend to details," I continued, "don't you feel that Mozart's conception of instrumental music far better corresponds with your assertion, than that of Beethoven?"

"Not that I am aware," replied my friend. "Beethoven immensely enlarged the form of Symphony when he discarded the proportions of the older musical 'period,' which had attained their utmost beauty in Mozart, and followed his impatient genius with bolder but ever more conclusive freedom to regions reachable by *him* alone; as he also knew to give these soaring flights a philosophical coherence, it is undeniable that upon the basis of the Mozartian Symphony he reared a wholly new artistic genre, which he at like time perfected in every point. But Beethoven would have been unable to achieve all this, had Mozart not previously addressed his conquering genius to the Symphony too; had his animating, idealising breath not breathed a spiritual warmth into the soulless forms and diagrams accepted until then. From here departed Beethoven, and the artist who had taken Mozart's divinely pure soul into himself could never descend from that high altitude which is true Music's sole domain."

"By all means,"—I resumed. "You will hardly deny, [78] however, that Mozart's music flowed from none but a musical source, that his inspiration started from an indefinite inner feeling, which, even had he had a poet's faculty, could never have been conveyed in words, but always and exclusively in tones. I am speaking of those inspirations which arise in the musician simultaneously with his melodies, with his tone-figures. Mozart's music bears the characteristic stamp of this instantaneous birth, and it is impossible to suppose that he would ever have drafted the plan of a symphony, for instance, whereof he had not all the themes, and in fact the entire structure as we know it, already in his head. On the other hand, I cannot help thinking that Beethoven first planned the order of a symphony according to a certain philosophical idea, before he left it to his phantasy to invent the musical themes."

"And how do you propose proving that?"—my friend ejaculated. "By this evening's Symphony perhaps?"

"With *that* I might find it harder," I answered,—"but is it not enough to simply name the Heroic Symphony, in support of my contention? You know, of course, that this symphony

was originally meant to bear the title: 'Bonaparte.' Can you deny, then, that Beethoven was inspired and prompted to the plan of this giant work by an idea outside the realm of Music?"

"Delighted at your naming that symphony!" R. . . . quickly put in. "You surely don't mean to say that the idea of a heroic force in mighty struggle for the highest, is outside the realm of Music? Or do you find that Beethoven has translated his enthusiasm for the young god of victory into such petty details as to make you think he meant this symphony for a musical bulletin of the first Italian campaign?"

"Where are you off to?"—I interposed: "Have I said anything like it?"

"It's at the back of your contention," my friend went passionately on.—"If we are to assume that Beethoven sat down to write a composition in honour of Bonaparte, [79] we must also conclude that he would have been unable to turn out anything but one of those 'occasional' pieces which bear the stamp of still-born, one and all. (3) But the *Sinfonia eroica* is all the breadth of heaven from justifying such a view! No: had the master set himself a task like that, he would have fulfilled it most unsatisfactorily:—tell me, where, in what part of this composition do you find one colourable hint that the composer had his eye on a specific event in the heroic career of the young commander? What means the Funeral March, the Scherzo with the hunting-horns, the Finale with the soft emotional Andante woven in? Where is the bridge of Lodi, where the battle of Arcole, where the victory under the Pyramids, where the 18th Brumaire? Are these not incidents which no composer of our day would have let escape him, if he wanted to write a biographic Symphony on Bonaparte?—Here, however, the case was otherwise; and permit me to tell you my own idea of the gestation of this symphony.—When a musician feels prompted to sketch the smallest composition, he owes it simply to the stimulus of a feeling that usurps his whole being at the hour of conception. This mood may be brought about by an outward experience, or have risen from a secret inner spring; whether it shews itself as melancholy, joy, desire, contentment, love or hatred, in the musician it will always take a musical shape, and voice itself in tones or ever it is cast in notes. But grand, passionate and lasting emotions, dominating all our feelings and ideas for months and often half a year, these drive the musician to those vaster, more intense conceptions to which we owe, among others, the origin of a *Sinfonia eroica*. These greater moods, as deep suffering of soul or potent exaltation, may date from outer causes, for we all are men and our fate is ruled by outward circumstances; but *when* they force the musician to production, these greater moods have already turned to music [80] in him, so that at the moment of creative inspiration, it is no longer the outer event that governs the composer, but the musical sensation which it has begotten in him. Now, what phenomenon were worthier to rouse and keep alive the sympathy, the inspiration of a genius so full of fire as Beethoven's, than that of the youthful demigod who razed a world to mould a new one from its ruins? Imagine the musician's hero-spirit following from deed to deed, from victory to victory, the man who ravished friend and foe to equal wonder! And the republican Beethoven, to boot, who looked to that hero for the realising of his ideal dreams of universal human good! How his blood must have surged, his heart glowed hot, when that glorious name rang back to him wherever he turned to commune with his Muse!—*His* strength must have felt incited to a like unwonted sweep, his will-of-victory spurred on to a kindred deed of untold grandeur. He was no General,—he was Musician; and in *his* domain he saw the sphere where he could bring to pass the selfsame thing as Bonaparte in the plains of Italy. His musical force at highest strain bade him conceive a work the like of which had ne'er before been dreamt of; he brought forth his *Sinfonia eroica*, and knowing well to whom he owed the impulse to this giant-work, he wrote upon its title-page the name of "Bonaparte." And in fact is not this symphony as grand an evidence of man's creative power, as Bonaparte's glorious victory? Yet I ask you if a single trait in its development has an immediate outer connection with the fate of the hero, who at that time had not even reached the zenith of his destined fame? I am happy enough to admire

in it nothing but a gigantic monument of Art, to fortify myself by the strength and joyous exaltation which swell my breast on hearing it; and leave to learned other folk to spell out the fights of Rivoli and Marengo from its score's mysterious hieroglyphs!"

The night air had grown still colder; during this speech a passing waiter had taken my hint to remove the punch and warm it up again; he now came back, and once more [81] the grateful beverage was steaming high before our eyes. I filled up, and reached my hand to R . .

.. "We are at one," I said, "as ever, when it touches the innermost questions of art. However feeble our forces, we shouldn't deserve the name of musicians, could we fall into such blatant errors about the nature of our art as you have just denounced. What Music expresses is eternal, infinite, and ideal; she expresses not the passion, love, desire, of this or that individual in this or that condition, but Passion, Love, Desire itself, and in such infinitely varied phases as lie in her unique possession and are foreign and unknown to any other tongue. Of her let each man taste according to his strength, his faculty and mood, what taste and feel he can"—

"And to-night,"—my friend broke in, in full enthusiasm,—"'tis joy I taste, the happiness, the presage of a higher destiny, won from the wondrous revelations in which Mozart and Beethoven have spoken to us on this glorious Spring evening. So here's to Happiness, to Joy! Here's to Courage, that enheartens us in fight with our fate! Here's to Victory, gained by our higher sense over the worthlessness of the vulgar! To Love, which crowns our courage; to friendship, that keeps firm our Faith! To Hope, which weds itself to our foreboding! To the day, to the night! A cheer for the sun, a cheer for the stars! And three cheers for Music and her high priests! Forever be God adored and worshipped, the god of Joy and Happiness,—the god who created Music! Amen.—

Arm-in-arm we took our journey home; we pressed each other's hand, and not a word more did we say.

Notes

Note 1 on page 5

"Not dead in Paris yet" did not appear in the French. The tale was originally styled "Une soirée heureuse: Fantaisie sur la musique pittoresque," and published in the *Gazette Musicale* of Oct. 24 and Nov. 7, 1841.—Tr.

Note 2 on page 7

Cf. "Wo ich erwacht, weilt' ich nicht; doch wo ich weilte, das kann ich dir nicht sagen. . . . Ich war—wo ich von je gewesen, wohin auf je ich gehe: im weiten Reich der Welten Nacht." *Tristan*, act iii.—Tr.

Note 3 on page 9

In the *Gazette* there was a footnote here: "Il y a huit ans, à l'époque où cette conversation eut lieu, mon ami R... ne pouvait connaître la symphonie de Berlioz pour la translation des victimes de Juillet."—Tr.