
The Destiny of Opera

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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[128]

Translator's Note

This essay was published in the Spring of 1871 (E. W. Fritsch, Leipzig), with the subsidiary title "An Academic Lecture by Richard Wagner." The author had in 1869 been elected a member of the Royal Academy of the Arts in Berlin, and "The Destiny of Opera" was intended as the thesis for his installation, which followed on April 28, 1871.

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Preface

IN preparing the following essay for an Academic lecture, the author experienced the difficulty of having to enlarge once more on a subject he many years ago had treated exhaustively, as he believes, in a special book entitled *Oper und Drama*. As the requisite brevity of its present treatment would only allow of the main idea being sketched in outline, whoever might haply feel roused to more serious interest in the subject must needs be referred to that earlier book of mine. It then would scarcely escape his notice that, albeit a complete agreement holds between the older, lengthier, and the present conciser treatment of the subject itself—namely the character and importance ascribed by the author to the Musically-conceived drama—yet in many respects this recent setting offers new points of view, from whence regarded certain details necessarily assume another aspect; and that, perhaps, may make this newer treatment interesting even to those already familiar with the older one.

Certainly I have been given ample time to digest the topic started by myself, and I could have wished to have been diverted from the process by practical proof of the justice of my views being made more easy to me. The obtaining of single stage-performances, correct in my sense of the term, could not suffice me so long as they were not withdrawn completely from the sphere of modern operatic doings; for the ruling theatrical element of our day, with all its outward and inward attributes, entirely inartistic, un-German, both morally and mentally pernicious, invariably gathers again like a choking mist over any spot where the [130] most arduous exertions may have given one for once an outlook on the sunlight. May the present writing therefore be not taken as an ambitious contribution to the field of Theory proper, but merely as a last attempt from that side to awaken interest and furtherance for the author's efforts on the realm of artistic Practice. It will then be understood why, prompted by this wish alone, he has constantly endeavoured to place his subject in new lights; for he was bound to keep on trying to propound the problem, that occupied his mind, in such a way that it finally might strike the minds of those alone qualified to give it serious attention. That this result has hitherto been so hard of attainment that he could but regard himself as a lonely wanderer soliloquising to a croaking accompaniment of the frogs in our stage-reporters' swamp, has simply shewn him how low had sunk the sphere to which he found himself and problem banned: but this sphere alone contains the elements capable of producing a higher Artwork, and thus the object of the following treatise, too, can only be to direct to those elements the gaze of those who at present stand entirely outside this sphere.

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The Destiny of Opera

A WELL-MEANT cry of earnest friends of the Theatre lays the blame of its downfall on the Opera. The charge is founded on the unmistakable decline of interest in the spoken Play, as also on the degeneration of dramatic performances in general.

The correctness of this accusation must needs seem obvious. Merely, one might ask how it came to pass that the foundations of Opera were laid with the first beginnings of the modern Theatre, and why the most distinguished minds have repeatedly dwelt on the potentialities in a genre of dramatic art whose one-sided development has taken the shape of current Opera? In such an inquiry we might easily be led into regarding our greatest poets as, in a certain sense, the pioneers of Opera. Though such an allegation must be accepted with great reserve, on the other hand the issue of our great German poets labours for the theatre, and their effect on the whole spirit of our dramatic representations, can but cause us earnestly to ponder how it was that Opera could have acquired so overpowering a control over theatric taste in general, in face of just the influence of those great poetic works themselves. And here we perhaps may gain an answer if we limit ourselves at first to the actual result, upon the character of stage-doings in the stricter province of the *Play*, of the effect of the Goethe-and-Schiller Drama upon the spirit in which our actors approach their work.

That result we recognise at once as due to a disproportion between the capacity of our actors and the nature of the tasks proposed them. A full account of this misrelation belongs to the history of German Acting, and has already been undertaken in praiseworthy fashion. (1) [132] Referring to that account, on the one hand, and on the other reserving the deeper aesthetic problem at bottom of the evil for the later course of our inquiry, our present concern is that our poets had to couch their idealising tendency in a dramatic form to which the natural parts and training of our actors could not adapt themselves. It needed the rarest talents, such as of a Sophie Schröder, to completely solve a task pitched far too high for our players; accustomed solely to their native element of German burgher life, the sudden demand could not but set them in the most ruinous bewilderment. To that disproportion we owe the rise and eventual rampancy of "false pathos." This had been preceded, at an earlier epoch of the German stage, by the grotesque affectation peculiar to the "English comedians" so-called: a grotesquery applied by them to the rough-and-ready representation of old-English and even Shakespearian pieces, and to be met to this day at the degenerate English national theatre. In healthy opposition there had since arisen the so-called "true-to-nature," which found its suitable field of expression in the "Burgher" drama. Though Lessing himself, as also Goethe in his youth, wrote poems for this Burgher drama, we must note that it always derived its chief supply from pieces written by the foremost actors of this period. Now, the narrow sphere and scant poetic value of these products impelled our great poets to extend and elevate dramatic style; and though their original purpose was to continue the cultivation of the "true-to-nature," it was not long before the Ideal tendency shewed itself,—to be realised, as for expression, by *poetic pathos*. Those at all acquainted with this branch of our art-history, know how our great poets were disturbed in their endeavours to instil the new style into the players; however, it is much to be doubted whether in any event they would finally have proved successful, as they had previously been obliged to content themselves with a mere artificial semblance of success, which persistently developed into just that so-called "false pathos." In harmony with the German's [133] modest talent for play-acting, this remained the sole but doubtful profit, as regards the character of performance of dramas of an Ideal trend, of that else so gigantic influence of our poets on the Theatre.

Now, what took the outward form of this "false pathos" became in turn the tendency of all

the dramatic conceptions of our lesser stage-poets, whose matter from first to last was every whit as hollow as that pathos itself: we need but recall the products of a Houwald, Müllner, and the string of similar playwrights who have made for the Pathetic to the present day. The only adducible reaction against this tendency would be the constantly reviving Burgher play or prose-comedy of our time, had the French "Sensational piece" ("*Effektstück*") not overwhelmed us with its influence in this direction also. Hereby has the last trace of purity of type been wiped from our stage; and all that our Play has retained from the dramas of Goethe and Schiller themselves, is the now open secret of the employment of "false pathos," to wit "*Effect*."

As everything written for, and acted at the theatre is nowadays inspired by nothing but this tendency to "Effect," so that whatever ignores it is promptly condemned to neglect, we need feel no surprise at seeing it systematically applied to the performance of pieces by Goethe and Schiller; for, in a certain sense, we here have the original model that has been misconstrued to this tendency. The need of "poetic pathos" made our poets deliberately adopt a *rhetorical mode of diction*, with the aim of working on the Feeling; and, as it was impossible for our unpoetic actors to either understand or carry out the ideal aim, this diction led to that intrinsically senseless, but melodramatically telling style of declamation whose practical object was just the said "Effect," i.e. a stunning of the spectator's senses, to be documented by the outburst of "applause." This "applause" and its unfailing provoker, the "exit"-tirade, became the soul of every tendency of our modern theatre: the "brilliant exits" in the rôles of our classical plays have been counted up, and [134] the latter's value rated by their number—exactly as with an Italian operatic part. Surely we cannot scold our applause-dry priests of Thalia and Melpomene for casting envious glances at the Opera, where these "exits" are far more plentiful, and the storms of applause are raised with much greater certainty, than in even the most effective play; and since our playwrights live on the Effect of the rôles of our actors, 'tis easy to understand why the opera-composer appears to them a very hateful rival, for he can bring all this about by simply arranging for a good loud scream at the close of any vocal phrase you please.

In truth the outer reason, as also the most obvious character of the complaint we noted at starting, turns out to be thus and not otherwise. That I am far from thinking I have herewith shewn its deeper ground, I sufficiently hinted above: but, before we touch the inner core, I deem it more advisable to first weigh well its outer tokens, open to the experience of everyone. Let us therefore remember that in the character of all theatrical performances there inheres a tendency whose worst consequence comes out as the striving for "effect," and, though just as rampant in the spoken Play, in Opera it has the fullest opportunity of satiation. At bottom of the common actor's cry against the Opera there probably lies nothing but jealousy of its greater wealth of means of effect: but we must admit that the earnest actor has far more show of reason for annoyance, when he compares the seeming easiness and frivolity of these means of effect with the certainly much severer pains he has to take, to do some justice to the characters he represents. For, even from the standpoint of its outward effect on the public, the Play may boast of at least this merit:—that the plot itself, with the incidents that hold the plot together and the motives that explain it, must be intelligible, to rivet the spectator's interest; and that a piece composed of nothing but declamatory phrases, without an underlying plot intelligibly set forth and thereby centering the interest, is here as yet unthinkable. Opera, on the contrary, may be taxed with simply stringing [135] together a number of means of exciting a purely physical sense, whilst a mere agreeable contrast in their order of sequence suffices to mask the absence of any understandable or reasonable plot.

Plainly, a very serious point in the indictment. Yet even of this we may have our doubts, on closer scrutiny. That the so-called text of an opera must be interesting, composers have felt so clearly in every age, and particularly of late, that to obtain a good "book" has been one of

their most earnest endeavours. An attractive, or if possible a rousing plot, has always been essential for an opera to make its mark, especially in our time; so that it would be difficult to argue wholly away the dramatic tendency in the flimsy structure of an operatic text. In fact this side of the procedure has been so little unpretentious, that there is hardly a play of Shakespeare's, and there soon will be none of Schiller's and Goethe's, which Opera has not deemed just good enough for adaptation. Precisely this abuse, however, could only irritate our actors and playwrights still more, and this time with great justice; they might well protest: "Why should we take any pains in future to acquit ourselves of true dramatic tasks, when the public runs from us to where the selfsame themes, most frivolously distorted, are employed for mere multiplication of the vulgarest effects?" To this we at any rate might reply by asking how it would have been possible to set Herr Gounod's opera "Faust" before the German public, if our acting-stage had been able to make it really understand the "Faust" of Goethe? No: 'tis not to be disputed that the public has turned away from our actors' singular efforts to make something of the monologue of our own "Faust," to Herr Gounod's aria with the theme on the pleasures of youth, and here applauds whilst it there refused to move a hand.

Perhaps no instance could shew us more plainly and distressingly, to what a pass our Theatre has come. Yet even now we cannot admit the perfect equity of laying the whole blame of this undeniable downfall on the vogue [136] enjoyed by Opera; rather, that very vogue should open our eyes alike to the failings of our Play and the impossibility of fulfilling within its bounds, and with the only expressional means at its command, the *ideal* scope of Drama. Precisely here, where the highest ideal is faced with its utmost trivialising, as in the above example, the horror of the thing must force us to look deeper into the nature of our problem. We still might shirk the obligation, if we merely meant to take a great depravation of public taste for granted, and to seek its causes in the wider field of our public life. But for ourselves, having reached that horrifying experience from just this standpoint, it is hopeless to contemplate an improvement of public art-taste, in particular, by the lengthy route of a regeneration of our public spirit itself; we deem wiser to take the direct path of an inquiry into the purely æsthetic problem lying at bottom, and thus to arrive at an answer which perchance may give us hopes of the possibility of an influence being exerted on the public spirit from this opposite side.

We therefore will formulate a thesis, whose working-out may haply guide us to that end. As follows:—

We grant that Opera has made palpable the downfall of the Theatre: though it may be doubted whether it really brought about that downfall, yet its present supremacy shews clearly that by it alone can our Theatre be raised again; but this restoration can never truly prosper till it conducts our Theatre to that Ideal to which it is so innately predisposed, that neglect and misapprehension thereof have done far greater harm to the German stage than to the French, since the latter had no idealistic aspirations and therefore could devote itself to the development of realistic correctness in a narrower sphere.—

An intelligent history of stage "pathos" would make plain what the idealistic trend in modern drama has ever aimed at. Here it would be instructive to note how the Italians, who sat at the feet of the Antique for wellnigh all their art-tendencies, left the spoken drama almost quite in embryo; they promptly attempted a reconstruction of the [137] antique drama on a basis of musical Lyrics, and, straying ever farther to one side, produced the Opera. While this was taking place in Italy under the omnipotent influence of the cultured upper circles of the nation, among the Spaniards and English the Folk-spirit itself was evolving the modern Play, after the antiquarian bent of lettered poets had proved incapable of any vital influence on the nation. Only by starting from this realistic sphere, wherein Lope de Vega had shewn such exuberant fertility, did Calderon lead the Spanish drama to that idealising tendency, which brought him so close to the Italians that many of his pieces we can but characterise as

wellnigh operatic. Perhaps the English drama also would not have held aloof from a similar tendency, had not the inscrutable genius of a Shakespeare enabled the loftiest figures of history and legend to tread the boards of the realistic Folk-play with such a truth to nature that they passed beyond the reach of any rule erewhile misborrowed from the antique Form. Perhaps their awe at Shakespeare's unfathomable inimitability had no less share than their recognition of the true meaning of the Antique and its forms, in determining our great poets' dramatic labours. They pondered too the eminent advantages of Opera, though it finally passed their understanding how this Opera was to be dealt with from their standpoint. Schiller, transported by Gluck's "Iphigenia in Tauris," nevertheless could not discover a *modus vivendi* with the Opera; and Goethe appears to have plainly seen that the task was reserved for the musical genius, when he regarded the news of Mozart's death as effacing all the splendid prospects of a Musically-conceived Drama opened up to him by "Don Giovanni."

Through this attitude of Goethe and Schiller we are afforded a deep insight into the nature of the *poet* pure and simple. If on the one hand Shakespeare and his method to them seemed incomprehensible, and on the other they felt compelled to leave to the *musician*—whose method was equally incomprehensible—the unique task [138] of breathing ideal life into the figures of the Drama, the question arises: how did they stand as poets toward the genuine Drama, and whether, solely as such, they could feel themselves equipped for Drama at all? A doubt of this seems to have invaded more and more these so profoundly truthful men, and the constant change of Form in their projects shews, of itself, that they felt as if engaged in one continual series of experiments. Were we to try to probe that doubt, we might find in it the confession of a certain insufficiency in the poetic nature (*das Bekenntniss einer Unzulänglichkeit des dichterischen Wesens*); for Poetry, taken by itself, is only to be conceived as an *abstractum*, and first becomes a *concretum* through the matter of its fashionings. If neither the Plastic artist nor the Musician is thinkable without a trace of the poetic spirit, the question simply is how that latent force, which in them brings forth the work of art, can lead to the same result in the Poet's shapings as a conscious agent?

Without embarking on an inquiry into the mystery just mooted, we yet must call to mind the distinction between the modern culture-poet and the naive poet of the ancient world. The latter was in the first place an inventor of Myths, then their word-of-mouth narrator in the Epos, and finally their personal performer in the living Drama. Plato was the first to adopt all three poetic forms for his "dialogues," so filled with dramatic life and so rich in myth-invention; and these scenes of his may be regarded as the foundation—nay, in the poet-philosopher's glorious "Symposium," the model unapproached—of strictly literary poetry, which always leans to the didactic. Here the forms of naive poetry are merely employed to set philosophic theses in a quasi-popular light, and conscious *tendence* takes the place of the directly-witnessed scene from life. To extend this "Tendence" to the acted drama, must have appeared to our great culture-poets the surest mode of elevating the existing popular play; and in this they may have been misled by certain features of the Antique Drama. The Tragedy of the Greeks having [139] evolved from a compromise between the Apollinian and the Dionysian elements, upon the basis of a system of Lyrics wellnigh past our understanding, the didactic hymn of the old-Hellenian priests could combine with the newer Dionysian dithyramb to produce that enthralling effect in which this artwork stands unrivalled. Now the fact of the Apollinian element in Greek Tragedy, regarded as a literary monument, having attracted to itself the principal notice in every age, and particularly of philosophers and didacts, may reasonably have betrayed our later poets—who also chiefly viewed these tragedies as literary products—into the opinion that in this didactic tendency lay the secret of the antique drama's dignity, and, consequently into the belief that the existing popular drama was only to be raised and idealised by stamping it therewith. Their true artistic instinct saved them from sacrificing living Drama to Tendence bald and bare: but what was to

put soul into this Drama, to lift it on the cothurnus of ideality, they deemed could only be the purposed elevation of its tendency; and that the more, as their sole disposable material, namely Word-speech, the vehicle of notions (*Begriffe*), seemed to exclude the feasibility, or even the advisability, of an ennoblement and heightening of expression on any side but this. The lofty *sentence* alone could match the higher *tendency*; and to impress the hearer's physical sense, unquestionably excited by the drama, recourse must be had to so-called *poetic diction*. But this diction lured the exponents of their pieces into that "false pathos," whose recognition must needs have given our great poets many a pang when they compared it with their deep delight in Gluck's "Iphigenia" and Mozart's "Don Juan."

What so profoundly moved them in these last, must surely have been that here they found the drama transported by its music to the sphere of the Ideal, a sphere where the simplest feature of the plot was at once transfigured, and motive and emotion, fused in one direct expression, appealed to them with noblest stress. Here [140] hushed all desire to seize a Tendency, for the Idea had realised itself before them as the sovereign call of Fellow-feeling. "Error attends manes ev'ry quest," or "Life is not the highest good," was here no longer to be clothed in words, for the inmost secret of the wisest apothegm itself stood bared to them in limpid Melody. Whilst that had said "it means," this said "it is!" Here had the highest pathos come to be the very soul of Drama; as from a shining world of dreams, Life's picture stepped before us here with sympathetic verity.

But what a riddle must this artwork have seemed to our poets!—where was the Poet's place therein? Certainly not where their own strength lay, in the poetic thought and diction, of which these "texts" were absolutely destitute. There being, then, no possible question of the Poet, it was the Musician alone to whom this artwork appeared to belong. Yet, judged by their artistic standard, it fell hard to accord this latter a rank at all commensurate with the stupendous force he set in motion. In Music they saw a plainly irrational art, a thing half wild half foolish, not for a moment to be approached from the side of true artistic culture. And in Opera, forsooth, a paltry, incoherent pile of forms, without the smallest evidence of a sense for architectonics; whilst the last thing its capriciously assorted items could be said to aim at, was the consistence of a true dramatic plan. So that, admitting it was the dramatic groundwork that in Gluck's "Iphigenia" had held that jumble of forms together for once, and made of it a thrilling whole, there arose the question: Who would ever care to step into the shoes of its librettist, and write the threadbare text for the arias of even a Gluck, unless he were prepared to give up all pretence to rank as "poet"? The incomprehensible in the thing, was the supreme ideality of an effect whose artistic factors were not discoverable by analogy with any other art soever. And the incomprehensibility increased when one passed from this particular work of Gluck's, instinct with the nobility of a tragic subject taken bodily from the antique, [141] and found that under certain circumstances, no matter how absurd or trivial its shape, one could not deny to Opera a power unrivalled even in the most ideal sense. These circumstances arose forthwith, whenever a great dramatic artist filled a rôle in such an opera. We need but instance the impersonation, surely unforgettable by many yet alive, once given us by Frau Schröder-Devrient of "Romeo" in Bellini's opera. Every fibre of the musician rebels against allowing the least artistic merit to the sickly, utterly threadbare music here hung upon an opera-poem of indigent grotesqueness; but ask anyone who witnessed it, what impression he received from the "Romeo" of Frau Schröder-Devrient as compared with the Romeo of our very best play-actor in even the great Briton's piece? And this effect by no means lay in any vocal virtuosity, as with the common run of our prime donne's successes, for in this case that was scant and totally unsupported by any richness of the voice itself: the effect was simply due to the dramatic power of the rendering. But that, again, could never possibly have succeeded with the selfsame Schröder-Devrient in quite the finest spoken play; and thus the whole achievement must have issued from the element of music, transfiguring

and idealising even in this most meagre form.

Such an experience as this last, however, might set us on the high road to discover and estimate the veritable factor in the creation of the Dramatic Artwork.—As the Poet's share in it was so infinitesimal, Goethe believed he must ascribe the whole authorship of Opera to the Musician; and how much of serious truth resides in that opinion, we perhaps shall see if next we turn our notice to our great poets' second object of non-comprehension in the realm of Drama, to wit the singularity of *Shakespeare* and his artistic method.—

To the French, as representatives of modern civilisation, Shakespeare, considered seriously, to this day is a monstrosity; and even to the Germans he has remained a subject of constantly renewed investigation, with so little [142] positive result that the most conflicting views and statements are forever cropping up again. Thus has this most bewildering of dramatists—already set down by some as an utterly irresponsible and untamed genius, without one trace of artistic culture—quite recently been credited again with the most systematic tendency of the didactic poet. Goethe, after introducing him in "Wilhelm Meister" as an "admirable writer," kept returning to the problem with increasing caution, and finally decided that here the higher tendency was to be sought, not in the poet, but in the embodied characters he brought before us in immediate action. Yet the closer these figures were inspected, the greater riddle became the artist's method: though the main plan of a piece was easy to perceive, and it was impossible to mistake the consequent development of its plot, for the most part pre-existing in the source selected, yet the marvellous "accidentia" in its working out, as also in the bearing of its dramatis personae, were inexplicable on any hypothesis of deliberate artistic scheming. Here we found such drastic individuality, that it often seemed like unaccountable caprice, whose sense we never really fathomed till we closed the book and saw the living drama move before our eyes; then stood before us life's own image, mirrored with resistless truth to nature, and filled us with the lofty terror of a ghostly vision. But how decipher in this magic spell the tokens of an "artwork"? Was the author of these plays a *poet*?

What little we know of his life makes answer with outspoken naïvety: he was a *play-actor* and *manager*, who wrote for himself and his troop these pieces that in after days amazed and poignantly perplexed our greatest poets; pieces that for the most part would not so much as have come down to us, had the unpretending prompt-books of the Globe Theatre not been rescued from oblivion in the nick of time by the printing-press. *Lope de Vega*, scarcely less a wonder, wrote his pieces from one day to the next in immediate contact with his actors and the [143] stage; beside Corneille and Racine, the poets of *façon*, there stands the actor *Molière*, in whom alone production was alive; and midst his tragedy sublime stood *Æschylus*, the leader of its chorus.—Not to the Poet, but to the Dramatist must we look, for light upon the Drama's nature; and he stands no nearer to the poet proper than to the *mime* himself, from whose heart of hearts he must issue if as poet he means to "hold the mirror up to Nature."

Thus undoubtedly the essence of Dramatic art, as against the Poet's method, at first seems totally irrational; it is not to be seized, without a complete reversal of the beholder's nature. In what this reversal must consist, however, should not be hard to indicate if we recall the natural process in the beginnings of all Art, as plainly shewn to us in *improvisation*. The poet, mapping out a plan of action for the improvising mime, would stand in much the same relation to him as the author of an operatic text to the musician; his work can claim as yet no atom of artistic value; but this it will gain in the very fullest measure if the poet makes the improvising spirit of the mime his own, and develops his plan entirely in character with that improvisation, so that the mime now enters with all his individuality into the poet's higher reason. This involves, to be sure, a complete transformation of the poetic artwork itself, of which we might form an idea if we imagined the impromptu of some great musician noted down. We have it on the authority of competent witnesses, that nothing could compare with

the effect produced by Beethoven when he improvised at length upon the pianoforte to his friends; nor, even in view of the master's greatest works, need we deem excessive the lament that precisely these inventions were not fixed in writing, if we reflect that far inferior musicians, whose penwork was always stiff and stilted, have quite amazed us in their 'free fantasias' by a wholly unsuspected and often very fertile talent for invention.—At anyrate we believe we shall really expedite the solution of an extremely difficult problem, if we define the Shakespearian Drama as [144] *a fixed mimetic improvisation of the highest poetic worth*. For this explains at once each wondrous accidental in the bearing and discourse of characters alive to but one purpose, to be at this moment all that they are meant to seem to us to be, and to whom accordingly no word can come that lies outside this conjured nature; so that it would be positively laughable to us, upon closer consideration, if one of these figures were suddenly to pose as poet. This last is silent, and remains for us a riddle, such as Shakespeare. But his work is the only veritable Drama; and what that implies, as work of Art, is shewn by our rating its author the profoundest poet of all time.—

From the countless topics for reflection afforded by this Drama of Shakespeare's let us choose those attributes which seem of most assistance to our present inquiry. Firstly then, apart from all its other merits, it strictly belongs to the class of effective *stage-pieces*, such as have been devised in the most dissimilar ages by skilful authors either sprung from the Theatre itself or in immediate contact therewith, and such as have enriched, for instance, the popular stages of the French from year to year. The difference between these true dramatic products, similarly arisen, simply lies in their *poetic value*. At first sight this poetic value seems determined by the dignity and grandeur of the subject-matter. Whereas not only have the French succeeded in setting every incident of modern life with speaking truth upon the stage, but even the Germans—with their infinitely smaller talent for the Theatre—have done the like for the narrower burgher province of that life, this genuinely reproductive force has failed in measure as the scene was to picture forth events of higher life, and finally the fate of heroes of world-history and their myths, sublimely distant from the eye of everyday. For here the mime's improvisation fell too short, and needed to be wielded by the poet proper, i.e. the inventor and fashioner of Myths; and his genius had to prove its pre-election by raising the style of mimetic improvisation to the level of his own poetic aim. How Shakespeare may have succeeded [145] in raising his players themselves to that level, must remain to us another riddle; the only certainty is, that our modern actors wreck their faculties at once upon the task he set. Possibly, what we above have called the grotesque affectation peculiar to English actors of nowadays is the remains of an earlier aptitude, and, springing from an inborn national idiosyncrasy, it may once have led, in the fairest age of English folk-life and through the contagious example of the poet himself, to so unheard a climax of the player's art that Shakespeare's conceptions could be realised thereby. If we are indisposed to assume so great a miracle however, we perhaps may explain this riddle by instancing the fate of great Sebastian Bach, whose difficult and prolific choral compositions tempt us at first to assume that the master had the most unrivalled vocal forces at command for their performance; whereas, on the contrary, we have unimpeachable documents to prove his complaints of the mostly altogether pitiable condition of his schoolboy choir. (2) Certain it is, that Shakespeare withdrew very early from his business with the stage; for which we may easily account by the immense fatigue the rehearsing of his pieces must have cost him, as also by the despair of a genius that towered high above the "possibility" of its surroundings. Yet the whole nature of this genius is explicable by nothing but that "possibility" itself, which assuredly existed in the nature of the mime, and was therefore very rightly presupposed by the genius; and, taking all the cultural efforts of the human spirit in one comprehensive survey, we may regard it as in a certain sense the task bequeathed to Shakespeare's aftercomers by the greatest Dramatist, to actually attain that highest possibility in the development of histrionic art.

To fulfil this task, appears to have been the inner aspiration of our great German poets. Starting, as here [146] was indispensable, with the recognition of Shakespeare's inimitability, every form in which they cast their poetic conceptions was dictated by an aim we can readily understand on this assumption. The search for the ideal Form of the highest work of art, the Drama, must necessarily lead them away from Shakespeare to a fresh and ever deeper consideration of Antique Tragedy; in what sense they thought to draw profit thence, we have explained before, and we had to see them turning from this more than dubious path to the strangely powerful impression made on them by the noblest products of a genre that yet appeared so highly enigmatic, the genre of Opera.

Here were two chief points of notice: firstly, that a great master's music lent the doings of even poor dramatic exponents an ideal charm, denied to the most admirable of actors in the spoken play; secondly, that a true dramatic talent could so ennoble even entirely worthless music, as to move us with a performance inachievable by the self-same talent in the recited drama. That this phenomenon must be accounted to nothing but the might of *Music*, was irrefutable. Yet this could apply to Music solely in the general, and it still remained incomprehensible how the dramatic poet was to approach the singularly paltry fabric of her forms without falling into a subjection of the very vilest sort—Now, we have appealed to Shakespeare to give us, if possible, a glimpse into the nature, and more especially the method, of the genuine dramatist Mysterious as we found the most part of this matter too, yet we saw that the poet was here entirely at one with the art of the mime; so that we now may call this mimetic art the life-dew wherein the poetic aim was to be steeped, to enable it, as in a magic transformation, to appear as the mirror of life. And if every action, each humblest incident of life displays itself, when reproduced by mimicry, in the transfiguring light and with the objective effect of a mirror-image (as is shewn not only by Shakespeare, but by every other sterling playwright), in further course we shall have to avow that this mirror-image, again, displays [147] itself in the transfiguration of purest Ideality so soon as it is dipped in the magic spring of Music and held up to us as nothing but pure Form, so to say, set free from all the realism of Matter.

'Tis not the *Form* of Music, therefore, but *the forms which music has evolved in history*, that we should have to consider before arguing to that highest possibility in the development of the latent powers of the mimo-dramatic artwork, that possibility which has hovered before the earnest seeker as a voiceless riddle, and yet a riddle crying out aloud for answer.

Music's Form, without a doubt, is synonymous with *Melody*; the latter's special evolution makes out the history of our music, just as its need determined the development of Lyric Drama, once attempted by the Italians, into the "Opera." If one meant to imitate the form of the Greek Tragedy, the first glance shewed it falling into two main sections, the choral chant and a dramatic recitation that mounted periodically to *melopöe*: so the "drama" proper was handed over to Recitative, whose oppressive monotony was at last to be broken by the academically-approved invention of the "Aria." In this last alone did Music here attain her independent Form, as Melody; and it therefore most rightly gained such a preponderance over the other factors of the musical drama, that the latter itself eventually sank to a mere pretext, a barren prop on which to hang the Aria. It thus is with the history of Melody chained to the Aria-form, that we should have to occupy ourselves, were it not sufficient for our present purpose to consider that one particular shape in which it offered itself to our great poets when they felt so deeply moved by its effect in general, but all the more bewildered at the thought of any poetic concern therewith. Beyond dispute it was always the particular genius, and he alone, who knew to put such life into this cramped and sterile cast of melody as to make it capable of that profound effect: consequently its expansion, its ideal unfolding, could be awaited from no one [148] but the Musician; and the line of this development was already to be traced, if one compared the masterpiece of Mozart with that of Gluck. And here the greater

store of musical invention turned out to be the unique measure of Music's dramatic capacity, since Mozart's "Don Juan" already displayed a wealth of dramatic characterisation whereof the far lesser musician Gluck could never have dreamt. But it still was reserved for the German genius to raise musical Form, by the utmost vitalising of its tiniest fraction, to the infinite diversity the music of our great *Beethoven* now offers to a wondering world.

Now, Beethoven's musical fashionings bear marks that leave them equally inexplicable as those of Shakespeare have remained to the inquiring poet. Whilst the power of effect in both must needs be felt as different at once and equal, upon a deeper scrutiny of its essence the very difference appears to us to vanish, for suddenly the one unsolved peculiarity affords the only explanation of the other. Let us select the peculiarity of the Humour, as that most swiftly seizable, and we discover that what often seems to us an unaccountable caprice in the sallies given off by Shakespeare's characters, in the corresponding turns of Beethoven's motive-moulding becomes a natural occurrence of the utmost ideality, to wit a melody that takes the mind by storm. We cannot but here assume a blood-relationship, which to correctly define we must seek it, not between the musician and the poet, but between the former and the poet-mime.

Whereas no poet of any artistic epoch can be compared with Beethoven, we find his fellowship with Shakespeare in the very fact that the latter, as poet, would forever remain to us a problem, could we not detect in him before all else the poet-mime. The secret lies in the directness of the presentation, here by mien and gesture, there by living tone. That which both directly mould and fashion is the actual Artwork, for which the Poet merely drafts the plan,—and that itself successfully, only when he has borrowed it from their own nature.

[149]

We have found that the Shakespearian Drama was definable the most intelligibly as a "fixed mimetic improvisation"; and as we had to suppose that this Art-work's high poetic value, resting in the first place on the elevation of its subject, must be ensured by the heightening of the *style* of that improvisation, we can scarcely go astray if we look for the possibility of such an utmost heightening in a mode of music which shall bear thereto the same relation as Beethoven's Music to just this Drama of Shakespeare's.

The very difficulty of thus applying Beethovenian Music to the Shakespearian Drama might lead, when conquered, to the utmost perfecting of musical Form, through its final liberation from each remaining fetter. What still distressed our great German poets in regard of Opera, and what still left its manifest traces on Beethoven's instrumental music,—that scaffolding which in nowise rested on the essence of Music, but rather on that selfsame tendency which planned the operatic aria and the ballet-tune,—this conventional four-square structure, so wondrously wreathed already with the luxuriant life of Beethovenian melody, would vanish quite away before an ideal ordering of highest freedom; so that Music now would take the ineffably vital shape of a Shakespearian drama, and its sublime irregularity, compared with the antique drama, would wellnigh give it the appearance of a nature-scene as against a work of architecture, a scene whose skilful measurement would be evinced by nothing but the unfailing sureness of the artwork's effect. And in this would lie withal the untold newness of this artwork's form: a form ideal alike and natural, and thus conceivable in no modern, racial language save the German, the most developed of them all; a form, on the other hand, which could be misconstrued only for so long as the artwork was measured by a standard it had thoroughly outgrown, whereas the new and fitting standard might haply be sought in the impression received by the fortunate hearers of one of [150] those unwritten impromptus of the most peerless of musicians. Then would the greatest dramatist have taught us to fix that impromptu too; for in the highest conceivable Artwork the sublimest inspirations of them both should live with an undying life, as the essence of the world displayed with clearness past all measure in the mirror of the world itself.

Now if we abide by this definition, "a mimo-musical improvisation, of consummate poetical value, fixed by the highest artistic care," we may find experience throw a startling light on the practical side of our Artwork's execution.—Taken in a very weighty sense, our great poets' prime concern was to furnish Drama with a heightened Pathos, and finally to discover the technical means of securely fixing its delivery. Markedly as Shakespeare had derived his style from the instinct of mimetic art, for the performance of his dramas he nevertheless stayed bound to the accidental greater or less degree of talent in his players, who all, in a sense, would have had to be Shakespeares, just as he was certainly at all times the whole character he personated; nor have we any reason to suppose that in the representations of his pieces his genius would have recognised aught beyond his own bare shadow cast across the boards. What so chained our own great poets' hopes to Music, was its being not only 'purest Form, but the most complete physical presentation of that Form; the abstract cypher of Arithmetic, the figure of Geometry, here steps before us in a shape that holds the Feeling past denial, to wit as Melody; and whereas the poetic diction of the written speech falls prey to every personal caprice of its reciter, the physical reproduction of this Melody can be fixed beyond all risk of error. What to Shakespeare was practically impossible, namely to be the mime of all his rôles, the tone-composer achieves with fullest certainty, for from out his each executant musician he speaks to us directly. Here the transmigration of the poet's soul into the body of the player takes place by laws of surest [151] technique, and the composer giving the beat (3) to a technically correct performance of his work becomes so entirely one with the executant that the nearest comparison would be that of a plastic artist and his work achieved in stone or colour, were it possible to speak of a metempsychosis into this lifeless matter.

If to this astounding might of the Musician we add that attribute of his art which we recognised at starting,—namely that even indifferent music, so long as it does not positively descend to the grotesque vulgarity of certain operatic genres in vogue to-day, enables a good dramatic artist to achieve results beyond his reach without it, as also that noble music virtually extorts from even inferior actors achievements of a type unreachable elsewhere at all,—we can scarcely doubt the reason of the utter dismay aroused in the Poet of our era who desires nobly to succeed in Drama with the only means at his disposal, that self-same speech in which to-day the very leading-articles address us. Precisely on this side, however, our hypothesis of the perfection destined for the Musically-conceived Drama should rather prove encouraging than the reverse, for its first effect would be to purge a great and many-sided genre of art, the Drama in general, from those errors which the modern Opera alike has heightened and exposed. To clear up this point, and at the same time to gain a survey of their future field of prosperous work, our dramatists perhaps might deem advisable to trace back the pedigree of the modern Theatre; not seeking its roots in Antique Drama, however, whose form is so distinctly a native product of the Hellenic spirit, its religion, ay, its State itself, that to assume the possibility of a modern imitation must necessarily lead to the gravest errors. No: the path of evolution of the Modern Theatre has such a wealth of products of the greatest worth to shew, that it fitly may be trodden farther without shame. The [152] thorough "stage-piece," in the modernest of senses, assuredly would have to form the basis, and the only sound one, of all future dramatic efforts: for success in this, however, the very first essential is to rightly grasp the spirit of theatric art, which rests upon mimetic art itself, and to use it, not for the bolstering-up of tendencies, but for the mirroring of scenes from actual life. The French, who not so long ago did admirably in this line, were certainly content to not expect a brand-new Molière every year; nor for ourselves would the birthdays of new Shakespeares be recorded in each calendar.

Coming at last to the contentment of ideal aspirations, from the working of that all-powerful dramatic Artwork itself we might see, with greater certainty than has hitherto been possible, the length to which such aspirations were justified in going. Their boundary

would be found at the exact point in that Artwork where Song is thrusting toward the spoken Word. By this we in no sense imply an absolutely lowly sphere, but a sphere entirely different, distinct in kind; and we may gain an instant notion of this difference, if we call to mind certain instinctive transgressions on the part of our best dramatic singers, when in the full flow of song they have felt driven to literally *speak* a crucial word. To this, for example, the Schröder-Devrient found herself impelled by the cumulative horror of a situation in the opera "Fidelio"; in the sentence "one further step and thou art—*dead*," where she aims the pistol at the tyrant, with an awful accent of desperation she suddenly *spoke* the closing word. The indescribable effect upon the hearer was that of a headlong plunge from one sphere to the other, and its sublimity consisted in our being given, as by a lightning-flash, a glimpse into the nature of both spheres at once, the one the ideal, the other the real. Plainly, for one moment the ideal was unable to bear a certain load, and discharged it on the other: seeing how fond people are of ascribing to Music, particularly of the passionate and stirring type, a simply pathologic character, it may surprise them to discover through this [153] very instance how delicate and purely ideal is her actual sphere, since the material terror of reality can find no place therein, albeit the soul of all things real in it alone finds pure expression.—Manifestly then, there is a side of the world, and a side that concerns us most seriously, whose terrible lessons can be brought home to our minds on none but a field of observation where Music has to hold her tongue: this field perhaps may best be measured if we allow Shakespeare, the stupendous mime, to lead us on it as far as that point we saw him reach with the desperate fatigue we assumed as reason for his early withdrawal from the stage. And that field might be best defined, if not exactly as the soil, at least as the phenomena of History. To portray its material features for the benefit of human knowledge, must always remain the Poet's task.

So weighty and clearing an influence as this that we here could only undertake to sketch in broadest outline—an influence not merely upon its nearest relatives in Drama, but upon every branch of Art whose deepest roots connect with Drama—most certainly could never be made possible to our "Musically-conceived-and-carried-out Dramatic Artwork" until that Artwork could present itself to the public in an outward garb entirely corresponding with its inner nature, and thus facilitate the needful lack of bias in the judgment of its qualities. 'Tis so closely allied to "Opera," that for our present purpose we might justly term it the fulfilment of the Opera's destiny: not one of the said possibilities would ever have dawned on us, had it not already come to light in Opera, in general, and in the finest works of great Opera-composers in particular. Quite surely, too, it was solely the spirit of Music, whose ever ampler evolution so influenced the Opera as to enable those possibilities to arise therein. Once more then, if we wish to account for the degradation to which the Opera has been brought, we certainly must seek its reason in the attributes of Music herself. Just as in Painting, and even in Architecture, the "piquant" has taken the place of the "beautiful," so was it doomed that [154] Music should turn from a sublime into a merely pleasing art. Though her sphere was that of purest ideality, and her effect on our mind so deeply calming and emancipating from all the anguish of reality, through her displaying herself as nothing but pure Form,—so that whatever threatened to disturb the latter, either fell away of itself, or had to be held aloof from her—this very unmixed Form, when set in a relation not completely suitable, might easily pass current for a mere agreeable toy; thus, once set in so indefinite a sphere as that on which the Opera rested, it could be employed in this sense alone, and finally be made to serve as a mere surface fillip to the ear or feeling.

On this point, however, we have the less need to dwell just now, as we started from the outcry raised against the Opera and its influence, whose ill effect we can express no better than by pointing to the notorious fact that the Theatre has long been given over to an intense neglect by all the truly cultured in the nation, though once they set great hopes thereon.

Wherefore, as we cannot but desire to bring our suggested Artwork to the only notice of profit to it, namely of those who have turned with grave displeasure from the Theatre of to-day, it follows that we must shun all contact with that Theatre itself. But although the neutral ground for this must locally be quite cut off from our theatres' field of action, it could prove fruitful only if it drew its nurture from the actual elements of mimetic and musical art that have already developed in their own fashion at the theatres. In these alone consists, and will consist, the truly fertile material for genuine dramatic art; each attempt in other directions would lead, instead of Art, to a posing Artificiality. 'Tis our actors, singers and bandmen, on whose innate instinct must rest all hope of the attainment of even artistic ends as yet beyond their understanding; for it is they to whom those ends will become clear the swiftest, so soon as their instinct is rightly guided to a knowledge of them. That this instinct has been led by the tendency of our theatres to the exclusive [155] development of the worst propensities in the profession,—it is this that needs must make us wish to snatch these irreplaceable artistic forces at least periodically from the influence of that tendency, and give them such a means of exercising their own good qualities as would rapidly and surely fit them for the realising of our Artwork. For only from the natural will of this mimetic fellowship, cutting so sorry a figure in its present misdirection, can issue now—as from of old have issued the best of things dramatic—the perfect Drama meant by us. Less by them, than by those who without the slightest calling have hitherto conducted them, has the downfall of the theatric art of our era been brought to pass. To name in one word what on German soil has shewn, and goes on proving itself least worthy of the fame of our great victories of to-day, we have only to point to this *Theatre*, whose tendency avows itself aloud and brazen the betrayer of German honour. Whoso should link himself to this tendency in any shape or form, must needs fall victim to a misconception that would assign him to a sphere of our publicity of the most questionable nature, whence to rise to the pure sphere of Art would be about as difficult and fatiguing as to arrive from Opera at what we have termed the Ideal Drama. Certain it is, however, that if Art has fallen solely through the artists,—according to Schiller's saying, here not exactly accurate,—it can be *raised again by the artists alone*, and not by those who have dishonoured it with their favour. *But to help forward from without, as well, that restoration of Art by the artists, would be the fitting national expiation for the national sin of our present German Theatre.*

Notes

Note 1 on page 9

Ed. Devrient's "*Geschichte der deutschen Schauspielkunst*."—Tr.

Note 2 on page 15

A story, now become a commonplace among musicians, tells us how the master contrived to get his excessively difficult works performed at all: it concerns one of Bach's former choristers, who made the strange confession, "first he thrashed us, and then—it sounded horrible."—R. WAGNER.

Note 3 on page 18

It is all-important that this beat should be the right one, however, for a false tempo will undo the spell at once; as to which I have therefore expressed myself at length elsewhere.—R. WAGNER.