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About this Title

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Translator's Note

The following article originally appeared in the Bayreuther Blätter for October 1878.
THIS title may serve to introduce a general survey of those relations and connections in which we find the artistically and poetically productive individual placed towards the social community assigned to him as representant of the human race for the time being, and which we to-day may call the Public. Among them we at once remark a pair of opposites: either public and artist fit each other, or they absolutely do not. In the latter case the Historic-scientific critic will always lay the blame upon the artist, and pronounce him unfit for anything; for it thinks it has proofs that no pre-eminent individual can ever be aught save the product of his spacial and temporal surroundings, of his day in fact, that historic period of the human race's evolution into which he happens to be thrown. The correctness of such an assertion seems undeniable; merely it fails to explain why, the more considerable that individual, in the greater contradiction has he stood with his time. And this cannot be so lightly disposed of. To cite the sublimest of all examples, the cotemporary world most certainly did not comport itself toward Jesus Christ as though it had nursed him at its breast and delighted in acknowledging him its fittest product. Plainly, Time and Space prepare us great perplexities. If it indeed is impossible to conceive a more fitting place and time for Christ's appearance, than Galilee and the years of his mission; and if it is obvious that a German university of the "now-time," for instance, would have offered our Redeemer no particular facilitation: on the other hand we may recall the cry of Schopenhauer at Giordano Bruno's fate, that stupid monks of the blessed Renaissance era should have brought to the stake in fair Italy a man who on the Ganges, at the selfsame date, would have been honoured as wise and holy.

Without going into the trials and sufferings of great minds in every age and country, too plainly visible, and consequently without touching on their deeper cause, we here will only note that their relation to their surroundings has always been of tragic nature; and the human race will have to recognise this, if it is ever to come to knowledge of itself. True religion may already have enabled it to do so; whence the eternal eagerness of the generality to rid itself of such belief.

For us, our first concern must be to trace the tragedy of that relation to the individual's subjection to the rules of time and place; whereby we may find those two factors assuming so strong a semblance of reality as almost to upset the "Criticism of Pure Reason," (1) which ascribes to Time and Space no existence but in our brain. In truth it is this pair of tyrants that give great minds the look of sheer anomalies, nay, solecisms, at which the generality may jeer with a certain right, as if to please the Time and Space it serves.

If in a review of the course of history we go by nothing but its ruling laws of gravity, that pressure and counter-pressure which bring forth shapes akin to those the surface of the earth presents, the welningh sudden outcrop of overtopping mental heights must often make us ask upon what plan these minds were moulded. And then we are bound to presuppose a law quite other, concealed from eyes historical, ordaining the mysterious sequence of a spiritual life whose acts are guided by denial of the world and all its history. For we observe that the very points at which these minds make contact with their era and surroundings, become the starting-points of errors and embarrassments in their own utterance: so that it is just the influences of Time, which involve them in a fate so tragical that precisely where the work of intellectual giants appears intelligible to their era, it proves of no account for the higher mental life; and only a later generation, arrived at knowledge through the very lead that remained unintelligible to the contemporaneous world, can seize the import of their [87] revelations. Thus the seasonable, in the works of a great spirit, would also be the
questionable.

Instances will make this clear. Plato's surrounding world was eminently political; entirely apart therefrom did he conceive his theory of Ideas, which has only been properly appreciated and scientifically matured in quite recent times: (2) applied to the spirit of his day and world, however, he bent this theory into a political system of such amazing monstrosity that it caused the greatest stir, indeed, but at like time the gravest confusion as to the real substance of his major doctrine. On the Ganges he would never have fallen into this particular error about the nature of the State; in Sicily, in fact, it served him badly. What his epoch and surrounding did for the manifestation of this rare spirit was therefore not exactly to his advantage; so that it would be absurd to view his genuine teaching, the theory of Ideas, as a product of his time and world.

A second case is that of Dante. In so far as his great poem was a product of his time, to us it seems almost repulsive; but it was simply through the realism wherewith it painted the superstitious fancies of the Middle Ages, that it roused the notice of the cotemporary world. Emancipated from the fancies of that world, and yet attracted by the matchless power of their portrayal, we feel a wellnigh painful wrench at having to overcome it before the lofty spirit of the poet can freely act upon us as a world-judge of the purest ideality,—an effect as to which it is most uncertain that even posterity has always rightly grasped it. Wherefore Dante appears to us a giant condemned by the influences of his time to awe-compelling solitude.

To call to mind one further instance, let us take great Calderon, whom we assuredly should judge quite wrongly if we regarded him as product of the Jesuit tenets prevailing in the Catholicism of his day. Yet it is manifest that, although the master's profundity of insight leaves the Jesuit world-view far behind, that view so strongly influences [88] the outward texture of his works that we have first to overcome this impression, to clearly seize the majesty of his ideas. An expression as pure as the ideas themselves was impossible to the poet who had to set his dramas before a public that could only be led to their deeper import by use of the Jesuitic precepts in which it had been brought up.

Admitting that the great Greek Tragedians were so fortunate in their surroundings that the latter rather helped to create, than hindered their works, we can only call it an exceptional phenomenon, and one which to many a recent critic already appears a fable. For our eyes this harmonious conjunction has fallen just as much into the rut of things condemned by Space and Time to insufficiency, as every other product of the creative human mind. Precisely as we have had to allow for the conditions of time and place with Plato, Dante and Calderon, we need them to complete a picture of Attic Tragedy, which even at its prime had quite a different effect at Syracuse to that it had at Athens. And here we touch the crux of our inquiry. For we now perceive that the same temporal surrounding which was injurious to a great spirit's manifestation, on the other hand supplied the sole conditions for the physical presentment of its product; so that, removed from its time and surroundings, that product is robbed of the weightiest part of its effect. This is proved distinctly by the attempts at resurrection of these selfsame Attic tragedies upon our modern boards. If we are obliged to get time and place, with their manners and particularly their State and Religion, explained to us by scholars who often know nothing at all of the subject, we may be sure we have forever lost the clue to something that once came to light in another age and country. There the poetic aim of great minds appears to have been fully realised through the time and place of their life being so attuned as almost palpably to conjure up that aim itself.

But the nearer we approach affairs within our own experience, [89] especially in the province of Art, the smaller grows the prospect of harmonious relations even distantly akin. The fact of the great Renaissance painters having to treat such ghastly subjects as tortured martyrs, and the like, has already been deplored by Goethe; into the character of their patrons and bespeakers we have no need to inquire, nor into the reason why great poets starved at
times. Though this happened to great Cervantes, yet his work found widespread popularity at once; and it is the latter point we must deal with, seeing that we here are discussing the detrimental influences of time and place upon the form and fashion of the artwork itself.

In this respect we notice that, the more seasonably a producer trimmed his work, the better did he fare. Till this day it never occurs to a Frenchman to draft a play for which theatre, public and performers, are not on hand already. A perfect study in successful adaptation to circumstances is offered by the genesis of all Italian operas, Rossini's in particular. With every new edition of his novels our Gutzkow announces revisions in step with the latest events of the age.—Now take the obverse, the fate of such works and authors as have not caught the trick of time and place. The front rank must be given to works of dramatic art, and especially those set to music; since the mutability of musical taste emphatically decides their fate, whereas the recited drama does not own so penetrant a method of expression as to violently affect an altered taste. In Mozart's operas we may plainly see that the quality which lifted them above their age, also doomed them to live beyond their age, when the living conditions that governed their conception and execution are no more. From this singular fate all other works of the Italian school of Opera were saved; not one has outlived the time to which alone it belonged, and whence it sprang. With the "Nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni" 'twas otherwise: it is impossible to regard these works as destined merely for the wants of a few Italian Opera seasons; the seal of immortality was stamped upon them. Immortality!—A [90] fatal boon! To what torments of being is the departed soul of such a masterwork exposed, when dragged to earth again by a modern theatrical medium for the pleasure of a later generation! If we attend a performance of "Figaro" or "Don Juan" to-day, would we not rather nurse the tender memory that it once had lived with full strong life, than see it hustled through an existence wholly strange to it, as one resuscitated for maltreatment?

In these works of Mozart's the elements of the flowering-time of Italian musical taste combine with the spacial conditions of the Italian Opera-house to form a very definite entity, in which the spirit of the close of the eighteenth century is charmingly and beautifully expressed. Outside these conditions, and transplanted to our present time and milieu, the eternal part of these creations undergoes a disfigurement which we seek in vain to cloak by fresh disguise and adaptations of its outward form. How could it ever occur to us to wish to alter anything in "Don Giovanni" for instance—a course deemed requisite by almost every enthusiast for this glorious work at one time or another—if the figure it cut upon our boards did not actually pain us? Almost every operatic regisseur has at some time attempted to trim "Don Juan" to the day; whereas every intelligent person should reflect that not this work must be altered to fit our times, but ourselves to the times of "Don Juan," if we are to arrive at harmony with Mozart's creation. To mark the futility of all attempts at reviving this particular work, I do not even touch on our altogether inappropriate means of performance; I pass over the disastrous effect on the German public of German translations of the Italian text, as also the impossibility of replacing the so-called "recitativo parlando"; and I will assume that we had succeeded in training a troupe of Italians for a perfectly correct performance of "Don Giovanni": looking from the stage to the audience, we should only find ourselves in the wrong place—a shock we are spared by our utter inability to imagine such an ideal performance at the present day.

Still more plainly does all this shew forth in the fate of [91] the "Magic Flute." The circumstances in which this work came to light were this time of poor and petty sort; here it was no question of writing for a firstrate Italian troupe of singers the finest thing that could anywhere be set before them, but of descending from the sphere of a highly developed and richly tended art-genre to the level of a showplace for Viennese buffoons where music had hitherto been of the very humblest. That Mozart's creation so immeasurably exceeded the demands addressed to him that here no individual, but a whole genus of the most surprising
novelty seemed born, we must take as the reason why this work stands solitary and assignable to no age whatsoever. Here the eternal and meet for every age and people (I need but point to the dialogue between Tamino and the Speaker) is so indissolubly bound up with the absolutely trivial tendency of a piece expressly reckoned by the playwright for the vulgar plaudits of a Viennese suburban theatre, that it requires the aid of an historical commentary to understand and approve the whole in its accidental dress. Analysis of the various factors of this work affords us speaking proof of the aforesaid tragic fate of the creative spirit condemned to a given time and place for the conditions of its activity. To save himself from bankruptcy, the manager of a Viennese suburban theatre commissions the greatest musician of his day to help him out with a spectacular piece designed to hit the taste of its habitual public; to the text supplied Mozart sets music of eternal beauty. But this beauty is inextricably embedded in the work of that director, and—waiving all affectation—it remains truly intelligible to none but that suburban audience of Vienna for whose ephemeral taste it was intended. If we would rightly judge and perfectly enjoy the "Zauberflöte," we must get one of the spiritualistic wizards of to-day to transport us to the Theater an der Wien in the year of its first production. Or do you think a modern performance at the Berlin Court-theatre would have the same effect?

Verily the ideality of Time and Space is sorely tried by such considerations, and we finally should have to regard them as the densest of realities, compared with the ideality [92] of the artwork proper, did we not detect beneath their abstract forms the concrete Public and its attributes. The diversity of the public of the selfsame time and nation I tried to indicate in my previous articles; in the present I have sought to prove a like diversity in time and place, yet will leave untouched the tendencies peculiar to each age and nation, if only from fear of losing myself in fanciful assumptions—as to the artistic tendencies of the newest German Reich, for instance, which I probably should rate too high were I misled by personal considerations into measuring them by the action of the Director-in-chief of the four North-German Court-theatres. (3) Nor, having taken our theme on its broadest lines, should I care to let it dwindle into a question of mere local differences, though I myself have experienced a remarkable instance of their determinant weight, in the fate of my Tannhäuser in Paris; whistled out of the Grand Opéra (for good reasons!), in the opinion of qualified judges at a house less ruled by its stock public my modest evening-star might perchance have still been twinkling in the French metropolis beside the sun of Gounod's "Faust."

More serious aspects of the public varying in time and space were those that crowded to my mind when seeking to account for the fate of Liszt's music; and as it was these that furnished the real incentive to my present inquiry, I think best to close it with a discussion of them. This time it was a fresh hearing of Liszt's Dante Symphony that revived the problem, what place in our art-world should be allotted to a creation as brilliant as it is masterly. Shortly before I had been busy reading the Divine Comedy, and again had revolved all the difficulties in judging this work which I have mentioned above; to me that tone-poem of Liszt's now appeared the creative act of a redeeming genius, freeing Dante's unspeakably pregnant intention from the [93] inferno of his superstitions by the purifying fire of musical ideality, and setting it in the paradise of sure and blissful feeling. Here the soul of Dante's poem is shewn in purest radiance. Such redeeming service even Michael Angelo could not render to his great poetic master; only after Bach and Beethoven had taught our music to wield the brush and chisel of the mighty Florentine, could Dante's true redemption be achieved.

This work has remained as good as unknown to our age and its public. One of the most astounding deeds of music, not even the dullest admiration has as yet been accorded it. In an earlier letter upon Liszt (4) I tried to state the outer grounds of the German musician's abominable ill-will toward Liszt's appearance as creative composer: they need not detain us.
to-day; who knows the German Concert-world with its heroes from General to Corporal, knows also with what a mutual insurance-company for the talentless he here has to do. No, we will merely take this work of Liszt's and its fellows to shew by their very character their unseasonableness in the time and space of the inert present. Plainly these conceptions of Liszt's are too potent for a public that lets Faust be conjured up for it at the Opera by the sickly Gounod, in the Concert-room by the turgid Schumann. (5) Not that we would blame the public: it has a right to be what it is, especially as under the lead of its present guides it cannot be otherwise. We simply ask how conceptions like Liszt's could arise amid such circumstances of time and place. Assuredly in something each great mind is influenced by those conditions of time and place; nay, we have seen them even confuse the greatest. In the present case I at last have traced these active influences to the remarkable advance of leading minds in France during the two decades enclosing the year 1830. Parisian society at that time offered such definite and characteristic instigations to its [94] statesmen, scholars, writers, poets, painters, sculptors and musicians, that a lively fancy might easily imagine it condensed into an audience before whom a Faust- or Dante-Symphony might be set without fear of paltry misconstructions. In Liszt's courage to pen these compositions I believe I detect as determining cause the incitations of that time and local centre, nay, even their special character—and highly do I rate them, though it needed a genius such as Liszt's, superior to all time and space, to win a work eternal from those promptings, however badly it may fare just now at Leipzig or Berlin.—

To take a last look back upon the picture afforded us by the Public astir in Time and Space, we might compare it with a river, as to which we must decide whether we will swim against or with its stream. Who swims with it, may imagine he belongs to constant progress; 'tis so easy to be borne along, and he never notes that he is being swallowed in the ocean of vulgarity. To swim against the stream, must seem ridiculous to those not driven by an irresistible force to the immense exertions that it costs. Yet we cannot stem the rushing stream of life, save by steering toward the river's source. We shall have our fears of perishing; but in our times of direst stress we are rescued by a leap to daylight: the waves obey our call, and wondering the flood stands still a moment, as when for once a mighty spirit speaks unawaited to the world. Again the dauntless swimmer dives below; not life, but life's true fount, is what he thrusts for. Who, once that source attained, could wish to plunge again into the stream? From sunny heights he gazes down upon the distant world-sea with its monsters all destroying one another. What there destroys itself, shall we blame him if he now disowns it?

But what will the "public" say?—I fancy the play is over, and folk are taking leave.—
Notes

Note 1 on page 7

Kant's.—Tr.

Note 2 on page 8

By Schopenhauer.—Tr.

Note 3 on page 10

Berlin, Hanover, Cassel and Wiesbaden. Not till 1881 was the *Ring des Nibelungen* performed in the German metropolis, and then in the little Victoria-theatre by Neumann’s travelling company, conducted by Anton Seidl, the Intendant of the Berlin Court-theatre (von Hülsen) having declined to permit a performance at his own establishment saving under the bâton of his own incompetent conductors.—Tr.

Note 4 on page 10

Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen, vol. v.—R. WAGNER.—Vol. III. of the present series.—Tr.

Note 5 on page 11

During a performance of the Dante Symphony in Leipzig, at a drastic passage in the first movement a piteous cry was heard from the audience: "Ei! Herr Jesus!"—R. WAGNER.
Summary

Genius more than mere product of its surroundings, or why should contemporary world reject it? Sublimest instance in Jesus Christ; Giordano Bruno burnt by Renaissance monks. Tragedy of great minds their subjection to rules of time and place, whereas their birth is governed by mysterious laws of a suprasecular life (86). Plato and his political error; Dante and medieval superstitions; Calderon and the Jesuit tenets. Surroundings of Greek Tragedians rather helped, than hindered, their creative work; but attempts to place those dramas on our stage shew that we have lost the clue to something that once conditioned them in another age and country (88). Italian painters and their patrons; Cervantes starving; Frenchmen never think of writing a play that has not its public ready for it, and so with Italian Opera—e.g. Rossini. What lifted Mozart's operas above their age doomed them to live on when each condition of their performance has vanished: *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, but in particular the *Magic Flute* (91). Leaving aside mere local differences in present public, we come to problem of Liszt's symphonic poems: his *Dante*-symphony the redemption of the soul of the Divine Comedy from all its superstitions, but not the dullest admiration has it gained; for whom could he have written it? Plainly for an ideal public, conjured up by the active stir in leading minds of Paris in 1820-40.—The Public is a river rushing to the sea of Vulgarity: who aims at higher things, must steer his course against the stream (94).