
On the Application of Music to the Drama

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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[174]

Translator's Note

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[175]

On the Application of Music to the Drama

MY last [article on Opera-writing](#) contained an allusion to the necessary difference in musical style between a dramatic and a purely-musical composition. I now should like to put this plainer, as it seems to me that one thus might rectify great misconceptions both in the judgment of music and, more particularly, in our composers' ideas of production. I spoke of "bunglers" who needlessly indulge in strange and startling modulation, and of "senators" who are unable to perceive the necessity of apparent extravagances in that department. The euphemism "Senator" was furnished me at a critical moment by Shakespeare's "Iago," who wished to avoid the application of an epithet from the animal world to a person of official status (1); in a similar predicament of respect towards art-scientific worthies I will in future employ the more becoming term "Professor." The weighty question here involved, however, had better be discussed without any reference to "Professors," purely among artists and true, i.e. unsalaried friends of art; to such alone I therefore propose to address the following upshot of my experiences and meditations in the exercise of my artistic calling.

As Example always teaches best, I at once adduce a speaking instance from art-history: namely that Beethoven shews such daring in his symphonies, such caution in his (only) opera, "Fidelio." The cramping structure then accepted as the mould of Opera I assigned in my preceding essay as the reason of the master's turning a sullen back on further attempts with the dramatic genre. Why he did not seek to broaden the whole style of Opera itself into correspondence with his mighty genius, was manifestly that he found no instigation in the only case that [176] lay before him; that he did not strive to gain him such a stimulus by hook or crook, we must explain by the all-unknown New having already opened up to him as Symphonist. If we watch him in the fulness of his innovating force, we can but recognise that he fixed for once and all the character of independent Instrumental-music by the plastic barriers his impetuous genius never overstepped itself. Let us now endeavour to perceive and understand these barriers, not as limitations, but conditions of the Beethovenian Artwork.

I have called these barriers plastic: I will further denote them the pillars through whose ordering, as symmetrical as to the purpose, the Symphonic edifice is bounded, borne, and made distinct. In the construction of the symphonic Movement, all ready-planned by Haydn, Beethoven altered nothing; and for the same reason that forbids an architect to displace the columns of a building at discretion, or to use forsooth the horizontal parts as vertical. If it was a conventional order, the very nature of the artwork had dictated that convention; for the basis of the Symphonic artwork is the Dance-tune. It is impossible for me to here repeat what I have said upon this theme in earlier essays, and, as I believe, established. Merely I would point once more to the character stamped for good and all on the Haydn and Beethoven Symphony by that foundation. Dramatic pathos is completely excluded, so that the most intricate involvements of the thematic motives in a symphonic movement could never be explained on the analogy of a dramatic action, but solely by the mazes of an ideal dance, without a suspicion of rhetorical dialectics. Here there is no "conclusion," no problem, no solution. Wherefore also these Symphonies bear one and all the character of lofty glee (*Heiterkeit*). Never are two themes of diametrically opposite character confronted here; diverse as they may seem, they always supplement each other as the manly and the womanly element of one whole character. Yet the undreamt variety in which these elements may break, re-form, and re-unite [177] with one another, is proved to demonstration by such a Beethovenian Movement: the first in the Eroica reveals this to the absolute bewildering of the uninitiate, although to the initiate this movement bares the unity of its root-character the most convincingly of all

It has been very rightly remarked that Beethoven's innovations are far rather to be sought on the field of rhythmic distribution, than on that of harmonic modulation. Remote changes of key are scarcely used except in wanton fun, whereas we find an invincible power of constantly reshaping rhythmic-plastic motives, of ordering and ranging them in ever richer piles. Here we light, so it seems, on the line of cleavage of the Symphonist from the Dramatist. Mozart was new and startling to his cotemporaries through his love of daring flights in modulation, inspired by deepest need: we know their horror at the harmonic acridities in the introduction to that Quartet which he dedicated to Haydn. Here, as in so many characteristic passages, where the contrapuntal theme is raised to the expression of anguished yearning through an ascending series of accented suspending-notes, the craving to exhaust all Harmonic possibilities appears to border on dramatic pathos. In effect it was from the realm of dramatic music, already widened by himself to undreamt capability of expression, that Mozart first entered on the Symphony; for those few symphonic works of his whose peculiar worth has kept them living to this day, we owe to that creative period when he had fully unfolded his genius as Opera-composer. To the composer of "Figaro" and "Don Giovanni" the framework of the symphonic movement only offered a curb on that mobile love of figure-painting (*gestaltungsfrohe Beweglichkeit*) which had found such congenial scope in the passionately changeful situations of those dramatic drafts. Viewing his art as Symphonist a little closer, we observe that here he shines by wellnigh nothing save the beauty of his themes, whilst in their application and refashioning he distinguishes himself merely as a practised contrapuntist; to breathe life into [178] connecting links he missed the accustomed dramatic stimulus. Now, his dramatic art of music had really fed on nothing but the so-called *Opera buffa*, the melodic comedy; true "Tragedy" was still a stranger to him, and only in single lofty features, as *Donna Anna* and the *Marble Guest*, had she turned on him her quickening countenance, Was he seeking for it in the Symphony? Who shall answer for the latent parts and possible developments of a genius who passed his earthly life, itself so brief, beneath the scalpel of the vivisector?

But now the Tragic Muse has actually laid hands on Opera. Mozart knew her only in the mask of Metastasio's "*Opera seria*": stiff and arid—"Clemenza di Tito." Her true visage she appears to have but gradually unveiled to us: Beethoven saw it not yet, and abode by "*his way*." I believe I may aver that, with the advent of full earnestness in the conception of Tragedy and the realising of the Drama, quite new necessities arose for Music; requirements which we must accurately measure against those demanded of the Symphonist in preservation of the pureness of his art-style.

Though the absolute Instrumental-composer found no musical forms to hand save those in which he originally had had to "strike up," more or less, for the enlivenment or even the encouragement of others at festal dances and marches; and if this formed the basal character of the Symphonic artwork, at first compounded of such Dance and March tunes, which dramatic pathos could only confuse by the posing of questions without a possibility of answers: yet certain vividly-gifted instrumentalists nursed the irrepressible desire to enlarge the bounds of musical form and expression by superscribing their pieces with a dramatic incident, and endeavouring to present it to the imagination through purely musical means. The reasons why a pure artistic style could never be attained on this path, have doubtless been discerned in course of the manifold attempts thereon; but to us it seems that the [179] admirable service thus rendered by exceptionally gifted musicians has not yet been sufficiently regarded. The excesses to which his guardian dæmon drove a Berlioz were nobly tempered by the incomparably more artistic genius of Liszt to the expression of soul and world events too great for words; and to the disciples of their art it might appear that a new

order of composition was placed at their immediate disposal. In any case it was astonishing to see what boundless faculties sheer Instrumental-music had acquired under guidance of a dramatic synopsis. Theretofore the Overture to an opera, or play, alone had offered occasion for the employment of purely musical means of expression in a form departing from the Symphonic movement. Beethoven himself had here proceeded very circumspectly: feeling impelled to introduce an actual stage-effect in the middle of his Leonora-overture, he still repeated the first section of the tone-piece, with the customary change of key, exactly as in a symphonic movement—heedless that the dramatic excitement of the middle section, reserved for thematic working-out, had already led us to expect the dénouement; a manifest drawback to the receptive hearer. Far more concisely, and in a dramatic sense correctly, did Weber plan his Freischütz-overture, where the so-called middle section rushes on at once to the conclusion through a drastic climax in the thematic conflict. Now, though in the larger Programme works of the more recent tone-poets named above we find clear traces of the Symphony-construction proper—indelible for natural reasons,—in the fashioning of the themes, their contrast and remodelling, there already appears a passionate and 'eccentric' character such as pure Symphonic instrumental-music seemed called to hold entirely aloof; indeed the Programmist felt bound to give this eccentric characterisation particularly high relief, as a poetic shape or episode was always present to his mind, and he believed he could not set it plain enough before, as it were, the eye. At last this obligation led to downright melodrama-music, with pantomime to be supposed, and quite [180] consistently to instrumental recitatives—whilst horror at the pulverising formlessness filled all the critical world; so that nothing really remained, but to help the new form of Musical Drama itself to light of day from such birth-agonies.—

This latter is as little to be compared with the older Operatic form, as the newer instrumental-music conducting to it is to be likened with the Classic Symphony, become impossible to our composers. But we will defer for a while our inquiry into that so-called "Musikdrama," and first cast a glance on the "classical" instrumental-composition of our latest times, all unaffected by that process of gestation; we shall find that this "classic survival" is an empty pretence, and has planted beside our great Classic masters a highly unattractive hybrid from "I would", and "Yet I cannot."

That Programme-music, on which "we" looked with timid glances from the corner of our eye, had imported so much novelty in harmonisation, theatrical and landscape effects, nay, historical painting; and had worked it all out with such striking brilliance, in power of an uncommonly virtuosic art of instrumenting, that to continue in the earlier style of Classic Symphony one lacked alas! the Beethoven who would have known how to make the best of it. "We" held our tongues. When at last we took heart to open our symphonic mouth again, just to show what still was in us, we found we had grown so turgid and wearisome that there was nothing for it but to deck ourselves with fallen feathers from the Programme petrel. In our symphonies, and that sort of thing, all now goes world-distraught and catastrophic; we are gloomy and grim, then mettlesome and daring; we yearn for the fulfilment of youthful dreams; dæmonic obstacles encompass us; we brood, we even rave: and then the world-ache's tooth is drawn; we laugh, and humorously shew the world its gaping gum; brisk, sturdy, blunt, Hungarian or Scotch, (2); —alas! to others dreary. To [181] be serious: we cannot believe that a happy future has been secured to instrumental music by the creations of its latest masters; above all, it must be bad for us to reck lesslytack on these works to the legacy of Beethoven, in view of the utter un-Beethovenism which we ought, on the contrary, to be taught to discern in them—a lesson that should not come so very hard in the matter of kinship to the Beethovenian spirit, in spite of all the Beethovenian themes we here meet once again; though in the matter of form it could scarcely be easy to the pupils of our Conservatoires, as under the rubric of "Æsthetic Forms" they are giving nothing but a list of different composers'

names, and left to form a judgment for themselves without further comparison.

The said symphonic compositions of our newest school—let us call it the Romantic-classical—are distinguished from the wild-stock of our so-called Programme-music not only by the regretted absence of a programme, but in especial by a certain clammy cast of melody which its creators have transplanted from their heretofore retiring "Chamber-music." To the "Chamber," in fact, one had withdrawn. Alas! not to the homely room where Beethoven once poured into the ears of few and breathless friends all that Unutterable he kept for understanding here alone, instead of in the ample hall-space where he spoke in none but plastic masses to the Folk, to all mankind: in this hallowed "chamber" silence long had reigned; for one now must hear the master's so-called "last" Quartets and Sonatas either badly, as men played them, or not at all—till the way at last was shewn by certain outlawed renegades, and one learnt what that chamber-music really said. No, those had already moved *their* chamber to the concert-hall: what had previously been dressed as Quintets and the like, was now served up as Symphony: little chips of melody, like an infusion of hay and old tea-leaves, with nothing to tell you what you are swallowing but the label "Best"; and all for the acquired taste of World-ache.—On the whole, however, [182] the newer tendency to the eccentric, the requiring-a-programme, retained the upper hand. With fine discernment Mendelssohn had gone to Nature for his subjects, and executed them as a kind of landscape epic: he had travelled much, and brought home many a thing that others could not lightly come by. But the latest phase, is to take the cabinet-pictures of our local Exhibitions and set them to music straightway; enabling one to seize those quaint instrumental effects which are now at everyone's command, disguise embezzled melodies in harmonisations that are a constant surprise, and play the outcome to the world as Plastic music.

The results of our survey may be summed up as follows:—

Pure Instrumental-music, no longer content with the legalised form of the Classical Symphonic Movement, sought to extend her powers in every respect, and found them easily increased by poet's fancies; the reactionary party was unable to fill that Classic form with life, and saw itself compelled to borrow for it from the wholly alien, thereby distorting it. Whilst the first direction led to the winning of new aptitudes, and the second merely exposed ineptitudes, it became evident that the further evaluation of those aptitudes was only to be saved from boundless follies, threatening serious damage to the spirit of Music, by openly and undisguisedly turning that line itself towards the *Drama*. What there remained unutterable, could here be spoken definitely and plainly, and thereby "Opera" redeemed withal from the curse of her unnatural descent. And it is here, in what we may call for short the "Musical Drama," that we reach sure ground for calmly reckoning the application of Music's new-won faculties to the evolution of noble, inexhaustible artistic forms.

The science of Æsthetics has at all times laid down Unity as a chief requirement from the artwork. In the abstract this Unity is difficult to dialectically define, and its misapprehension has led to many and grave mistakes. [183] It comes out the plainest in the perfect artwork itself, for it is it that moves us to unbroken interest, and keeps the broad impression ever present. Indisputably this result is the most completely attained by the living represented drama; wherefore we have no hesitation in declaring the Drama the most perfect of artworks. The farthest from this artwork stood the "Opera," and perhaps for very reason that she made a pretence of drama, but split it into countless disconnected fragments for sake of the Aria form: in Opera there are pieces embracing all the structure of a symphonic Movement in briefest lapse of time, with first and second themes, return, repetition and so-called "Coda"; but, self-included, they remain without one whit of reference to all the other pieces like them. In the Symphony, on the contrary, we have found this structure so developed and enlarged, that

its master turned in anger from the cramping form of Operatic numbers. In this Symphonic Movement we recognised the unity that has so determinant an influence on us in the perfect drama, and the downfall of that art-form so soon as foreign elements, all unassimilable with that unity, were introduced therein. But the element most foreign to it was the Dramatic, which needed infinitely richer forms for its unfolding than could naturally present themselves on the basis of the Symphonic movement, i.e. Dance music. Nevertheless, to be an artwork again quâ music, the new form of dramatic music must have the unity of the symphonic movement; and this it attains by spreading itself over the whole drama, in the most intimate cohesion therewith, not merely over single smaller, arbitrarily selected parts. So that this Unity consists in a tissue of root-themes pervading all the drama, themes which contrast, complete, re-shape, divorce and intertwine with one another as in the symphonic movement; only that here the needs of the dramatic action dictate the laws of parting and combining, which were there originally borrowed from the motions of the dance.—

Upon the new form of musical construction as applied [184] to the Drama I have expressed myself sufficiently in earlier articles and essays, yet sufficiently merely in the sense that I imagined I had plainly pointed out the road on which a true, and alike a useful judgment of the musical forms now won from Drama by my own artistic labours might be attained by others. To the best of my knowledge, that road has not been trodden yet, and I can remember nothing but the studies of one of my younger friends (3) who has viewed the characteristics of what he calls my "Leitmotive" rather in the light of their dramatic significance, than in that of their bearing on musical construction (since the specific art of music was not the author's province). On the contrary, I have lived to see our Music-schools all inculcating horror at the wild confusion of my periods, while young composers, fired by the success of public representations of my works, and guided by a superficial private reading of my scores, have unintelligently tried to copy me. As the State and Parish only pay for un-teachers of my art, such as Professor Rheinberger of Munich (to remain within the circle of my supposititious influence), instead of founding something like a Chair for it, as may some day happen in England or America,—the present little article will not have been labour thrown away if only it gives those said composers an inkling of what they might learn and copy from my works.

So, whoever till now has trained himself by listening to our newest Romantic-classical instrumental-music, and wants to try his skill with the dramatic genre, I would above all advise him not to aim at harmonic and instrumental Effects, but to await sufficient cause for any effect of the kind, as otherwise they will not come off. You could not insult Berlioz more profoundly, than by bringing him abortions of this sort on paper, and expecting them to please the composer of *Witches' Sabbaths* and the like. Liszt used to polish off these stupid suggestions with the remark that cigar-ash and sawdust steeped in aqua fortis [185] did not make pleasant soup. I have never yet made the acquaintance of a young composer who did not think to gain my sanction for "audacities" before all things. On the other hand it has been a real surprise to me, that the restraint I have striven for with increasing vigilance in the modulation and instrumenting of my works has not met the smallest notice. In the instrumental introduction to "Rheingold," for instance, it was impossible to me to quit the fundamental note, simply because I had no reason for changing it; a great part of the not un-animated scene that follows for the *Rhine-daughters* and *Alberich* would only permit of modulation to keys the very nearest of kin, as Passion here is still in the most primitive naïvety of its expression. I do not deny that I certainly should have given to the first entry of *Donna Anna*—denouncing the shameless seducer *Don Juan* in the height of passion—a stronger colouring than Mozart held appropriate to the conventions of the operatic style and those means of expression he himself was the first to enrich. But there sufficed that simple austerity, which I had as little to abandon when the "Walküre" was to be introduced with a storm, the "Siegfried" with a tone-piece conducting us into the silent depths of Nibelheim's

Hoard-smithy by a reminiscence of certain plastic motives from the previous dramas: all three were *elements* from which the drama had to quicken into life. Something different was demanded for an introduction to the Norns' scene of "Die Götterdämmerung": here the destinies of the ure-world are weaving themselves into that rope we must see the hooded sisters swing, when the curtain rises, to understand its meaning: wherefore this prelude could only be brief and preparatory, though the expectant use of motives made intelligible in the earlier sections of the work allowed a richer harmonic and thematic treatment. And it is important, how one commences. Had I used in an Overture a motive cast like that which is heard in the second act of "Die Walküre" at *Wotan's* surrender of world-sovereignty to the possessor of the Nibelungen-hoard: [186]



according to my notions of distinctness of style I should have perpetrated a piece of downright nonsense. But after in course of the drama the simple nature-motive



had been heard at the earliest gleam of the shining Rhinegold; at the first appearance of the Gods'-burg "Walhall," shimmering in the morning's red, the no less simple motive



and each of these motives had undergone mutations in closest sympathy with the rising passions of the plot,—with the help of a digression in the harmony I could present them knit in such a way that, more than *Wotan's* words, this tone-figure should give to us a picture of the fearful gloom in the soul of the suffering god. Again, I am conscious of having always endeavoured to prevent the acerbity of such musical combinations from making a striking effect as such, as a special "audacity" we will say; both by my marks of expression and by word of mouth I sought to so tone down the change, whether by a timely slackening of [187]

tempo or a preliminary dynamic compensation, that it should invade our willing Feeling as an artistic moment in strict accordance with the laws of nature. So that it may be imagined how nothing more enrages me, and keeps me away from strange performances of my music, than the insensibility of most of our conductors to the requirements of Rendering in such combinations in particular; needing the most delicate treatment, they are given to the ear in false and hurried tempo, without the indispensable dynamic shading, and mostly unintelligible. No wonder they are a bugbear to our "Professors."

I have dealt at some length with this example because it has an application to all my dramas, only far more extended, and shews the characteristic distinction between the Dramatic and the Symphonic use and working-out of motives. But I will take a second of like nature, and draw attention to the metamorphoses in that motive with which the *Rhine-daughters* greet the glancing Gold in childish glee:

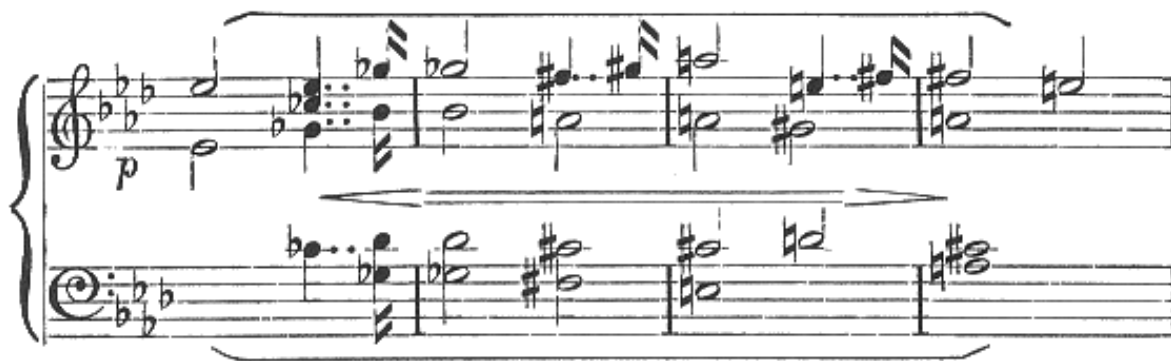


One would have to follow this uncommonly simple theme—recurring in manifold alliance with almost every other motive of the drama's wide-spread movement—through all the changes it receives from the diverse character of its resummoning, to see what type of variations the Drama can engender; and how completely the character of these variations departs from that of those figured, rhythmic or harmonic alterations of a theme which our masters ranged in immediate sequence to build up pictures of an often intoxicatingly kaleidoscopic effect. This effect was destroyed at once, and with it the classic form of Variation, so soon as motives foreign to the theme were woven in, giving something of a dramatic development to the Movement's [188] progress, and fouling the purity, or let us say self-evidence of the tone-piece. But neither a mere play of counterpoint, nor the most fantastic art of figuration and most inventive harmonising, either could or should transform a theme so characteristically, and present it with such manifold and entirely changed expression—yet leaving it always recognisable — as true dramatic art can do quite naturally. Hardly anything could afford a plainer proof of this, than a pursuit of that simple motive of the "Rhine-daughters" through all the changing passions of the four-part drama down to *Hagen's* Watch-song in the first act of the "Götterdämmerung," where it certainly takes on a form which—to me at least—makes it inconceivable as theme of a Symphonic movement, albeit it still is governed by the laws of harmony and thematism, though purely in their application to the Drama. To attempt to apply the results of such a method to the Symphony, however, must lead to the latter's utter ruin; for here would appear as a far-fetched Effect what follows there from well-found motives.

It cannot be my present purpose to repeat what I have said at length in earlier writings about the application of Music to the Drama, even though regarded from a fresh point of view; rather, my main object has been to mark the difference between two modes of music from whose commingling have sprung disfigurement of the one variety of art, false judgment of the other. And to me this seemed of weight, if we are ever to arrive at a proper æsthetic estimate of the great events in the evolutionary career of Music—the one still truly living and

productive art of our era,—whereanent the greatest confusion prevails to this day. Starting from the structural laws of the Symphony, Sonata, or the Aria, when we hitherto have made for Drama we never got beyond that Operatic style which trammelled the great symphonist in the unfolding of his faculties; on the other hand, in our amazement at the boundlessness of these faculties when unfolded in right [189] relation to the Drama, we confound those laws if we transfer the fruits of musical innovations on the dramatic field to the Symphony and so forth. However, as I have said that it would lead us too far, to display these innovations in all their mutual bearings; and as that task would also fall more fitly to another, I will conclude with one more illustration—namely of the characteristics demanded by the Drama, forbidden by the Symphony, not only in the use and transformation, but also in the first modelling of the Motive itself.

Properly speaking, we cannot conceive of a chief-motive of a Symphonic movement as a piece of eccentric modulation, especially if it is to present itself in such a bewildering dress at its first appearance. The motive which the composer of "Lohengrin" allots as closing phrase of a first arioso to his *Elsa* plunged in memory of a blissful dream, consists almost solely of a tissue of remote harmonic progressions; in the Andante of a Symphony, we will say, it would strike us as far-fetched and highly unintelligible; here it does not seem strained, but quite arising of itself, and therefore so intelligible that to my knowledge it has never been decried as the contrary. This has its grounds, however, in the scenic action. *Elsa* has slowly approached, in gentle grief, with timid down-bent head; one glance at her transfigured eye informs us what is in her soul.



Questioned, she replies by nothing save the vision of a dream that fills her with a sweet belief: "With signs so soft and courteous he comfort gave to me" ;—that glance had already told us something of the kind. Now, boldly [190] passing from her dream to assurance of fulfilment in reality, she adds : "That knight I will await then; he shall my champion be." And after all its wanderings, the musical phrase now passes back to its mother-key.





At the time a young friend of mine, (4) to whom I had sent the score for arrangement of a pianoforte edition, was much astonished by the look of this phrase which had so many modulations in so few bars, but still more when he attended the first performance of "Lohengrin" at Weimar and found that this selfsame phrase appeared quite natural—which at anyrate was due in part to the musical conducting of Liszt, who by a proper rendering had turned the transient eye-sore into a well-favoured shape of Tone.

It seems that already a very large portion of the public finds much, nay, almost everything in my dramatic music quite natural, and therefore pleasing, at which our "Professors" still cry Fie. Were the latter to seat me on one of their sacred chairs, however, they perhaps might be seized with even greater wonder at the prudence and moderation, especially in the use of harmonic effects, which I should [191] enjoin upon their pupils; as I should have to make it their foremost rule, never to quit a key so long as what they have to say, can still be said therein. If this rule were complied with, we possibly might again hear Symphonies that gave us something to talk about; whereas there is simply nothing at all to be said of our latest symphonies.

Wherefore I too will be silent, till some day I am called to a Conservatorium—only, not as "Professor."

Notes

Note 1 on page 7

Othello, Act I., scene i.:—BRABANTIO, "Thou art a villain." IAGO, "You are—a senator."—Tr.

Note 2 on page 9

Brahms again.—Tr.

Note 3 on page 11

Freiherr Hans von Wolzogen.—Tr.

Note 4 on page 15

Theodor Uhlig.—Tr.