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*A glance at the German operatic stage of  
to-day*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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## About this Title

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## A glance at the German operatic stage of to-day

FROM a tour which I lately made through the western half of Germany, for the urgent purpose of acquainting myself with the present state of the opera-personnel to be found there, I have derived so much enlightenment as to the artistic standpoint of the theatres themselves that I may hope an account thereof will not be unwelcome to my friends.

After remaining for so many years without any contact with the theatres, and thus in total ignorance of their present doings, I readily admit the dread with which I was filled by the necessity of putting them to the test once more. Against the impression I was about to receive from the maiming and disfigurement of my own operas I had steeled myself in advance, by a long-accustomed resignation: what I had to expect from our conductors on this field of dramatic music I knew well enough, since my eyes had been opened in the concert-room. My forebodings were outdone however, for I found the same inability to hit the right method displayed in every class of operatic music, Mozart's as much as Meyerbeer's; a thing explained by the simple fact, that these gentry have neither any feeling for dramatic life nor the very commonest notion of meeting the singer's needs. When my poor Tannhäuser has to challenge the whole Wartburg Hall of Minstrels with his Venus-song in mad defiance, I once heard him so over-hurried that the crucial phrase: "Go seek the Hill of Venus!" was understood by no one, nay [264] actually unheard. On the other hand I have found the *tempo di menuetto* of Leporello's famous aria so dragged that its robust young singer could make neither breath nor tone hold out—which the conductor never noticed. Hurry and drag, in these consists the conductor's principal treatment of an opera; to which, if it be not exactly a work of Mozart's or "Fidelio," he adds a shameless paring-down to the effect he deems advisable.

To the educated listener, who strays into the house on such a night, it is incomprehensible that no musicians should ever be appointed to the Theatre save those not only without the faintest idea of their proper relation to the singer's task, but moreover utter strangers to the literature of operatic music. In the little theatre at *Wurzburg* I chanced on a performance of "Don Juan" which surprised me on the one hand by the singers' general excellence of voice, their sound enunciation and natural good qualities, on the other by the diligence with which a worthy time-beater at the conductor's desk seemed trying to shew what his singers could do with even a tempo incorrect throughout. I learnt that the Director had imported this person from Temesvar, after enticing him from a military band with which he used to arrange very popular garden-concerts. In this there was some reason: for when the Wurzburg Magistrate looks out for a financially-solid lessee of his theatre, he's not the man to stipulate for the Director's knowing a little about the requirements of such a thing as Opera. But it also may happen that a rigorist called to the directorship of an important Court-theatre on account of his literary effusions, and desirous of making Opera one of his strong suits, will specially select a musician who had been placed at the conductor's desk in his native city on purely patriotic grounds, and there had proved through a series of years that he would never be able to learn the beating of time either good or bad. This case was reported to me at Carlsruhe, as having just occurred there. What is one to say?

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From these and similar instances, one might conclude that the blame for the musical misconduct of Opera at German theatres must be laid to the *Directors'* ignorance. I believe that conclusion would not be far out; only, I also think we should be in error to expect a real improvement from any mere shuffling or shifting of the present factors of theatric management. For example, if one found fault with the *Regisseur's* not being made director, in

my experience there is no such person in the whole domain of Opera. Of the Regisseur's activity in our operatic representations let those speak who know the interior of that curious higgledy-piggledy; the outsider can see nothing but a chaos of solecisms and omissions. In token of the Regisseur's activity I remarked a peculiar movement of the ladies and gentlemen of the chorus at the Karlsruhe Court-theatre, so proud of its former dramaturgic and choreographic control: after gathering right and left as knights and dames in the second act of "Tannhäuser," they bodily changed places with a regular "*Chassé croisé*" from the contredanse. Nor in general did this theatre go wanting for inventiveness, upon occasion. In "Lohengrin" I here had seen Elsa's church-going in the second act embellished by the Archbishop of Antwerp meeting the procession half-way and extending his white-cotton gloves above the bride in blessing. This time I saw Elisabeth rise from her knees, after praying to the prompter's box in the last act of "Tannhäuser," and retire to the depths of the forest instead of ascending the mountain-path towards the Wartburg, the height whither Wolfram gazes after her. As this change of route enabled her to dispense with the gestures pointing heavenwards in her mute dialogue with Wolfram, the Kapeilmeister had a welcome opportunity for a dashing cut; whilst Wolfram himself, reminded of the deepening twilight by the sudden entry of the sombre trombones, was absolved from his irksome side-turn of the head towards the mountain, and now might sing his Evening-star straight into the faces of the audience. And thus the thing went on.

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As there accordingly was little to hope from the *régie*, which in the "Magic Flute" at Cologne quite calmly let the Queen of Night appear in broad daylight, I turned my attention back to the Kapeilmeister. On his part again it was always Mozart that was worst maltreated. To certify the incredible it would repay the pains of taking the singers' evidence, bar by bar, as to the mode in which I heard the first act of this "Magic Flute" performed: the matchless scene between Tamino and the Priests, where the supposed *recitativo* of the dialogue was drawled to exasperation; the never-ending *largo* of the delicious duettino of Pamina with Papageno; and the tripping burthen, "Would that every honest man might find such bells to tinkle!" spun out into a pious psalm, would in themselves suffice to give a notion of the reading of *Mozart* under care of our music-schools and conservatories of the "now-time."—Meyerbeer was perhaps the least assailed on this side, simply because he had already been so clipped that little remained for assailing. At *Frankfort* I heard some remarkable extracts from the "Prophète," both musical and scenic: for one thing, the third act began without any orchestral prelude; the curtain rose (I anticipated the announcement of some *contretemps*) and chorus and orchestra fell plump into a bawling number; which made me suppose the Herr Kapelmeister had not discovered a suitable cut for patching the scene to an earlier one, here omitted. But who asks for such minutiae? We here meet a whole family that appears to have adopted the motto of Francis Moor, not to concern oneself with trifles.

Dulled to a certain insensibility by the impressions received already, I felt no repugnance against attending a performance of my "Flying Dutchman" at *Mannheim*. It amused me in advance to hear that this music, scarce long enough to fill a regulation opera-bill, and once intended by me for a single act, had not escaped a quite peculiar style of clipping: I was told that the Dutchman's aria and his duet with Daland had both been cut, leaving nothing save their closing cadences. This I declined to [267] believe, but it turned out true enough; and, after recognising the weakness of the singer of the title-rôle, my only regret was that the noisy closing sections should have been the ones retained. However, the omission spared me hearing the main body of these pieces rendered faultily and incorrectly, and I could console myself with the thought that these Moorish "trifles" were no concern of mine. It did concern me, on the contrary, to find that Senta's scene with Erik in the second act was *not* cut: a tenor who had the misfortune to spread fatigue all round him at his very entry, appeared to have

insisted on a full performance of his part, for which the conductor seemed taking his revenge by stretching the tempo of Erik's passionate complaints to a truly distressing length, beating it out in strictest crotchets. Here I suffered from the conductor's conscientiousness, but he suddenly made amends by unbridling his whole subjective freedom at finish of the act: coming after an important climax in the situation, the extended close, the *peroratio*, has here a decisive meaning, and has always worked in this sense on the audience; but Herr Kapellmeister took upon himself to act as censor and cut the closing bars just because they annoyed him, whereas in the first act it would seem to have delighted him to cut everything *except* the closing phrases. With that I thought I had reached the end of my studies of this singular conducting character, and nothing could induce me to pursue them farther. But soon afterwards I heard of something lovely. A new conductor at the Mannheim theatre, to celebrate his entry into office, announced to the astonished public a performance of "Der Freischütz" for the first time *without cuts*. Whoever would have dreamt that cuts were possible in "Freischütz" too?

And in such hands, in such a care, reposes German Opera! If the French—so conscientious and exact in their reproductions—but knew of this, how they would rejoice at the triumphal entry of solid German culture into Alsace!—

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For this utterly good-for-nothing German Kapellmeister-hood, hedged round with appointments for life and carefully nursed town-family coteries, and often retained by incompetent persons for half a century, there can only be one effectual corrective, namely the gifts and good sense of the singers themselves; who plainly are the first to suffer under that misrule, and after all are the only people to whom the public proper gives attention and applause.

Let us see, then, in what way these singers degenerate under that dishonouring régime.

On a recent occasion I said that, in seeking out competent singers for the stage-festivals (*Bühnenfestspiele*) purposed by me, I had much less anxiety about finding good voices than unspoilt manners of rendering. (1) I now must confess that not only have I met more reliable voices than might have been expected from their badness at our largest Court-theatres, but almost everywhere a better aptitude for dramatic speech than I had found ten years ago, when abominably-translated foreign operas ran rampant on the German stage. If one is to follow some of my friends and attribute this improvement to our singers having since appeared more often in my operas every year, whilst the juniors among them have mostly begun their career with learning my operas, my labours would thus receive a confirmation which really should move the Messieurs Singing-masters and Professors of our Conservatoria to a less hostile attitude towards my works.

Yet with these good qualities—nay, principles—of the singers, it at first was incomprehensible to me that their performances should be so vague and, strictly speaking, senseless. Not one of the singers observed by me had arrived at any true artistic finish. In the case of one tenor alone, Herr Richard, who sang the Prophet at Frankfort, did I remark that he had seriously aimed at artistic finish, and in a certain measure attained it. Beyond mistake this gentleman had tried for the method of the newer French tenors, as exemplified so temptingly by the amiable [269] Mons. Roger, and accordingly had devoted great diligence to the development of a somewhat stubborn voice: I heard the same volume that for long has characterised the tenors of French Opera, trained in the Italian school. Here one plainly had an *artist*; only, his art jarred upon me: it was the systematic "harangue" inseparable from all French art, which can never be applied with success to the German style of dramatic singing, since this style requires simplicity and naturalness of the whole demeanour. And yet such an artist would have every right to ask us where to find this style in practice, that he might mould his art thereon?

By side of this singer a Fräulein Oppenheimer, who played the Prophet's famous Mother, attracted my particular attention. An exceptional voice, faultless elocution, and a grand impassionedness of accent, distinguished this splendid lady. She, too, had unmistakably matured into an "artiste": yet, for all these advantages, her performance was wellnigh made repellent by the dramatic and musical caricature inherent in her task itself. Where must the singer of such a Prophet's-mother inevitably end, if, after all the fatuous extravagances of an enervating Pathos, she grasps at one effect the more? The representation of such a Meyerbeerian opera at our theatres, great and small, is the exercise of all the senseless tricks a tortured fancy can conceive; whilst the most appalling thing about it, is the stupid earnestness with which a gaping crowd accepts the rankest folly.

As I shall return to this point, I now pass over to the doings of those singers who have not yet attained that "artistic" finish, or merely in a minor degree. The only "culture" visible here, alas ! was expressed in the hideous variety of efforts to produce an effect with that "harangue" at a phrase's close.

And this laid bare the whole mournful system of our present opera-singing, which may be summarised as follows:—

Entirely without a model, in particular of German style, our young people are mostly chosen for their pretty voices, [270] often from among the members of the chorus, and employed for operatic parts in whose rendering they are completely dependent on the Kapellmeister's baton. This gentleman, equally without a model, or perhaps instructed by the Professors of our Conservatories—who in turn know nothing of dramatic singing, or for that matter, of opera-music in general—proceeds as I have said before; he beats his time by certain abstract-musical theories: for common time he drags, for *alla breve* he scuttles, and the fiat is: "Singer, go by me! I'm the Kapellmeister, and the tempo is my affair." It has really touched me to note the suffering devotion evinced in the reply of a singer whom I had taxed with either galloping or drawling out his pieces; he said he knew it well enough, but that was how the Kapellmeister took things. On the other hand these singers have learnt a lesson from their only available models, those "artists" of the Meyerbeerian school, namely the whereabouts to avenge themselves on the tyrant Kapellmeister's tempo and even soar to the glory of a storm of applause: i.e. the final *fermata*, where the conductor dares not lower his staff before the singer ends. This *fermata* with the closing-harangue is the grand bequest the departed Meyerbeer appears to have willed to our suffering opera-singers for a period long outlasting his natural life: into it is crowded all the blatant claptrap one ever hears from singers either good or bad. Levelled at the audience from the footlights, it has the special advantage that even when the singer has not to "make an exit" (so indispensable for giving the challenge full effect) he still can simulate one by a frantic retreat to his colleagues left within the frame.

Now all this hits its mark, especially in Meyerbeerian opera; though even there, as I later will prove by an example, it sometimes fails through overdoing. But the difficulty for our poor singers, is to apply this clap-trap to the honest music of our older composers. These people void of art and sense and counsel, maltreated by the Kapellmeister and his beat, can make nothing of their aria or phrase itself, and have to struggle through it like a lesson [271] got by rote; as a final resource they rush at its last note, and stick to it, with a scream to warn the audience of its duty; and behold! the Kapellmeister shuts one cultured eye, and—pauses too.

Once I expostulated with a Kapellmeister for allowing the singer of Roger in Auber's charming opera "le Maçon" ("*der Maurer und der Schlosser*") to foist that clap-trap on the closing bar of his almost entrancingly spirited aria in the third act. The Kapellmeister excused himself on grounds of sheer humanity: the public was so spoilt, he said, that it would no longer dole out the least applause to a merely *correct* delivery of such an aria; if one singer were to submit to his (the conductor's) views, and simply sing the closing bar as the composer

had written it—thereby most certainly going without applause—there soon would come another singer who would refuse to be robbed of his final hit, would bring off his round of applause, and be dubbed a success, against the former's failure. Indeed?— This time, however, I took upon myself to shew the Herr Kapellmeister that that obliging and very gifted singer of the performance just past could easily have gained the public's lively interest, even without that obnoxious Effect, had he himself but taught him—ay, simply made it possible to him by a proper tempo—to sing the *whole* aria *bar by bar* in such a way that the *aria* itself, not merely its closing bar, should compel applause. I proved it by singing him the theme in its proper tempo and with the right expression, following it with a reproduction of the singer's scampered rendering in false tempo; which had such a drastic effect upon him that for once, at any rate, I was declared in the right.

Reserving a statement of the grounds on which even our Kapellmeisters, particularly the younger ones, are as much to be pardoned for their ignorance of the true needs of Opera and dramatic music in general as the singers who suffer under them, I first must somewhat complete the picture of the ruin into which the representations at our opera-houses have fallen in consequence.

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For this I may continue with the last-named performance of an opera of the most unassuming genre, that "Maçon" of Auber's. How I pitied both the work and our singers! To what man of judgment has this early opera of the last truly national French composer not formed a red-letter in his estimate of the amiable qualities of the French bourgeoisie? The German Theatre most surely ran no risk to its development, in making such a work as this its own; and for a time it seemed to have completely succeeded, as our native talent for the unaffected Singspiel here obtained a wholesomely assimilable food. But witness a performance of this work today, and that by singers so naturally gifted, I am bound to add, as those of the *Darmstadt* Court-theatre ! The taste of high quarters having ordained that the very latest products of modern French Opera should be introduced at this court before any other place in Germany, this company had been accustomed to nothing but the most grotesque Effects, without the smallest practice in the Natural. Consequently not a creature was now in his proper place, in this bright and unsophisticated opera; the sparkling little vocal numbers, not one of which was taken in the right tempo or made intelligible by correct expression, slipped soulless through a dialogue defaced by "Grand Opera-singers" as if in lordly contempt. But since the dialogue, and especially its comic side, seemed raised in "le Maçon" to almost the main affair, they had to look about for tricks in substitution for the usual Operatic clap-trap; and so a creaking snuffbox and a sausage inadvertently drawn from the coat-pocket (traditional extempores of some former low comedian) became their models for enlivening a dialogue itself filled full with truly genial comedy, if one only gives it a little thought. 'Tis everywhere the same: the *text*, the true material substance of a work, our operists know no longer; like the rag-and-bone-man, they merely rake from here or there an obligato tag to trim their nightly plaudit-jacket—That evening, though, I soon discovered how the wind lay: poor Auber's opera was nothing but [273] the prelude to a *ballet*, where flower-fays and other mighty pretty things were to put in an appearance. The Intendant must have called me a barbarian, to turn my back on this!

The warmth with which I have defended Auber's harmless Singspiel must be my apology for the increasing chill with which I shall have to refer to other, higher art-doings at the theatres I visited. As the ratio of the reproduction to the task remained constant, the evils mounted higher with the higher pitching of the task itself, whilst the over-taxed sensitiveness of the hearer passed at last into insensibility. With the singers I found at the little theatre at *Wurzburg* I would wager to give an excellent dramatic performance, were I but allowed to choose a work in keeping with their faculties, and to see to its being properly directed. My

inability to sit out more than one act of "Don Juan" here, was chiefly attributable to the conductor's misrule; coupled with a senselessness on the part of the régie beyond imagining, it made a further stay in the theatre obnoxious to me. Every one of the singers had natural ability; only the principal lady, Donna Anna, seemed somewhat spoilt—I fancy, not incorrigibly—though her warmth of feeling was much in her favour: but most of them were in presence of a task un-understood throughout and merely learnt in compliance with the common operatic scheme. A young man of exceptionally powerful voice and capital enunciation, but with the manners of a schoolboy and somewhat clumsy carriage, had to conjure up for us the fascinations of a seductive Andalusian cavalier, the title-rôle of Mozart's opera. But "Don Juan" it must be, and "Don Juan" was it beaten.—

It is easy enough to see that the singers do not really feel at home in such performances of classic works; another life thrills in their pulses when the "fermate" operas come along—which promises the works of Meyerbeer a life by no means measurable as yet Hence there is something quite touching in their marked affection for my operas, seeing that they never arrive at a grand effect in them.

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But how should they get an effect at all commensurable with that from Meyerbeerian rôles, since here success can dwell in nothing but the effect of the whole, whilst there each phrase has its own effect provided for it in the closing tirade? Now our singers distinctly have a presentiment of this *effect of the whole*, and it probably is that which attracts them to my operas; but this whole is chopped in pieces for them by the Kapellmeister. Whenever I have gone through one of the rôles of my operas with a singer who interested me, in course of the scene he was always obliged to stop short, for here came his Herr Kapellmeister's cut and he had learnt no farther. When I told him how the matter lay, explaining the importance to his entire rôle of just the passage elided, in his instant mortification I could see where to build my only hopes of a proper understanding. Yet the very best singers at our theatres are kept in this hazy state of wellnigh childlike ignorance of the nature of the tasks I set them: with what, then, are they left?

Into this we must inquire.

What the singers of operas such as mine will never perceive while their parts are given out to them in the mutilation beloved of our Kapellmeisters, is in any case the *dramatic dialogue*, the perspicuous building-up whereof was the author's chief concern—for which reason, also, he staked his whole musical art upon its working out. As I myself have almost entirely discarded Monologue proper—which erewhile, in the form of Aria, filled a whole opera with a series of soliloquies—it is easy to imagine the shifts the singer is put to, to weld the scattered fragments of the dialogue into the mould of monologue, with music whose whole character can only be understood through the animation of its discourse. There necessarily is nothing left for him but to hunt for effective operatic bits, and to take as such whatever he deems likely. Hence his perpetual stepping outside the frame, as he no longer finds the action knit together by its dialogue: instead of facing the person to whom his speech is addressed, he apostrophises the audience from the footlights—making me often disposed [275] to ask, with the angry Jew: "Why does he say that to me, and not to his neighbour?"

Should anyone suppose that the ordinary effect of this ruling habit of our singers, namely a frequent interruption by applause, must at least be not without its profit to *my* operas, he would make a grand mistake: here nothing tells, but what is understood in due connection with the whole; what remains *unclear* in this sense, leaves the audience uninterested. Anybody may convince himself of this upon comparing the effect of a rightly rendered and undocked act, or even scene from one of my operas, with that of a maimed performance. At *Magdeburg*, a few years back, a Director had the courage to insist on "Lohengrin" being played in its entirety: the result was so successful, that in six weeks he was enabled to give the

opera six-and-twenty times to the public of this middling town, and always to full houses. Yet as such an experience teaches no one, we can but infer a really bad and vulgar will on the part of theatrical managers.

Nevertheless even they are to be excused at times, on ground of a deep demoralisation of artistic affairs in general. The management at *Bremen* procured the written orchestral parts with the [printed] score of the "Meistersinger" from the publisher: the latter, presumably anxious to lighten the performance of my work for this little theatre, had had the parts copied from those in use at *Mannheim*, where they are so famous for their cutting. The able Bremen Kapellmeister soon discovered that quite a host of passages in the score had not been written out in these parts at all, and, as the date announced was drawing nigh, could only restore a few of them; the last act in particular—with exception of Hans Sachs's monologue, which the admirable singer had been able to rescue—had to remain in the Mannheim strait-waistcoat. Here again it was quite evident what consequences attend such a deed of maiming. To both the audience and myself it was possible to follow the relatively little-shortened first two acts with interest: the third, the very act which had made the liveliest impression [276] at the first performances in Munich, so that its length was never noticed, here tired out the audience and plunged myself, who had lost all recognition of my work, into the most painful distraction. As the story is chiefly told in the thrust and parry of the dialogue, (2) these scandalous omissions made it vague and unintelligible; so that the performers got out of humour, and—most instructive point of all—the conductor, who till then had maintained an almost unexceptionably correct tempo, now fell from one misunderstanding to another: Eva's enthusiastic outpouring of her heart to Sachs was rushed, and therefore inarticulate; the Quintet was dragged, and thereby lost all suppleness and swing; whilst Walther's master-song, with the broader chorus built upon it, was rough and jerky. If this was done at *Bremen*, where at least there were many excellences in the rest of the performance, I might judge the character of the representations of my work at German theatres elsewhere.

Indeed it is particularly depressing to find the ineradicable vices of the German stage outcropping even in the doings of good and friendly artists. We are often on the verge of unalloyed delight, at seeing good material and ready will inclining to the right; all the more disheartened are we to see these good beginnings suddenly degenerate, and accordingly to find no vital consciousness of Art, but a blind submission to the havoc springing from an altogether spurious education.

To complete the hopeless picture, we find the theatre-going public in precisely the same attitude toward Opera. A dull insensibility lies stamped on every countenance:

uninterested in all that happens on the stage or in the orchestra, the audience only awakens from its deafness to cap the singer's inevitable "harangue" with a round of applause, in token that it had not so far forgot itself as to really fall asleep. Not a face shews any feeling, save that of curiosity about its neighbours: the saddest or the [277] merriest scene may be passing on the boards, not a muscle betrays the faintest sympathy. It is "Opera; which has nothing to do with either mirth or earnestness, but—simply *Opera*. Why doesn't the prima donna sing us something pretty?" And for this have they decked the theatre with untold luxury! The house is all aglow with gold and velvet, and the hospitable easy-chair seems upholstered for the evening's chief enjoyment. From nowhere can one get a view of the stage that does not include a large slice of the audience: the flaming row of footlights abuts on the middle of the proscenium-boxes; it is impossible to watch the prima donna, there in front, without taking in the glasses of the "opera-friend" who ogles her. One thus can find no line to part the putative artistic action from those before whom it is set. The two dissolve into one brew of most repulsive mixture, in which the Kapellmeister twirls his staff as magic-ladle of the modern witch's caldron.

What specially disgusted me, was the shameless baring of the scenic mystery to the eyes of

every gaper: that which can only operate through a well-planned distance, one thinks one cannot bring too near the glaring lamplight. As each organic link has been hewn from the tone-poet's work, one treats the scene itself no better; something must always be torn from the whole, and aimed at the audience from the footlights. At that Frankfort performance of the "Prophète" already mentioned, in the famous church-scene I saw the no less celebrated Fides quit her place in the extreme foreground and come down to the rail to vent her frantic imprecations on her son, which done she improvised a sensational exit behind the proscenium: as this did not extract the intended applause, came Fides humbly forth again and knelt beside the other worshippers, to be present, as needed, at the catastrophe's arrival. The astounding folly of this trick is manifest to anyone who knows that Fides should be among the people from the opening of this scene, with them should sink upon her knees at the litany "*salvum fac regem*," and in a pause of the chant [278] should be heard muttering her unearthly curse; which, to fit the situation at all intelligibly, cannot be sung subduedly enough. To be sure, this time the lady failed in her effect; she was not applauded. But neither was she jeered: not a feature of the audience shewed a sign of ridicule; just as the utmost nonsense, the most grotesque exaggeration, throughout was felt by no one. Once a senior officer behind me laughed in fact: but it was merely at a Bishop stalking in the coronation-train, whom the laughter probably had recognised as his orderly, or what not.—

If this somnolence of all feeling for artistic truth but confined its degrading influence to our opera-houses, we perhaps might find release by giving up the Drama altogether. Unfortunately, it is only too true that the whole spirit of our public musical life is poisoned thence and led to shamefulest degeneration. At its Garden-concert and Change-of-guard the people proper is regaled with nothing but a re-warming of the opera-house stew. From thence our regimental bands obtain their musical pabulum, and in what that consists one may easily guess. The tempo and entire reading of the theatre passes on to the conductors of these popular orchestras, as only accessible model; and whenever we meet with grave misunderstandings here, we invariably receive the excuse that things were taken thus and thus at some great theatre. Of late I have often been honoured by military corps with a very friendly serenade of pieces from my operas: sincerely delighted and truly touched by their doings, for the most part, I have not been able to conceal from their excellent conductors my difficulty in accounting for certain omissions and faulty tempi which I had uniformly noticed in the first finale of "Lohengrin," for one thing: whereupon I learnt that they had based their arrangements on the reputedly authoritative score of the Dresden Court-theatre, for instance, in which the missing passages were left quite out, whilst one heard the tempo thus and not otherwise at all the theatres. Whoever has once arrived at hearing the closing Allegro of this first "Lohengrin" finale played [279] properly in its entirety, may imagine my feelings at listening to the galloping stump of a tone-piece which I had laboured to make grow up before me like a well-formed tree, with branches, boughs and leaf-work!—When I explained this to the highly obliging, and for the most part excellent Kapellmeisters of those music-corps, they were utterly surprised and often disconcerted. "How were we to know any better? Indeed we nowhere hear it otherwise"—was their invariable reply.

And a whole nation that has its music played to it in none but this spirit?—Yet no! Our Conservatories and High Schools of Music now provide for the maintenance and nurture of the true musical spirit. It might be asked, who provides for these Schools themselves being conducted in the proper spirit and manned with really responsible teachers? But in the long run it always comes back to the question, how Music is plied with us in general; for the spirit in which the public is given its music, affords our only guarantee of a proper feeling on part of the leading authorities. And here we find that these institutes have absolutely no influence on the musical taste of the public, save this at most—they send incompetent conductors to our orchestras, and above all to our theatres. Forever in the position of the fox to the grapes,

regarding Opera, which none of those majestic Conservators can reach with any measure of success, they ply their music by themselves. Their Trios, Quintets, Suites and Psalms are played behind closed doors, so strictly closed as to admit no one but the Messieurs Composers and executants. Now and again, however, the best-to-do, and therefore the most influential families in the town are busily invited, and even hospitably entertained in times of peril: (3) on them is then impressed that [280] what they have just heard is the only genuine article, whilst the music which goes on outside is bad tone. But if these well-to-do and influential families are appealed to, once in a way, to tender help in those regions of public music where a powerful aid alone can further a thing of service to the nation's spirit, then every avenue is blocked by pietistic sentries, and the great journals are impounded to see that nothing but systematic slander and abuse shall find a door or crevice open. If one asks these people, on the other hand, how they themselves propose to fulfil their promises of "pure" musical treats—without which, when all is said, no believer will truly pin his faith to them—one hears tell of a magnificent, quite classical Handelian "Solomon," to which the departed Mendelssohn himself wrote an organ-accompaniment for the English. An outsider like myself must have listened with his own pair of ears, to form a notion of the sort of thing these gentry of "pure music" compel their believers to swallow. But they do it, those believers. And glorious are the temples they build for their high priests: there sit they, pull no face, (4) and follow with the book, while their dear relations on the platform up aloft sing choruses and Jupiter himself beats time. I witnessed a specimen of this at *Düsseldorf*, whilst folk at other places much regretted that I had come too late for exactly the same thing there!—

At *Cologne* I happened to say a few words among friends; my remarks were very kindly reported in a newspaper, but particular stress was laid on my expressing myself so much more mildly in private converse, such as this, than in my written lucubrations destined for publicity, where it would seem that I dipped my pen in venom. No doubt it makes a difference, whether I am speaking on the spur of the moment, or writing to the public: (5) there [281] I have a pen to dip indeed, and public matters offer me by no means honey. However, to take my cue from a certain flask of Cologne venom that I wo'n't confound with sweet *Eau de Cologne*, I will close my "Glance" in right optimistic fashion with some well-meant advice—which I fancy myself better able to give than our Conservatories—to various Kapelimeisters; whence they may see that I find no pleasure in writing hopeless letters in the air.—

In the conductor of the "Magic Flute" at Cologne I made acquaintance with a really educated man, outside the theatre, who seemed to have taken up music as a profession, and the theatrical baton as emblem of office, rather late in life. May he more and more arrive at a perception how hard it is to master the Theatre, and become familiar with the peculiar spirit that is the soul of a dramatic performance, from without. Should his musical training have issued from the sphere of our Conservatories, I beg him to particularly remark the woodenness with which the very soul of *Mozart's* music, its *singing quality*, is treated there, and thence to take a warning without the laying to heart whereof he can never attain a knowledge of the rendering required by Mozartian melody, and thus by all Mozartian music.

To the Kapellmeister of the *Mayence* theatre I take the liberty of expressing my delight at his eminent gifts as conductor: here was great precision without the smallest affectation, and the performance of "Fidelio" shewed many signs of correct conception as regards both tempo and dynamics. The more important I therefore think it, to direct his notice to the weakness common to all our conductors for scampering those Allegros which have only twobeatstoabar: he *must* reflect that his tempo for the great Quartet in the second act, as also for the following Duet, not only turns the thing into a musical monstrosity, but robs the singers of all possibility of effective or even clear participation in the scene. Whilst the same remark applies to the closing chorus: "Wer ein solches Weib errungen," which was deprived of all its dignity by a too [282] rapid pace, it is again to be deplored that the famous section preceding it in 3/4

time—which seems to hover like a fleece of golden light above the surcharged situation—completely changed its character for that of painful rigid ness, through a dragging of its tempo. By the conductor's fault the Quartet in act i. met an almost identical fate: could he not feel that we here have no set chant, but rather an *aside* by four persons soliloquising at once, and that its character is diffidence, embarrassment, musically expressed in staccato notes for the singers, and therefore at first accompanied by a *pizzicato* for the strings? Each speaks to himself; we hear them, but they do not hear each other. Nothing is farther from this piece, than the Adagio character; and only its *sostenuto* introduction can account for its being falsely classed by inexperienced conductors with the Adagio type of melody. But that introduction ranks as one of the noblest gems of Beethoven's genius for very reason that, before any of these characters begins to express himself in words, it enables us to plumb the unuttered inmost heart of each. And here the proper rendering was missed by all: each bawled and ranted at his fellow, whereas almost the entire piece should be sung with bated breath, and its fleeting accents little more than hinted.

This brings me to a last and capital offence of our conductors: with scarcely an exception, they have no sense of dynamic agreement between the singers and the orchestra; and for that matter, their disregard of the orchestra's connection with what takes place upon the stage is at the root of all their errors, even in respect of Tempo. I have repeatedly found that the orchestral nuances had been practised with diligence, consequently that the band played soft and low where needed, but hardly ever that the singers were held to a like expression, more especially in ensemble-pieces: the chorus in particular sings as a rule with all its force, and the Kapellmeister doesn't seem struck by its ridiculous and most disturbing contrast with his quiet orchestra. This utter obtusity of the conductor is perfectly [283] incomprehensible when we hear the elfin chorus at end of the second act of "Oberon" murdered by the shrillest shouts of the common operatic chorus, as wellnigh universally, while the strings are playing with their 'mutes' on; and yet we are forced to assume that he hears nothing amiss.

My advice to friendly-disposed conductors of Opera might therefore be summed up as follows: *If you otherwise are good musicians, in Opera pay heed to nothing but what is happening on the stage, be it the monologue of a singer or a general action; let it be your prime endeavour that this scene, so infinitely intensified and spiritualised by association with its music, shall acquire the "utmost distinctness": if you bring that distinctness about, rest assured that you at like time have found the proper tempo and correct expression for the orchestra.* To the very able conductor of the operatic orchestra at *Bremen*—which delighted me, despite its smallness, by the unexpected excellence of its work in every respect—I offer the above advice in especial, since in this regard alone could he be said to fall short of mastership.—

It is impossible to close this account of my recent Glance at the Opera-stage of To-day, especially in the direction last taken, without referring to a theatre scarcely noticed by our newspapers, but which has been led on to deeds of exemplary perfection by the true artistic taste of one man at its head. In the little ducal capital of *Dessau* the Intendant of the Court-theatre, *Herr von Normann*, invited me to a performance of Gluck's *Orpheus*, since the illness of several singers forbade the representation of any opera that required a larger company. *I publicly declare that I have never witnessed a nobler and more complete performance at any theatre.* Certainly the misfortune suffered by the Intendant, in the laming of his personnel, had turned to the advantage of this evening; for it would have been impossible for a more numerous caste to achieve anything so thoroughly distinguished, as the impersonation [284] of Orpheus and Eurydice by the two soloists. Naturally gifted, but in no uncommon manner, both these ladies were inspired by the most delicate artistic feeling, and

so uniformly fine a portrayal of Gluck's creation I had never hoped to meet. As everything else was in such entire harmony with this portrayal, I could only conclude that the latter's perfection had been evoked by the studied beauty of every detail on the stage. Here the operatic *mise-en-scène* had taken life, and become an active element in the whole performance: each scenic factor, grouping, painting, lighting, every movement, every step, contributed to that ideal illusion which wraps us as it were in twilight, in a dream of truths beyond our ken. From the frequency with which the estimable Intendant left my side, in his consuming care lest any trifling fault should harm this fragile dream-life, I guessed to whose love of art was due the excellence of all I witnessed. And most surely I was not mistaken in ascribing the exceptionally brilliant execution of the whole musical ensemble, orchestra and chorus fully included, to the immediate influence of this wonderful care in the staging.

A truly encouraging example, and evidence of the truth that he who grasps the *whole* will recognise and rule the right in all its portions, even should he have no direct acquaintance with their technique. Herr *von Normann*, perchance without any knowledge of music, by his thoughtful stage management led his Kapeilmeister to a musical exploit of such beauty and correctness as I nowhere else have met at any theatre.

And this, as said, was in little *Dessau*.



## Notes

### Note 1 on page 7

"*Actors and Singers*" page 203.—TR.

### Note 2 on page 11

"Die in einem theilweise exzentrischen Dialoge sich aussprechende Handlung" etc.—

### Note 3 on page 13

This forcibly reminds us of Wagner's experiences in 1834 at those Magdeburg "Lodge-concerts" about which he then wrote to Schumann: "During the Adagio of a Symphony one hears the rattle of plates.... When all is over, and respectable people are taking their hats, a mysterious door is opened, tempting vapours issue forth, the confederates troop into the inner chamber" (Glasenapp's *Das Leben Richard Wagner's*, 3rd ed. vol. i. p. 205). We also hear of a grand concert "with supper," to celebrate the centenary of the Gewandhaus Concerts, March 9, 18.43 (ibidem, p. 211).—TR.

### Note 4 on page 13

An evident parody of the author's own "Waltraute-scene" in *Die Götterdämmerung*, act i.: "So—sitzt er, sagt kein Wort" etc.—TR.

### Note 5 on page 13

"Gewiss ist es wohl etwas Anderes, wenn ich aus mir spreche, oder zur Öffentlichkeit schreibe."—