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Francis Hueffer

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I.

RICHARD WAGNER.

## 1.

IF I were asked for a striking point of distinction between musicians of the old and modern schools, I should mention, first of all, their essentially altered position with regard to literature in general. During the last century, a musician was expected to study, from his very childhood, all the intricacies, both theoretical and practical, of his art, but beyond this his education, as a rule, showed the most deplorable deficiencies; and whenever he had to write on ordinary foolscap, instead of the accustomed staff of five lines, his hand seemed to shake and his thought to stammer. Mozart, for instance, seems to have been decidedly

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not above the average level of middle-class education at his time; and to connect the idea of a thinker with good old "papa Haydn," who, while composing his *Creation*, used to mumble a couple of 'Ave Maria's' when the source of his inspiration ceased to flow, seems grotesquely incongruous. Indeed, with the sole exception of Gluck, no first-rate musician of the eighteenth century can be named who would not have shrunk from the idea of giving literary evidence as to the fundamental principles of his own art; a phenomenon which, in most cases, finds its explanation in the mentioned circumstance of an exclusively technical education. Beethoven's youth also was passed in a purely professional atmosphere; but his powerful mind soon expanded with interests of a wider range. Plutarch was his favourite author, and verses of Homer were frequently found, interspersed with those puzzling economical calculations and musical sketches which covered the walls of his room and the scraps of paper on his writing-table. His æsthetical thoughts also display the intuitive depth of his great nature. Still the language of illiterate awkwardness in which they were clad, as far, at least, as we may judge

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from Schindler's account, distinctly shows a want of early training.

We receive a very different impression as we turn to the literary capabilities of representative modern composers. It is true that Mendelssohn refrained, on principle, from untraditional theoretic utterances, although the fluent grace of his style shows to great advantage in his private letters. But Schumann went through a regular course of university studies, and after that was the editor of a musical journal for many years, before his name as a composer became known beyond the circle of his immediate admirers. The literary style of Liszt too reflects clearly the suppleness and grace of his refined genius, although, in his case, one might suppose that the unequalled mastery of his instrument, which he displayed as *enfant prodige* from his earliest youth, would have engrossed the attention even of the most precocious intellect.

These few remarks seemed required to assist the reader in seeing in its true light one of the numerous accusations which Wagner's innumerable enemies have raised against his creative power. It is grounded on the fact of his having investigated

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the metaphysical and historical sides of his art.

The two faculties of speculation and execution—these wise men assert—are never found combined in the same individuality, and on the strength of this axiom, they prove *a priori* that the author of *Oper und Drama* cannot but produce works of cold deliberation, which, based on theoretical speculation, may occasionally attain effects of skill, but must needs lack the life of spontaneous production. To refute the arguments of such theorists by the intrinsic value of Wagner's creations would be in vain, as these appeal altogether to a higher kind of receptive faculty, than is to be found amongst the high-priests of orthodox Philistinism. Such men never will or can conceive that, in art, as well as in life, we must distinguish between the state of Paradisiac innocence and that of self-conscious knowledge. In the former the feelings are poured forth with almost childlike *naïveté*; and if the mind from which they flow draws its sources from the inexhaustible fountain of beauty, they will possess all the charms of virginity. Mozart might be named as the representative genius of this kind of de-

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lightly fresh spontaneity. Unfortunately, the times of juvenile enjoyment have been changed for the manhood of deeper thought and sorrow. We have tasted the bitter fruit of knowledge, and the artists of our latter days must have passed with us through the furnace of "fierce and unfathomable thought," purifying in it the inarticulate longings of the soul, to the not less passionate but conscious strife for ideal aims. Beethoven and Wagner are the artists by whose names the philosophical, and therefore essentially modern, epoch of music will be recognised. By these remarks, however, it shall by no means be implied that the works of Wagner or Beethoven are not the emanation of spontaneous production, but have been fashioned after a certain scheme, the result of previous speculation. In Wagner's case the futility of such an accusation can easily be proved by chronological dates. He himself has told us how "unintentionally" (*unvorsätzlich*) he entered upon his career as a reformer in the *Flying Dutchman*. This work, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin* were finished, and even the scheme of the words of *Siegfried* and the *Meistersinger* conceived and partly executed, before his first theoretical work, the

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*Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, saw the light. It is indeed one of the most interesting studies of musical history to see how the new idea in all its consequences grew upon Wagner, and how he embodied it unconsciously in his dramatic creations, which only afterwards, like the works of any other composer, served him as material for his researches. The great importance of these theoretic writings lies, for us, in the fact of their being the only way in which a full understanding of Wagner's aims, and further, of those of modern music in general, can be obtained.

Germany is the country of music and philosophy, but the philosophy of music has been treated by most of its deepest thinkers with an undeserved and equally unaccountable neglect. Even a man of Leibnitz's pre-eminence saw in music only an "exercitium arithmeticae occultum nescientis se numerare animi," although the works of his contemporaries, Bach and Handel, might have taught him better. Hegel's views on the same subject cannot be said to enlighten the mind to any considerable extent, and in our own time Friedrich Vischer, the "*Aesthetiker*" *par excellence*, confessed his own ignorance of music in a double way, first by not treating

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it himself in his principal work, and secondly by choosing Dr. Hanslick as his substitute. Arthur Schopenhauer, the greatest thinker Germany has produced since Kant, was the first to pierce the clouds hanging around this most ethereal art. There is a certain likeness between the characters of Wagner and Schopenhauer as writers, and equally between the positions which they take in the history of their respective branches of human development. Both acknowledge one and only one, of their predecessors as their superior, whose ideas they are destined to carry out. In this exclusive admiration of Beethoven and Kant, on the part of Wagner and Schopenhauer, lies at the same time the cause for their frequently unjust contempt of epigonic aspirations and the bitterness of their critical utterances. Perhaps such one-sidedness and misunderstanding of individualities not strictly akin to their own is inevitably the doom of creative minds; but only too often it leads to a fatal isolation from the stream of contemporary progress. The bitter resentment on the part of the objects concerned is another disadvantage of such reformatory zeal. The flaying of Marsyas, —wretched singer though he may have been,—seemed to me always the least enviable part of

Apollo's career. In both Wagner's and Schopenhauer's cases the numerous victims of their wrath agreed upon a system of self-defence and revenge, in which the positive and negative weapons of abuse, and even more pernicious silence, were handled with considerable skill, and the temporary success of which showed the influential position of the Marsyas tribe in the literary community. The consequence was, that of Schopenhauer's standard work scarcely two editions were sold in almost half a century, while the immense importance of Wagner's ideas is only just now, after a painful struggle of more than thirty years, beginning to dawn upon his own nation. It is perhaps partly owing to this affinity of character that Wagner adopted, with slight modifications, the great pessimist's views on the ideal basis of music. Into Schopenhauer's views, as contained in 'The World as Will and Imagination,' we therefore now must enter a little more fully.

The great discovery of Kant, in the 'Critique of Pure Reason,' is the doctrine that the outer world, or what we call the universe, appeals to our senses only by means of its *phenomenon*. About the real essence, the *noumenon* of this world, as it

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might appear to beings with other means of perception than ours, and not limited by the notions of space and time, nothing is revealed to us. Even these notions originate, according to Kant, in a certain predisposition of the brain, by means of which we discern the co-existence and succession of different phenomena and the phenomena themselves. Against the absolute idealism of Berkeley, Kant holds that, outside the human Ego, there must exist an independent *something* to act upon the individual. Schopenhauer, starting from this basis, proceeds to the further assertion that this something hitherto nondescript exists only in so far as it has the "will of existence;" in fact, that it is nothing else but this will in its different forms and phases. The highest and last of these phases is the human volition, made conscious of its being and aims by the intellect, and comprising in its microcosm the universe out of which it grows, and from which it differs gradually but not essentially. The first manifestation of this will, Schopenhauer proceeds, takes place in the ideas in Plato's sense,—that is, in the archetypal forms which fashion the cosmos, and of which the single phenomena are further subdivisions. It is the aim of all arts

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to express the eternal essence of things by means of these Platonic ideas, only music takes in this respect an exceptional position. Arts like painting and sculpture embody these ideas, as conceived by the artist through the medium of phenomena, the ideal value of which he shows, but only by the reproduction of their actual appearance. Even in poetry the realities of life and the visible wonders of the world, with their symbolic meaning, form an essential ingredient. Music, on the contrary, does not want, nor even allow of, a realistic conception. There is no sound in nature fit to serve the musician as a model, or to supply him with more than an occasional suggestion for his sublime purpose. He approaches the original sources of existence more closely than all other artists—nay, even than Nature herself. His harmonies and melodies are, to speak with Schopenhauer, “as immediate and direct an objectification or copy of the will of the world as the world itself is, as the ideas are of which the universe of things is the phenomenon. Music is not the copy of the ideas, like the other arts, but a representation of the cosmical will co-ordinate with the ideas themselves.” In this sense the musical composer is the