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978-1-108-06245-9 - Richard Wagner: His Life and his Dramas; a Biographical Study of the Man and an Explanation of his Work

William James Henderson

Excerpt

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RICHARD WAGNER

CHAPTER I

THE BOYHOOD OF A GENIUS

“O kindischer Held! O herrlicher Knabe.”—SIEGFRIED.

THE ancestry of Richard Wagner has been traced as far as his grandfather. This good man was Gottlob Friedrich Wagner, a custom house official, whose life-work it was to see that nothing was smuggled into Leipsic through the city gates. Gottlob Friedrich had a son to whom was given the second name of his father. Friedrich Wagner was a clerk of police. He had a considerable acquaintance with languages, and spoke French so well that when the French army under Napoleon occupied the city, he was appointed by Marshal Davoust to organise the police. Wagner's father was born in 1770, and his life was short. It is known that he had a taste for the theatre and for verse. After the battles of October 18 and 19, 1813, at the gates of Leipsic, when Napoleon's power was broken in Germany, the accumulation of dead around the city caused an epidemic fever, and among its victims was the police clerk Wagner. He passed away

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on November 22, 1813, leaving among other children a male babe of six months, destined to immortalise his name. This child was Wilhelm Richard Wagner, born May 22, 1813, in "The House of the Red and White Lion," No. 88 Hause Brühl.

Wagner's mother, whom his father married in 1798, was Johanna Rosina Bertz, who died in 1848. Richard was the youngest of nine children, the others being Albert, Carl Gustav, Johanna Rosalie, Carl Julius, Luise Constanze, Clara Wilhelmine, Maria Theresia, and Wilhelmine Ottilie. Of these Albert became an actor and singer of considerable importance and finally stage manager in Berlin. He married Elise Gollmann, a singer with a remarkably extensive voice, who is said to have sung "Tancredi" and "The Queen of the Night" equally well. She bore him a daughter, Johanna, who became one of the most eminent sopranos of her time, and was the original Elizabeth in "Tannhäuser" at the age of seventeen. Wagner's sister Johanna Rosalie was an actress and Clara was a singer.

When the epidemic had carried off the police clerk, the widow was in straitened circumstances. Her oldest son was only fourteen years old and not competent to contribute to the support of the large family. The governmental pension was small and she had no fortune of her own. At this trying period Ludwig Geyer, an old friend of her husband, asked her to be his wife, and although only nine months had elapsed since Friedrich Wagner's death, she, like a sensible woman, accepted the offer. Geyer was a man of talent and well fitted to be the parental guide of the young Richard. He was an actor, a singer, an au-

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thor, and a portrait painter. As a singer he once appeared in "Joseph in Egypt," when that opera was produced by Weber on his assumption of the conductor's bâton at the Dresden opera. His gift for portrait painting is said almost to have reached genius. He was the writer of several comedies, and one of his plays, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," is still well known in Germany. To celebrate the sixtieth birthday of Richard Wagner his family at Bayreuth surprised him with a performance of this play, and he was much touched by it, for he always cherished a deep affection for his stepfather.

Owing to the employment of Geyer in a Dresden theatre, the whole family removed to that city. Here the education of the future composer began in earnest. The home influences were the example of Geyer and the sweet, gentle affection of the mother, to whom her children were the first of all considerations. The outside influence was found in the Dresden Kreuzschule, where the boy was entered under the name of Richard Geyer. This schooling, however, was not begun till after the death of the stepfather. In the beginning Geyer thought that Richard would make a good painter, but, the composer tells us in his autobiographic sketch, "I showed a very poor talent for drawing." Geyer died on September 30, 1821, still cherishing the belief that there was some sort of promise in the boy. "Shortly before his death," says the brief autobiography, "I had learnt to play 'Ueb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit' and the then newly published 'Jungfernkranz' upon the pianoforte; the day before his death I was bid to play him both these pieces in the adjoining room; I heard him then

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with feeble voice say to my mother : ‘Has he perchance a talent for music?’ On the early morrow, as he lay dead, my mother came into the children’s sleeping room and said to each of us some loving word. To me she said : ‘He hoped to make *something* of thee.’ I remember, too, that for a long time I imagined that something indeed would come of me.”

Wagner was eight years old when his stepfather died, and in order that the mother’s cares might be lightened, he was sent for a year to live with a brother of Geyer at Eisleben, where he attended a private school. It was in December, 1822, that he began to go to the Kreuzschule in Dresden. If ever there was a childhood in which the future man was foreshadowed it was that of Wagner. His biographers have with one accord set down the statement that the boy showed no promise in his early years. Look at them and see for yourself. At the Kreuzschule he conceived a profound love for the classicism of Homer, and to the delight of his teacher, Herr Silig, translated the first twelve books of the *Odyssey* out of school hours. He revelled in the fascinations of mythology, and his fancy was so stimulated that when commemorative verses on the death of one of the boys were asked for, Wagner’s, having been pruned of some extravagances, were crowned with the halo of type.

Thereupon this child of eleven resolved to become a poet. He projected vast tragedies on the plan of Apel’s “*Polyeidos*” and “*Die Aetolier*.” He plunged into the deeps of Shakespeare and translated a speech of Romeo into metrical German. Finally he began a

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grand tragedy, which proved to be compounded of elements from “Hamlet” and “King Lear.” He laboured on this for two years. “The plan,” he says, “was gigantic in the extreme ; two-and-forty human beings died in the course of this piece, and I saw myself compelled in its working out to call the greater number back as ghosts, since otherwise I should have been short of characters for my last acts.”

Huge poetic projects already throbbing in the young brain, music, too, seized him for her own. He would not stay away from the piano, and so the tutor who was guiding him through the mazes of Cornelius Nepos engaged to teach him the technic of the instrument. But the wayward Wagner would not practice. The moment that the tutor’s back was turned he began to strum the music of “Der Freischütz” by ear, and he learned to perform the overture with “fearful fingering.” The teacher overheard him and said that nothing would come of his piano studies. And so it proved, for Wagner never learned to play the piano. Yet was there nothing in all this to show the bent of the young mind? Was it not a childhood meet for him who was one day to project tragedies before undreamed of on the lyric stage, and to cut loose from all the traditions of operatic music? And was it not a good omen when at last there fell across his childhood the shadow of his artistic progenitor, Weber? “When Weber passed our house on his way to the theatre,” writes Wagner, “I used to watch him with something akin to religious awe !” Indeed, Weber used to enter the house to talk to the sweet Frau Geyer, who was well liked among artists, and so perhaps the little Richard looked into the

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luminous depths of the eyes of the composer of “Der Freischütz.”

Weber became the idol of his boyhood, and no doubt the worship of this real genius had some influence on the bent of Wagner’s musical thought. It is narrated of him that, when he was not permitted to go to the theatre to hear “Der Freischütz,” he used to stand in the corner of a room at home and count the minutes, specifying just what was going on at each particular instant and finally weeping, so that his mother would yield and send him happy off to the performance. However, in 1827 the family returned to Leipsic and that was the end of young Richard’s close observation of Weber. A still more serious influence now entered into his life, for at the concerts of the Leipsic Gewandhaus he first heard the works of Beethoven. The overture to “Egmont” fired him with a desire to preface his own drama with such a piece of music. So he borrowed a copy of Logier’s treatise on harmony and counterpoint and tried to learn its contents in a week. This was the crucial test of his genius. If he had not been born to be a composer, the difficulties which he encountered in his solitary struggle with the science of music would have turned him aside from the study forever. But it was not so. He says in his autobiography: “Its difficulties both provoked and fascinated me; I resolved to become a musician.” And thus we find Wagner, whose childhood has been pronounced insignificant, at the age of fifteen already a dramatist and eager to be a composer. To be sure, he was not a prodigy, but the future of the man was marked out plainly by the child; and we shall see that from

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this time he moved steadily toward the goal of his ambition.

The progress was not accomplished without a struggle. As he himself tells us in his autobiography, his family now unearthed his great tragedy, and he was severely admonished that in the future it would be well for him to give less attention to Melpomene and more to his text-books. But he was not to be turned aside from his purpose. "Under such circumstances," he says, "I breathed no word of my secret discovery of a calling for music; but nevertheless I composed, in silence, a sonata, a quartet, and an aria. When I felt myself sufficiently matured in my private musical studies, I ventured forth at last with their announcement. Naturally, I now had many a hard battle to wage, for my relatives could only consider my penchant for music as a fleeting passion—all the more as it was unsupported by any proofs or preliminary study, and especially by any already won dexterity in handling a musical instrument." We laugh, perhaps, at this awkward boy in his lumbering struggles, but there was something large in it all. He aimed at the top, and from the outset, pathetically enough, as it afterward proved, tried to hitch his "waggon to a star."

The family so far humoured his new ambition as to engage a music teacher for him, Gottlieb Müller, afterward organist at Altenburg. But a sorry time this honest man had with his eccentric young pupil. The boy was at this time head over ears in the romanticism of Ernst Theodor Hoffmann, then recently dead and still in the height of his fame in Germany. The astounding fecundity of this writer's invention of

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marvellous incidents inflamed the boy's mind, and threw him into a state of continual nervous excitement. He says himself that he had day-dreams in which the keynote, third and dominant, seemed to take form and to reveal to him their mighty meanings. But he would not study systematically, and his family apparently had ground for believing that music would soon be abandoned for some other fancy. Instead of treading patiently the rocky path of counterpoint, the impatient boy endeavoured at one leap to reach the top of the musical mountain, and wrote overtures for orchestra. One of them was actually performed in a theatre in Leipsic under the direction of Heinrich Dorn. It was, as Wagner confessed, the culminating point of his folly. The parts of the string instruments in score were written in red ink, those of the wood in green, and those of the brass in black. "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony," he says, "was a mere Pleyel sonata by the side of this marvellously concocted overture." At every fourth measure the tympani player had a note to be played forte, and when the audience had recovered from its astonishment at this wonderful effect, it burst into laughter.

But all these strivings were not in vain. As Adolphe Jullien notes in his "Richard Wagner," the influence of the Hoffmann stories was not lost; "for the 'Brothers of Serapion' contained an account of the poetical tourney at Wartburg, and some germs of 'The Meistersinger' are found in another story by Hoffmann, 'Master Martin, the Cooper of Nuremberg.'" Dorn, the conductor, became interested in young Wagner, and afterwards proved to be a valuable friend. The boy modestly and sincerely thanked him

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for producing the overture, and Dorn replied that he had at once perceived the boy's talent and that furthermore the orchestration had not needed extensive revision. Wagner now seemed to feel his own need of some sort of regular study, for he matriculated at the University of Leipsic, chiefly in order that he might attend the lectures on æsthetics and philosophy. Here again his want of application made itself apparent, and he entered into the dissipations of student life with avidity. But he soon wearied of them and once more settled down to the study of music, this time under Theodor Weinlig, who sat in the honoured seat of Bach as the cantor of the Thomas School.

In less than half a year Weinlig had taught the boy to solve the hardest problems of counterpoint, and said to him, "What you have made your own by this dry study, we call self-dependence." At this time, too, Wagner became acquainted with the music of Mozart and its influence upon his mind was very healthful. He laboured to rid himself of bombast and to attain a nobler simplicity. He wrote a piano sonata in which he strove for a "natural, unforced style in composition." This sonata was published by Breitkopf and Härtel, and was, so far as the records show, Wagner's real Opus 1. It shows no trace of inspiration, and can rank only as a conservatory exercise.

It was followed by a polonaise in D for four hands, Opus 2, and this was also printed by Breitkopf and Härtel. It is nothing more than school work, like its predecessor. The third work was a fantasia in F sharp minor for piano. The restraining power of the

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teacher is less apparent in this composition, which remains unpublished. In his article on Wagner in Grove's "Dictionary of Music," Mr. Edward Dannreuther quotes at some length from a personal conversation with the composer, who described Weinlig's method of teaching. It was a plain and practical method, in which example and precept were judiciously combined. Wagner said to Mr. Dannreuther, "The true lesson consisted in his patient and careful inspection of what had been written." It was fortunate for Wagner that he had such a mentor, and that he was in the beginning of his career as a composer compelled to learn and practice the old forms in which the fundamental laws of music found their perfect exemplification. His readiness to depart from the straight and narrow path would have led him into insuperable difficulties, and perhaps to hopeless discouragement, had he not possessed so kind and trustworthy a guide.

Young Wagner now launched upon musical activities of no small magnitude for one so youthful. In the year 1830 he made a pianoforte transcription of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and in a letter dated Oct. 6 he offered it to the Messrs. Schott, of Mayence. The offer was not accepted. He also wrote to the Peters Bureau de Musique, offering to make piano arrangements at less than the usual rates. In 1831 he composed two overtures, one a "Concert Ouverture mit Fuge" in C, and the other in D minor. This one is dated Sept. 26, with emendations dated Nov. 4. It was performed at one of the Gewandhaus concerts on Dec. 25, 1831. The *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* said of it: "Much pleasure was given us by