

WAGNER

AS MAN AND ARTIST

INTRODUCTION

WHILE there is at present no adequate Life of Wagner, there is probably more biographical material available in connection with him than with any other artist who has ever lived ; and on the basis of this material it seems justifiable now to attempt—what was impossible until the publication of *Mein Leben* in 1911—a complete and impartial psychological estimate of him. There has probably never been a more complex artist, and certainly never anything like so complex a musician. A soul and a character so multiform as this are an unending joy to the student of human nature. It has been Wagner's peculiar misfortune to have been taken, willy-nilly, under the protection of a number of worthy people who combine the maximum of good intentions with the minimum of critical insight. They have painted for us a Wagner so impeccable in all his dealings with men and women—especially women—a Wagner so invariably wise of speech, a Wagner so brutally sinned against and so pathetically incapable of sinning, that one needs not to have read a line of his at first hand to know that the portrait is a parody—that no such figure could ever have existed outside a stained-glass window, or, if it had, could ever have had the energy to impress itself upon the imagination of mankind even for a day. The real Wagner may be hard enough to disentangle from the complications and contradictions presented by his life, his letters, his prose works, his music, his autobiography, and the testimonies of his friends and enemies ; but in the case of no man is the attempt better worth making. For the enduring interest of his character, with its perpetual challenge to construc-

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tive psychology, is in the manysidedness of it. The well-meaning thurifers who try to impose him upon us in a single formula as one of the greatest and best of mankind,¹ do but raise him to their own moral and reduce him to their own intellectual level, making their god in their own image, as is the way of primitive religious folk. The more interesting Wagner is the one who stands naked and unashamed before us in the documents of himself and others—equally capable of great virtues and of great vices, of heroic self-sacrifice and the meanest egoism, packed with a vitality too superabundant for the moral sense always to control it; now concentrating magnificently, now wasting himself tragically, but always believing in himself with the faith that moves mountains, and finally achieving a roundness and completeness of life and a mastery of mankind that make his record read more like romance than reality.

It is in keeping with the whole character of the man that he should have left us more copious documentary material concerning himself than any other artist has ever done. Publicity was as much a necessity to him as food and air. The most interesting person in the universe to him was always himself; and he took good care that the world should not suffer from any lack of knowledge of a phenomenon which he rightly held to be unique. It would be a sign of unwisdom to despise him for this. It has to be recognised that whatever criticism the contemporary moralist might have to pass upon this or that portion of Wagner's conduct with the outer world, he was always the soul of purity and steadfastness in the pursuit of his ideal. He believed he had come into the world to do a great and indispensable work; and if he occasionally sacrificed others to his ideal, it must be admitted that he never hesitated to sacrifice himself. Regarded purely as an artist, no man has ever kept his conscience more free from stain. And it is precisely this ever-present burning sense of the inherent greatness of his mission that accounts primarily for his constant pouring-out of himself, not only in music—his musical output,

¹ "From her [Frau Wesendonck] it was I earliest learnt a truth which added years have simply verified; that in Richard Wagner we have more than a great,—a profoundly good man." Mr. Ashton Ellis's Introduction to his version of the *Wagner-Wesendonck Letters*, p. xl.

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after all, was not a remarkably large one—but in twelve volumes of literary works and in innumerable letters. I say “primarily,” because a second set of impulses obviously comes into play here and there. Wagner had the need that many men of immense vitality have felt—Mr. Gladstone was a notable example in our own day—of dominance for dominance’ sake ; there is something aquiline in them that makes it impossible for them to breathe anywhere but on the heights. Wagner felt the need of over-lordship as irresistibly as his own Wotan did. Had he been a soldier living in a time of warfare he would have become one of the world’s rulers, with Alexander, Julius Cæsar, and Napoleon. Had he been a business man he would have controlled the commerce of a continent through the strength and the thoroughness of his organisations. Being an artist, a dealer in the things of the mind alone, his ends could be achieved only by example and argument. His voluminous letters and prose works are the outcome of the one great need of his life—to win the world to see everything as he saw it. The letters to Liszt, to Roeckel, to Uhlig, and others show how powerful was this desire in him ; the least expression of disagreement, the least failure of comprehension, would call forth a whole pamphlet of eager explanations. He yearned to hunt out misunderstanding with regard to himself as Calvin yearned to hunt out heresy. Always there was the inability to conceive himself, Wilhelm Richard Wagner, except as the central sun of his universe ; ideas and persons had to revolve round him or find orbits in another and smaller universe. Here again ethical commentary by way of either praise or blame would be the merest supererogation. One simply notes the phenomenon as one notes the colour of his eyes or the shape of his head ; it was one of the things that made Wagner Wagner, as the lion’s mane is one of the things that make him a lion.

The need for mastery over everything and everybody that came within his orbit extended from art to life. All accounts agree that with people who loved and looked up to him he was the most charming of men ;¹ while not only the testimony of his associates but his own words and conduct show with what difficulty he accom-

¹ See, for example, the reminiscences of Judith Gautier, *Wagner at Home*, English translation by Effie D. Massie.

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modated himself to the natural desire of others to take life in their own way. Read, for example, his naïf account of his anger with Tausig and Cornelius for not coming to him when he wanted them :

“ Cornelius and Tausig had again been to see me. Both had first of all to bear the brunt of my real ill-temper for their behaviour during the previous summer [1862]. Having had the idea of bringing the Bülowes and the Schnorrs to me at Biebrich, my cordial interest in these two young friends of mine decided me to invite them too. Cornelius accepted immediately, and so I was all the more astonished when one day I received a letter from him from Geneva, whither Tausig, who suddenly seemed to have money at his disposal, had taken him on a summer excursion—no doubt of a more important and more agreeable nature. Without the slightest expression of regret at not being able to meet me this summer, I was simply told that they had just gaily ‘ smoked a splendid cigar to my health.’ When I met them again in Vienna, I could not refrain from pointing out to them the offensiveness of their conduct ; but they did not seem to understand that I could have had any objection to their preferring the beautiful tour in French Switzerland to visiting me at Biebrich. *They obviously thought me a tyrant.*”¹

All through the correspondence and the autobiography we see the same spirit of unconscious egoism. His conviction that he was always in the right naturally led to a passionate desire that those who differed from him should hear every word he had to say on his own behalf. Hence the frequent and lengthy *plaidoyers* in the letters ; hence too the autobiography. His lust for dominance looked even beyond the grave ; thirty years after his death the world should read a document which should be his final, and, he hoped, successful effort at self-justification. We cannot, I think, understand Wagner fully unless we recognise that, however honest he was in intention, this consuming desire to prove himself always in the right should make us chary of accepting everything he says at its face value. No man is a perfectly unprejudiced witness on his own behalf, in his own suit ; and in Wagner’s case the very vehemence of his pleading lets us see how earnestly he desired to impress his own reading of himself upon

¹ *Mein Leben*, pp. 829, 830.

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the world, and is therefore a warning that he may often have seen things as he desired them to be rather than as they were. It is pretty clear that at an early age he realised that he was destined to be a great man, and took care that the world should not suffer from any lack of materials for the writing of his life.¹ The autobiography is simply the last and longest speech of a thousand long speeches for the defence. We need not consider at present the particular opinions upon his friends and associates and enemies that Wagner expresses there. The only question for the moment is as to the general trustworthiness of the book. That he has been exceedingly, even embarrassingly, candid on some points all the world now knows. Whether he always saw things at the correct angle is a different matter. It is obviously impossible to check him throughout, even where one suspects him to be unconsciously distorting the truth;² but there are several instances in which he is obviously not telling quite the truth or all the truth, and in more than one instance he can certainly be convicted of manipulating the facts to suit his own purpose.

I shall try to show later that the account he gives of the episode with Madame Laussot in 1850 does not square at every point with his letters to Minna. He deliberately tries to mislead the reader with regard to his relations with Frau Wesendonck; everyone

¹ In 1835 he was travelling about in search of singers for the Magdeburg Opera. A temporary financial stringency—neither the first nor the last in his life!—forced him to remain a week at Frankfort. “To kill time,” he says, “I had recourse, among other things, to a large red pocket-book which I carried about with me in my valise; I wrote down in this, with exact details of dates, some notes for my future biography.” (He was twenty-two at the time, and almost unknown outside his own little provincial circle.) “It is the same book that is before me at this moment to refresh my memory, and which I have kept up without any breaks at various periods of my life.” *Mein Leben*, p. 133.

² It would be unwise, for example, to believe without further evidence his story (*Mein Leben*, p. 743) that the Paris press during the *Tannhäuser* events of 1861 “was entirely in Meyerbeer’s hands”; that (p. 723) Meyerbeer had some years before bribed Fétis *père* to write articles against Wagner; or (p. 708) that Berlioz was influenced against Wagner by his wife, who had received a present of a valuable bracelet from Meyerbeer. Everyone who has mixed much with musicians knows how prone many of them are to believe that their colleagues—and still more their critics—are always “intriguing against them.”

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who has read Wagner's ardent letters to her must have gasped with astonishment to find him in *Mein Leben* glossing over that long and passionate love-dream, and actually speaking of "Minna's coarse misunderstanding of my real relations—friendly relations—with the young wife, who was continually concerned for my repose and my well-being."¹ That is not an actual untruth, but it is considerably less than the truth. In the preface to *Mein Leben* Wagner tells us that the only justification of the volumes was their "unadorned veracity." Perhaps he found "unadorned veracity" at this point a trifle embarrassing; perhaps he forgot his letters to Mathilde, or had never considered the possibility of their being published. But the fact remains that his own letters show the account he gives of his relations with Mathilde Wesendonck to be quite unreliable. What warrant have we, then, for believing him implicitly in other cases in which it may have been to his interest to suppress or distort the truth?

Let us take one of the most striking cases of this suppression and distortion. One of the friends of the middle period of Wagner's life was a certain Baron Robert von Hornstein. In 1862 Wagner—who was at that time in Paris—was, as frequently happened with him, looking for someone who would undertake the burden of keeping a home above his head. He tried two or three people, but without success; then he thought of the young Baron von Hornstein. This is the account he gives of the matter in *Mein Leben*:

"Finally I bethought me of looking for a quiet abode in the neighbourhood of Mainz, under the financial protection of Schott. He had spoken to me of a pretty estate of the young Baron von Hornstein in that region. I thought I was really conferring an honour upon the latter when I wrote to him, at Munich, asking permission to seek shelter for a time at his place in the Rhine district; and I was greatly perplexed at receiving an answer that only expressed terror at my request."²

On the face of it this seems candid and credible enough. Von Hornstein's son, Ferdinand von Hornstein, has, however, thrown another light on the affair. When Baron Ferdinand published a memoir of his father in 1908, he omitted certain letters, he tells

¹ *Mein Leben*, p. 667.

² *Mein Leben*, pp. 795, 796.

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us, “out of consideration for Wagner and his family.” The wounding allusions to Baron Robert in *Mein Leben*, and the evident animus displayed against him there, unlocked, however, the son’s lips. He resents Wagner’s description of his (Hornstein’s) father—the friend of Schopenhauer, Paul Heyse, Hermann Lingg and others—as a “young booby,”¹ and proceeds to explain “why Wagner has misrepresented my father’s character.”

On an earlier page (627) of *Mein Leben* Wagner tells us that during their stay together at Zürich in the winter of 1855-6 Hornstein declared himself to be so “nervous” that he could not bear to touch the piano—that his mother had died insane, and that he himself was greatly afraid of losing his reason. “Although,” says Wagner, “this made him to some extent interesting, there was blended so much weakness of character with all his intellectual gifts that we soon came to the conclusion that he was pretty hopeless, and were not inconsolable when he suddenly left Zürich.”² The impression conveyed—and obviously intended to be conveyed—is that the young man’s departure was a piece of half-mad caprice.

As it happens, however, Hornstein at his death had left among his papers an account of the affair that puts a different complexion on it. Wagner’s own eccentricities had been making the relations of the little circle none too pleasant.³ And Hornstein, so far from leaving Zürich in obedience to a sudden impulse, had actually made arrangements at his lodgings under which he could leave at any time when the “scenes” with Wagner became intolerable. He often expressed to Karl Ritter and the latter’s mother⁴ his regret that he was not in a position to “take his revenge” for the invitations he received to Wagner’s table. Their reply always was: “Wagner does not at all expect this now. He knows your circumstances, and is sure to follow you up later. He is waiting for a more favourable moment.” When he voiced his regret that

¹ *Mein Leben*, p. 602. On another page (626) he speaks of the “young booby” as being “agreeable [*anschniegend*] and intelligent,” apparently because he shared Wagner’s views upon Schopenhauer.

² *Mein Leben*, p. 627.

³ He admits, on the same page of *Mein Leben* (627), that he was very ill at this time, and prone to outbursts of irritability, during which his friends often had to suffer.

⁴ Frau Ritter was at this time making an allowance to Wagner.

there should be anything but ordinary friendly feeling to account for Wagner's attentions to him, his friends replied, "Oh, there is no doubt Wagner likes you and prizes your talents greatly; but these calculations (*Hintergedanken*) are too much second nature with him for him to be able to make an exception." "This," says Hornstein, "was to become still clearer to me." He learned that Wagner's guests were expected to bring bottles of wine with them—a point on which Hornstein, as a young man of breeding,¹ evidently felt some delicacy. On his birthday the great man entertained Hornstein and Baumgartner at dinner. "During the dessert, Wagner asked his sister-in-law—it came like a pistol shot—to bring him the wine-list from a neighbouring restaurant. She hesitatingly carried out this unexpected commission. The card comes. Wagner runs down the list of the champagnes and their prices, and orders a bottle of a medium quality to be brought. Everyone felt uncomfortable. The bottle having been emptied, Wagner turned to his two guests with a sneering smile, and said loudly, 'Shall I now present another thaler to each of these two gentlemen?' His wife and his sister-in-law fled in horror, like the ladies in the Wartburg scene in *Tannhäuser*. Baumgartner and I were stunned; we looked at one another, and each of us probably had an impulse to throw a glass at the head of our dear host." Instead of doing so, they burst into laughter, thanked him, and took their leave. Baumgartner declared to Hornstein that he would never accept another invitation from Wagner, "and I, for my part," says Hornstein, "*was firm in my resolve to leave Zürich as soon as possible.*" Afterwards Wagner, as was no doubt his wont, came and excused himself to Hornstein and Karl Ritter.² He had not meant *them*, he said, but "the German Princes" who performed his operas and raved about him, but gave him nothing: "it does not occur to them to send me a hamper of wine"; and so on. The young men, however, were not to be so easily appeased, and Wagner "had to listen to many things that he would rather not have heard." An outward reconciliation was effected, but the sting remained; Hornstein delayed his departure for a few weeks,

¹ He was twenty-two at the time. Wagner was forty-two.

² Hornstein had told the story to Karl, who was furious, and insisted on sending Wagner at once a hamper of champagne.

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and still visited Wagner's house, though less frequently than before. "I had," he writes, "to tell this distressing story, as it gives the key to my later conduct when, soon after my father's death, Wagner tried to borrow so heavily from me. The correspondence connected with this attempt led to a permanent separation from Wagner."¹

All this, it will be seen, puts the Zürich episode in a new light. There is not the least reason for doubting Hornstein's veracity. What he says is quite consistent with the accounts of Wagner's behaviour that we get from other sources, private and public. Moreover, Hornstein's reminiscences simply take the form of a note left among his personal papers. He could not have anticipated the misleading version that was to appear in *Mein Leben* many years after his death,² and, as has been said, his own version would probably have remained unpublished for ever, but for the provocation given to his son by the autobiography.

Baron Ferdinand von Hornstein gives further evidence of the pettiness of Wagner's rancour against this young man from whom, notwithstanding his disparagement of him, he was willing to borrow money. For now comes the full record of the incident to which Wagner alludes so airily in the passage from *Mein Leben* quoted on page 6. Here is the actual letter, dated, "19, Quai Voltaire, Paris, 12th December 1861," in which Wagner, according to *his* account, simply asked permission to stay for a time at Hornstein's place in the Rhine district.

"DEAR HORNSTEIN,—I hear that you have become rich. In what a wretched state I myself am you can easily guess from my failures.³ I am trying to retrieve myself by seclusion and a new work. In order to make possible this way to my preservation—that is to say, to lift me above the most distressing obligations, cares, and needs that rob me of all freedom of mind—I require an immediate loan of ten thousand francs. With this I can again put my life in order, and again do productive work.

"It will be rather hard for you to provide me with this sum ;

¹ There is not a word in *Mein Leben* as to these borrowings.

² He died in 1890, twenty-one years before the publication of *Mein Leben*.

³ In connection with the Paris production of *Tannhäuser*, &c.

but it will be possible if you wish it, and do not shrink from a sacrifice. This, however, I desire, and I ask it of you against my promise to endeavour to repay you in three years out of my receipts.

“ Now let me see whether you are the right sort of man !

“ If you prove to be such for me,—and why should not this be expected of some one some day ?—the assistance you give me will bring you into very close touch with me, and next summer you must be pleased to let me come to you for three months at one of your estates, preferably in the Rhine district.

“ I will say no more just now. Only as regards the proposed loan I may say that it would be a great relief to me if you could place even six thousand francs at my disposal immediately ; I hope then to be able to arrange to do without the other four thousand francs until March. But nothing but the immediate provision of the whole sum can give me the help which I so need in my present state of mind.

“ Let us see, then, and hope that the sun will for once shine a little on me. What I need now is a success ; otherwise—I can probably do nothing more !—Yours,
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“ I must confess,” says Hornstein, “ that the largeness of the amount and the tone of the letter made a refusal easier to me. What made it easier still was my knowledge that I had to do with a bottomless cask,—that while ten thousand francs were a great deal for me, they were simply nothing to him. I knew that Napoleon, Princess Metternich, Morny, and Erlanger had been bled of large sums that were simply like drops of water falling on a hot stone.” Hornstein was particularly grieved at the remark that the loan would draw him nearer to Wagner. “ Was I not near to him, then,” he asks, “ before I gave him money ? Was the intimate intercourse with him at the Lake of Geneva, on the Seelisberg, in Zürich, intended only to prepare the way for the borrowings he had in view when my father should die ? ”¹ So he replied to Wagner in these terms :

“ DEAR HERR WAGNER,—You seem to have a false idea of my riches. I have a modest (*hübsch*) fortune on which I can live in

¹ This, it will be remembered, had been hinted by Karl Ritter.