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978-1-108-07824-5 - Richard Wagner's Letters to his Dresden Friends: Theodor Uhlig, Wilhelm Fischer, and Ferdinand Heine

Translated by J.S. Shedlock

Excerpt

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LETTERS TO THEODOR UHLIG.
1849—1853.

I.

DEAR FRIEND,

Every now and then I feel anxious about you : how are you, are you well, and have you experienced no reactionary unpleasantnesses ? There are some friends, very few, for whose sake I often think of Dresden : among other things I have a warm remembrance of a passionate Beethoven Symphony, and then I am transported with delight and affection back again, in thought, amongst the Royal Musicians ; yet I must frankly confess that the freedom which I here inhale in fresh Alpine draughts is intensely pleasing to me. What is the ordinary care about the so-called future of citizen life compared with the feeling that we are not tyrannized over in our noblest aims ? How few men care more for themselves than for their stomachs ! Now I have made my choice, and am spared the trouble of choosing ; so I feel free in my innermost soul, and can despise what torments me from without ; no one can withdraw himself from the evil influences of the civilized barbarism of our time, but all can so manage that they do not rule over our better self.

I

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My friend Liszt, with devilish impetuosity, wishes me to write an opera for Paris: I have been there and arranged with a certain poet to furnish him with the complete sketch of an opera libretto, while he undertakes the execution of the same in French, and to see about a commission for me from the Grand Opera to write the music (excuse me, I have not expressed myself very clearly). Now, besides my *Siegfried*, I have in my head two tragic and two comic subjects, but not one of them would suit the French stage: I have also a fifth, and I care not in what language it is presented to the world—*Jesus of Nazareth*. I think of offering this subject to the Frenchman, and hope thus to be rid of the whole matter, for I can guess the dismay which this poem will cause to my *associé*. If he have the courage to hold up against the thousand conflicts which the proposition to treat such a subject for the theatre will cause, I shall look upon it as fate and set to work. If he abandon me, all the better: I am then freed from all temptation to work in the hateful jabbering language; for with my disposition, you can easily imagine that only with the greatest repugnance should I set to work on such a mishmash: if I do, it will be out of consideration for my creditors, to whom I should make over the French fees.

Into what good humour the sight of the Parisian art-economy has put me again, you will shortly see in an important article of mine in the *National*, "Art and Revolution," which I believe will appear in German at Wigand's in Leipzig. I am living here—helped in communistic fashion by Liszt—in good spirits, and I may say prosperously, according to my best nature: my

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TO UHLIG.

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only and great anxiety is about my poor wife, whom I am expecting here very shortly. To my very great astonishment, I find that I am a celebrity here ; made so indeed, by means of the piano scores of all my operas, out of which whole acts are repeatedly performed at concerts and at choral unions. At the beginning of the winter I shall go again to Paris to have something performed and to put my opera matter into order. You cannot imagine what joy one finds in frugality if one knows that thereby the noblest thing, freedom, is assured. You know how long I was brewing in my blood the Dresden catastrophe, only I had no presentiment of the exact hurricane which would drive me thence ; but you are thoroughly convinced that all the amnesties and restitutions in the world would not induce me to become again what, to my greatest sorrow, I was in Dresden. I have just a last remnant of curiosity, however, and you would give me much pleasure in letting me know how matters stand with you. My wife has never found leisure to give me news of Dresden, the theatre, and the band. Do relieve this last Dresden longing. Do you happen to know anything definite about the state of the police inquiry ? The fate of Heubner, Röckel, and Bakunin, troubles me much. Anyhow, *these* persons ought not to be imprisoned. But don't let me speak of it ! In this matter one can only judge justly and adequately if one looks at the period from a lofty point of view. Woe to him who acts with sublime purpose, and then, for his deeds, is judged by the police ! It is a grief and a shame which only our times can show.

Yesterday, at length, I received my scores : I looked through a little of *Lohengrin* at the piano, and cannot

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describe to you what a powerful effect this my work produced on me! Now I come to a favour which I have to ask of you. At my request you at once undertook to prepare, at your leisure, the piano score of this opera. To you, and especially to me, it must be most unpleasant to find that this work is interrupted. If you are still of the same mind, and are willing to continue to place me under obligation (always on the understanding that you will be compensated for your trouble by the future publisher of the opera), I beg you to get the score from the Dresden theatre in order to continue the piano version. Ask the chorus master, Fischer, in my name, to apply for the score for himself, in order to hand it over to you. For that purpose I enclose a few lines to Fischer, which I beg you will forward to him at once.

Now farewell, and let's hope we shall meet once again. If I should hear of any post likely to suit you in Switzerland, shall I tell you of it? This Switzerland, with its nature, its air, makes the most miserable man well and happy. I should like to bestow it on every one whom I love, even upon L.

Salute the few friends in the band who are yet willing to receive a salutation from me: among them I may probably reckon Horack. Salute Müller and H., also young Fürstenau. I rejoice that on that most fatal Tuesday evening, when I came once more to the Town Hall, it was in my power to render a good service to Fürstenau: probably he is not aware that without me it would have fared badly with him.

Tell Eisold I cannot come again to-morrow to the rehearsal of *Martha*; he should engage Röckel in my

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TO UHLIG.

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place. I am curious to know in what way Tietze will manage to reconcile me with the Princess A.; but I do not despair of his genius yet succeeding; on this, indeed, rests my whole hope for this life. But the man was an excellent double-bass player.

Again greetings in my name; for example, to Schlick. But, above all, delight me by sending a really long letter.

Once more farewell, and remain good to me.

Your

RICHARD WAGNER.

ZURICH, *August 9th*, '49.

Address to Mr. Alexander Müller, Professor of Music at Zurich.

2.

MOST WORTHY FRIEND, AND STILL ROYAL
CHAMBER MUSICIAN!

First of all receive this flattering title as a fiery coal for the depressing "*Ex-Kapell-Meister*."

Then let me thank you for your excellent letter. I am also indebted to you, namely, for the uncommon amount of time which you must have withdrawn from your deep speculations about the nature of three-four time. You hold to me with a faith and devotion, of which, for state reasons, high traitors are unworthy. Though you try to reconcile this with your royal Saxon conscience, my human political phantasy declares you free from fault, and so praises you heartily.

I have read through the letter several times, and your true nature, as therein revealed, has afforded

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me special joy. Ponder over your character, your knowledge, painfully acquired, yet, on that account, more solid, your capabilities, and your powers of performance, etc., and compare them with your position and employment, etc. Do, I say, ponder over the legitimate condition of our art and life relationships; and then, without attending university lectures, you will sufficiently recognize that the good God of the existing Christian and political social organization is a grand affair, but that royal bands are not bad either.

Your letter is so full that I cannot possibly answer it; I therefore write you, for reply, a new, if shorter one. God knows how it is that I cannot become quite sad. As my wife is now with me, and as for the coming months I can be without anxiety as to my means of existence, I feel as jolly and as comfortably disposed as a dog who has got over a whipping. But I have not yet got back into working order. Next week we shall go into a small house in which I shall have a special room for work: up to now I have only been able to sit down and scribble in a coffee-room, and this circumstance explains how I have been able to satisfy your request, and get my *Wibelistic* article ready for publication. While copying I rewrote much, so that you may find it interesting to compare the enclosed manuscript with the old version; and I would specially call your attention to the third section of the *Wibelungen*, and then also to the twelfth, dealing with "real property," in which you will meet with a rich use of the material.

I send you this little work with the request to

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TO UHLIG.

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forward it with enclosed letter to the publisher Wigand in Leipzig: the expense of sending it will, I hope, not be ruinous, yet I advise you, in case of necessity, to arrange for a subscription from the radical members of the band.

Wigand is already publishing a pamphlet of mine, *Art and Revolution*: of its French fate in the *National*, I have, as yet, learnt nothing. Get this little work as soon as it appears: it will be only a precursor—as soon as I set to work again I shall follow it up by one of greater detail, *The Art-work of the Future*; to which, afterwards a third, *The Artists of the Future*, will form the conclusion. I will not give you at random a notice of the contents of these writings; it must not be done in a rough, but in a really complete, way.

It is most essential that I should accomplish this work and send it into the world before going on with my immediate artistic productions. I must come myself, and those who are interested in my artistic being must come with me to a clear understanding; else shall we for ever grope about in hateful twilight, which is worse than absolute darkness in which one sees nothing and only religiously clutches hold of the old-accustomed balustrade.

If I accomplish this to my satisfaction, I shall then set to work at the music of my *Siegfried*; for that is what I yearn after, with all my soul's sincerity. Equally sincerely do I desire to escape from the Parisian opera scheme into which I so unwillingly entered. Compelled from the commencement to think of gain, I naturally entertained the idea, and let events take their course. And so now, as I have already told you, I

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am placed in the droll dilemma of deciding between Parisian help really offered, and my inmost aversion. The report that I am writing an opera for Paris does not make my decision a matter of difficulty, although, not to appear a bragger, I should certainly like to confirm it; but consideration for my wife, who really is somewhat of a bragger, and against whose practical common sense I may have to fight hard, if I have to tell her the plain truth, viz., that I will not write an opera for Paris. Were this matter not in many ways connected with my prospects of subsistence, she would shake her head, but give way. There's the critical knot, which I can only cut through with great pain. Already my wife is ashamed of our stay in Zurich, and thinks we ought to make every one believe that we are in Paris.

You see, dear friend, it is such trifles as conventional fame-seeking and anxiety for daily bread which threaten to exert—and in a decisive manner—their august modern, sovereignty over the true, free sphere of man's art. But can there be a choice here? Certainly not, not even if persons like you begin to be prudent and practical. I will be happy, and a man can only be that if he is free; but that man only is free who is what he can, and therefore must be. Whoever, therefore, satisfies the inner necessity of his being, is free; because he feels himself at one with himself, because everything which he does answers to his nature, to his true needs. Whoever follows a necessity, not from within but from without, is subject to compulsion; he is not free, but an unfortunate slave. The free man laughs at oppression from without if only inner necessity be not sacrificed to it: it can cause only fly-stings, not

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TO UHLIG.

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heart-wounds. I don't care what happens to me, if only I become what, according to my nature, I ought to become. So shall I be right, even if no idler take notice of me.

Apropos! If you know any persons who would give me as much per year as would satisfy my wants, in exchange for all that I may do during my life, in the way of writing poetry and music, please give them my address. Without this help I can do nothing.

I have scarcely anything more to write to you, for I have already chattered the best part; so I will finish, at any rate, about myself.

The little troop of my Dresden friends, of whom you send me news, gives me endless joy. How far above difference of character, capability, order and prospects of life is the one sure feeling of love, which all government and society are giving themselves so much trouble to root out! It makes me happy, and I can love not only this man, but all men, if even the roughest fellow salutes me in a friendly way—as my wife says to me.

Salute, from the bottom of my heart, the friends whom you have named to me, and do not forget X.

But say specially to H., from me, that if I do not write specially to him this time, this among other things may make him disposed to excuse me—that I presume you will let him see this letter. I am also superhumanly indebted to him in that he behaves in so silent, tender, and noble a manner with regard to a loan, which sum I formerly spent in publishing my operas; and which, considering his modest means, was not so easy for him to dispense with. Thank him for it in

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my name. A thing of this kind is of great value, and truly I don't ignore it.

Farewell! Salute my friends once more, and let me soon have fresh news. Write often to me, and do not trouble about the postage: I will make up for it out of something else! I shall soon have your article here to read. Adieu!

Your

RICHARD WAGNER.

ZURICH, *September 16th*, 49.

My address is always:—"Alexander Müller, Prof. d. Musik."

I have requested Wigand, in the enclosed letter, if he does not print the *Wibelungen* MS., or give it to another publisher, to send it back to you to Dresden. In case you get it back I would trouble you to get as good a publisher as possible.

Please see the enclosed letter through the town post, pre-paid.

September 19th.

After further inquiry I learn now that this packet—originally the *Wibelungen* MS. which I intended sending by parcel post—must contain no real letter. I therefore give you the enclosed letters unclosed and unsealed, with the request that you will close and seal them for me, so that each one may think he is receiving an absolute secret. For the money spent on sealing-wax or wafers kindly reimburse yourself out of the proceeds of the enclosed waste-paper, as well as from the fuel of the enclosed conductor's stick, of the Spontini kind, which you might perhaps even sell to Engelmann as a truncheon for the commander in Don Juan.