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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

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Richard Wagner's Letters to his Dresden Friends

Richard Wagner (1813–83) grew up in Dresden and served as Kapellmeister to King Frederick Augustus II of Saxony there from 1843 until he was forced to flee the country after the 1849 uprising. His operas *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* received their first performances at the Dresden Court Theatre. During his time in the city, Wagner became firm friends with the composer and violinist Theodor Uhlig, the stage manager and chorus master Wilhelm Fischer, and the comedian and costume designer Ferdinand Heine. This collection of letters from the composer to his three great friends covers the period 1841–68. First published in 1888, the letters are reissued here in the 1890 English translation by the pianist and Beethoven scholar John South Shedlock (1843–1919). They offer an intimate and compelling insight into Wagner's personal and professional life and his forthright views on many contemporary musicians and public figures.

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Richard Wagner

*Taken from a portrait
painted in 1853.*

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TO HIS

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**THEODOR UHLIG, WILHELM FISCHER, AND
FERDINAND HEINE.**

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH, WITH A PREFACE,

BY

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AND AN ETCHING OF WAGNER BY C. W. SHERBORN.

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PREFACE.

THE correspondence of Wagner and Liszt commenced in 1841 and closed in 1861; in this volume the letters extend from 1841 to 1868. Of early letters there are only a few; and setting aside these and the last written to Heine from Munich in 1868, the series may be said to begin in 1849 and to close in 1860. This represents the period of exile at Zurich; and amid much that is familiar we come across much that is new. Of the eventful visit to Paris in 1850, there is the briefest possible mention in a letter from Wagner to Liszt; but here in letters to Uhlig and Heine he pours out his whole soul, and tells of his sorrows, his anger, and his despair. The picture which he draws of himself is indeed a striking one. The Paris failure, however, as Wagner himself fully acknowledges, resulted in good. He returned to Switzerland, and soon the whole plan of the *Ring des Nibelungen* was conceived. The letter in which he describes his ambitious scheme to Liszt bears the date November 20th, 1851; but he had already written on the same

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subject to Uhlig a week before. Then, again, there is the unfortunate visit to London in 1855. The five letters addressed to Fischer are full of characteristic details. These subjects, and others connected with Wagner's literary works, are naturally to be found in both correspondences; and it may be that here and there we are reminded even of the phraseology of the letters to Liszt. But the differences are greater than the resemblances. Liszt showed great sympathy for Wagner as a man, and extraordinary enthusiasm for his art-work; and this sympathy and enthusiasm proved indeed powerful bonds of union between the two. But Liszt was a famous man, and Wagner comparatively unknown; and the friendship was not of that intimate kind which is so clearly displayed to us in the letters to Uhlig, Fischer, and in particular to Heine. And in other important matters Wagner himself tells Uhlig how Liszt "stands apart from me in his life and mode of thought." But his Dresden friends were all in a comparatively humble station of life, and in "modes of thought" one with him. The letter to Wilhelm Fischer, dated November 20th, 1849, shows clearly how strong was the bond of friendship between the four men. In many small, and perhaps in themselves unimportant details, we feel the difference in the style of writing. Here there are colloquialisms, strong expressions, jokes, etc., such as are not to

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be found in the letters to Liszt. There are details with regard to Wagner himself, to his wife, his home-life, his bird, and his dog which tell their own story. To mention only one small instance. To Liszt he writes two lines about the death of his "dear little parrot;" but to Uhlig a whole letter. I would specially ask readers of these letters not to forget their specially private character; the bitter remarks about certain musicians of note, the violent denunciations of men standing in high places, and the liberty of speech in which he occasionally indulges must all be considered privileged. They evidently were never intended for the public eye. In a certain degree, one may regret the publication of such letters; there is a tendency to pick out what is objectionable for condemnation, if not ridicule. The good and the bad must, however, be taken together. To have both put before us is in one respect a great advantage; we have the *whole* man, and no one-sided representation.

A few particulars respecting the three friends to whom these letters are addressed may perhaps prove welcome.

Theodor Uhlig, who began at an early age to take interest in music, studied composition under Fr. Schneider, from 1837 to 1840. In 1841 he became a member of the Royal Orchestra at Dresden, and in 1852 leader of the same. He

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was an accomplished musician, and composed overtures, quartets, trios, songs, etc. He, of course, became acquainted with *Rienzi*, *Flying Dutchman*, and *Tannhäuser*, produced at Dresden under Wagner's direction: however, up to the year 1847, he was not in sympathy either with him or with his art-views. But an attentive perusal of the composer's "Programme" to the Choral Symphony, and a careful examination of the score of *Tannhäuser* lent to him, at his own request, by Wagner, brought about a revolution. Uhlig became a zealous disciple and firm friend of the master's; and from that time down to his last day (he was snatched away by death on January 3rd, 1853, in the thirty-first year of his age) he devoted to him his time and his talents. Like Liszt, Uhlig found Wagner at times difficult to get on with; and in the letters before us we find that on one or two occasions a rupture seemed imminent. In one letter Wagner writes: "Truly, in our intercourse, if one of us two need to make apology, it is I, once and always. Pay no attention, if now and then something in my letters vexes you. Unfortunately, I am often in such bitter humour, that it almost affords me a cruel relief to offend some one; this is a calamity which only makes *me* the more deserving of pity." Uhlig, like Liszt, made allowances for genius. We learn from a letter written by Wagner to Liszt, dated

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July 11th, 1851, how much he valued the friendship of Uhlig. Speaking of him he says: "Thus I gained a friend, who subsequently from a distance made it the task of his life, as far as his power extended, to serve me in a manner which—the inclination being equal in both cases—has been surpassed only by your brilliant genius." After Uhlig had become acquainted with Wagner, he abandoned composition and took to literary work. He was one of the most industrious contributors to the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*; and the obituary notice by J. Rühlmann in 1853 shows how highly his services were valued. Besides articles on Wagner's operas and pamphlets, he wrote a series of articles on the Beethoven Symphonies, and another series entitled *Lesefrüchte auf dem Felde der musikalischen Literatur*.

Wilhelm Fischer, who was born about the year 1790, was connected with the opera at Magdeburg and Leipzig; in the latter city he appeared as a *buffo* bass singer. He went to Dresden in 1831, and became stage-manager and chorus-master at the theatre. In December 1840, Wagner, who was in Paris, sent the score of *Rienzi* to Herr v. Lüttichau, the Intendant. The first of the letters to Fischer is dated September 7th, 1841, and refers to the acceptance of that opera by the management. From that letter it appears that Wagner was not

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personally known to him then. They met in the following year ; and from that time down to Fischer's death in November 1859 they were on excellent terms. In an obituary notice of his old friend, Wagner speaks of the consolation of knowing that such beings exist, of the happiness of meeting such a man on one's path.

Ferdinand Heine was a comedian engaged at the Dresden Court Theatre, and also a designer of the costumes. The first letter addressed to him by Wagner is dated 1841, and the last 1868. In this collection there are only twenty-six ; so that it is natural to suppose that many have got lost. The "highly honoured Herr Heine" changed to "dear old friend" soon after they came to know each other, and then he was addressed as *Heinemännel*, *Nante*, etc. In his third letter Wagner claims the right of family friendship, in that Heine was a friend of his father's. In the letters there are many references to Wilhelm Heine, the son, and to America and Japan. This talented son, born in 1827, went to New York in 1849, and became known there as a painter. He was artist of the expedition of the American squadron to the China Seas and Japan during the years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the command of Commodore Perry, and he is twice mentioned in the official narrative of the expedition. In 1856 he published his *Reise um die Erde nach Japan*, and between

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1873 and 1880 his great work *Japan, Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Landes und seiner Bewohner*. Wilhelm Heine died in 1885.

The hurried and at times careless manner in which many of these letters were written, sentences apparently having been put on paper as fast as pen could write; the constant references to persons and things which, with time, have lost their meaning; the fact that there are no answers to the letters, as in the Wagner-Liszt correspondence, to throw a light on questions or doubtful passages; and the colloquialisms so plentifully scattered through the letters,—all these things have rendered the translator's task one of exceptional difficulty; and as Wagner asked of Fischer with regard to *Rienzi*, so I too would ask of my readers—indulgence and patience. An attempt has been made to reproduce the style of the original; and the question is not how far it reads as clear or good English, but how far it preserves the spirit of the original. I beg publicly to express my thanks to Messrs. Grevel & Co., the publishers, for their assistance with regard to the Saxon idioms and even slang, and to Mr. W. Ashton Ellis (editor of the Wagnerian quarterly, *The Meister*), for valuable aid and many useful suggestions, as well as for the preparation of a comprehensive Index.

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