

***LUDWIG
NOHL***



***LIFE
OF WAGNER***

Ludwig Nohl

Life of Wagner

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PREFACE.

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The masters of music, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, advanced this art beyond the limits of their predecessors by identifying themselves more closely with the development of active life itself. By their creative power they invested the life of the nation and mankind with profounder thought, culminating at last in the most sublime of our possessions—religion. No artist has followed in their course with more

determined energy than Richard Wagner, as well he might, for with equal intellectual capacity, the foundation of his education was broader and deeper than that of the classic masters; while on the other hand the development of our national character during his long active career, became more vigorous and diversified as the ideas of the poets and thinkers were more and more realized and reflected in our life. Wagner's development was as harmonious as that of the three classic masters, and all his struggles, however violent at times, only cleared his way to that high goal where we stand with him to-day and behold the free unfolding of all our powers. This goal is the entire combination of all the phases of art into one great work: the music-drama, in which is mirrored every form of human existence up to the highest ideal life. As this music-drama rests historically upon the opera it is but natural that the second triumvirate of German music should be composed of the founder of German opera, C. M. von Weber, the reformer of the old opera, Christoph Wilibald Gluck, and Richard Wagner. To trace therefore the development of the youngest of these masters, will lead us to consider theirs as well, and in doing this the knowledge of what he is will disclose itself to us.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

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Just as this volume is going to press the announcement comes from Germany that the prize offered by the Prague Concordia for the best essay on "Wagner's Influence upon

the National Art" has been adjudged to Louis Nohl, an honor which will lend additional interest to this little volume.

THE LIFE OF WAGNER.

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CHAPTER I.

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1813-1831.

WAGNER'S EARLY YOUTH.

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"I resolved to be a musician."—Wagner.

Richard Wilhelm Wagner was born in Leipzig, May 22, 1813. His father at that time was superintendent of police—a post which, owing to the constant movement of troops during the French war, was one of special importance. He soon fell a victim to an epidemic which broke out among the troops passing through. The mother, a woman of a very refined and spiritual nature, then married the highly gifted actor, Ludwig Geyer, who had been an intimate friend of the

family, and removed with him to Dresden, where he held a position at the court theatre and was highly esteemed. There Wagner spent his childhood and early youth. Besides the great patriotic uprising of the German people, artistic impressions were the first to stir his soul. His father had taken an active interest in the amateur theatricals of the Leipzig of his day, and now the family virtually identified themselves with the practical side of the art. His brother Albert and sister Rosalie subsequently joined the theatre, and two other sisters diligently devoted themselves to the piano. Richard himself satisfied his childish tendency by playing comedy in his own room and his piano-playing was confined to the repetition of melodies which he had heard. His step-father, during the sickness which also overtook him, heard Richard play two melodies, the "Ueb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit" and the "Jungfernkranz" from "Der Freischuetz," which was just becoming known at that time. The boy heard him say to his mother in an undertone: "Can it be that he has a talent for music?" He had destined him to be an artist, being himself as good a portrait painter as he was actor. He died, however, before the boy had reached his seventh year, bequeathing to him only the information imparted to his mother, that he "would have made something out of him." Wagner in the first sketch of his life, (1842) relates that for a long time he dwelt upon this utterance of his step-father; and that it impelled him to aspire to greatness.

His inclinations however did not at first turn to music. He was rather disposed to study and was sent to the celebrated Kreuzschule. Music was only cultivated indifferently. A

private teacher was engaged to give him piano lessons, but, as in drawing, he was averse to the technicalities of the art, and preferred to play by ear, and in this way mastered the overture to "Der Freischuetz." His teacher upon hearing this expressed the opinion that nothing would become of him. It is true, he could not in this way acquire fingering and scales, but he gained a peculiar intonation arising from his own deep feeling, that has been rarely possessed by any other artist. He was very partial to the overture to "The Magic Flute," but "Don Juan" made no impression on him.

All this, however, was only of secondary importance. The study of Greek, Latin, mythology, and ancient history so completely captivated the active mind of the boy, that his teacher advised him seriously to devote himself to philological studies. As he had played music by imitation so he now tried to imitate poetry. A poem, dedicated to a dead schoolmate, even won a prize, although considerable fustian had to be eliminated. His richness of imagination and feeling displayed itself in early youth. In his eleventh year he would be a poet! A Saxon poet, Apel, imitated the Greek tragedies, why should he not do the same? He had already translated the first twelve books of Homer's "Odyssey," and had made a metrical version of Romeo's monologue, after having, simply to understand Shakspeare, thoroughly acquired a knowledge of English. Thus at an early age he mastered the language which "thinks and meditates for us," and Shakspeare became his favorite model. A grand tragedy based on the themes of Hamlet and King Lear was immediately undertaken, and although in its progress he killed off forty-two of the *dramatis personae* and was

compelled in the denouement, for want of characters to let their ghosts reappear, we can not but regard it as a proof of the superabundance of his inborn power.

One advantage was secured by this absurd attempt at poetry: it led him to music, and in its intense earnestness he first learned to appreciate the seriousness of art, which until then had appeared to him of such small importance in contrast with his other studies, that he regarded "Don Juan" for instance as silly, because of its Italian text and "painted acting," as disgusting. At this time he had grown familiar with "Der Freischuetz," and whenever he saw Weber pass his house, he looked up to him with reverential awe. The patriotic songs sung in those early days of resurrected Germany appealed to his sensitive nature. They fascinated him and filled his earnest soul with enthusiasm. "Grander than emperor or king, is it to stand there and rule!" he said to himself, as he saw Weber enchant and sway the souls of his auditors with his "Freischuetz" melodies. He now returned with the family to Leipzig. Did he, while at work on his grand tragedy, occupying him fully two years, neglect his studies? In the Nicolai school, where he now attended, he was put back one class, and this so disheartened him, that he lost all interest in his studies. Besides, now for the first time, the actual spirit of music illumined his intellectual horizon. In the Gewandhaus concerts he heard Beethoven's symphonies. "Their impression on me was very powerful," he says, speaking of his deep agitation, though only in his fifteenth year, and it was still further intensified when he was informed that the great master had died the year previous, in pitiful seclusion from all the world. "I knew not

what I really was intended for," he puts in the mouth of a young musician in his story, "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven," written many years after. "I only remember, that I heard a symphony of Beethoven one evening. After that I fell sick with a fever, and when I recovered, I was a musician." He grew lazy and negligent in school, having only his tragedy at heart, but the music of Beethoven induced him to devote himself passionately to the art. Indeed while listening to the Egmont music, it so affected him that he would not for all the world, "launch" his tragedy without such music. He had perfect confidence that he could compose it, but nevertheless thought it advisable to acquaint himself with some of the rules of the art. To accomplish this at once, he borrowed for a week, an easy system of thoroughbass. The study did not seem to bear fruit as quickly as he had expected, but its difficulties allured his energetic and active mind. "I resolved to be a musician," he said. Two strong forces of modern society, general education and music, thus in early youth made an impression upon his nature. Music conquered, but in a form which includes the other, in the presentation of the poetic idea as it first found its full expression in Beethoven's symphonies. Let us now see how this somewhat arbitrary and selfwilled temperament urged the stormy young soul on to the real path of his development.

The family discovered his "grand tragedy." They were much grieved, for it disclosed the neglect of his school studies. Under the circumstances he concealed his consciousness of his inner call to music, secretly continuing, however, his efforts at composition. It is noticeable that the

impulse to adapt poetry never forsook him, but it was made subordinate to the musical faculty. In fact the former was brought into requisition only to gratify the latter, so completely did musical composition control him. Beethoven's Pastoral symphony prompted him at one time to write a shepherd play, which owed its dramatic construction on the other hand to Goethe's vaudeville, "A Lover's Humor," to which he wrote the music and the verses at the same time, so that the action and movement of the play grew out of the making of the verses and the music. He was likewise prompted to compose in the prevailing forms of music, and produced a sonata, a string quartet, and an aria.

These works may not have had faults as far as form is concerned, but very likely they were without any intrinsic value. His mind was still engrossed with other things than the real poesy of music. Notwithstanding this, under cover of such performances as these, he believed he could announce himself to the family as a musician. They regarded such efforts at composition however as a mere transitory passion, which would disappear like others especially so as he was not proficient on even one instrument, and could not therefore assume to do the work of a practical musician with any degree of assurance. At this time a strange and confused impression was made upon the young mind, which had already absorbed so much of importance. The so called "romantic writers" who then reigned supreme, particularly the mystic Hoffmann, who was both poet and musician, and who wrote the most beautiful poetic arrangements of the works of Gluck, Mozart, and Beethoven, along with the absurdest notions of music,

tended to completely disturb his poetic ideas and mode of expression in music. This youth of scarce sixteen was in danger of losing his wits. "I had visions both waking and sleeping, in which the key note, third and quint appeared bodily and demonstrated their importance to me, but whatever I wrote on the subject was full of nonsense," he says himself.

It was high time to overcome and settle these disturbing elements. His imperfect understanding of the science of music, which had given rise to these fancies and apparitions, now gave place to its real nature, its fixed rules and laws. The skilled musician, Mueller, who subsequently became organist at Altenburg, taught him to evolve from those strange forms of an overwrought imagination the simple musical intervals and accords, thus giving his ideas a secure foundation even in these musical inspirations and fantasies. Corresponding success however, had not yet been attained in the practical groundwork of the art. The impetuous young fellow and enthusiast continued inattentive and careless in this study. His intellectual nature was too restless and aggressive to be brought back easily to the study of dry technical rules, and yet its progress was not far-reaching enough, for even in art their acquisition is essential.

One of the grand overtures for orchestra which he chose to write at that time instead of giving himself to the study of music as an independent language, he called himself the "culmination of his absurdities." And yet in this composition, in B major, there was something, which, when it was performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, commanded the

attention of so thorough a musician as Heinrich Dorn, then a friend of Wagner, and who became later Oberhofkapellmeister at Berlin. This was the poetic idea which Wagner by the aid of his mental culture was enabled to produce in music, and which gives to a composition its inner and organic completeness. Dorn could thus sincerely console the young author with the hope of future success for his composition, which, instead of a favorable reception, met only with indignation and derision.

The revolution which broke out in France in July, 1830, greatly excited him as it did others and he even contemplated writing a political overture. The fantastic ideas prevalent at that time among the students at the university, which in the meantime he had entered to complete his general education, and fit himself thoroughly for the vocation of a musician, tended still further to divert his mind from the serious task before him. At this juncture, both for his own welfare and that of art, a kind Providence sent him a man, who, sternly yet kindly, as the storm subsided, directed the awakening impulse for order and system in his musical studies. This was Theodore Weinlig, who had been cantor at the Thomasschule in Leipzig, since 1823 and was therefore, so to speak, bred in the spirit and genius of the great Sebastian Bach. He possessed that attribute of a good teacher which leads the scholar imperceptibly into the very heart of his study. In less than a year the young scholar had mastered the most difficult problems of counterpoint, and was dismissed by his teacher as perfectly competent in his art. How highly Wagner esteemed him is shown by the fact that his "Liebesmahl der