Carl Maria von Weber. (Conclusion)

Author(s): F. Weber

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 17, No. 393 (Nov. 1, 1875), pp. 263-264

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3354697>

Accessed: 31-12-2015 10:19 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

NOVEMBER 1, 1875.

CARL MARIA VON WEBER.

By F. WEBER.

(Conclusion.)

THE attitude of supreme indifference on the part of the Italian maestros resident in Germany with regard to the language and character of her people, necessarily resulted in their total inability to understand the bearings of the national movement inaugurated by Weber's *Freischütz*. In order to point out more clearly the views entertained by that party concerning the latter work and German opera in general, we cannot do better than quote a few passages from a letter written to a friend in 1821 (the year of the first production of *Freischütz*), by an eminent Italian (Carpani) residing in Vienna, and published in December of the same year in the *Biblioteca Italiana*. The writer says: "We have here (Vienna) an exceedingly romantic opera (*opera romanticissima*) with a more than romantic music by a certain Wöber (*sic*), which has a full house every time it is produced. I have not yet been able to hear it myself, but I know that it contains some pearls smothered in the scientific sand of counterpoint, and, besides, some few pretty choruses; for science is never wanting in the Germans—on the contrary, they have an abundance of it—but order, taste and melody . . . The facility with which the public here, highly musical as it is, will almost from day to day change its taste, is a fact both remarkable and difficult of explanation. To-day they applaud an opera by Rossini, to-morrow they go into raptures over a work by Paesello: the one full of fire and rich in accompaniment—all melody and simplicity the other. The next day they are again quite content with a *Cortez*, composed in French by Spontini, or with a *Freischütz* by Weber, both most sparingly endowed with melody, especially the latter. To be more explicit, I will tell you that I gather from the score, that with the exception of some choruses and some marches, one looks in vain for the melodious *portamento* song throughout the entire opera. Instead thereof, you find a scrupulous interpretation of the meaning of every single word . . . but at the same time you are struck with a profound knowledge regarding chords and modulations, and with a number of devilish bounds from one idea to another . . . We shall shortly have a German opera by Spöhr. As this learned composer has lived some years in Italy, he will, no doubt, have acquired the proper taste for melody, and should he be able to unite this prerogative of Italian music with German science, we may fairly expect, notwithstanding the musically intractable German words, to be treated to a fine opera. Through the unwieldiness (*indocilità*) and uncouthness of the native language, as well as through the overbearing attitude which the instrumental music had assumed over the vocal, the melodious singing was at one time in danger of being driven from the country altogether. Rossini and Mercadante, however, with other Italian swans, are gradually leading back the Germans to the only true path of the art. They will revive the great days of Hasse, Täuber, Mara, &c., and it will not be long before we shall again acknowledge but one Beautiful, one School, one Music: viz., that of Durante, Piccini, Cimarosa, of Gassmann, Graun, Mozart, and so many others . . . Without the appearance of Rossini, this divine art was in danger of being

drowned in the ocean of the most common-place and ever-to-be-repeated songlets, or to be lost sight of in the barren desert of abstruse harmonic complications. There can be no doubt that, by introducing once more the good style of music (*il buon genere*), and enriching it with new treasures, Rossini and Mercadante will save the art in Europe from decay. And if the former in his admirable works will only endeavour to check the impetuosity of his creative genius by the recognized laws of truth, and the latter continue to give us such smoothly and lucidly written operas as those are with which at this moment all Milan is enraptured; the superiority of Italian music will once more be universally acknowledged, no matter in which country it is produced. . . . "The opinions as here pronounced, with the only variation, perhaps, of the respective choice in the person of the supposed "saviour of the art," may fairly be taken as representative of the views held by the Italian party all over Germany. They show plainly how little the independent character of the works of even such German masters whom our referee allows to participate in the merit of having cultivated *il buon genere*, i. e., the style of music as revealed periodically from the other side of the Alps, was understood in these quarters. For even Mozart, though his operas are undoubtedly cast in an Italian mould, as his genius had been trained in an Italian school, differs nevertheless widely from his preceptors in the manifold and sustained dramatic life pervading his stage-works, and in the essentially German character of his music. The stern and wholesome reforms of Gluck, with regard to the whole structure of the musical drama, are altogether ignored by the writer of the above exposition, though the theories of the composer of *Iphigenia* had a devoted follower in Vienna in the person of the writer's own countryman Salieri. It is not surprising then that—notwithstanding the hostility with which the Italian party met Weber's success—the real significance of his *Freischütz*, which showed neither the Italian leanings of a Mozart, nor the deliberate and one-sidedly reformatory tendencies of a Gluck, but had its roots entirely in the national life of the people, should have altogether escaped their notice. Keeping in mind, however, the fact that these men represented a powerful aristocracy in matters musical all over the country, the importance of the appearance of Weber, with his democratic mission, becomes at once apparent. In his double capacity of director of an operatic establishment and creative artist, Weber had long keenly felt the subordinate position in which the German music-drama had for years been suffered to remain; a fact which had stunted its natural growth, and had contributed largely to the increasing preponderance of purely instrumental music. The mighty Beethoven himself, after having once demonstrated the wondrous effects which music of the most ideal order could produce on the stage, withdrew for ever from an unhealthy atmosphere of intrigue and unworthy competition, into the isolated regions of independent thought. Weber, on his part, was differently constituted. All his artistic aims, his whole being, centred in the stage. It was here, and here only, where he could hope to realize the dreams of his youth. Already in the merry days of his stay at Darmstadt, while yet the oracular utterances of "Papa Vogler" exercised their spell over the admiring pupil, Weber, with some friends, had formed a society, whose chief objects were to be to preserve the native art in its purity, and to labour for its due recognition in the country. Like many other creations of youthful enthusiasm,

the Society soon dissolved itself into its elements. But to the principle Weber remained true throughout life; while another member, Meyerbeer, preferred to use his splendid talent in mastering and combining in his music the styles of *all* nations, and to become the founder of the musical sensation-drama, a monstrosity which, in spite of the consummate skill with which its incongruous elements are welded together, will certainly prove to have been adapted "for an age" only, and not "for all time." We would not in this be misunderstood. The character of art, speaking in the abstract, is no doubt cosmopolitan, and in this sense music too is of no country. Still, as we recognise a distinct individuality in the works of every great artist, so there are certain special characteristics peculiar to the nation to which he belongs, which indeed establish its position in the great republic of Arts; and in art, as well as in politics, occasions may arise when this national character must assert itself against encroachments from outside tending to obstruct its natural development. And such a period was that of which we are now treating. When Weber threw down the gauntlet as champion for specifically German music, his patriotism went hand in hand with the higher interests of that art, which is indeed of no country.

The spirit of the time, it should be remembered, considerably strengthened, and to some extent suggested, the position which our composer had taken up. The wars of liberation had only recently been fought, and the expulsion of the foreign invader from German soil, if it had left the country politically as divided as before, had at any rate kindled in the nation a feeling of spiritual unity, which was kept alive by the poetry and popular literature of the day. Weber too, though not by any means of a warlike disposition, had at least once been carried beyond his ordinary sphere by the high-going waves of a great epoch in history. His songs of "Lyre and Sword," written under the stirring influence of the events which lie between the years of 1813 and 1815, may be said to have first directed the attention of the whole country upon the small, delicate-looking man, whose simple notes could arouse so much manly enthusiasm. Here already it was the element of a noble popularity which had produced such deep effects. A few years later the country should hail in the composer of "Lyre and Sword" a new rallying point for the national consciousness, whereto it could turn from a politically unsatisfactory present. Not only had the music of *Der Freischütz* touched familiar chords in every German home, both in the cool and criticising North and the more enthusiastic, if more homely, people of the South: it had also raised the common language from the timid position it had hitherto occupied by the side of Italian, which had so long been considered the only linguistic basis tolerable in music. Though operas and songs had, of course, been composed in German before that time, we believe we are not going too far in asserting, that to Weber and to Schubert we must trace the now universal recognition of the value of that language for musical purposes. In his masterly treatment of it, Weber solves the difficult problem of maintaining the happy medium between rigid declamatory correctness and purely musical phrasing. The great singers of his time, moreover, bore eloquent witness to the delightful manner in which his music is adapted to the capacities of the human voice. In this he has never been surpassed. On the contrary, it would seem that in the modern

opera-drama, where the human throat is fast becoming a mere instrument, the singer will have to make up his mind to the "higher development," *i.e.*, a constant strain upon his highest notes—and will have to forego the not unreasonable luxury of having his voice treated with some consideration. How far Weber, whose influence upon modern art in various directions consisted as much in pointing out new paths as in his actually walking in them, has had a share in the reformatory ideas of Richard Wagner, it is not at present our object to determine. Certain it is, that the chief features of Wagner's earlier operatic works are to be found in *Euryanthe*, however much in his later phase he may have freed himself from this influence. But it appears to us that, in the elaborate modern "art-work," the grand simplicity of the *Volklied*-element (which, after all, is the most immediate manifestation on record of the genius of the people, whom Wagner himself holds in such reverence) has been lost sight of. Instead of following up and enlarging upon the example so successfully set by Weber, the modern reformer, in his now so well-known theories, sets himself a task which, to be effectively carried on, would require a reconstruction and reorganisation of the whole fabric of modern society. Nevertheless we are far from denying that the ideas underlying this new movement are grand, and as such worthy of the enthusiastic support of the, as yet small, circle of its devotees. There can be no doubt that, at any rate, these men represent the party of progress in musical art, in opposition to the rest-and-be-thankful spirit prevalent among the great majority of composers of the present day; and in this capacity they may claim kinship with the genius of Carl Maria von Weber, who, as his excellent biographer remarks, always had youth and progress on his side.

Weber was a conscious tone-poet, worshipping in himself the divine faculty which he recognized. He was an artist of great cultivation, who had the power to view his own relative position in the art by the objective light of its history, who distinctly felt the links which connected him with the great masters that had gone before him. It was this, which filled his soul with the earnest desire to hold sacred the purity of his art, as it had been handed down to him. Unlike the men of the "school," he aimed at the generalisation and popularisation, in the noblest sense of these terms, of that national inheritance; and listening intently to the voice of the people as it manifested itself, now with rich humour, now with touching pathos, in the *Volklied*, he succeeded in holding up to them their ideal self—a precious pearl in elaborate, yet chaste, setting. This is Weber's great artistic deed, which has firmly established him in the hearts of the German people, and which places him foremost in the ranks of truly national Tone-poets.

We are conscious of having done but imperfect justice to the picture of an artist, whose importance to the art which his genius graced, cannot be pointed out with too much force. But if these remarks have given some inducement, here and there, to a closer study of the *life* as well as of the works of the modest composer of *Freischütz*, *Euryanthe*, and *Oberon*, we feel sure the subject will render the student more than ever impressed with the truth, that music is not merely a means by which to convey vague feelings—but a living power, capable of penetrating a man's whole existence with its divine influence, and enlisting in its service the noblest aspirations both of his heart and intellect.