A MIDST the events which were agitating the world, the false news of the passing of Cosima Wagner fell, if not unnoticed, at least without occupying public attention for some days, as would have been the case at another time. The newspapers simply announced that the daughter of Liszt died at Bayreuth on December 22, 1919; some devoted a few lines to a brief survey of her career—that was all.

Without pretending, à propos of the unpublished correspondence which is to follow, to rehearse the biography of her who was the wife of Richard Wagner, with which every one familiar with the literary and musical history of the past century is acquainted, we shall merely recall the principal events in her long life, before letting her speak for herself.

Frans Liszt, born in 1811, had three children by Marie de Flavigny (daughter of the comte de Flavigny, born at Frankfort in 1805), comtesse d’Agoult, whose pen-name was Daniel Stern. The eldest was Blandine, born at Geneva in 1836; she died in 1861, five years after marrying Émile Ollivier, a lawyer, and a future minister of the liberal Empire. The youngest, Daniel, born at Rome, died at Berlin at the age of nineteen, in 1859. Cosima first saw the light in 1850.

In the fifth of his “Lettres d’un Bachelier à la musique,” published by the Revue et Gazette musicale of Paris, addressed from Bellagio, September 20, 1857, to Louis de Ronchaud, Liszt leads off thus:

Whenever you may write the story of two happy lovers, place them on the shore of Lake Como. I do not know any countryside so manifestly blessed by heaven; I have never seen one where the enchantments of a life of love appeared more natural.—(And further on): Yes, my friend, should you have a vision in your dreams of the ideal form of one of those women whose celestial charm is not a snare for the senses, but a revelation for the soul; should there appear to you, besides her, a young man whose heart is faithful and sincere,—let your fancy picture a moving love-tale between them, and begin it with these words: “By the shore of Lake Como.”
Two years later, Cosima Liszt was born by the shore of this entrancing lake, and in the Spring of 1840 George Sand, the friend of Liszt and the countess (whom she calls Arabella in her "Lettres d'un Voyageur"), brought out at the Théâtre-Français Cosima, ou la Heine dans l'amour, her first dramatic work, whose very first performance was a complete fiasco. Liszt, continuing his triumphant progress throughout Europe, entrusted his three children to his excellent mother, dwelling in Paris at 19, rue Pigalle. A little later (about 1848-49) they were en pension with Seghers, the violinist and orchestral conductor, founder of the Société Sainte-Cécile. In 1851, Reinecke, then in Paris, gave piano lessons to Blandine and Cosima.

It was in 1853 that Wagner, during a brief stay in Paris, saw the two sisters and their brother Daniel for the first time. The very striking resemblance of the youthful Daniel to his father made a "touching impression" on him, whereas the two young girls impressed him only "by their timidity and the air of reserve which they continually maintained."

Blandine married Émile Ollivier in October, 1857. The same year, and nearly at the same time, Hans von Bülow, the composer, pianist and conductor, and a most zealous admirer of Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner, married, at Berlin, “that angel in heart and soul whose name is Cosima.” The young married pair proceeded straightway to Zurich, where they passed several weeks in Wagner’s circle. This was a short time before the “catastrophe” which put an end to Wagner’s sojourn at the Wesendonks’, where he had just begun writing Tristan und Isolde. Thenceforward Cosima felt herself irresistibly attracted toward him for whom her father incessantly fought and devoted himself. Seven years later, at Munich, when Wagner thought he had at last found an asylum, the decisive intimacy was established. The sequel—we know:

In 1865 Wagner was forced to leave Munich and retire to Switzerland; in 1865 his first wife, Wilhelmine Planer, died; Hans von Bülow having obtained a divorce, Wagner married Cosima Liszt on August 26th, 1870; she had already presented him with two daughters and a son—Isolde, Eva and Siegfried.

He passed the last ten years of his life at Bayreuth, not leaving the little Bavarian town, where he had erected his theatre, until the performances of Parsifal were ended and he sought repose in Venice, where death overtook him in 1888.

Everybody knows with what rare energy and what a comprehension of artistic affairs she whom Liszt termed his Valkyrie took up and developed the exploitation of the “Festspiele” at Bayreuth.
Thenceforward the enterprise entered upon a period of prosperity which Wagner himself could have imagined only for a distant future.

The hitherto unpublished letters now following were written by Cosima Wagner, or taken from her dictation, as the state of her health—so the letter of December the 6th, 1885, and some others, inform us—did not permit her to wield the pen herself. They have reference to the French translation which Victor Wilder, commencing with the year preceding, had undertaken to make of the Wagnerian poems (with the exception of Rienzi, The Flying Dutchman, Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, which had been translated and published by Nuijter). It was a long and arduous task—nothing less than the translation of seventeen acts and their adaptation to the music; and Wilder, in order to accomplish it to the satisfaction of Wagner's heirs and assigns, had addressed himself to Bayreuth to obtain their sanction for his undertaking. Such was the origin of this correspondence of 1885, wherein the widow of the poet-composer imparts information, calls attention to the Master's principles, suggests procedures of translation, and offers observations, to which Wilder replies in his long letter of November 30.

The first letter from Bayreuth is addressed to the composer Eduard Lassen (1880-1904), who, of Danish extraction, had prosecuted his studies at Brussels and had succeeded Liszt at Weimar in 1861.

When Die Walküre (after Victor Wilder's death) had been brought out at the Paris Opéra (1886), and the question arose of producing the Meistersinger at the same theatre, Cosima Wagner chose a new translation, made by Alfred Ernst. There ensued a lawsuit between the publisher Schott, the heirs of Wagner and those of Wilder. Despite the eloquent plea of Waldeck-Rousseau, the Paris Court of Appeals decided on July 1, 1897, that the publishers and Wagner's family were entitled to put on the stage a version differing from the one which is the subject of the correspondence below. Thenceforward, only Die Walküre continued to be given on the French stage in the first translation in which it had been produced.

Bayreuth, July 12, 1885.

Dear Mr. Lassen,

We are really grateful to you; the question you raise has occupied us for months.
The translations of the *Meistersinger*, by Wilder, and of *Lohengrin*,
are known through and through at Wahnfried. Two points are to be
seriously considered—it is perfectly certain that if *Lohengrin* had been
produced at Paris in 1882, Mr. Nutter’s translation would have been
accepted without hesitation.

On the other hand, the problem of translating the works into the
French language has not yet been so completely solved, in spite of the
fine versions already made, that so great a responsibility as the adopt-
ation of a translator other than the one selected can be assumed. I
enclose herewith a piece of work which my mother commenced this
winter, and which she intended to have submitted to M. Wilder at a
future time, in order to reach an understanding with him concerning
the definitive cast to be given to his translations. But nothing less
being involved than a total revolution of the entire system now in vogue,
we were reluctant to dispatch a hasty message, and my mother (after
consulting with the conductor) limited herself to addressing the request
to M. Nutter, that he should make some few alterations which appeared
indispensable, or—in case he had no time to do so—to ask M. Wilder
to assume this task.

Kindly convey, with my compliments, my thanks to M. Wilder,
whose devotion to our cause and whose talent we thoroughly appreciate,
and believe me, etc.

Daniela de Bülow.

P. S. It occurs to me that perhaps you have not time to examine
my mother’s critical work. It will suffice, without wearying you unneces-
sarily, for you to know that the translation of the *Meistersinger* has
been revised word by word and note by note.

To Victor Wilder

Bayreuth, Oct. 5, 1885.

Sir,

As soon as I had written you in her name, Mamma began with the
revision of your version. This morning she sends you the first pages
as revised, begging you to excuse their disorderly look. She has gone
over what you had the kindness to write me; knowing that you are so
well informed, she does not refer you to pages 136-148 in Vol. IV of
the Writings, and asks nothing better than to support your contention
with regard to the rhyme, should you actually achieve the *four de force*
of observing it and, at the same time, doing away with manner-
isms and misconstructions, and respecting the agreement of word with
note.

After having accomplished a considerable task, this is an enor-
mously difficult one to which you so obligingly address yourself,
for the genius of the two languages is so dissimilar, that one has to
ponder almost every word.

If you found it possible to give the version a more naive turn
(making use of Old French), Mamma thinks that you would render it
more spirited and also more faithful.

As for the apostrophe, she inquires if you could not employ it in
the refrains, after the manner of the French folk-song.
Finally, she begs you to let her know whether you desire that she should continue as she has begun, or if you prefer that she should merely add notes to your version.

We all unite with her in thanking you, Monsieur, and in assuring you of our most affectionate esteem.

Eva Wagner.

P. S. "Handlung in drei Akten" has been the cause of much misapprehension in Germany, too; it is not the title of the tragedy; on the back of the title my father wrote: "Persone der Handlung," and more than once he made fun of the resulting misconceptions and the theories erected on these misconceptions.

(The pages in Wagner's Writings to which this letter alludes form Chapter II of the third part of "Opera and Drama" —Poetry and Music in the Drama of the Future.)

Sir,

Mamma has received your version of Tristan and Isolde, and the first impression received is the following—that there are no changes, or hardly any, possible in this most conscientious and remarkable version.

Another question occupies her particularly. She asks herself whether, in translating my father's works into French, it would not be better to break with all conventions, omit the rhymes, introduce blank verse, employ the apostrophe when necessary to avoid mute syllables, utilise archaisms, make inversions without hesitation—in a word, to proceed with the utmost boldness in order to succeed in giving a faithful reflection of his works.

Their introduction into France is a complete innovation; Mamma thinks that it cannot succeed except by venturing an open rupture with all operatic procedure. If the melody of the orchestra conveys to us the mood of a character, the declaimed note is, so to speak, the soul of the word it accompanies. In order that this sung declamation shall produce its effect, it is well-nigh indispensable that this union of word and note should not be broken, far more so, indeed, that everything should be sacrificed to it (such, at least, is Mamma's idea). She is well aware of the scope of her proposition, but the longer she considers it the more she is convinced that a transplantation of my father's works cannot be effected unless one shows the same spirit of originality and innovation in France that was shown in Germany. He himself demanded blank verse for the translation of Tannhäuser; the Director of the Opéra refused his request. Mamma thinks that by adopting it all mannerisms would be avoided and, with them, serious poetical ineptitudes.

Now, Monsieur, have the goodness to let Mamma know what you desire her to do. The extreme carefulness of your version, the trouble you have taken to observe the accents of the original, have not escaped her attention, and, as I remarked at the outset, she finds nothing to correct in your work. It appears to her that you have made some alterations in the notes, concerning which she has nothing further.
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to say. But in case you would like her to give you an approximate
idea of the translation she dreams of, please send her the vocal score
which you have been using, and she will make the word for word [transla-
tion] of some of the scenes, or even of all, should you so desire. And
you would then recast this word for word version in the indispensable
literary form, which you will certainly find, thanks to the talent which
has already solved an almost insolvable problem. If it meets your
approval, the two versions might be published in one and the same
volume, the second being preceded by an explanatory preface (the
second version, in this case, would be for the singers).

With regard to the subtitle "Drame musicale," Mamma requests,
you to omit it, and in explanation of this request refers you to Vol.
IX, page 559, of my father's Complete Works.

Mamma is deeply moved by the devotion and the lofty comprehen-
sion of the ideal manifested in your work; she is also very sensible of
the friendly feelings which dictated your message, for which she thanks
you with all her heart.

To her compliments I add the assurance of my most distinguished
consideration.
Bayreuth, Oct. 39, 1885.
Eva Wagner.

Victor Wilder's Reply


Mademoiselle,

The approbation of my work which your noble mother is so kind
as to express is, for me, the most precious appreciation and the highest
recompense that my ambition could seek.

What gives me the keenest satisfaction is to see that, as regards the
essential principle which should control the translation of your illustrious
father's works, my ideas are in complete conformity with yours.

"In order that this sung declamation (you say) shall produce its
full effect, it is indispensable that this union of word and note should
not be broken, but rather that everything should be sacrificed to it." I
It is precisely this rule which has served me as a guide, and to its prac-
tical realisation I have subordinated my every effort.

With indefatigable perseverance I have endeavored above all to
reproduce, in the French version, the energy and the speaking precision
of the original declamation, seeking in some sort to incarnate my verse
in the music. By blending two distinct and long-separated arts, poetry
and music, your illustrious father created a superior art which, although
realizing the most sublime effects of the two arts that it absorbs, is,
strictly speaking, neither the one nor the other. My unswerving intent
has been to make this interpenetration of music and poetry felt in the
French text.

Hence, I did not scruple to insert a few notes when they were
needed to give additional force to the declamation, or greater fidelity
to my interpretation of the German text. I am very glad to learn that
your noble mother attaches no importance to these modifications, and,
furthermore, I feel as though I were absolved in advance by the Master
himself, because in this respect he takes all the liberties that the
declamation demands, every time when the development of the action
recalls one or another of the typical motives.

I now reach, Mademoiselle, the most delicate question raised by
your letter.

You advise me to be bold, and encourage me to break with all conven-
tions by adopting a system of versification different from the one which
is in common use in our language. Permit me to say, that audacity
of this sort is the privilege of genius, and to this I have no rightful pre-
tension whatever. I see no impropriety in making use of archaisms and
inversions; on the contrary, certain advantages may arise therefrom,
by which, in accordance with your advice, I shall henceforward hasten
to profit; but, with regard to the other innovations you recommend, I
beg to make certain reservations.

The mute syllables, when skilfully handled, offer no difficulty, as
I hope to convince you by practical demonstration. To replace them
by the apostrophe would be a more artful than efficacious procedure.
You may indeed banish them from the written word, but you cannot
expel them from the pronunciation. This being so, it is better to accept
them frankly, taking care, however, to curb them (so to speak) and,
to allow them no more than the strict value they possess in the language.
As for that, I understand your antipathy for the mute syllables, con-
sidering the deplorable use to which they are put by the French trans-
lators and our composers themselves, who have not the most elementary
notions of prosody, and are ignorant of the laws governing the union
of words with music.

Concerning blank verse, I am equally unable to acquiesce in your
opinion, and I shall lay before you the reasons for my own, formed
long ago after mature consideration. To begin with, Tristan and the
Meistersinger are written in rhymed verse. The Tetralogy, to be sure, em-
ploys alliteration—but what may alliteration be, if not embryonic rhyme?
So it would be an initial infidelity, to my thinking, to translate a
rhymed text into verses deprived of rhyme.

A still weightier reason is, that blank verse is non-existent in
French; rhyme is the very essence of our verse, whose rhythm is founded
on rhyme alone. Translating a poem into blank verse amounts to the
same thing as translating it into prose. Now, French prose—as your
noble mother knows better than I—does not measure up to the elevation
of speech indispensable to the translation of works so lofty in
scope as those at present in question.

Any attempt at exalting its tone results in pomposity and grandilo-
quence. To associate the prose tongue of the earth earthly with the ideal
language of music appears to me, under the given conditions, like a
sort of profanation.

Poetry alone has wings capable of following the flight of melody.
For the rest, why demand the proscription of rhyme? The only
reason that could be advanced is, that it might interfere with the fidelity
of the translation.

Well then, permit me to say, Mademoiselle, that this reason does
not exist. Rhyme is assuredly troublesome for those who do not find
it naturally, but, for a versifier familiar with the secrets of his trade,
it does not offer the slightest obstacle.
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Together with this letter you will receive, Mademoiselle, the score of Tristan with my manuscript version under the musical text. Kindly excuse its bad condition, which, it should be observed, is due to its having passed through the engraver’s hands.

I venture to hope that your noble mother will have the goodness to submit it to a searching revision, and inform me of all the details to which she may take exception.

Regarding the obliging offer she made me to translate several scenes, I accept it gratefully; though I should prefer that it might apply to Siegfried, on which I am working at present. A version made by her, and conforming at every point to her ideal, would be an invaluable model for me, and I await it with lively impatience.

Believe me, etc.

Victor Wilder.

Bayreuth, Nov. 18, 1885.

Monsieur,

I am greatly indebted to you for your amiable letter with the score, and thank you most heartily.

Moreover, I am really touched by the indulgence with which you are pleased to receive my observations, and I entreat you, Monsieur, not to consider my remarks as a criticism (disapproval) of your work, or as a proof of my incapacity to appreciate either the difficulty of the problem or the value of the results already obtained; they represent merely a modest and serious attempt to reach an understanding on fundamental principles.

Even if you had told me that it was too late to make changes in the translation of Tristan, I should nevertheless have continued, in order to let you see what I meant by the additional difficulties you encounter by the observance of the rhyme. But I should be hopelessly discouraged if my remarks could be interpreted by you in the sense of a criticism wholly out of place with respect to so formidable a task as yours.

The serious weakness of my eyes has prevented me from finishing the first act of Tristan. I expect to take it up again next week, but I progress far more slowly than I could wish. Could you not obtain a postponement from the firm of Breitkopf?

It is the alterations made in the music that disturb me almost more than the poetical liberties. Would it not be possible for us to come to an agreement on this point—to change notes only in favor of an absolute exactitude of the text?

I do not know whether the inverse procedure is possible (to change the text only in favor of a rigorous adherence to the notes), but I submit it to you with the other, while repeating my entreaty that you should not misunderstand the intention of my observations.

If they were addressed to you, Monsieur, by the spoken word, it would be in the form of interrogations; in writing, and with the brevity enjoined on me, they assume, I fear, an appearance not inherently their own.

I venture to hope, Monsieur, that you will take the circumstances into consideration, and that you will always feel that no one can better
appreciate, than I, the almost insurmountable difficulties of the undertaking, and the high order of excellence that you have displayed.

Believe me, etc.

C. Wagner.

Dear Sir,

Mamma has received your kind lines and the package. She desires me to thank you most heartily for them. Her eyes continually prevent her from working. Three times she has begun on Tristan, and has been obliged to give it up. I am going to write in her name to Messrs. Breitkopf & Härtel and ask them how long a postponement they can grant Mamma, who some day or other will probably have to consult an oculist, as her sight is failing more and more. We beg you, etc.

Eva Wagner.

P. S. In case her eye trouble should be protracted, or even grow worse, Mamma would beg you to proceed with the publication without her, for she relies implicitly on your good management, and on your divination of what she has endeavored to convey to you.

Bayreuth, Dec. 6, 1885.

(Translated by Theodore Baker.)