

The Great Composers. No. XXVIII. Wagner (Concluded)

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THE GREAT COMPOSERS.

By JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. XXVIII.—WAGNER (*concluded from page 654*).

LAST month we devoted considerable space to one of the most curious features in the character of Richard Wagner—his inordinate love of personal and household finery. Many men have “fads” with regard to themselves and their surroundings, and those “fads” are of all kinds, from going about in skins, as did a respectable City man some years ago, to accumulating loads of old china. It would, however, be very difficult, if not impossible, to find an individual belonging to the sterner sex who doats upon silks and satins, and loves to emulate “Solomon in all his glory,” as did the musician of Bayreuth. Our present concern is with traits of a more important nature. Wagner in his dressing-gown of rose-coloured satin and *et ceteras* was a singular figure doubtless, but nobody was a bit the worse for it so long as he paid the modiste; neither was it anybody’s concern. There were other manifestations of a different kind, the results of which went beyond himself and his household.

Hardly one out of the many observers of Wagner’s career would venture to deny that the most conspicuous feature in his character was a measure of self-esteem so prodigious as to be almost without parallel. The working of that quality in determining the events of his life is seen even by the most casual student to be singularly comprehensive and powerful. It is by no means uncommon for men whom Nature has endowed with the artistic temperament to evince extreme sensitiveness in the face of criticism. They are quick to feel, which is an inevitable attendant upon that endowment; and some of them are quick to resent, which is simply an infirmity of temper. But in the case of Wagner we find a complete identity established between the man and his work, so that to touch the one was to touch the other. Wagner was quite aware of this, and sought—not for the first time—to shelter a personal failing under the ægis of a theory. It has been said of many men, from Mahomet to Joe Smith, who sought to thrive upon the passions of their followers, that they generally contrived to get a “revelation” suited to the desire of the moment. Wagner was not insensible to the advantages of an analogous process, and being by nature “touchy,” he proclaimed the inseparableness of the man and his artist. Under cover of this doctrine, he could give full play to his egoism and treat every opponent of his artistic principles as an enemy of his person. He could also regard circumstances which, strictly speaking, concerned only himself as of artistic moment. He exercised both these potentialities, as we have seen. The “Communication to my friends” was an attempt to secure a position where sacrifices to the art might take the form of benefits to himself. The pamphlet, “Judaism in Music,” was the product of personal resentment. The “Capitulation” was an outburst of savage joy over the downfall of a city, some of whose inhabitants had rejected him. In these and most other cases connected with the militant Wagner, very little examination serves to make clear that the moving cause was not so much consideration for art as for personal feeling. It was “I, Richard Wagner,” that men touched when they put their finger upon real or supposed faults in his theory or practice, and they very soon found hurtling through the air objurgations from one of the most skilful and determined employers of those missiles that ever lived.

It is to this intense personal feeling, this excessive sensibility, born of a proud and arrogant nature, that the peculiar virulence of Wagnerian warfare is due.

We can see nothing in the nature of the case from which bitter passion must necessarily proceed. There were men before Wagner who introduced new artistic theories and novel points of practice, but in no case did the circumstance divide those interested by it into two hostile camps, each, one might almost say, thirsting for the blood of the other. No doubt, the warfare between the Gluckists and the followers of Piccinni was sharp, but every student of musical history knows that the German master and his rival (who kept on good terms with each other) were only a pretext for gratifying a class of Parisian society then widely sundered on many points, and willing to quarrel about anything. The rule has been for all tendencies towards change in art to excite discussion between the lovers of change and the partisans of *laissez faire*, and discussion proportionate in keenness to the quick feeling which artistic natures naturally possess; but the extreme personal animosity, we had almost said ferocity, shown in Wagnerian warfare has never to our knowledge been equalled, or even approached. It is not unreasonable to assume that this character was given to the warfare, in great measure at all events, by the exacerbating tongue of the principal combatant. Wagner seems never to have restrained the action of his pride—of his perfect confidence in himself and all that he did, by any exercise of the reason which would have told him that the world requires time to focus novelties, especially new ideas and theories connected with subjects which it believes to be already settled beyond dispute. The world, happily, is not “blown about by every wind of doctrine,” and, like those typical Bereans whom St. Paul commended, it searches and enquires before accepting strange teachings. This attitude is one of absolute self-preservation, and an instinctive attitude to boot. Naturally, it vexes and annoys discoverers and inventors, to whom the truth of what they produce is so apparent that when men will not accept it at first sight, the old vituperative formula, “O fools and blind!” at once springs to lip. But this “ignorant impatience” is utterly unphilosophical, and argues something suspiciously wrong in the mental constitution of those who display it. Wagner undoubtedly possessed it to a remarkable extent, and what was the result? Simply that the obviously healthy in his scheme of operatic reform met with rejection along with that which appeared to be exaggerated and mischievous. Arrogance and impatience on the one hand were opposed by indiscriminate resentment on the other. The “mighty opposites” became blind with passion and struck out at random all over the field.

It may be said that Wagner’s personal attitude with regard to his own work and its opponents showed at least extreme earnestness, and fervid devotion to the cause he had in hand. It would be possible, we think, to qualify this assertion, because various passages in Wagner’s life suggest that he not only identified himself with his art in the special manner referred to above, but put himself before it. We have no desire to be ungenerous, however, and are ready to assume that the master’s fiery championship of his cause was the exact measure of his devotion to it. The position so regarded is one with which all reasonable men must necessarily sympathise up to a certain point. Earnestness and zeal, “instant in season and out of season,” are expected and commended in men who would teach the world. Those qualities are taken as a rough proof of sincerity, and as demonstration that the teacher, as well as holding his opinions firmly, has the courage of them. So far, so good, but every virtue may be carried to excess. The zealot is a most efficacious firebrand, and as there will certainly

be zealots in support of every cause, the founders of new movements may all of them take up the words of the most illustrious among their number, and say: "I come, not to send peace on earth, but a sword." The Wagnerian sword was wielded by Wagner himself, and his partisans, or many of them, naturally followed the example of their leader till men were concerned less with the cause of artistic change or conservation than with the progress of a "heady fight."

Belief in ourselves may lead to varied consequences. For example, it may find expression, as with Wagner, in scorn and contempt of all who do not agree with us; or, avoiding direct outward manifestation, it may serve as a stay and support in the battle of life. Sometimes the volume of it is so great that there is enough to answer both purposes. So in the present case. Wagner, quarrelling with and abusing everybody who would not swallow his formulæ and bow down and worship his personality, is the proud and self-sufficient man in one aspect. As a revolutionist who had determined to achieve, and went straight to his end through evil report and good, he is the same man in another and much more agreeable phase. As the first he was cordially disliked and opposed, as the second he extorted admiration even from his bitterest enemies, though, perhaps, it was such admiration as the loyal angels felt for the splendid leader of the revolt in heaven. Wagner's constancy to his purpose under all circumstances is one of the greatest features in his remarkable character. No man was ever more qualified than he to take up the strain of self-eulogy which Shakespeare has provided for use in such cases, and say:—

I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.
The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks,
They are all fire, and every one doth shine,
But there's but one in all doth hold his place:
So in the world, 'tis furnished well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That, unassailable, holds on his rank,
Unshaken of motion.

It is interesting to enquire why Wagner became a revolutionist of lyric drama instead of a reformer—why he sought to overturn the old fabric, preparatory to building a new one, instead of restoring it. He himself has told us about an "unconscious necessity" which led him on almost without his own volition, and, in the nature of the case, we must see that every step he took along the strange new path, which at first diverged at a small angle from the old road, opened up fresh prospects and presented further inducements to persevere. But we find the first cause, perhaps, in Wagner's rooted opposition to established things. Born into the world at a time of turmoil, when the "old order" was reaching the close and consummation of a series of changes, Wagner had a revolutionary spirit in his very nature. He embodied the universal feeling that humanity had made a mess of its concerns, and that there was a *prima facie* case for destruction against all the institutions handed down by obviously blundering ancestors. Wagner was conscious of a deep-seated impulse to overturn something; in his youth it did not much matter what. There was need to run *amok*, the particular victims being a point of secondary consideration. Of this, at any rate, we may be sure: in whatever field of human activity Wagner began to work, he would distinguish himself among iconoclasts. Eventually he chose music, and the result we know. His "unconscious necessity" did not much differ, perhaps, from the feeling which impelled the immigrant Irishman to say, when asked in New York for a declaration of his politics, that he knew

nothing about Democrats or Republicans, but was "agin the government." Wagner was "agin the government," and sought to establish one of his own. But, as usual in such cases, he failed to understand how that could have opponents.

In contemplating the Bayreuth master as he appeared to the world, and in noting the many and serious traits which disfigured him, we must not lose sight of the fact that the fire of his pride and impatience was assiduously fed by flatterers. The discontented in music crowded around a man resolute and valiant enough to make a path not only for himself but for them also. They saw themselves within a circle which more and more attracted the observation of the world and they preferred to shine with a reflected light rather than not shine at all. So in the old days of European warfare did the Free Companions gather around a famous sword. Wagner's companions were very free—especially in lauding their leader and abusing all who stood aloof. These gentlemen and their abettors were enough to demoralise even a modest hero, much more one in whose nostrils the incense of adulation was a sweet-smelling savour. They burnt that incense before him daily. They were ever ready to do his bidding, and they continued to pay him the sincerest flattery of imitation—copying, however, his defects (which was easy) and not aspiring to a reproduction of his merits (which was difficult). This is not an extraordinary state of things when a great man has reached a commanding position, but it is noteworthy that Wagner had devoted partisans—it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say a body-guard of swash-bucklers—before his ultimate eminence was declared. In some cases, no doubt, there was honest admiration of his genius; where mere self-interest operated, we cannot help recognising sharp discernment of the means by which it could in the end be gratified.

Materials for an estimate of Wagner in private life are not abundant, little more being available than the testimony of avowed friends. Through that evidence we see the master in a very rosy light. But, indeed, there is reason to conclude that, when not on the war-path, when the weapons he knew so well how to use had been laid aside and there was no question of his infallibility, Wagner could conduct himself as an amiable and agreeable person. He had an attractive individuality under such favourable circumstances; his conversation was bright and engaging, and his interlocutors came away from his presence with an idea of having met a good fellow as well as a great man. To this power of personal fascination (which many in an analogous position have shared) may be attributed much of the devotedness with which he was served by the honest and sincere among his adherents. It may be doubted whether any one lacking that quality has ever been served well, or helped by true zeal to eminence of place and achievement. That Wagner possessed it seems certain, and the fact explains much.

It is not our intention again to bring up the strange features in the master's life and conversation which came under our notice as we followed the steps of his career. The little space that remains to us may better be occupied in holding up Richard Wagner as an example and a warning. Whether his musical teachings were right or wrong is just now beside the question, the example being found in an unconquerable resolution to pursue an ideal good at whatever sacrifice, through whatever humiliations. And, truly, Wagner's humiliations were unspeakable, even if we credit him with no more than a rag or two of self-respect. His continued appeals for money, both in public and private, must have cost him severe pangs, the harder to bear because he could plead

neither inability to earn it for himself, as Liszt suggested he should, nor the merit of using it with prudence when bestowed. A proud man does not without intense mortification beg to be kept in luxury by others, however firmly he may believe that the unremunerative work he is doing will ultimately provide a rich return. But it seemed to Wagner necessary that he should subordinate himself to anything and everything by which he could be helped along the road to his goal. The resolution and endurance we must all admire, though none of us may be equal to a manifestation which deserves to be called sublime. But Wagner was a warning as well as an example—a warning not only against various defects of temper and manner, but against an egregious assertion of personality under circumstances involving only matters of principle. Every cultivated man is two-fold—he is pure reason and more or less impure passion. Every discreet man as far as possible keeps the second from entering the domain of the first and interfering with the work of its machinery. As far as we can judge, it would have been better even for Wagner's cause, as, undoubtedly, for the peace of the musical world, had he argued his theories simply on their character and merits instead of making their acceptance or rejection a matter personal to himself. That fiery individuality raging around amid delicate considerations of art too closely resembles the proverbial bull in a china shop to command respect for the situation, or any conclusions arrived at under the conditions. There was nothing in Wagner's proposed changes to make such an intrusion of the mere man necessary. They would in any case, perhaps, have been discussed with warmth; it does not at all follow that they would have excited animosity, with its consequences in the shape of alienated sympathies and broken friendships. Wagner unhappily elected to throw his sword into the scale, and the progress of his cause has been made over a hotly disputed field of battle, amid fierce clashing of weapons.

No doubt it is an easy matter to be wise after the event, and it is equally certain that only under the millennium shall we see men arranging any affairs whatever in the light of pure reason. Passion, and the gratification of human weakness, will have their say:

Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment choler'd,
Assays to lead the way.

But very often a good that may not be reached may be approached so nearly as that some of its influence falls upon us. In any case, Richard Wagner will remain almost as interesting a personality in the domain of human conduct as in that of music, and he will become more interesting as the mists of prejudice clear away and the striking figure, with its oddly assorted characteristics, stands clearly revealed. He will ever remain a representative man—the embodiment of much that is strong and no little that is weak in our complex nature, and of a capacity for doing and undoing, some manifestations of which in the dim past, when creeds began to form, gave man two masters seated in places as far apart as heaven and hell.

THE "ASSOCIATED BOARD."

THE Local Examinations of the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music, which are conducted by the Associated Board of those two chartered Institutions, have already exercised such an important influence on musical education that it is not surprising to find the work of the Board warmly supported by the principal teachers of music

throughout the kingdom. The fact that our rival "Conservatoires," some two years ago, agreed to join hands and forces, and form, as it were, a Local Examination Alliance, was in itself presumptive evidence of the firm foundation and solid disinterestedness on which the scheme would be built up; and it is no more than just, in passing, to remark that the Local Examinations of the Academy had been already long established, and the number of candidates was a yearly increasing one; but these personal considerations weighed little with the authorities of the Academy when the opportunity occurred of submitting to the College a proposal for joint action, which would give music the advantage of Local Examinations conducted on University lines.

The alliance was most happily brought about, and the Associated Board, of which H.R.H. the Prince of Wales graciously consented to become President, was formed in equal numbers from the governing bodies and professors of the two Schools.

A glance at the names of the Examiners, whose services the Associated Board has been in a position to secure, would seem to justify the boast that there is not a musical institution in Europe which can show such a list. It would also have been difficult for the Royal Academy or the Royal College, acting separately, to send two examiners to each Local Centre—an arrangement of which candidates for examination reap the benefit under the joint scheme. A further element of strength is to be found in the co-operation, throughout the country, of the gentlemen of influence and position who act at the various centres as Hon. Local Representatives of the Board and devote much valuable time to the work.

The standard of efficiency adopted by the Board is high enough to make its certificates a prized possession, and place them out of the reach of ill-taught or careless students of music. Where parents realise this, they can discover, at a very moderate cost, if their children are obtaining good music lessons. It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the importance of this advantage, for notwithstanding our musical progress, incompetent and neglectful teachers may still be found in considerable numbers. That these will diminish as the work of the Associated Board increases needs no demonstration.

In the interest of boys and girls at school, whose other studies do not leave them time to work their music up to the standard of the Local Centre Examinations, the Board has devised a system of Local School Examinations, of which the Lower and Higher Divisions are preparatory to the Junior and Senior Grades respectively of the Local Centre Examinations. The examiners here again are selected from our most eminent musicians. Heads of schools, therefore, to many of whom music is a *terra incognita*, have only themselves to blame if they do not test, by the sure means now within their reach, the quality of the music-teaching in their establishments. The Board offers every facility, by undertaking, in return for a small fee, to show under what particular heads a candidate may have failed to satisfy the examiners.

We have used the word "disinterestedness," and if proof of that quality be invited it is furnished by the published balance-sheet of the Associated Board. The accounts having to undergo the scrutiny of no less keen a critic than the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir Charles Lister Ryan, K.C.B., who generously gives his services to the Board as honorary auditor, we may be satisfied that its affairs are conducted in a businesslike and economical manner; and as the receipts little more than cover the expenditure, it is evident that the candidates get the highest possible value for the fees they pay.