

WAGNER THE DRAMATIST.

WHENEVER a truly original genius has appeared in any department of art, his advent has been accompanied by two diverse streams of criticism. On the one hand are the reactionaries, complaining of tasteless innovation and barbaric extravagance, and by their very opposition exciting the party of admirers to more open and aggressive worship of their idol. The latter on the other hand are not content with any qualifications of their master less comprehensive than "founder of a new school," or "high-priest of art," and usually make discoveries in his works of deep motives and far-seeing design, which in reality exist only in their own imaginations. In the present generation we have seen Victor Hugo despised by Mr. Matthew Arnold and idolised by Mr. Swinburne; Walt Whitman condemned by Alfred Austin as a "screaming gull," and revered as a "divine poet" by Mr. Robert Buchanan. Equally with these poets, Wagner has had his worshippers and his assailants, although the latter have in recent years been compelled to change their strain of abuse to one of pathetic lamentation over the errors of his genius. Thanks to the efforts of friends and enemies alike, his name at least is well known throughout the world that interests itself in art; and in Canada, where his music has been seldom heard, a curiosity exists as to the theories and thoughts that his operas are supposed to embody.

Before attempting to assign to Wagner his proper place in musical art, we must close our ears to partisans and detractors, and listen solely to what he has to tell us of himself, whether in his theoretical writings or by his music. In the essay, "Artwork of the Future," he enunciates his conception of the ideal musical drama in the following terms: "Starting from the vantage of symphonic music, we may hope to rise to the level of Greek tragedy; our theatre *can* be made to embody our ideal of life. From the opera at its best a drama can be evolved that shall express the vast issues and complex relations of modern life and thought, as the Greek stage expressed the life and thought of Greece." From this passage, then, as well as from many others in his literary works, we learn that Wagner's ideal was the Greek tragedy, or rather such a revival of the essential character of Greek tragedy as should be adapted to the requirements of the modern stage. The choice of this form of art as a model necessarily imposes limitations upon the dramatist, and, greater disadvantage yet, puts him out of touch with the age. For at the outset he is confronted with a fundamental difference between the ancient and the modern drama, best expressed in Aristotle's words. "Of all the parts of tragedy," he says, "which together constitute its peculiar character (plot, manners, diction, sentiments, decoration, and music), the most important is the combination of incidents, or the plot; because tragedy is an imitation not of men but of actions." This description is not applicable to the tragedy of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, nor to that of Goethe, nor to that of De Musset, to say nothing of the realistic prose drama of the modern French stage. In fact the focus of interest in these matters has shifted since the days of Æschylus; we speak less frequently of a tragic plot than of a tragic character, meaning thereby a character so twisted and worked upon by circumstances, external or internal, as to give rise to those emotions of pity and horror that it is the province of tragedy to excite. Wagner, however, in strict consistency with his views above quoted, has adopted the principle of the Greek drama in his practice. Each opera is constructed as an account, and, for the sake of one tragic episode or situation, it is the artistic expression of one emotional idea; and for the better attainment of his object, Wagner was led, as he tells us himself, very early in his career to select mythical and legendary matter for his subjects, "because the emotional elements of a mythical story are always of a simple nature and can readily be detached from any side issue." The desire for simplicity and unity may be satisfied by the proportions of a myth, but such a deliberate limitation of subject cannot but cause his achievement to fall short of the splendid and comprehensive proposal previously quoted, to wit, to evolve a drama expressing the vast issues and complex relations of modern life and thought. It must be confessed that in this respect Wagner does not represent the modern tendency, nor does he appear to appreciate the complexity of which he speaks. Rather is his face turned resolutely to the distant past and to a singleness of culture from which we are too far removed ever to be restored, if indeed it were a restoration at all or worth the sacrifice of modern breadth.

The essence of a dramatic work in modern times is development of character. For technical reasons, the Greek drama did not admit of a similar treatment. Each individual was stamped with a definite emotional character at the beginning of the play, and remained unchanged to the end. As Aristotle puts it, "the requisite of character is uniformity." Wagner's adherence to this dictum is sufficiently obvious from the libretto of any of his operas; and in the music, by reducing the rôles of individuals to declamation, he has deprived himself even of the power possessed by the Greek drama of differentiating the *dramatis personæ*. Character is expressed no more by the purely vocal portion of Wagner's recitative than by an actor's elocution, considered apart from the words he utters. How greatly words may be assisted by music in individualising a part can be best appreciated after listening to an opera by Mozart. Leporello, by the music alone, is as distinct a person from Don Giovanni as he is by his sentiments expressed in words. It may be claimed on behalf of Wagner that the instrumental portion of the music provides the necessary personal colouring, giving form to the mental attitude of the various characters as they appear. It is true that the orchestra is intended to interpret and express the emotional contents of the scene, but it is also true that this expression of the dominant sentiment is wholly abstracted from personal considerations. The expedient of *leit motiven*, or typical musical phrases, though supposed to give individuality to the characters, was never adopted by Wagner with this object, as may be easily

shown. One example will suffice. In the Ring tetralogy a special and peculiar *motiv* is assigned to Freia, the Goddess of Love. And yet, not only does this *motiv* occur at the time of the actual appearance of Freia on the stage, but it also is heard wherever, in any scene, the emotion of love is alluded to or suspected; from this the impersonal quality that it conveyed to the composer's mind is manifest. The old form of opera, on the other hand, undoubtedly possessed abundant capacity for a personal treatment by means of peculiarities of melody and rhythm, for which declamation is inadequate.

As the most finished example of Wagner's method, we may take "Tristan and Isolde," a work of which the composer was especially proud. He says of it: "I constructed it after no system—for I entirely forgot all theory; here I moved with entire freedom, independent of theoretical misgivings." It may be regarded, then, as the completest expression of Wagner's natural instinct for drama, and it may be expected to yield fuller information on the characteristic merits and demerits of his system than any of the other operas. We find it made up of one emotion, two important characters, and three tableaux. Both characters appear at first in a quiescent or neutral state, soon succeeded by the passionate love-emotion which dominates them from the time of taking the magic potion to their death. The first act is occupied with laying the foundations of the story, and preparing for the tragic results of the love potion. This is effected mainly by the conversation of Isolde and her attendant, the orchestra meanwhile playing the part of chorus in Greek tragedy, suggesting what is to follow and commenting on that conversation by means of *leit motiven*, most variously interwoven. At the close of the act King Mark arrives to receive his bride, just as Tristan and Isolde have taken the potion and become inspired with their immortal attachment. The entire second act is an interview between the lovers, in which all the resources of language and orchestration are employed to express the wildest and most passionate love; and at the conclusion King Mark again surprises them, and Tristan is wounded by Melot. Act iii. expresses the longing of the dying knight to see his lady once more and the fruition of that desire, for she at length arrives. Then the sentiment of Act ii. is repeated, but painted in more sombre colours, saddened as it were by the anticipation of the death with which the drama concludes. A cardinal mistake in "Tristan and Isolde," one that strikes at the root of Wagner's own conception of a musical drama, is its want of action; the author seems to forget the presence of the audience in the congenial task of turning an emotion inside out. Simplicity of motive, unity of plot, it undoubtedly possesses. But the simplicity becomes monotony, and the unity is that of monomania, not the superior unity resulting from the harmonious welding together of elements apparently incongruous. On this side Wagner is especially vulnerable. His aim is to make each drama a complete exposition of one emotional situation, on which all the action should hinge. The key to "Lohengrin," he tells us, is the fatal question which Elsa has in her breast to ask of her deliverer, and which, when asked, entails their separation. In "Lohengrin," however, there is such a wealth of episode that the development of this theme never becomes monotonous, but in the later dramas Wagner makes no concession to his hearers, and pursues his task of laying bare the heart of the emotional idea, while the play proper remains at a standstill. A remarkable parallel to Wagner's operas is presented by the dramas of Victor Hugo. Each writer has in his mind the representation of an idea, and each alike is master of the most magnificent declamatory power, which is taxed to the utmost to give fullness and breadth to an emotional theme in itself of somewhat meagre proportions.

We are now in a better position to appreciate Wagner's standpoint. By drama he understands action alone; his characters are the reflections of an idea, diversely tinted it may be, but after all mere ghosts of real individuals; and his orchestra is the expounder of the emotional subject matter. Is not this an art rather narrative than dramatic in substance? Mr. Dannreuther contemptuously alludes to the phrase "too epic," as applied to "Tannhäuser" by a German critic. It certainly seems as if the epithet were well chosen.

In this discussion of Wagner's work one opera, "The Meistersinger," has not been considered at all. It is, in a measure, the most important of his dramatic works, because in it he temporarily abandoned some of his artistic principles, departing from the sphere of legend and the lines of Greek tragedy, and grappling with real every-day life and character and the exigencies of romantic comedy. The greatness of his genius is shown by his success in this domain; he has not forsaken his principles of realism in the treatment of the vocal part, the characters sing no set pieces, but converse in broken melodic phrases, and yet the music allotted to each he has impressed with the individuality of the part. In short, he has written a musical play which is dramatic in a sense applicable to no other of his dramas, important though they be from a purely musical point of view. It is scarcely too much to say that Wagner would be only half as great a man as he is if he had never composed "The Meistersinger."

In conclusion, to return to that side of Wagner's genius represented by such an opera as "Lohengrin," it must be gladly admitted that within the narrow limits of legendary and epic opera he has created immortal works. He possesses a rare power of leading up to a climax by a long series of successive steps, at each of which the interest is heightened and expectation more fully aroused. The magnetic influence, too, which men who knew him personally have attested, proves as enthralling in his compositions.

It is late in the day to praise Wagner for technical musical gifts or acquirements. He has them all in a supreme degree, melody, instrumentation, counterpoint, and all these resources he devotes to his attempted revival of the Greek Drama. It is a melancholy spectacle, a genius such as Wagner's lavished upon what can only prove a *cul-de-sac* in art. His work is without any logical outcome, and it is for this reason perhaps that