

A WAGNER OPERA.

I will confess to a good deal of surprise at finding that the first impression of an opera of Wagner's was of simplicity rather than of complexity and incomprehensibility. The method by which certain effects were produced seemed to me (who am no musician) to be infinitely complicated and involved, but the effects themselves to be incapable of being misunderstood. Wagner treats music as the native language of the emotions, and the mind has not to translate in order that the emotional side of the nature may be able to comprehend. The composer's idea is conveyed directly and unmistakeably, and the intellect finds itself only apprized secondarily of the significance of the impressions received.

The ordinary listener is helpless when he endeavours to understand or explain the reason why he is affected thus and thus, but none the less does he feel that the chords of his nature are roused one by one to vibrate in unison with the sentiment of the music. The gamut of the emotions is run through, and love, despair, awe, anger and fear in turn reign in the soul when the composer wills it. Even the sense of the ludicrous is at times irresistibly present—as in *Die Meistersinger*, where a smile is seen on every face in the audience at one or two comical passages, although but very few understand the German words that are being sung.

Is it the case that there is a natural correspondence between the different emotions and certain definite musical intervals, and that Wagner has understood this better than others? This seems to be an inevitable conclusion, unless indeed the impressions of which I write are merely fancied, and the appropriate feelings are read into the music by some dexterous and evasive mental process. The human voice in emphatic conversation naturally regulates itself to certain intervals which have been investigated and found to be approximately invariable, and one can frequently tell, even when at such a distance as to be unable to discern words, what emotion is animating a speaker. It is not unlikely, then, that arrangement of notes and transitions of chords may more or less nearly represent emotional states, and this apart from time and *timbre*, which are obviously adjuncts of music in the expression of feelings. This individual conclusion is infinitely strengthened when one finds the same ideas and impressions excited in an entire audience apparently by virtue of the music alone, and it seems incredible that some fantastic universal self-deception should be at the base of it.

I would therefore put it (still from the standpoint of a humble listener) that Wagner has found in a singular way the means of making music the vehicle of the emotions, and has (so to speak) made it more of an intelligible language in this respect. Beethoven rises to greater intellectual heights, but Wagner plays more directly and variously on the feelings; it would then seem that the latter can be comprehended and enjoyed with much less of a musical education than the former.

W. H. B.

BALZAC.

For students of French at the University pleasant recollections, as of a great and fascinating romance-writer, will hardly be awakened by the name of Balzac. Until recently, he was represented on the course of French prescribed for Honour work by a volume of selections, consisting mainly of long and elaborate descriptions, singularly repellent in character. "Eugénie Grandet," the work now on the curriculum, is a novel which all critics agree in calling perfect, and which most readers find unutterably depressing. The volume opens with an account of an old and dilapidated house, which fills pages upon pages, and reads like the architect's specifications. In an extract from another novel, which was inserted in the volume of selections previously named, it is a battered coat-of-arms that takes the author's fancy. He treats it in similar scientific fashion, scattering his heraldic terms without stint. To understand and appreciate, a smattering, or perhaps more than a smattering, of heraldry is indispensable, just as in the former case the reader must be first architect, and then student of French. This is Balzac's mode of procedure, whatever be the object that he undertakes to describe; every third word is a technical term. I have somewhere seen that a certain

French *avocat* placed "César Birotteau" among his professional text-books, as an authority upon the law of bankruptcy.

But Balzac's great reputation as a writer is based upon more than professional lore and scientific accuracy. Mr. Leslie Stephen is not an *avocat* nor an architect, but he, too, acknowledges Balzac as a writer of text-books, text-books upon human nature, and on his shelf of such text-books finds him a place beside Shakespeare. The volume of extracts formerly used at the University was not calculated to impress the reader with this view of Balzac's achievement. Wealth of words, not portrayal of character, seemed to have been the principle of selection adopted by Mr. Van Lann. And, indeed, no selection of fragments, nothing but a complete novel could completely express Balzac's supreme literary virtue, development of character. And no single novel could give an adequate idea of his other distinctive excellence, variety of type. Only those devoted students who have laboured through the fifty-five volumes, which constitute Balzac's title-deeds to fame, know how much he has observed, and how well.

The example of some eminent authorities would lead me to mention Balzac's exactness and truth of detail as his most important quality. But the instinct of truth refuses to sanction such a statement. There is no question about his exactness. The most casual reader will acknowledge that characteristic of Balzac's mind. But we are not all heralds, architects, *avocats*. To the unprofessional reader such exactness is always fatiguing. It is often more than fatiguing, it is dull; and dullness is emphatically *not* a virtue for a storyteller. We should not forget that Balzac's claim to rank as an artistic writer depends solely upon stories, and from the days of Demodocus to this present age—the age of Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson—it has been held by the majority that a story cannot be a good story unless it be an interesting one. Unfortunately for Balzac, he constantly forgot to be interesting. There is not one of his longer stories that does not drag at some stage in the action, owing to his fatal propensity for interminable description or display of learning. "Le Père Goriot," an acknowledged masterpiece, contains a famous account of a cheap boarding-house, the scene of Père Goriot's sufferings. Considered simply as a picture, the description is perfect. The elaboration of every detail produces a wonderful impression of reality. You see the hideous furniture and decorations, you feel the horrible presence of the mistress of the house and of her no less horrible cat. But the process proves an exhausting one for the reader. The mind demands rest and relaxation before proceeding further and entering upon what is really the main business of the book, the people and their sayings and doings. Then, when the conclusion is reached, on a mental review of the story, the vision that comes up unbidden before the mind's eye is probably this very scene of Madame Marneffe, her cat, her dining room and her dinners. Surely this excess of local colour is a blemish on Balzac's work. Local colour ought to be a mere accessory, a background to the characters, and a true artist would keep it properly subordinate. A good example of artistic treatment of the *mise-en-scène* is found in Prosper Mérimée's novelette "Carmen." At every stage in the action the surroundings are altered, not capriciously, but with evident intention to make the locality suggest the event, thus fulfilling the true function of local colour. Now imagine what Balzac would have made of this exquisite story. He would have overloaded it with minute description, until the tragic significance of the plot was lost in the multiplicity of landscape.

In "César Birotteau" that same bankruptcy episode is insufferably wearisome from the very exactness of the professional details. The marvel is, how Balzac himself ever struggled through his self-imposed task of writing down such dry technicalities. The explanation, no doubt, is to be found in Balzac's systematic economy of everything but money. Early in life he had been engaged in a business speculation, which failed and left him a bankrupt. It is likely that he himself at this time went through all the annoying experiences which he assigns to the poor merchant, César Birotteau. In this way he had been supplied with the necessary information, and rather than let it go to utter waste he inserted it in this novel. Such a thrifty proceeding is a credit to Balzac, the man of business, (with whom, however, we have no concern) but scarcely a merit in Balzac the creative artist.

In many of the shorter *Scènes* the story is obviously of