WAGNER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY.*

To the voluminous bibliography of Richard Wagner including a legion of titles, to the six-volume official biography of the composer by Glasenapp, the ten volumes of his own writings, and the twelve volumes of his letters to publishers and friends, is now added his autobiography in two bulky volumes, under the simple title "My Life." The genesis and development of these volumes are of unusual interest. They cover his life and career from 1813 to 1864, based upon notes and a diary kept after 1835, and now appear after forty years of silence. They were dictated, in 1873, to Cosima, the daughter of Liszt, who was married to Wagner, after her divorce from Von Bülow, in 1869. As Wagner died in 1883, the story of his life therefore has remained untold for nineteen years.

Twelve copies of the book were printed forty years ago, four of which were given to intimate friends and eight to Cosima, with the understanding that they should not be made public until a stated time after Wagner's death. It is to be regretted that he did not tell the whole story, for the omitted portion includes his relations with Ludwig, his royal patron, and his domestic life with Cosima, to both of whom the barest reference is made. On reading this interesting and at times fascinating autobiography, one cannot help wishing Wagner had told the story of his relations with Ludwig as circumstantially as he has told that of his youth and early manhood, and that of his life with Cosima as intimately and frankly as he has described his experiences with the unfortunate Minna Planer, his first wife, and his alleged platonic friendship with Mme. Wesendonck.

The story of Wagner's early life is one of the most interesting portions of the autobiography. He frankly confesses his dissipations, quarrels, and youthful horseplay, "the outward ugliness and inward emptiness of which make me marvel to this day." He makes no concealment of his early passion for gambling, and the dishonest use of his mother's pension, of which he was trustee, at the gaming table. By good fortune he won this money back. He never gambled again. He contritely says:

"No sense of shame deterred me from telling my mother, to whom I presented her money, the whole truth about this decisive night. I voluntarily confessed my sin, in having utilised her pension, sparing no detail. She folded her hands and thanked God for His mercy, and forthwith regarded me as saved, believing it impossible for me ever to commit such a crime again.

"And, truth to tell, gambling had lost all fascination for me from that moment. The world, in which I had moved like one demented, suddenly seemed stripped of all interest or attraction. My rage for gambling had already made me quite indifferent to the usual student's vanities, and when I was freed from this passion also, I suddenly found myself face to face with an entirely new world.

"To this world I belonged henceforth: it was the world of real and serious musical study, to which I now devoted myself heart and soul."

Equally frank is he in describing his duellistic encounters, his early love affairs, the details of which show that his love-making was decidedly practical rather than romantic, and his early attempts at writing poems and dramas of the most turgid and sensational sort, which greatly distressed his mother and frequently exposed him to the ridicule of friends and relatives.

At last, however, Wagner found himself. Among the occasional visitors to the house was Weber, of whom we have this picture:

"Weber's really refined, delicate, and intellectual appearance excited my ecstatic admiration. His narrow face and finely cut features, his vivacious though often half closed eyes, captivated and thrilled me; while even the bad limp with which he walked, and which I often noticed from our windows when the master was making his way home past our house from the fatiguing rehearsals, stamped the great musician in my imagination as an exceptional and almost superhuman being. When, as a boy of nine, my mother introduced me to him, and he asked me what I was going to be, whether I wanted perhaps to be a musician, my mother told him that, though I was indeed quite mad on 'Freischütz,' yet she had as yet seen nothing in me which indicated any musical talent."

Weber's music made the first appeal to Wagner. He says: "'Der Freischütz' in particular appealed very strongly to my imagination mainly on account of its ghostly theme. The emotions of terror and the dread of ghosts formed quite an important factor in the development of my mind." He never lost his reverence for that great master and father of German music.

After Weber's death (1826), an event which greatly distressed Wagner, he came under the influence of Beethoven, of whom and his music he says:

"It was now Beethoven's music that I longed to know more thoroughly; I came to Leipzig and found his music to 'Egmont' on the piano at my sister Louisa's. After that I tried to get hold of his sonatas. At last, at a concert at the Gewandhaus, I heard one of the master's symphonies for the first time; it was the symphony in A major. The effect on me was indescribable. To this must be added the impression produced on me

* MY LIFE. By Richard Wagner. In two volumes, with portraits. Authorized translation from the German. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.

by Beethoven's features, which I saw in the lithographs that were circulated everywhere at that time, and by the fact that he was deaf, and lived a quiet, secluded life. I soon conceived an image of him in my mind as a sublime and unique supernatural being, with whom none could compare. This image was associated in my brain with that of Shakespeare; in ecstatic dreams I met both of them, saw and spoke to them, and on awakening found myself bathed in tears."

It was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, however, rather than the music of "Egmont" or the A Major Symphony, which made the deepest impression upon the young Wagner. He writes:

"Beethoven's Ninth Symphony became the mystical goal of all my strange thoughts and desires about music. I was first attracted to it by the opinion prevalent among musicians, not only in Leipzig but elsewhere, that this work had been written by Beethoven when he was already half mad. It was considered the *non plus ultra* of all that was fastastic and incomprehensible, and this was quite enough to rouse in me a passionate desire to study this mysterious work. At the very first glance at the score, of which I obtained possession with much difficulty, I felt irresistibly attracted by the long-sustained pure fifths with which the first phrase opens: these chords, which, as I have related above, had played such a supernatural part in my childish impressions of music, seemed in this case to form a spiritual keynote of my life."

Years afterward, the Ninth Symphony and Schröder-Devrient's singing in "Fidelio" aroused in Wagner the ambition to compose something which would give him a similar satisfaction. He says:

"In this mood I sketched an overture to 'Faust' which, according to my original scheme, was only to form the first part of a whole Faust Symphony, as I had already got the 'Gretchen' idea in my head for the second movement. This is the same composition that I re-wrote in several parts fifteen years later; I had forgotten all about it, and I owed its reconstruction to the advice of Liszt, who gave me many valuable hints."

One more influence, and a powerful one, which came into Wagner's young life is thus referred to:

"I came across Mozart's 'Requiem' which formed the starting point of my enthusiastic absorption in the works of that master. His second finale to 'Don Juan' inspired me to include him in my spirit world. I was now filled with a desire to compose, as I had before been to write verse . . . My future distinction would be to win the titles of conductor and writer of operas."

Thus early did Wagner forecast his future.

Space does not allow even the sketching of Wagner's musical career or the great results which he accomplished. Indeed, these volumes add but little to what is already known of Wagner as a composer. The story is so familiar that many of the pages devoted to it are dry and monotonous, though they give us interesting glimpses of the master in his workshop and of his constructive methods. It would have been interesting to have his critical estimate of his contemporaries: but he only alludes to a few, and briefly at that. He expresses generous appreciation of Mendelssohn, but is somewhat indifferent toward Schumann. He was inclined to think that

"Halévy was simply a man whose youthful talent was only stimulated to achieve one great success with the object of becoming rich . . . Only once did Halévy speak to me with real candor, when, on my tardy departure for Germany, he wished me the success he thought my works deserved."

Of Spontini's conducting, he says:

"Spontini's method was based upon the absolutely correct system (which even at the present time is misunderstood by some German orchestras) of spreading the string quartette over the whole orchestra. This system further consisted in preventing the brass and percussion instruments from culminating in one point (and drowning each other) by dividing them on both sides, and by placing the more delicate wind instruments at a judicious distance from each other, thus forming a chain between the violins."

For a long time he entertained a dislike for Berlioz, and pronounced him a vulgar time-beater; but a performance of the "Symphonie Funèbre et Triomphale" convinced him of "the greatness and enterprise of this incomparable artist." The overpowering brass effects in this composition evidently attracted him. He wasted no love upon Meyerbeer or his music, though Meyerbeer was very good to him when he was in dire straits in Paris. When Wagner first saw "The Prophet," he got up in the middle of an act and left the house. "I was filled with rage and despair at the thought that I should be called upon to listen to such a thing, and never again did I pay the slightest heed to this opera." He pays a left-handed compliment to Gounod after the failure of his own "Tannhauser" in Paris:

"With Gounod alone did I still continue on friendly terms, and I heard that he energetically championed my cause in society. He is said on one occasion to have exclaimed: '*Que Dieu me donne une pareille chute!*' As an acknowledgment of this advocacy I presented him with the score of 'Tristan und Isolde,' being all the more gratified by his behaviour because no feeling of friendship had ever been able to induce me to hear his 'Faust.'"

It is astonishing to read Wagner's only allusion to Brahms. Did he, like Schumann, recognize in him another musical Messiah, and "new paths"? On the eve of a concert in Vienna, Wagner needed copyists. Tausig mentioned Brahms, "recommending him as a 'very good fellow,' who, although he was so famous himself, would willingly take over a part of their [the other copyists'] work, and a selection from the

'Meistersinger' was accordingly allotted to him. And, indeed, Brahms's behaviour proved unassuming and good-natured, but he showed little vivacity and was often hardly noticed at our gatherings."

As already said, the Autobiography throws little new light upon Wagner the musician. His multitude of friends and his equal multitude of enemies have taken good care that posterity shall know him from that point of view, though it may be affirmed that the "music of the future" is the music of the present, the impressionists and ultra-modernists to the contrary notwithstanding. Taken as a whole, however, we get a good impression of Wagner the man. He was a lover of the fantastic, and his favorite story-writers were Grimm and Hoffman. He was greatly inclined to mysticism, with occasional demoniacal tendencies. He says:

"From my earliest childoood certain mysterious and uncanny things exercised an enormous influence over me. If I were left alone in a room for long, I remember that, when gazing at lifeless objects such as pieces of furniture, and concentrating my attention upon them, I would suddenly shriek out with fright, because they seemed to me alive."

Of an experience in Spezia, in 1859, he writes:

"Suddenly I seemed to be sinking in swift-running water. The rushing water took on the musical sound of an E flat major chord, which was tossed hither and thither by the waves, and continually breaking up into melodious variations of ever-increasing movement, yet never losing the perfect harmony of the chord, which, by its pertinacity, appeared to wish to impart some infinite signification to the element in which I was sinking. With the sensation of waves rearing high above my head, I awoke in a fright from the trance. Then I immediately recognized that the orchestral prelude to 'Das Rheingold,' which had long been in me, but which I had never been able to properly find, had arisen."

Notwithstanding the grim earnestness of Wagner, his humor was always good natured, as is evidenced by many playful allusions to musicians he met. He greatly loved animals. His gray parrot nearly restored peace in his relations with Minna his wife, — for "this sociable bird, which had no vices and was an apt scholar," together "with a pretty little dog, born on the day of the first 'Rienzi' rehearsal in Dresden, did much to brighten our dwelling in the absence of children. My wife soon taught the bird snatches of songs from 'Rienzi,' with which it would good naturedly greet me from a distance when it heard me coming up the stairs." He had an intense affection for his little dog Peps, and devotes much space to a description of Peps's last hours, and his interment in the landlady's garden, where he was buried with his basket and cushions. Four years later, Wagner revisited the spot, but found no trace of his "little friend's" grave, much to his regret.

The Autobiography is replete with Wagner's wretched experiences with Minna. They quarrelled up to the hour of the wedding; they came near quarrelling during the ceremony; they quarrelled ever after like cat and dog. He accuses her of infidelity, and intimates that Netta, whom she passed off as her sister, was in reality her own daughter. She did not understand him nor sympathize with him. He says:

"I always felt somewhat distressed, uncomfortable, and ill at ease, whenever I tried to pass a few pleasant hours in the society of my wife. . . . The strange power she exercised over me from the very first was in no wise due to the fact that I regarded her in any way as the embodiment of my ideal; on the contrary, she attracted me by the soberness and seriousness of her character, which supplemented what I felt to be wanting in my own, and afforded me the support that in my wanderings after the ideal I knew to be necessary for me."

Perhaps this explains one of the causes of Wagner's wretchedness. He was wandering after the ideal, and she after the real. In their pathetic life in Paris, Minna did all she could to keep his head above water, and their mutual privations, which she endured with more courage than her husband, brought them nearer together. Perhaps they might have lived with each other some years longer; but Madam Wesendonck now comes into his life, and his intimacy with her — which he contends was innocent, though more than once it provoked discord in the Wesendonck household — at last roused Minna's furious jealousy of his affinity, and the separation was inevitable. Wagner describes his life with Minna with the most brutal frankness, and with as close detail as if he were on the witness-stand. Assuming all he says of Minna to be true, yet he knew all about her before he married her. She may have been his intellectual inferior; this he also knew. She was not of the kind to make a good wife; neither was he of the kind to make a good husband. Musicians who marry actresses usually make a mess of it. She did much for him; it cannot be said, however, that he did much if anything for her. The honest reader will remember that Wagner had the last word. There is no Minna Planer, or friend of Minna Planer's, to tell her side of the story. *Audi alteram partem.* The sad part of it is that we cannot. Evidently Wagner has presented these

sordid and pathetic details in self-justification. Whether or not he has succeeded must be left to the reader.

And now Cosima comes into his life, with whom he is to "live happy ever after" as the story-books say. But of her we first hear only this:

"While I was singing 'Wotan's Abschied' to my friends I noticed the same expression on Cosima's face as I had seen on it, to my astonishment, in Zurich on a similar occasion, only the ecstacy of it was transfigured into something higher. Everything connected with this was shrouded in silence and mystery; but the belief that she belonged to me grew to such certainty in my mind that when I was under the influence of more than ordinary excitement my conduct betrayed the most reckless gayety. As I was accompanying Cosima to the hotel across a public square I suddenly suggested she should sit in an empty wheelbarrow which stood in the street, so that I might wheel her to the hotel. She assented in an instant. My astonishment was so great that I felt all my courage desert me, and was unable to carry out my mad project."

Near the close of the second volume Wagner refers briefly to Cosima again at a time when he was visiting the Bülows in 1863.

"As Bülow had to complete the preparations to his concert, I drove out alone with Cosima on the promenade, as before, in a fine carriage. This time all our jocularity died away into silence. We gazed speechless into each other's eyes; an intense longing for an avowal of the truth mastered us and led to a confession — which needed no words — of the boundless unhappiness which oppressed us."

Still briefer is Wagner's allusion to King Ludwig which forms the closing sentence in the Autobiography. After a short statement of the circumstances attending his invitation to meet Ludwig, he says:

"On the same day I had received the most urgent warnings against returning to Vienna. But my life was to have no more of these alarms; the dangerous road along which fate beckoned me to such great ends was not destined to be clear of troubles and anxieties of a kind unknown to me heretofore, but I was never again to feel the weight of the everyday hardships of existence under the protection of my exalted friend."

In summing up this extraordinary Autobiography — extraordinary for its frankness, its confessions, its honesty, its self-unsparingness —it must be called a plain tale of a life which is laid bare to the minutest detail, in the most unegotistic manner, and has been written evidently because the hero of the story felt it necessary that posterity should understand him and that history should present him in a true light, nothing extenuating, and setting down naught in malice. Another impression that must inevitably come to the reader is of Wagner's literary skill. A musician once said of Theodore Thomas, that one of the greatest violinists in the world was lost in the making of one of the greatest conductors. It may similarly be said of Wagner, that one of the most skilful literary artists in the world was lost in the making of one of the greatest composers. Weinlich, one of Wagner's early teachers, said to him: "Probably you will never write fugues or canons; but what you have mastered is independence. You can now stand alone." That independence was manifest all through Wagner's life, and impressed itself upon all his contemporaries as in the case of no other composer since Beethoven. In all his voluminous writings, he has never written better, or clearer, or with more literary skill, than in the book he dictated to Cosima. It should be supplemented by another, telling the story of his life from 1864 to 1883, with which no one is more familiar, and for which no one has ampler material than Cosima.

No autobiography was needed to establish Wagner's musical fame as the greatest operatic composer of the nineteenth century. He is an epoch-maker like Bach and Beethoven. He has indelibly stamped his influence upon operatic music and permanently changed its course. He has restored the old Grecian artistic unity, and reinforced and symmetrized the art of music by bringing other art-forms into harmony with it. As I have said in another place, he has abolished conventional forms and "substituted a poetry full of music and a music full of poetry; and both are exquisitely set forth against a pictorial background where illusion is almost lost in reality." Wagner had no need to justify his music. If it were necessary to justify himself, it must be acknowledged that he has done so frankly and courageously, and with the assurance that characterizes one who has sublime faith in himself. Like Horace, he might have added to the story of "My Life," "*Exegi monumentum perennius ære.*"

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