THE FLYING DUTCHMAN: ROMANTIC OPERA IN THREE ACTS

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The Flying Dutchman: Romantic Opera in Three Acts by Richard Wagner

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RICHARD WAGNER

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ROMANTIC OPERA IN THREE ACTS.

BY RICHARD WAGNER.

TRANSLATED BY JOHN P. JACKSON,

AUTHOR OF "THE ALBUM OF THE PASSION-PLAY AT OBER-AMMERGAU."

LONDON:
CARL ROSA OPERA COMPANY.
1876.

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INTRODUCTION.

FEW composers have had so many obstacles to overcome, so much bitter, uncompromising opposition to withstand, as Richard Wagner: and none while yet on earth have achieved such triumphs and received such homage. "Long wandering homeless in distant, distant countries," during the earlier part of his career, his aims and aspirations long misunderstood; then "from his native land exiled," for endeavouring in a troublous period to demonstrate the benefits that should accrue to Art from political revolution; we have seen how very recently kings and emperors made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth in order to witness the representation of his last great work, and to pay

homage to the reformer of the German opera. Never had a composer such honours paid to him during his lifetime. And the fact may be considered worthy of record when Wagner's biography shall come to be written, that in the year of the Bayreuth Festival was performed the first English version of any of Wagner's operas. Let us hope, too, that the "Flying Dutchman" may prove only the forerunner of the other beautiful musical and dramatic creations of the poet-composer, whose productions have hitherto been vainly striving to reveal their beauties through the veil of a foreign though charming tongue.

It would be presumption to attempt to forestall musical criticism by any assertion about the grandeurs and beauties of the so-called "music of the future," yet it is almost a necessity, if Wagner is to be thoroughly understood and appreciated, that the composer's subject and his poetry should be considered. Wagner should not be judged as a musician, a composer, pure and simple, for we have to do with a poet-composer, whose libretti have very great claims to poetic capacity. Had Wagner never composed a note of music, his claims as a poet could not have been disregarded. In the "Flying Dutchman," and still more in "Tannhäuser," "Lohengrin," and the "Mastersinger of Nuremberg," Wagner has furnished poems of real dramatic and poetic excellence, wherein "music and sweet poetry agree, as they must needs, the sister and the brother." Wagner, as he tells us himself, became a musician only after he had become a poet, and he was a poet only after he had found inspiration in the rich mines of German legend and mythology.

In the "Flying Dutchman" the composer became first of all a poet; the grand old legend opened up its treasures to him, and with its production he rose from the rank of an opera text-maker to that of a poet, and this newly acquired poetic capacity made him at the same time a true musician. The composer has told us himself how this artistic development was brought about. In "Rienzi," he says, "my only purpose was to write an opera,

and thinking only of this opera, I took my subject as I found it ready made in another man's finished production. . . . . With the "Flying Dutchman," I entered upon a new course, by becoming the artistic interpreter of a subject which was given to me only in the simple crude form of a popular tale. From this time I became, with regard to all my dramatic works, first of all a poet; and only in the ultimate completion of the poem my faculty as a musician was restored to me."

Wagner is by no means an innovator in his endeavour to make "music and sweet poetry agree:" and this endeavour, on his part, was simply the result of study, and grew to conviction with his artistic development. His poetical capacity is not shown to us full born: nor did his musical genius burst forth full fledged like Athene from the head of Zeus.

Wagner was never a marvellous boy, except for his disinclination to follow settled rules and precedents. Did space permit, it would be of interest to follow the composer's artistic development, all the way from the "Fairies," the "Novice of Palermo," "Rienzi," and the "Dutchman," up to the "Ring of the Nibelung;" but we must content ourselves with recording only the events that led to the production of the present opera. While musical director of a theatre at Koenigsberg, the composer began to look towards Paris as the goal of his artistic ambitions. He made the plan of a grand five-act opera from Koenig's romance of "Die Hohe Braut," and sent it to Scribe, asking him to furnish the libretto. Scribe, however, did not deign to answer the unknown and ambitious young German. In the autumn of 1837, when musical director of the theatre at Riga, he took up a project, which he had previously conceived, of making Rienzi the Tribune the subject of a grand opera after the fashion of Meyerbeer. He wrote the text himself, but not with any great care or poetical skill, his great aim being to produce grand scenic effects, effective ensembles and finales. In the spring of 1839 two acts of "Rienzi" were completed, his

contract at Riga was at an end, and he determined to seek fortune in Paris. He embarked with his wife on board a sailing vessel which was to take him to London, en route for Paris, and it was on this eventful voyage that the present opera of the "Flying Dutchman" was first conceived.

The voyage to London lasted nearly four weeks. A fearful storm drove the vessel up to the Norwegian coast, and it was here, "amid the raging storms and conflicting waves, the gray northern rocks and the curious life on board a ship, that," as he says, "the ancient legendary figure of the Dutchman gained physiognomy and colour." It is possible that he also heard the story from the lips of the seamen, told in their own rude fashion. Wagner remained only a short time in London, and then continued his journey to Paris. During a stay in Boulogne, he made the acquaintance of Meyerbeer, to whom he showed his "Rienzi," and who provided him with some letters of introduction for Paris. His opera "The Novice of Palermo" was accepted for the Theatre de la Renaissance; a new French text had been made for it, and everything promised to be successful, when suddenly the theatre became bankrupt, and the hopes of the composer were destroyed.

Wagner made no headway until Meyerbeer returned to Paris, when he was introduced to the directors of the grand opera. He proposed to them a plan of composing the "Flying Dutchman," suggesting that a French text should be written for his music. The consequence, however, was, that his idea was stolen, the "book" was given to a French poet, and the composition to another musician. His sojourn in the French capital was an utter failure, and the necessities of life pressed upon him so heavily, that he was compelled to undergo "the most humiliating trials in musical drudgery" in order to earn a scanty livelihood. He gained a little by arranging popular melodies for the cornet-à-piston, wrote articles for the "Gazette Musicale," but amidst his troubles never forgetting "Rienzi," which was