

FACE TO FACE WITH GREAT MUSICIANS

BY
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Introduction by
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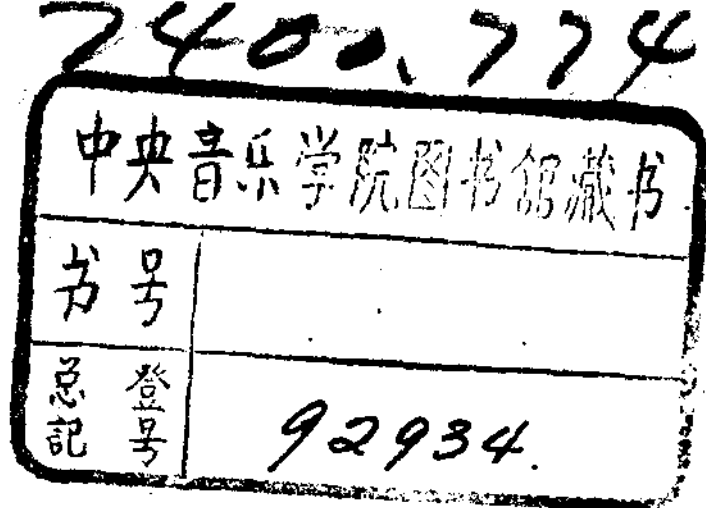
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FOREWORD

CHARLES D. ISAACSON'S work in New York has been unique and invaluable. He is an original and energetic personality.

If it be true that a genius is one who is capable of being "possessed" by an idea, he is surely a genius.

He loves music. So do we all. But this love in him rises to a sort of religious devotion. He loves music so much, and so unselfishly, that he cannot rest until he has made others love it.

Hence, he is a missionary for music.

At great personal sacrifice of time, energy and money, he has organized popular concerts and brought the best music to the masses.

He has succeeded in securing in this splendid work the coöperation of the greatest artists of this country and of the world.

They have caught fire at his flame, and have gladly joined in his efforts to offer the beauty and inspiration of their talents to hundreds of thousands who otherwise could not have received this opportunity.

His free concerts have become an institution. They have kindled ambition in many an aspiring

youth, and brought light and happiness to vast numbers.

If music has a mission, if it be an element of culture, surely what is most needed is to bring the very best music to those multitudes who need it most.

“Culture,” said Joubert, “is anything that can bring the satisfactions of life over from the body to the mind.”

If that be true, certainly music is entitled to a place in the highest rank in the list of the instruments of culture.

And certainly one who carries this advantage into the reach of the people has done much to improve the character-quality of the community.

In this, as in his earlier book, Mr. Isaacson emphasizes the human element in music.

He shows that the great masters were human beings, as we.

We can touch and feel them.

After reading such a book, the music of the masters must be nearer to us, a more comprehensible and usable thing.

For those who are familiar with the history of music, the volume will be a delight, a book to read, and to dip into again and again.

For the many young people who are studying music it will be an invaluable aid to understanding, and a wonderful inspiration to more intelligent and sympathetic work.

FRANK CRANE

PREFACE

PROBABLY no publication or periodical has ever again had the popularity or the degree of circulation of Volume One, Number One. Hence the accession of any work to a second appearance is among the wonders of the world.

It is, therefore, with a feeling of a species of awe that I behold this modest venture of my conception again mounting the public rostrum. In the first step I had been moved to put my little vignettes into permanent form by the kindly assurance of many of my good friends among the musicians and my audiences. Now, in a different spirit, I am going forward, because I am sensible of a duty to complete the structure I have begun.

However faulty the technique of the author, there seems to me now no doubt that the thing I have tried to do in setting down these little face to face meetings was right and necessary. All creators of art may be made utterly human to those who would gain the largest share of enjoyment from their creations. Indeed, to the newcomers to fine art, I look upon the process of humanizing the masters as essential to an understanding.

I chose for my initial sphere of endeavor the world of music, for its field of importance is widening with the last years into the lives of the millions, instead of the few. In music I find practically a virgin land; my brother writers have scarcely kissed the fringe of the sward. In music I am most nearly at home . . . but it is not of music only that I speak in the few words that make up this brief preface. What is spoken here may be taken for painting, sculpture, literature. The same theory applies equally.

When one glances down the right-hand side of a program at a concert, there are names that even to the regular connoisseurs are little more than ink on paper. The words carry no mystic meaning, the letters do not instantly flash the picture of a living creature of flesh and blood. I am an ardent admirer of the reproducing machines, but I miss the smile and the electric personality of the interpreter himself. When I find a new name in the list of composers, I say: "Wait! First show me his picture and tell me his story." Half the joy in Schubert's songs is Schubert himself. I hear him pleading, I see him bashfully hiding his tears. Not to know him were calamitous! Do I overstate?

Then reverse this process and obliterate from your memory the vivid personalities you know. For experiment, fasten your thoughts upon a man or woman you know well. Think of his characteristics, the cast of features, the rhythm of his walk, the tone

of voice, his idiosyncrasies, his whims, his noble habits, his ambitions, the unforgettable incidents of your contact with him. Now blot all this knowledge from your memory. Think just of his name—along with his work. What does the name mean? Nothing!

Take another view of the subject. Let me assume you are a new reader—that my other volume has not had the privilege of your companionship. You have known something of Beethoven—you have seen his portrait, learned that he was deaf, heard some romantic story of his “Moonlight Sonata.” Have these facts not been of value to you, in your attitude toward Beethoven’s music and your comprehension of its import? The purists laugh at me. They would take their art unadulterated without exoteric matter. They scoff at my attempts to interpret music and musicians. Let them have a good time. I am writing these sentences aboard a train en route to Florida, where I am to address a convention of music clubs. When I get to Tampa, I shall deliver my speech, yes; but, unlike the purists, I shall first learn everything I can about Tampa!

I am making a plea, then, for biography—all of it, not for this little venture, though there be a hundred volumes before I put up my pen. The only virtue I seek to claim for my chapters is that I have spent the years studying and gathering the facts, and perhaps have saved the effort for my readers. But I would be a happier man if I knew, dear reader, that

you had been inspired to read more of the authentic biographies after scanning my words. Those of you who have told me of the impetus which these faltering efforts have given your music interests do not dream how much confidence you have given me to go forward.

The present book of the series takes up a company of thirty vital figures in music history, arranged in such a way as to provide a nice sense of contrasts, without forgetting to encompass the old and the new days, the opera and the symphonic world, the classic and the semi-classic. This time I have chosen, as well, a great singer, the maker of the pianoforte, and a man I love more than any other who ever lived.

Again I desire to express my gratitude to the *New York Globe* for permission to reprint the series (written originally for its columns); also to thank the following individuals for their kindly advice and aid: John C. Freund, editor of *Musical America*; Bruce Bliven of the *Globe*; C. E. Williams of *Physical Culture Magazine*; O. G. Sonneck of the *Musical Quarterly*; Otto H. Kahn; Charles M. Schwab; Adolph Lewisohn; Alexander Lambert; Rose Roden; and A. M. Sweyd.

CHARLES D. ISAACSON

INTRODUCTION

IT was a deep understanding that enabled Charles D. Isaacson to awaken the interest of the thousands of members of the Globe Music Club in the best music by providing free concerts, many of which are of a degree of excellence that cannot be surpassed. Mr. Isaacson's philanthropic spirit is so contagious that the best artists now deem it an honor to be invited to appear at the *Globe* concerts. Through this splendid opportunity the *Globe* audiences have developed into enthusiastic assemblages whose standard of criticism is so high that it inspires the artists to their best efforts.

In connection with this work, Mr. Isaacson has had a rare opportunity for the study of human nature, and has come to a knowledge of that which interests the great masses, as evidenced in the phenomenal growth of the Globe Music Club. It now makes itself felt in the publication of a second group of those remarkable essays, *Face to Face with Great Musicians*, which have been the feature of all the *Globe* meetings. In the second volume Mr. Isaacson's understanding of human nature is probably even more in evidence than in the first. I find this

more solid, more literary, more lasting. The composers, who were, to many, nothing but idealized pictures or marble busts, become creatures of flesh and blood, with emotions of joy and sorrow. We come to know a side of their lives which the historian leaves untouched and which the music catalogues cannot classify, but which, after all, is of the greatest importance, as it is the human side.

These volumes have a great message for artists in helping them to understand better the composers whose work they interpret. It was difficult for me to reconcile the tenderness of the lyrics of Brahms with the rugged type which his portraits present, until, while studying in Vienna, I made the acquaintance of Frau Truxa, who was for fifteen years the housekeeper for the master. After hearing her tell many anecdotes in illustration of Brahms' thoughtfulness for others, even to sharing his breakfast *semmel* with the birds who came every morning to his window, I saw what I never before had seen, the human side of the great man, and realized that his extreme delicacy of feeling is reflected in his immortal songs.

The interpretative imagination can be greatly stimulated by these volumes. These little word-pictures, told in Mr. Isaacson's unique style, have a charm and freshness that reveal to the reader a personal touch which, so far as I know, is not elsewhere to be found. There is a wide scope in this volume from Palestrina to Dvorak, from grand

opera of Wagner and Weber to the songs of Stephen Foster and Abt and the comic opera of Balfe. There is rare farce in the chapters on Field and Rossini, fierce tragedy in that on Tschaikowsky, romantic drama in that on Coucy, melodrama in those on Garcia and Weber, splendid character drawing in those on Auber, Field, Donizetti, Mozart, Berlioz, and especially in that on Moussorgsky.

Bizet's chapter is as perfect a confession of the struggle of inspiration against drab necessity as has ever been written.

The Wagner chapter actually sets in brief form all the controversies of the master's life—the charges and his defense.

There is a sweet tendency, a Barriesque calm in the Lalo, Schubert, Abt, Franck chapters, with the latter giving an exceptional study of the pipe organ.

The development of the pianoforte is told dramatically in the Cristofori chapter and again touched upon in the discussion of the Scarlattis.

The real "close-up" is that of Patti, a friend of the Isaacson family, but the tenderest bit is Isaacson's tribute to his father in "M. N. I."

A very catholic volume, full of information, presenting great humans as they must have been in the flesh. In short, they bring us face to face with those great lights who seem so remote from the world in which we live.

FRANK LA FORGE

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FACE TO FACE WITH GREAT MUSICIANS

I

FACE TO FACE WITH WAGNER

1813-1883

HE sat there in his big chair, writing on his opera "Parsifal." On his head lolled the velvet cap, falling over to one side. The spectacles were set firmly on the firm nose. The forehead rose high, intellectual. The hair was bushy at the back, a little suggestion of beard was on the side of his face. The cleft chin was forward and prominent, stubborn, obstinate. How I caught the impression I don't know, but something about the face made me think of an old seaman, who has known the roughest tides. The eyes were deep and heavy lines were on the forehead from frowning and thinking, with high hills drawn over the eyes. The cheeks were marked ferociously. The mouth always seemed to say, "No quarter." An old captain I knew at Gloucester looked exactly like him. But there was an indolence about his clothes that sug-

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gested the very opposite character. Soft collar, rich cravat, velvet jacket, slippers, a scent of perfume—the setting of a sensualist—an Oriental.

The room in which he sat was hung with heavy draperies, the floors were covered with thick rugs. The whole place was adorned with lavish colors, depicting the voluptuary at his worst.

As he sat writing his music, the lips going tighter, the jaws were working incessantly, grinding, grinding, as if he were intent upon pounding an enemy to powder. He was a little man, but one didn't realize it, so straight did he hold himself. He passed a theme and paused a moment, drumming his pen on the table. As he awaited his inspiration, he rubbed his hands against a silken cloth, doing it with evident physical pleasure, his eyes closing a trifle at the effect of the sensation.

From the distance some voices rose, and presently a group of musicians trooped into the room. They were excited—the King had sent them—and here was pretty Miss Sedgwick, a new singer for the Master to hear.

“Good,” said Wagner, “let me hear you.”

“Shall I?” the young woman asked hesitantly.

Then she went to the piano and sang from the love music of “Isolde.” It was a lovely voice. In the joy of hearing, Wagner actually stood on his head on the couch; then he ran under the piano like an overwrought animal and roared like a stag. “It is beautiful. Lovely! Ecstatic!”

The young woman shrank back. Impetuously Wagner rushed to her, threw his arms about her and kissed her, threw his arms about the man who brought her and thanked him.

“You are frightened, my lady. Do not be like that. Come here. I will do something for you. I like to be excited when I stand in the presence of beautiful singing. I like to give vent to my feelings. We should be permitted to do that. Why stand always like mummies? I know that many people have resented my freedom. It isn't dignified, doing these things. Once at a picnic in the country, with my one-time friend Nietzsche, I climbed a tree. He couldn't get over it—he hasn't got over it yet, and he's dead. Good-by, now, my friends. Don't come again though——” His voice had changed from the happy, cheerful spirit of fun to a mean, insulting tone. “Don't come again when I'm working. You should know better.”

“But, master, I thought you would like us. We meant no harm. We——”

“Be silent—don't you see that I'm anxious to work? Don't come again, any of you.”

Richard Wagner, this was Richard Wagner! Impetuous, generous, boyish, moody, cruel, unfeeling, a lexicon of moods in a moment. So we saw him, in the outer man. Left alone, he returned to his desk, rubbed his hands with scented powder and prepared to resume his writing. As we watched him, it seemed as if the place darkened.

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And this was what we heard coming from the nowhere—the creatures of Wagner's life.

“Ah! My little Richard,” sounded the sweet voice of an old woman. The man quickly put down the pen and jumped to his feet.

“Ah! Liebes Mutterchen, you have come; it is so many years since I saw you. Are you proud of me? Ah! And here is dear friend Geyer, my almost father, who used to lift me on his knees and show me the theater. Much has happened to your Richard since we saw each other last. I have had many fights. But my creed is winning out, my disciples are many, my devoted followers are legion.”

“Disciples, followers, eh,” came a cutting voice. “Egotistic to the last, eh, Wagner? The sun shines for you alone. Your disciples, your followers! The whole world exists only for you. If some one liked your music, he was a good man. If some one didn't like you and your ideas, he was paid to keep you down.”

“Yes, they were paid, the miserable scoundrels, writing against my ideas. I have preached my doctrines to the world, and the world has been a long time coming to realize me. For six years I had to stop my music to preach my ideas—to make them understand. They have hated me, these jealous fools. They have been either paid to keep me down or they have been Jews.”

“Oh, he's at it again about the Jew,” came a laughing chorus.

“You and the Jews would make a good comedy. Hating the Jews and feeding out of their hands. Meyerbeer was all right as long as you needed him, but afterwards you reviled him. Leah David you were in love with when you were a lad, but when she wouldn't have you, then she was only a Jewess and you were attracted by her dog, so you said. You escaped imprisonment through a Jew's aid—everywhere you turned, they helped you. An anti-Semite in theory, and a pro-Semite in practice. That essay of yours will not be forgotten. How ungrateful, Wagner, you have been, accepting help from Jews at every turn in your life, at every great moment, and then talking as you have done against them. Aren't you ashamed?”

“No, I am not!” shouted Wagner, roaring like a lion and tearing up and down the room. “I hate them. They are incapable of doing big things. They are constitutionally wrong. I hate them all. I hate . . .”

“Yes, that is the word,” put in a mournful voice, “you hate. You hate everybody, every creed—Christian, freethinker, except as it fits your selfish moods to like them. You have been a lover and a hater of Germany. What you are you don't know yourself. Nobody knows. You are nothing, you are changeable as the west wind, Wagner.”

“That is true,” responded the man. “I have no feelings, truly, about anything except my music. That only is what seriously interests me.”