

ERNEST NEWMAN

VOLUME I *

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The Wagner Operas

Operas included in this volume

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN * TANNHÄUSER
LOHENGRIN * TRISTAN AND ISOLDE
THE MASTERSINGERS OF NUREMBERG

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The Wagner Operas

Volume I

BY

ERNEST NEWMAN



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Overture

WHEN the first volume of this series was published in England — the *Opera Nights* of 1943 — those great and good men the reviewers, from whose lynx-eyes nothing can remain hidden for long, reproached me tenderly for what they regarded as my arbitrary choice of operas. *Falstaff*, for instance, was there, but not *Otello* or *Aida*, *Turandot* and *Gianni Schicchi* but not *Tosca* or *La Bohème*, *Così fan tutte* but not *Don Giovanni* or *Figaro*, and so forth. Berlioz and Tchaikovski and Johann Strauss were among the chosen composers, but not Weber or Rossini or Wagner and a few others in whose company the music lover looks to spending an occasional night at the opera. In their grieved perplexity at this seeming aberration on my part there went up a wail from the English reviewers like that of Mr. Wodehouse's Monty Bodkin when Miss Butterwick broke off the engagement — "Gertrude, your conduct is inexplicable." My own conduct, however, can be explained.

A good many years ago I dashed off, at the request of an English firm of publishers, a fortnightly series of analyses, in popular style, of some of the best-known operas, together with brief biographies of the composers. Although this matter did not, in my opinion, in any sense constitute a "book", it was issued as such, in three volumes, under the general title of *Stories of the Great Operas*, in the United States, where, if hearsay is to be trusted, it had a considerable sale. As the English copyright was mine, Messrs. Putnam and Co. suggested, during the late war, that the American volumes should be reprinted in London. From this suggestion I recoiled in horror. In the first place I saw no sense in reprinting the elementary biographies, while in the second place I felt that if the opera analyses were to be collected in volume form I would prefer to revise them all thoroughly, enlarge the scale of treatment, and altogether try to make a better job of it. On these terms agreements were ultimately made with Messrs. Putnam on my side of the Atlantic and Mr. Alfred Knopf on the other.

OVERTURE

While these negotiations were proceeding I arranged with Mr. Knopf for a volume dealing with twenty-nine operas that had not been included in the fortnightly series to which I have referred. This entirely new volume appeared in England in 1943 under the title of *Opera Nights*; but as the analyses of twenty-odd years ago had been issued in the U.S.A. under the title of *Stories of the Great Operas*, Mr. Knopf brought out the new volume as *More Stories of Famous Operas*, a procedure calculated, I am afraid, to give a little trouble one of these days to library cataloguers and bibliographers. However, that was no concern of mine. I then set to work to rewrite all the original analyses (*Stories of the Great Operas*), one volume to be devoted to Wagner, the other to deal with all the famous works by other composers not included in *Opera Nights* (*More Stories of Famous Operas*). The present volume is the first stage in this process of reincarnation. It has no connection whatever with the Wagner volume of *Stories of the Great Operas*; it is an entirely new work from cover to cover. A further volume, similarly rewritten, dealing with the standard works of Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, Gounod, Rossini etc. not included in *Opera Nights*, will follow, I hope, before long.

At first sight there may appear to be no great necessity today for yet another book on the Wagner operas. Sooner or later, however, such a work would have had to be written by someone or other, for our knowledge of Wagner has been so vastly increased during the last few years that the close student of him has a score of lights on him that were denied to our fathers. The recent publication in Germany of his full-length prose sketches for some of his works has taught us a great deal we had never suspected before about him and them; for example, we are now able for the first time to trace every smallest step of his that led, over so many years, to the building up of the present *Ring*. We see how drastically his original scheme was changed in the course of time, and not always, perhaps, for the better; we see, too, that, as was the case with Vergil and the *Aeneid*, he has sometimes made an alteration in his plan without noticing that the new feature is inconsistent with something he has left in its first form elsewhere in the poem.

My own study of him has convinced me that it is impossible to understand fully the works of his maturity without having trav-

OVERTURE

ersed on our own account the extensive and often difficult country over which he himself had to travel before he reached his distant goal. Often a point that is obscure or even inconsistent in the opera poem is elucidated for us by his sketches. Sometimes the psychological motivation of an episode becomes clear to us only in the light of our knowledge of the mediaeval legend that was his starting-point. Sometimes, in the *Ring*, the clue to his procedure is unexpectedly discovered in such works as the *Deutsche Mythologie* of the brothers Grimm, which we know him to have studied closely in the late 1840's.

I venture to lay it down, then, that a clear picture of Wagner's mind-processes during the conception and realisation of a work is to be obtained only by following him step by step through the literature, ancient and modern, out of which it grew. It may be objected that a work of art should be its own sufficient explanation. But there are cases, some of them the most notable in literary history, in which that simple proposition obviously does not hold good. The *Aeneid* is one of them; the *Divina Commedia* is another. No student of today can hope to get quite inside the mind of Dante by a mere reading of his text; he requires to be told a great deal about many things which are implicit in the text but not self-revelatory in it, such as the mediaeval conception of the universe, the mediaeval attitude towards religion, the contemporary characters who figure in the poem, and so on. Coming down to our own epoch, Albert Thibaudet, in his searching study of Flaubert, has told us that in *Salammbô* the great novelist "has for the most part followed the history of Polybius, and the reader assuredly needs to be acquainted with this." So it is again with Henry James: his own retracing, in the prefaces to one of the later editions of his works, of his mental processes when he was working out the characters and the situations of this novel or that is of fundamental importance to the serious student of him; after reading one of these prefaces we re-read the novel itself in quite a new way, with many a new and revealing light on things.

It would be surprising, indeed, if the case were otherwise: since the whole mind of a great artist has gone into the making of one of his major works, the more we know about the nature and the operations of that mind the more profound will be our understanding of the work; and since the inner world from which it

OVERTURE

came was built up by the slow unconscious coalescence within the man of influences and impulses from many quarters, it is of the first importance that we, for our part, shall re-live, to the best of our ability, his own inner life during the years when the work was shaping itself within him.

I have accordingly devoted a considerable amount of space not only to Wagner's prose sketches for some of his works but to the mediaeval poems that were the prime generators of them; we listen to *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, for instance, in a new way — and I venture to say, a way that is more like Wagner's than any opera house ever conveys to us — after we have read Gottfried of Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach. The *Ring* is a peculiar case. The Wagnerian mental complex that went to the making of the great tetralogy was built up slowly out of not only the Nibelungenlied and the Volsunga and other sagas but also out of the storehouse of facts relating to the Teutonic past that was thrown open to Wagner by the Grimms and other scholars of the first half of the nineteenth century. For this reason, among others, I have gone at considerable length into the history of Wagner's prose sketches for the *Ring*. The reader need not necessarily plough doggedly through all this right away, for its complexities may sometimes discourage him: he will probably find it more convenient to keep these pages for reference after he has worked at the poems and the scores and read the present analyses. Some knowledge of it all is indispensable to a full understanding of the *Ring*; and a reader or two here and there may at any rate be grateful to me for having spared him the labour of hacking his way through the jungle on his own account.

The need for a clearer view on our part of the Wagner operas as Wagner himself saw them is all the greater because it is the sad lot of the ordinary opera-goer, who is almost entirely dependent for his impressions of them on what he sees and hears in the theatre, to have them put before him, in even the best of present-day performances, in a way that often does them the minimum of justice. In the Overture to *Opera Nights* I pointed out how much worse off the opera-lover is than the ordinary theatre-goer in the matter of casting. Care is taken when casting Hamlet, for instance, that by the grace of the gods there is some correspondence between the actor's own appearance and build and voice and

OVERTURE

mentality and those we associate with the character; whereas in the opera house a woman with neither the face nor the figure nor the mind for a Gilda or a Lakmé is set down to play the fragile part merely because she has the right range and timbre of voice and the coloratura technique for it; or a man who physically and intellectually might have made the ideal Des Grieux or Parsifal is forced to play the Conte di Luna or Germont *père* merely because nature has stupidly seen fit to make him a baritone instead of a tenor.

Seldom indeed do we find a Wagnerian part played by a man or woman who looks and thinks — or mimics the apparatus of thinking — like the character he or she is supposed to be representing. Wagner himself, after working himself to death trying to knock some understanding of a part into one of his male singers, asked the gods piteously by what primal curse laid upon him it came about that he had to allot his most intellectual parts to a tenor. Think of the young Siegfried as Wagner imagined him, the incarnation of youthful health and beauty and active joy in life, or the metaphysical Tristan, or the spiritual Parsifal, and then recognise these creations, if you can, in some amphora¹ Helden-tenor or other who looks and behaves like an overgrown Boy Scout, and gives the spectator the impression of a man whose mental development was arrested at the age of twelve and has been in custody ever since. Or take the case of Brynhilde. "That is no man!" Siegfried ejaculates when he has removed the breast-plate from the form of the sleeping Valkyrie; and a smile goes round the house, for what we see is a matron who could serve anywhere for a demonstration of the physical possibilities of the higher mammalia. And only the other day I found a French critic complaining that while some German lady or other had sung beautifully, in *Lohengrin* her Elsa "manquait de virginité". Well, one can't have everything.

My main object in the present volume has been to help the opera-goer to see the Wagnerian works as nearly as possible as Wagner must have seen them, and so to get more value out of his

¹ An amphora is defined by the classical dictionaries as "a two-handled, big-bellied vessel, usually of clay, with a longish or shortish neck and a mouth proportioned to the size, sometimes resting firmly on a foot, but often ending in a blunt point . . ."

OVERTURE

listening in the theatre and by radio. It is unfortunately impossible to make an analysis of them clear except by frequent reference to the leading motives. But I have tried to reduce that reference to the minimum, for two reasons: in the first place, if there is too much of it one's text comes to resemble a series of mathematical formulae; in the second place, it is a cardinal error to suppose either that the musical tissue of a Wagner opera is made up simply of a pinning together of motives, or that, in most cases, any one label can be found that will cover all the uses and meanings of any one motive. The practice of the commentators has been to make out the label in terms of the words that have accompanied a given motive at its first appearance in the score. But that is pure fallacy: for Wagner himself his motives had no such fixity or limitation of meaning, a point which the reader will find insisted upon again and again in the course of these analyses.

I have made the *Flying Dutchman* my starting-point because the central purpose of the volume is to be practically helpful, and the reader is hardly likely ever to see a performance of *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* or *Rienzi*.

As often as was possible I have allowed Wagner the poet to speak for himself, using my own translations in the Breitkopf and Härtel edition of the operas. (The one exception is *Lohengrin*, which I never translated).

E. N.



Contents

OVERTURE	ix
THE FLYING DUTCHMAN	3
TANNHÄUSER	50
LOHENGRIN	105
TRISTAN AND ISOLDE	169
THE MASTERSINGERS OF NUREMBERG	279

The Wagner Operas

Volume I


The Flying Dutchman

CHARACTERS

DALAND, A NORWEGIAN MARINER	<i>Bass</i>
SENTA, HIS DAUGHTER	<i>Soprano</i>
ERIK, A HUNTER	<i>Tenor</i>
MARY, SENTA'S NURSE	<i>Mezzo-soprano</i>
DALAND'S STEERSMAN	<i>Tenor</i>
THE DUTCHMAN	<i>Baritone</i>

Scene: The Norwegian Coast

1

HE STORY of the Flying Dutchman may be a modern variant of the ancient one of the Wandering Jew; but when it first took its present form we do not know. In *Blackwood's Magazine* for May 1821 there appeared an anonymous short story entitled *Vanderdecken's Message Home; or, The Tenacity of Natural Affection*, which, on the face of it, could be taken for an episode detached from a novel. The narrator is on a vessel that has just left the Cape of Good Hope. The conversation on board turns to the story of the Flying Dutchman, which is assumed to be known, more or less, to everyone present. Seventy years earlier, it appears, one Vanderdecken, captain of an Amsterdam ship, had sworn to round Table Bay in spite of wind and weather, "though I should beat about here until the day of judgment"; and beating about those seas he is still, always bringing foul weather to any ship that sights him. He has an embarrassing habit of hailing other vessels, sending out his jolly-boat to them, and asking them, if they are homeward bound, to take charge of a bundle of letters for delivery to his friends and relatives in Holland; "but no good", says one of the seamen who

THE WAGNER OPERAS

are discussing the matter, "comes to them who have communication with him".

Soon the Flying Dutchman's ship comes into sight, its boat is lowered, and a sailor appears with letters from the captain for Holland; but he is considerably put out when the crew of the English ship, after glancing at the letters, inform him that this and that addressee — including the wife of Vanderdecken — has long been dead, such-and-such a banking house went bankrupt forty years ago, and so on. He insists on leaving the letters on the deck, however, though none of the English seamen will touch them. In the end, to everyone's relief, a gust of wind blows them into the sea; "there was a cry of joy among the sailors, and they ascribed the favourable change which soon took place in the weather to our having got quit of Vanderdecken".

The writer, as has just been said, seems to take it for granted that his readers have already heard of the Flying Dutchman. But there is nothing elemental or eerie in the story as he tells it — no compact with the Devil, no landing of Vanderdecken every few years to find, if he can, some woman whose love will lift the burden of the curse from him. All the *Blackwood's Magazine* writer is concerned with is the touching evidence of "the tenacity of natural affection" afforded by Vanderdecken's still writing home to wife and friends after seventy years.

2

We next meet with the story, so far as England is concerned, in a play by an industrious theatrical man-of-all-work of the period, calling himself Edward Fitzball, which was produced at the Adelphi Theatre, London, under the title of *The Flying Dutchman, or the Phantom Ship, a Nautical Drama in three acts*, on the 4th December 1826. We need not have concerned ourselves with Fitzball at all had it not been conjectured at one time that Heine may have seen the play in London in 1827 and derived from it some hints for his story of a play in his *Memoirs of Herr von Schnabelewopski*, to which we shall come shortly. No one who had ever read Fitzball's farcical tragedy could have entertained such a notion. The drama has the minimum of connection with the Flying Dutchman story as we all know it now, and that minimum it derives from the fact that, as the author tells his

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

readers in a foreword to the play, it was founded on the *Blackwood's* article of 1821.

Evidence of the currency of the legend just then is afforded by a passage in De Quincey's *Murder as a Fine Art*, which appeared in 1827. Speaking of the cool intrepidity by which the philosopher Descartes was said to have saved himself, in 1621, from the seamen who were plotting to kill him, De Quincey says that "he could not possibly have brought the vessel to port after murdering the crew; so that he must have continued to cruise for ever in the Zuyder Zee, and would probably have been mistaken for the Flying Dutchman, homeward bound." The casual nature of the reference implies that knowledge of the legend on the ordinary reader's part can be taken for granted.

3

Captain Marryat's full-length novel *The Phantom Ship*, which is still a capital yarn of the sea, appeared in 1839. Here again the Dutch captain bears the name of Vanderdecken, but there is still no suggestion either of the periodical permission of the mariner to seek salvation on shore or of the Devil having had a hand in the business. It is the celestial, not the infernal powers that pounce upon the Dutchman's oath and take the bold blasphemer at his word. His vow to round the Cape even if he had to beat about until the Day of Judgment "was registered", he writes to his wife in Amsterdam, "in thunder and in streams of sulphurous fire. The hurricane burst upon the ship, the canvas flew away in ribbons; mountains of seas swept over us, and in the centre of a deep o'erhanging cloud, which shrouded all in darkness, were written in letters of vivid flame these words — UNTIL THE DAY OF JUDGMENT!" He had sworn his impious oath by a sacred relic, a fragment of the Holy Cross, which his wife was accustomed to wear on her neck; and the only thing that can put an end to his sufferings is a sight of this, if it can be brought to him. His son Philip brings it to him after many marvellous adventures by sea and land; at the moment of reunion his vessel breaks into fragments, father and son sink beneath the waves, and "all nature smiled as if it rejoiced that a charm was dissolved for ever, and that THE PHANTOM SHIP WAS NO MORE."

Marryat has an uncanny character of the name of Schriften,

THE WAGNER OPERAS

a little wizened old sailor who turns up like a bad penny wherever Philip Vanderdecken junior goes, always bringing disaster to him and the ship on which he happens to be, but always being miraculously saved from death himself. It appears that when Vanderdecken senior was persisting in his blasphemous resolve to round the Cape he was remonstrated with by his pilot, whom the captain knocked overboard in a scuffle and left presumably drowned. Schriften was this pilot: like the Flying Dutchman, he is deathproof, and he lives only for the exquisite revenge of enticing the son to destruction and so preventing the father from ever getting a sight of the holy relic. Just before the final catastrophe to Vanderdecken and Philip, however, Schriften is redeemed and released from his own particular curse by the magnanimous forgiveness of the son.

Though Wagner makes no use of this Schriften, a character corresponding to him comes into the Wagnerian record later in a curious way. The reader will know that while Wagner was working at his *Flying Dutchman* in Paris in 1841 he tried to get the work accepted at the Opéra. The Director, Léon Pillet, would not promise this; but he liked the scenario so much that he offered to buy it from Wagner, meaning to have it made into a libretto for one of the composers on the Opéra's waiting-list. As Wagner could claim no proprietary rights in the story itself he wisely, though much against the grain, accepted Pillet's offer; he was not in a position at that time to turn his back contemptuously on a few hundred francs. A new text was therefore put together by two theatre hacks of the day, Benedict-Henri Révoil and Paul Foucher; it was set to music by Pierre Dietsch, and the opera, which proved a dismal fiasco, was produced in 1842. The French librettists altered Wagner's plan so radically that the two plots are hardly the same. It is interesting to note, however, that in their version the phantom seaman — not Vanderdecken and a Dutchman now but a Norwegian of the name of Troil — has added to the sin of impiety the crime of killing the pilot when the latter tried to persuade him not to persist in his mad purpose. Now this pilot motive, as we may call it, is not found either in Wagner or in Heine, who was Wagner's source for at any rate part of the story. It appears, however, as we have seen, in Marryat, so that it looks as if Révoil and Foucher may have read *The Phantom Ship*;

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

as a matter of fact their opera was entitled not *The Flying Norwegian* but *Le vaisseau fantôme*. (The pilot motive, of course, may have existed already in some popular version of the legend, unknown to us today, that was in circulation at the time).

4

In view of the fact that Marryat, De Quincey and the *Blackwood's* writer all imply that the legend of the Flying Dutchman was known to their readers we can take it for granted that a popular version of it was already current to some extent. We find the same implication again in the next literary form of the story that comes within the scope of our enquiry.

In 1834 Heine published in his *Salon* a series of papers with the title of *Memoirs of Herr von Schnabelewopski*. In Chapter VI the supposed memoirist tells how in Hamburg he saw one night "a big ship looking like a sombre giant in a great scarlet cloak. Was it the Flying Dutchman?" he asks. "This fable of the Flying Dutchman", he continues, "you surely know." After leaving Hamburg the itinerant Herr von Schnabelewopski had gone to Amsterdam; and in his next chapter he tells how he there saw "the dread Mynherr", as he calls him, on the stage. Heine outlines the action of the play thus. The Dutch captain had sworn by all the devils in hell that he would round a certain cape if he had to keep on sailing until the Day of Judgment. "The Devil took him at his word; he would have to sail the seas until the Last Judgment, unless he was redeemed by the fidelity of a woman's love. Donkey as the devil is, he doesn't believe in female constancy; so he allows the accursed captain to land once every seven years, take a wife, and thus achieve his salvation. Poor Dutchman! Time after time he is glad enough to be saved from matrimony itself and escape from his saviour, so back he goes to his ship again."

Heine continues with the action of the play up to the point where the Dutchman has met Katharina, the daughter of a Scottish skipper, and received her promise to be "true unto death". Then Herr von Schnabelewopski's attention is diverted to a pretty blonde in the audience. He makes her acquaintance: she is of an obliging disposition, and by the time the pair return to the theatre the drama is in its final stage, with the Dutchman generously warning Katharina of the doom that awaits her if she links her

7