

MUSIC APPRECIATION SECTION

GREAT COMPOSERS OF MUSIC

By BERT PAUL OSBON*

IX. WAGNER, WRITER OF MUSIC-DRAMAS



Richard Wagner

RICHARD WAGNER (pronounced vahg-ner), who has greatly enriched the modern world of music, was born in Germany in 1813. As a youth he delighted in reading the heroic myths of Greek gods and goddesses. He liked to read the story of Rome, and similar stories and legends. As a boy he became greatly interested in the theater through his stepfather who was an actor.

Richard was given music lessons, but he never became a great singer or piano player. He went to school in Germany and later attended a German university. Greek and Shakespeare were his favorite studies.

At the age of thirteen he wrote a tragedy and began to study harmony (the science of writing music). After he had learned to know Beethoven's works thoroughly, he decided to devote his life to music. (See the article *Beethoven, Mu-*

sical Genius in the July, 1940, issue of THE YOUNG CITIZEN.)

We later find him wandering from town to town in Germany, conducting orchestras and leading choruses. Then he traveled to Paris and to Russia, but was not successful there in music, so he returned to Germany.

Unfortunately Wagner became involved in German political struggles. For this reason he was forced to leave the country and go to Switzerland. During his eleven years of exile he spent his time in writing books and essays and in music composition.

In all his troubled days of exile and failure Wagner worked faithfully at his dream of a new kind of opera. From Switzerland he sent to his friend Liszt (a great pianist and composer) an opera which he had completed there. This opera is called *Lohengrin* (pronounced lo-en-grin).

At this time a great celebration was being prepared in Germany in honor of one of the German poets. Famous men and women would come from distant cities to attend the celebration. Wagner's friend Liszt (pronounced list) was one of those in charge of the celebration program. Liszt had Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* performed at this celebration. In no other way could the fame of Wagner have spread so quickly. The audience realized that this opera was the work of a genius.

Wagner had turned to the Middle

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Ages for the story which he used in his opera *Lohengrin*. The story is about a knight of mystery named *Lohengrin*. A noble maiden named *Elsa* had dreamed that a mysterious knight would come in a boat drawn by a swan to rescue her from the false charge of having killed her brother. Who *Lohengrin* was, how he saved *Elsa*, how they were happily married, and by what means *Elsa* lost *Lohengrin* is a story you will want to read for yourself.

Wagner did not use the word *opera* for his dramatic musical plays, but instead he called them *music-dramas*. As a writer of great music-dramas he became famous.

He believed that the music-drama should be a heroic story told in noble poetry. He wrote the poetry as well as the music of his productions. He thought that the music should suggest the true character of each person in the story, and used a musical phrase to describe a character or an idea. This phrase he called a *leitmotif* (pronounced light-mo-teef). It is like a key that unlocks the door to understanding.

Such ideas sound very reasonable, but it was many years before people accepted them. People missed the old melodious singing of former operas. In the music-

dramas of Wagner the singing is more often like dramatic speech than melody.

While he was exiled in Switzerland, Wagner worked out the idea of a series of music-dramas in which the old legends of Northern Europe were used. No single legend suited him, so he planned to write a group of music-dramas that should tell the whole story of the mythology of Northern Europe. He found enough material for four music-dramas. He called this series of four music-dramas *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. The Nibelungs, according to German mythology,

were the children of the mist, a legendary race of dwarfs or demons, the original possessors of the hoard and ring won by a mythical hero named *Siegfried*.

These four music-dramas cen-

ter around this mythical hero *Siegfried*, and the story is about the ring made from the stolen gold of the Rhine river. This ring was the cause of conflicts between the gods and men, and the final defeat of the gods. The four music-dramas of *The Ring of the Nibelungs* are: (1) *The Rhinegold*, (2) *The Valkyrie*, (3) *Siegfried*, and (4) *The Twilight of the Gods*.

Wagner wrote other dramatic musical compositions. One of these is called *Tannhauser* (pronounced tahn-hoi-zer),

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Contest of the Minnesingers

WAGNER

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and another is known as *The Mastersinger*. There were knightly singers who wandered about Germany during the Middle Ages. Sometimes these singers met in contests to decide who was the best singer. An artist has painted an imaginary scene representing a contest of these *minnesingers*, as they were called. A copy of this picture is shown on page 421.

After years of exile, Wagner was permitted to return to Germany. With considerable difficulty he built a theater in the little city of Bayreuth (pronounced high-roit). He called this theater his Festival Playhouse, and it has become very famous. It took a long time to get it built, but at last it was finished. Wagner had fulfilled his dream of the union of arts in the creation of the music-drama and the Festival Playhouse.

The last opera which Wagner wrote was *Parsifal* which tells of a knight named *Parsifal* and his deeds. This was completed in 1882. Failing health caused Wagner to spend the following winter at Venice, where, in 1883, he suddenly died. He was buried at Bayreuth, at

THE BAT

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—ghosts that come out of their graves at night, according to superstition, and suck the blood of human beings. Of course, this belief is only a superstition—most certainly it is not true.

There are thousands and thousands of bats in the Philippines which help and benefit the Filipinos. Have you ever seen thoughtless Filipino boys stoning or killing a bat? Do you think they should do that? Certainly not. We should protect the bats, for that is the only way we can repay them for their good work.

which place his famous theater is still in use.

REVIEW

1. Tell of Richard Wagner as a boy.
2. Tell of his early study of music.
3. When he was a young man what did he do in music?
4. Why did Wagner have to leave his country?
5. What did Wagner call his musical plays?
6. What stories did he use in his series known as *The Ring of the Nibelungs*?
7. Name the four music-dramas of this series.
8. Have you ever heard any of Wagner's music?

COLLECTING BUTTERFLIES

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ly. Then I arrange them in my display case. I fasten each specimen securely in place by sticking a pin through it.

My mother admires my collection very much. So do many of my friends, and some of them have gone into the business of collecting moths and butterflies for themselves.

I took my collection to school where it was on display. My teacher showed it to other teachers and pupils and the visitors who came to our school.

Any one living here in the Philippines can make a good collection of moths and butterflies. There are plenty of specimens here.

BOOK ADVENTURE

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A sinking ship, a desolate cry,
Tell of men who soon will die;
The pirates now have gained the top.
Hurry! Can no man make them stop?
One man left to save the ship!
One man left! He must not slip.
Far into the night so late,
I read to learn this one man's fate.