

RICHARD WAGNER

---Revolutionary of the Music Drama

A talk given recently from 2YA by Mrs. Daisy Basham on a music genius whom once the world regarded with indifference, but whose works are to-day the joy of opera-lovers.

IT is probable that no musician who ever lived has caused so much discussion as Richard Wagner, who has been well-called "the Revolutionary of the Music Drama." Around his works have raged the fiercest controversies. He has, at least, never been treated with indifference, or "damned with faint praise." His music has aroused in its hearers both the most extreme dislike and the deepest joy.

Wagner himself declared his music to be the music of the future, and at that time it was emphatically so. Now it is, just as emphatically, the music of the present. Seventy years ago he was looked upon almost as a musical madman who threw all established art forms and traditions to the winds. The pendulum has to-day swung to the other side, and perhaps we are now making too much of Wagner. But at least we must accept him as a colossal genius in his own domain—the domain of music drama.

Wagner altered the whole course of modern opera, and founded a musical system which it is impossible for later composers to set aside. He disliked opera in the Italian style, and was determined to have German opera, in which poetry, music, scenery and acting all blended to make one artistic whole. He wrote his own words as well as the music, and gave the most minute and thorough directions about the scenery, the dresses, the danc-

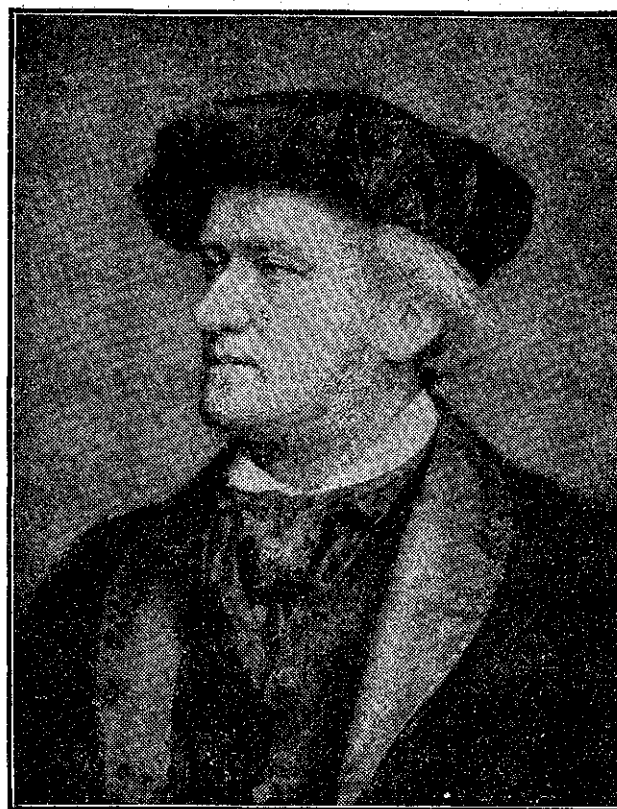
ing, and the acting. The object of Wagnerian opera is, in fact, to present a true picture of human feeling with the utmost fullness and intensity, dealing with everything. His operas completely exhaust the situation.

The music is not split up now and again by pretty songs often having no reference to the play; but flows smoothly, *helping* the drama, and showing *in itself*, the feeling emotion which the performers are acting on the stage. Thus for each leading character, or for each thought or motive, Wagner composed one particular and special tune or phrase. This "leading motive" was varied in speed, strength, or harmony to show variety in power and meaning of the character or thought; but the basic tune always accompanied the appearance of the character on the stage, or the influence of the thought in the play.

IN the "Tannhauser" music three leading motives portray the meaning of the opera, which is the eternal contest between flesh and spirit, earthly and heavenly love; symbolised in the persons of Venus and the pure maiden Elizabeth. First we have the quiet but impassioned chant of the Pilgrims, which is most subtly woven into the fabric of the drama—now associated with the mechanical patter of dull monks, now giving expression to Tannhauser's repentance, now goading him to despair with its hope of salvation not for him, and, lastly, with its triumphant joy at the final miraculous forgiveness of Tannhauser.

The chant dies away, to give place to the second idea—the spells of Venus, or, as Wagner calls it, the "pulse of life"—and this in turn gives place to the third, which is Tannhauser's love-song, asserting the lower side of his nature. Sometimes these themes occur together, and sometimes alone. At other times one is stronger—illustrating musically the struggle between the pure and the base—which went on in Tannhauser's mind.

One can quite see that, to follow all this out properly, audiences must not merely look and listen, but also they

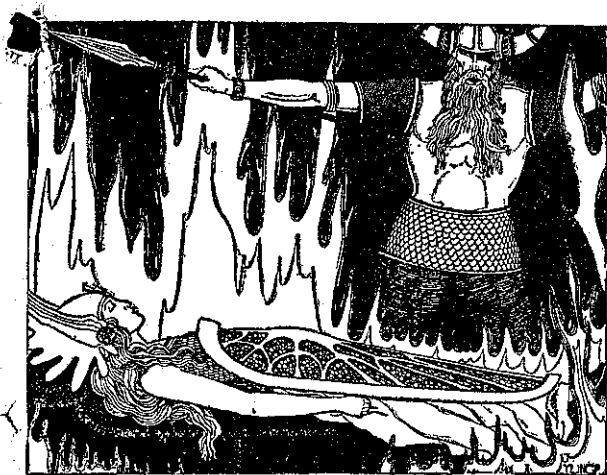


RICHARD WAGNER—1813-1883.

must think. Thus it is not surprising that at first Wagner's operas were not popular. It was something new to have to *think* at an opera performance. In addition, his operas are much longer than those of other composers, and people had been so long accustomed to shorter performances requiring slight use of the intelligence that it took a long time to become accustomed to a whole evening of close concentration. But to those who took the trouble, how immense the reward! The joy of experiencing a performance of "Tannhauser" or "Lohengrin" can hardly be compared with an ordinary evening at the theatre.

WHEN Wagner was 42 he went to London to conduct the Philharmonic Society's concerts. He was much liked as a conductor, especially for his presentations of Beethoven, which he always conducted from memory. But his operas met with furious opposition; in fact it seems astonishing that people could become so angry and bitter. When the now-so-popular overture to "Tannhauser" was performed by the Philharmonic, the *Times* printed this amazing criticism: "A more inflated display of extravagance and noise has rarely been submitted to an audience; and it was a pity to hear so magnificent an orchestra engaged in almost fruitless attempts at accomplishing things which, even if really practicable, would lead to nothing."

Truly, time does bring changes, for "Tannhauser" has for many years now been one of the greatest draws in the operatic repertoire! Wagner met with the same opposition in Paris in 1860. When "Tannhauser" was presented at the Grand Opera people in the audience blew whistles, hissed, shouted, and created such a disturbance (Concluded on page 29).



"Let none who fear the spear of Wotan venture across this fire!"

The closing scene from Wagner's opera, "The Valkyrie."