

GILMAN LAWRENCE

ASPECTS OF MODERN
OPERA: ESTIMATES AND
INQUIRIES

Lawrence Gilman
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INTRODUCTORY

THE WAGNERIAN AFTERMATH

Since that day when, a quarter of a century ago, Richard Wagner ceased to be a dynamic figure in the life of the world, the history of operatic art has been, save for a few conspicuous exceptions, a barren and unprofitable page; and it has been so, in a considerable degree, because of him. When Mr. William F. Apthorp, in his admirable history of the opera – a book written with unflagging gusto and vividness – observed that Wagner's style has been, since his death, little imitated, he made an astonishing assertion. "If by Wagner's influence," he went on, "is meant the influence of his individuality, it may fairly be said to have been null. In this respect Wagner has had no more followers than Mozart or Beethoven; he has founded no school." Again one must exclaim: An astonishing affirmation! and it is not the first time that it has been made, nor will it be the last. Yet how it can have seemed a reasonable thing to say is one of the

insoluble mysteries. The influence of Wagner – the influence of his individuality as well as of his principles – upon the musical art of the past twenty-five years has been simply incalculable. It has tinged, when it has not dyed and saturated, every phase and form of creative music, from the opera to the sonata and string quartet.

It is not easy to understand how anyone who is at all familiar with the products of musical art in Europe and America since the death of the tyrant of Bayreuth can be disposed to question the fact. No composer who ever lived influenced so deeply the music that came after him as did Wagner. It is an influence that is, of course, waning; and to the definite good of creative art, for it has been in a large degree pernicious and oppressive in its effect. The shadow of the most pervasive of modern masters has laid a sinister and paralysing magic upon almost all of his successors. They have sought to exert his spells, they have muttered what they imagined were his incantations; yet the thing which they had hoped to raise up in glory and in strength has stubbornly refused to breathe with any save an artificial and feeble life. None has escaped the contagion of his genius, though some, whom we shall later discuss, have opposed against it a genius and a creative passion of their own. Yet in the domain of the opera, wherewith we are here especially concerned, it is an exceedingly curious and interesting fact that out of the soil which he enriched with his own genius have sprung, paradoxically, the only living and independent forces in the lyrico-dramatic art of our time.

Let us consider, first, those aspects of the operatic situation which, by reason of the paucity of creative vitality that they connote, are, to-day, most striking; and here we shall be obliged to turn at once to Germany. The more one hears of the new music that is being put forth by Teutonic composers, the stronger grows one's conviction of the lack, with a single exception, of any genuine creative impulse in that country to-day. It is doubtless a little unreasonable to expect to be able to agree in this matter with the amiable lady who told Matthew Arnold that she liked to think that æsthetic excellence was "common and abundant." As the sagacious Arnold pointed out, it is not in the nature of æsthetic excellence that it should be "common and abundant"; on the contrary, he observed, excellence dwells among rocks hardly accessible, and a man must almost wear out his heart before he can reach her. All of this is quite unanswerable; yet, so far as musical Germany is concerned, is not the situation rather singular? Germany – the Germany which yielded the royal line founded by Bach and continued by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Wagner, and Brahms – can show us to-day, save for that exception which we shall later discuss, only a strenuous flock of Lilliputians (whom it would be fatuous to discuss with particularity), each one of whom is confidently aware that the majestic mantle of the author of "Tristan" has descended upon himself. They write music in which one grows weary of finding the same delinquency – the invariable fault of emptiness, of poverty of idea, allied with an extreme elaboration

in the manner of presentation. And it is most deliberate and determined in address. One would think that the message about to be delivered were of the utmost consequence, the deepest moment: the pose and the manner of the bearer of great tidings are admirably simulated. Yet the actual deliverance is futile and dull, pathetically meagre, causing us to wonder how often we must remind ourselves that it is as impossible to achieve salient or distinguished or noble music without salient, distinguished, and noble ideas as it is to create fire without flame.

In France there are – again with an exception to which we shall later advert – Saint-Saëns, d'Indy, Massenet, Charpentier, and —*les autres*.

Now Saint-Saëns is very far from being a Wagnerian. He is, indeed, nothing very definite and determinable. He is M. Saint-Saëns, an abstraction, a brain without a personality. It is almost forty years since Hector Berlioz called him "one of the greatest musicians of our epoch," and since then the lustre of his fame has waxed steadily, until to-day one must recognise him as one of the three or four most distinguished living composers. Venerable and urbane, M. Saint-Saëns, at the New York opening of the American tour which he made in his seventy-second year, sat at the piano before the audience whom he had travelled three thousand miles to meet, and played a virtuoso piece with orchestral accompaniment, and two shorter pieces for piano and orchestra: a valse-caprice called "Wedding Cake," and an "Allegro Appassionato." That is to say, M. Camille Saint-Saëns,

the bearer of an internationally famous and most dignified name, braved the tragic perils of the deep to exhibit himself before a representative American audience as the composer of the "Wedding Cake" valse-caprice, an entertaining fantasy on exotic folk-themes, and a *jeu d'esprit* with a pleasant tune and some pretty orchestral embroidery.

No one could have it in his heart to chide M. Saint-Saëns for these things, for he is very venerable and very famous. Yet is not the occurrence indicative, in a way, of M. Saint-Saëns's own attitude toward his art? – that facile, brilliant, admirably competent, chameleon-like art of his, so adroit in its external fashioning, yet so thin and worn in its inner substance! One wonders if, in the entire history of music, there is the record of a composer more completely accomplished in his art, so exquisite a master of the difficult trick of spinning a musical web, so superb a mechanic, who has less to say to the world: whose discourse is so meagre and so negligible. One remembers that unfortunate encomium of Gounod's, which has been so often turned into a justified reproach: "Saint-Saëns," said the composer of "Faust," "will write at will a work in the style of Rossini, of Verdi, of Schumann, of Wagner." The pity of his case is that, when he writes pure Saint-Saëns, one does not greatly care to listen. He has spoken no musical thought, in all his long and scintillant career, that the world will long remember. His dozen operas, his symphonic poems, his symphonies, his concertos, the best of his chamber works – is there in them an accent which one

can soberly call either eloquent or deeply beautiful? Do they not excel solely by reason of their symmetry and solidity of structure, their deft and ingenious delivery of ideas which at their worst are banal and at their best mediocre or derivative? "A name always to be remembered with respect!" cries one of his most sane and just admirers: since "in the face of practical difficulties, discouragements, misunderstandings, sneers, he has worked constantly to the best of his unusual ability for musical righteousness in its pure form." "A name to be remembered with respect," beyond dispute: with the respect that is due the man of supereminent intelligence, the fastidious artisan, the tireless and honourable workman – with respect, yes; but scarcely with enthusiasm. He never, as has been truly said, bores one; it is just as true that he never stimulates, moves, transports, or delights one, in the deeper sense of the term. At its best, it is a hard and dry light that shines out of his music: a radiance without magic and without warmth. His work is an impressive monument to the futility of art without impulse: to the immeasurable distance that separates the most exquisite talent from the merest genius. For all its brilliancy of investiture, his thought, as the most liberal of his appreciators has said, "can never wander through eternity" – a truth which scarcely needed the invocation of the Miltonic line to enforce. It may be true, as Mr. Philip Hale has asserted, that "the success of d'Indy, Fauré, Debussy, was made possible by the labor and the talent of Saint-Saëns"; yet it is one of the pities of his case that when Saint-Saëns's name shall have become faint

and fugitive in the corridors of time, the chief glories of French art in our day will be held to be, one may venture, the legacies of the composers of "Pelléas et Mélisande" and the "Jour d'été à la montagne," rather than of the author of "Samson et Dalila" and "Le Rouet d'Omphale." Which brings one to M. Vincent d'Indy.

Now M. d'Indy offers a curious spectacle to the inquisitive observer, in that he is, in one regard, the very symbol of independence, of artistic emancipation, whereas, in another phase of his activity, he is a mere echo and simulacrum. As a writer for the concert room, as a composer of imaginative orchestral works and of chamber music, he is one of the most inflexibly original and self-guided composers known to the contemporary world of music. With his aloofness and astringency of style, his persistent austerity of temper, his invincible hatred of the sensuous, his detestation of the kind of "felicity" which is a goal for lesser men, this remarkable musician – who, far more deservedly than the incontinent Chopin, deserves the title of "the proudest poetic spirit of our time" – this remarkable musician, one must repeat, is the sort of creative artist who is writing, not for his day, but for a surprised and apprehending futurity. He is at once a man of singularly devout and simple nature, and an entire mystic. For him the spectacle of the living earth, in lovely or forbidding guise, evokes reverend and exalted moods. His approach to its wonders is Wordsworthian in its deep and awe-struck reverence and its fundamental sincerity. He does not, like his younger

artistic kinsman, Debussy, see in it all manner of fantastic and mist-enwrapped visions; it is not for him a pageant of delicate and shining dreams. Mallarmé's lazy and indulgent Faun in amorous woodland reverie would not have suggested to him, as to Debussy, music whose sensuousness is as exquisitely concealed as it is marvellously transfigured. The mysticism of d'Indy is pre-eminently religious; it has no tinge of sensuousness; it is large and benign rather than intimate and intense.

He is absolutely himself, absolutely characteristic, for example, in his tripartite tone-poem, "Jour d'été à la montagne." This music is a hymn the grave ecstasy and the utter sincerity of which are as evident as they are impressive. In its art it is remarkable – not so monumental in plan, so astoundingly complex in detail, as his superb B-minor symphony, yet a work that is full of his peculiar traits.

Now it would seem as if so fastidious and individual a musician as this might do something of very uncommon quality if he once turned his hand to opera-making. Yet in his "L'Étranger," completed only a year before he began work on his astonishing B-minor symphony, and in his "Fervaal" (1889-95), we have the melancholy spectacle of M. d'Indy concealing his own admirable and expressive countenance behind an ill-fitting mask modelled imperfectly after the lineaments of Richard Wagner. In these operas (d'Indy calls them, by the way, an *action dramatique* and an *action musicale*: evident derivations from the "Tristan" – esque *Handlung*) – in these operas, the speech,

from first to last, is the speech of Wagner. The themes, the harmonic structure, the use of the voice, the plots (d'Indy, like Wagner, is his own librettist) – all is uncommuted Wagnerism, with some of the Teutonic cumbrousness deleted and some of the Gallic balance and measure infused. These scores have occasional beauty, but it is seldom the beauty that is peculiar to d'Indy's own genius: it is an imported and alien beauty, a beauty that has in it an element of betrayal.

We find ourselves confronting a situation that is equally dispiriting to the seeker after valuable achievements in contemporary French opera when we view the performances of such minor personages as Massenet, Bruneau, Reyer, Erlanger, and Charpentier. They are all tarred, in a great or small degree, with the Wagnerian stick. When they speak out of their own hearts and understandings they are far from commanding: they are vulgarly sentimental or prettily lascivious, like the amiable Massenet, or pretentious and banal, like Bruneau, or incredibly dull, like Reyer, or picturesquely superficial, like Charpentier – though the author of "Louise" disports himself with a beguiling grace and verve which almost causes one to forgive his essential emptiness.

Modern Italy discloses a single dominant and vivid figure. In none of his compatriots is there any distinction of speech, of character. In that country the memory of Wagner is less imperious in its control; yet not one of its living music-makers, with the exception that I have made, has that atmosphere and

quality of his own which there is no mistaking.

I have referred by implication and reservation to three personalities in the art of the modern lyric-drama who stand out as salient figures from the confused and amorphous background against which they are to be observed: who seem to me to represent the only significant and important manifestations of the creative spirit which have thus far come to the surface in the post-Wagnerian music-drama. They are, it need scarcely be said, Puccini in Italy, Richard Strauss in Germany, and Debussy in France. Yet these men built upon the foundations laid by Wagner; they took many leaves from his vast book of instructions, in some cases stopping short of the full reach of his plans as imagined by himself, in other cases carrying his schemes to a point of development far beyond any result of which he dreamed. But they have not attempted to say the things which they had to say in the way that he would have said them. They have been content with their own eloquence; and it has not betrayed them. No one is writing music for the stage which has the profile, the saliency, the vitality, the personal flavour, which distinguish the productions of these men. So far as it is possible to discern from the present vantage-ground, the future – at least the immediate future – of the lyric stage is theirs. In no other quarters may one observe any manifestations that are not either negligible by reason of their own quality, or mere dilutions, with or without adulterous admixtures, of the Wagnerian brew.

A VIEW OF PUCCINI

A plain-spoken and not too reverent observer of contemporary musical manners, discussing the melodic style of the Young Italian opera-makers, has observed that it is fortunate in that it "gives the singers opportunity to pour out their voices in that lavish volume and intensity which provoke applause as infallibly as horseradish provokes tears." The comment has a good deal of what Sir Willoughby Patterne would have called "rough truth." It is fairly obvious that there is nothing in the entire range of opera so inevitably calculated to produce an instant effect as a certain kind of frank and sweeping lyricism allied with swiftness of dramatic emotion; and it is because the young lions of modern Italy – Puccini and his lesser brethren – have profoundly appreciated this elemental truth, that they address their generation with so immediate an effect.

In those days when the impetus of a pristine enthusiasm drove the more intelligent order of opera-goers to performances of Wagner, it was a labour of love to learn to know and understand the texts of his obscure and laboured dramas; and even the guide-books, which were as leaves in Vallombrosa, were prayerfully studied. But to-day there are no Wagnerites. We are no longer impelled by an apostolic fervour to delve curiously into the complex genealogy and elaborate ethics of the "Ring," and it is no longer quite clear to many slothful intelligences just what

Tristan and Isolde are talking about in the dusk of King Mark's garden. There will always be a small group of the faithful who, through invincible and loving study, will have learned by heart every secret of these dramas. But for the casual opera-goer, granting him all possible intelligence and intellectual curiosity, they cannot but seem the reverse of crystal-clear, logical, and compact. A score of years ago those who cared at all for the dramatic element in opera, and the measure of whose delight was not filled up by the vocal pyrotechny which was the mainstay of the operas of the older *répertoire*, found in these music-dramas their chief solace and satisfaction. Wagner reigned then virtually alone over his kingdom. The dignity, the imaginative power, and the impressive emotional sweep of his dramas, as dramas, offset their obscurity and their inordinate bulk; and always their splendid investiture of music exerted, in and of itself, an enthralling fascination. And that condition of affairs might have continued for much longer had not certain impetuous young men of modern Italy demonstrated the possibility of writing operas which were both engrossing on their purely dramatic side and, in their music, eloquent with the eloquence that had come to be expected of the modern opera-maker. Moreover, these music-dramas had the incalculable merit, for our time and environment, of being both swift in movement and unimpeachably obvious in meaning. Thereupon began the reign of young Italy in contemporary opera. It was inaugurated with the "Cavalleria Rusticana" of Mascagni and the "I Pagliacci" of

Leoncavallo; and it is continued to-day, with immense vigour and persistence, by Puccini with all his later works. The sway of the composer of "Tosca," "Bohème," and "Madame Butterfly" is triumphant and wellnigh absolute; and the reasons for it are not elusive. He has selected for musical treatment dramas that are terse and rapid in action and intelligible in detail, and he has underscored them with music that is impassioned, incisive, highly spiced, rhetorical, sometimes poetic and ingenious, and pervadingly sentimental. Moreover, he possesses, as his most prosperous attribute, that facility in writing fervid and often banal melodies to the immediate and unfailing effect of which, in the words of Mr. Henry T. Finck, I have alluded. As a sensitive English critic, Mr. Vernon Blackburn, once very happily observed, Puccini is "essentially a man of his own generation ... the one who has caught up the spirit of his time, and has made his compact with that time, in order that he should not lose anything which a contemporary generation might give him."

It is a curious and striking truth that the chief trouble with the representative musical dramatists who have built, from the standpoint of system, upon the foundational stones that Wagner laid, is not, as the enemies and opponents of Bayreuth used to charge, an excess of drama at the expense of the music, but – as was the case with Wagner himself (a fact which I have elsewhere in this volume attempted to demonstrate) – an excess of music at the expense of the drama: in short, the precise defect against which reformers of the opera have inveighed since

the days of Gluck. With Richard Strauss this musical excess is orchestral; with the modern Italians it implicates the voice-parts, and is manifested in a lingering devotion to full-blown melodic expression achieved at the expense of dramatic truth, logic, and consistency. In this, Puccini has simply, in the candid phrase of Mr. Blackburn, "caught up the spirit of his time, and made his compact with that time." That is to say, he has, with undoubted artistic sincerity, played upon the insatiable desire of the modern ear for an ardent and elemental kind of melodic effect, and upon the acquired desire of the modern intelligence for a terse and dynamic substratum of drama. His fault, from what I hold to be the ideal standpoint in these matters, is that he has not perfectly fused his music and his drama. There is a sufficiently concrete example of what I mean – an example which points both his strength and his weakness – in the second act of "Tosca," where he halts the cumulative movement of the scene between *Scarpia* and *Tosca*, which he has up to that point developed with superb dramatic logic, in order to placate those who may not over-long be debarred from their lyrical sweetmeats; but also – for it would be absurd to charge him with insincerity or time-serving in this matter – in order that he may satisfy his own ineluctable tendency toward a periodical effusion of lyric energy, which he must yield to even when dramatic consistency and logic go by the board in the process; when, in short, lyrical expression is supererogatory and impertinent. So he writes the sentimental and facilely pathetic prayer, "Vissi d'arte,

vissi d'amore," *dolcissimo con grande sentimento*: a perfectly superfluous, not to say intrusive, thing dramatically, and a piece of arrant musical vulgarity; after which the current of the drama is resumed. We have here, in fact, nothing more nor less respectable than the old-fashioned Italian aria of unsavoury fame. It is merely couched in more modern terms.

The offence is aggravated by the fact that Puccini, in common with the rest of the Neo-Italians, is at his best in the expression of dramatic emotion and movement, and at his worst in his voicing of purely lyric emotion, meditative or passionate. In its lyric portions his music is almost invariably banal, without distinction, without beauty or restraint – when the modern Italian music-maker dons his singing-ropes he becomes clothed with commonness and vulgarity. Thus in its scenes of amorous exaltation the music of "Tosca," of "Madame Butterfly" (recall, in the latter work, the flamboyant commonness of the exultant duet which closes the first act), is blatant and rhetorical, rather than searching and poignant. Puccini's strength lies in the truly impressive manner in which he is able to intensify and underscore the more dramatic moments in the action. At such times his music possesses an uncommon sureness, swiftness, and incisiveness; especially in passages of tragic foreboding, of mounting excitement, it is gripping and intense in a quite irresistible degree. Often, at such moments, it has an electric quality of vigour, a curious nervous strength. That is its cardinal merit: its spare, lithe, closely-knit, clean-cut, immensely

energetic orchestral enforcement of those portions of the drama where the action is swift, tense, cumulative, rather than of sentimental or amorous connotation. Puccini has, indeed, an almost unparalleled capacity for a kind of orchestral commentary which is both forceful and succinct. He wastes no words, he makes no superfluous gestures: he is masterfully direct, pregnant, expeditious, compact. Could anything be more admirable, in what it attempts and brilliantly contrives to do, than almost the entire second act of "Tosca," with the exception of the sentimental and obstructive Prayer? How closely, with what unswerving fidelity, the music clings to the contours of the play; and with what an economy of effort its effects are made! Puccini is thus, at his best, a Wagnerian in the truest sense – a far more consistent Wagnerian than was Wagner himself.

It is in "Tosca" that he should be studied. He is not elsewhere so sincere, direct, pungent, telling. And it is in "Tosca," also, that his melodic vein, which is generally broad and copious rather than fine and deep, yields some of the true and individual beauty which is its occasional, its very rare, possession – for example, to name it at its best, the poetic and exceedingly personal music which accompanies the advancing of dawn over the house-tops of Rome, at the beginning of the last act: a passage the melancholy beauty and sincere emotion of which it would be difficult to overpraise.

In Puccini's later and much more elaborate and meticulous "Madame Butterfly," there is less that one can unreservedly

delight in or definitely deplore, so far as the music itself is concerned. It is from a somewhat different angle that one is moved to consider the work.

In choosing the subject for this music-drama, Puccini set himself a task to which even his extraordinary competency as a lyric-dramatist has not quite been equal. As every one knows, the story for which Puccini has here sought a lyrico-dramatic expression is that of an American naval officer who marries little "Madame Butterfly" in Japan, deserts her, and cheerfully calls upon her three years later with the "real" wife whom he has married in America. The name of this amiable gentleman is Pinkerton – B.F. Pinkerton – or, in full, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. Now it would scarcely seem to require elaborate argument to demonstrate that the presence in a highly emotional lyric-drama of a gentleman named Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton – a gentleman who is, moreover, the hero of the piece – is, to put it briefly, a little inharmonious. The matter is not helped by the fact that the action is of to-day, and that one bears away from the performance the recollection of Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton asking his friend, the United States consul at Nagasaki, if he will have some whiskys-and-soda. There lingers also a vaguer memory of the consul declaring, in a more or less lyrical phrase, that he "is not a student of ornithology."

Let no one find in these remarks a disposition to cast a doubt upon the seriousness with which Puccini has completed his work, or to ignore those features of "Madame Butterfly" which compel

sincere admiration. But recognition and acknowledgment of these things must be conditioned by an insistence upon the fact that such a task as Puccini has attempted here, and as others have attempted, is foredoomed to a greater or less degree of artistic futility. One refers, of course, to the attempt to transfer bodily to the lyric stage, for purposes of serious expression, a contemporary subject, with all its inevitable dross of prosaic and trivially familiar detail. To put it concretely, the sense of humour and the emotional sympathies will tolerate the spectacle of a *Tristan* or a *Tannhäuser* or a *Don Giovanni* or a *Pelléas* or a *Faust* uttering his longings and his woes in opera; but they will not tolerate the spectacle of a *Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton* of our own time and day telling us, in song, that he is not a student of ornithology. The thing simply cannot be done – Wagner himself could not impress us in such circumstances. The chief glory of Wagner's texts – no matter what one may think of them as viable and effective dramas – is their ideal suitability for musical translation. Take, for example, the text of "Tristan und Isolde": there is not a sentence, scarcely a word, in it, which is not fit for musical utterance – nothing that is incongruous, pedestrian, inept. All that is foreign to the essential emotions of the play has been eliminated. So unsparingly has it been subjected to the alembic of the poet-dramatist's imagination that it has been wholly purged of all that is superfluous and distracting, all that cannot be gratefully assimilated by the music. That is the especial excellence of his texts. Opera, though it rests, like the other arts,

heavily upon convention, yet offers at bottom a reasonable and defensible vehicle for the communication of human experience and emotion. But it is not a convincing form, and no genius, living or potential, can make it a convincing form, save when it deals with matters removed from our quotidian life and environment: save when it presents a heightened and alembicated image of human experience. Thus we accept, with sympathy and approval, "Siegfried," "Lohengrin," "Die Meistersinger," "Don Giovanni" – even, at a pinch, "Tosca"; but we cannot, if we allow our understanding and our sense of humour free play, accept "Madame Butterfly," with its naval lieutenant of to-day, its American consul in his tan-coloured "spats," and its whiskys-and-soda.

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