

## Chapter II.

I HAVE already alluded to the fact that *Tristan and Isolde* cuts against the general tenour of Wagner's creative principles, so far as they became conscious during his middle period, and presages a development of music drama almost opposed to the construction of *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. All the same, *Tristan* possesses several features which prove its kinship with the very definite and detailed drama that Wagner argued for. The chief of these are the chromatic quality of its melodic design, the complexity of its harmonic form and the distinctly subordinate part allotted to the chorus. The strained and yearning chords which give distinctive emotion to that love-sick chromatic figure generally known as the Theme of the Love Potion, the furious whirl of the duet in Act II., and even the tortuous modulations of that calmer music where the lovers rise above the immediate urge of their passion, and the erratic Beardsley-like design of the piping on the English horn in Act III.,—all these features are the fruits of a mind delighting in subtlety and complexity.

Some of the greatest minds possessed by human beings have been characterised by just these two qualities; but so also have the minds of many mad persons and criminals. Subtlety and complexity may be products of a very high degree of civilisation, but they are not on that account of positive value; and anyhow they are the very qualities least comprehens-

ible by the common mind, and therefore of least value in such a communal art-work as a religious drama. And so, when we come to *Parsifal* we find a very significant unburdening of detailed technic: that is, of the power to express complex and subtle ideas by means of art.

Technic has lain like a load on the back of many an artist, as the bundle of sins was fixed to the shoulders of Bunyan's dream-hero. Christian's load fell from him at the sight of the cross. So also it happened that Wagner lightened his burden of musical power after he had passed that moment in his career when material power was a thing of account to him; then he reached that exquisite quality of simple-heartedness which can only come after the experiences of life, and consecrated the temple of Bayreuth with the grave tenderness and solemn joy of the love-feast. Hence the wonderful simplicity and straightforwardness of its expression. And in this connection it is worth remembering that in his early work, *The Love Feast of the Apostles*, the harmonic and melodic ranges scarcely exceeded those at the disposal of Palestrina. Of course, that work—like *Parsifal*—was intended for festival performance and therefore for the participation of many folk; and, as I have already suggested, numbers make for simplicity,—the greater the number of people involved in any procedure the less complicated must the business be. There are unsuspected subtleties and complexities in the minds of most of us, even in the mind of the veriest country yokel: they are part of individuality. But we cannot organise any common effort upon them, and only in ages of rank individualism will they be regarded as of outstanding importance. The moment two friends meet, each must forego something of individuality and eccentricity (in the strict meaning of

the word) for the sake of the greater and simpler joys of communion; and the more they admit others to their intimacy the more must they curb their own special and individual inclinations. We may realise this in the political field by recognising how simple minds like those of Joseph Chamberlain and Lloyd George have possessed much greater power with the people than the subtler minds of Arthur Balfour and John Morley.

It is clear then that art-works intended for the general understanding must be simpler than art-works intended for private use; and we can no longer be surprised that the oratorios of Handel and Mendelssohn have been more popular with our monster choirs than the complex weavings of Bach and the serious subtlety of Brahms. Here also is an explanation of the fact that the latest symphonies of Beethoven are much less involved than his latest string quartets, when one might have expected to find the very reverse if the number of instruments used bore any relation to the involutions of music. So also the Sistine Madonna is simpler than the arrogant simplicity of Beardsley's *Isolda at Joyous Gard*. And the same principle explains why Shaw's plays are so jolly and his prefaces so ponderous; and why good poetry in dramatic form may reach the many while poetry in epic or lyric form remains the right of the few,—unless the delicacy of the lyric is supported by the more generalised emotion of music.

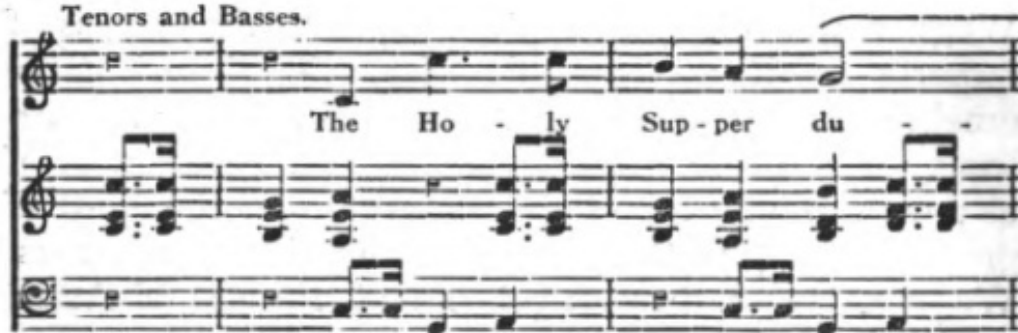
Now, consider Wagner's treatment of the chorus in *Parsifal* as compared with his use of it in his other works. In his earliest dramas, he treated it as tradition and convention suggested; accordingly, it loomed large in *Rienzi* and was only gradually lost when the individualistic qualities of problem-drama (as distinct from music-drama) pressed upon the outer

consciousness of Wagner's mind, re-appearing again in fuller significance and glory in the popular atmosphere of *The Mastersingers* and the religious atmosphere of *Parsifal*. But whereas in the earlier works the choral music is often tarred with that chromatic brush which was so apt a medium for subtlety of characterisation, in the latest works it re-appears with an extraordinary *naïveté* and straightforwardness. Especially is this so in *Parsifal*, where there are fewer of those subtle harmonies, so beautiful on certain instruments but quite out of place in choral writing. The Pilgrim's Chorus from *Tannhäuser* is a flagrant example of mistaken subtlety. It was but the other day that I read the lamentations of some musician who had never heard it sung in tune. But it must not be imagined that the real objection to that beautiful music lies in the difficulties attaching to a good performance: its real wrongness lies in the obvious fact that it does not express the penitence of simple-hearted folk. The great, good, sensitive mind of Wagner was capable of plunging into that abyss of remorse as it was capable of soaring into unfathomable heights of spiritual rapture in Isolde's death song. But those are unexplored realms for most of us; we can only take them on trust,—on the word of great saints, in the imagination of great artists. Wagner, Dante, Fra Angelico and Francis of Assisi may tell of these extremes of horror and joy; but we, who have not their spiritual powers, can neither truthfully assert these things of our own experience nor honestly echo their stories. And so the choral song of the pilgrims in *Tannhäuser* is an unregrettable piece of false dramatic psychology. But Wagner made no such mistakes in his later works. And that is why the choral music in *The Mastersingers* and *Parsifal* is so strangely simple.



When discussing the work with one of the chief of our English writers upon Wagner, I was met with the contention that though there are no signs of senility in the work there are certain definite fallings from grace in the Grail choruses of Act I., where the simplest choral outlines are to be found. But Mr. Ernest Newman is, as all his friends know, a character of uncommon subtlety and complexity. By nothing is this fact so much emphasized as by his insistence that Wagner was first and finally a musician, and by a refusal to accept music-drama as an art form distinct from opera on the one hand and spoken drama on the other. Mr. Newman has, in fact, for all his kindness and generosity of spirit, just such a mind as is least to be moved by art works most suited for communal use. So we need scarcely be surprised if the great ritual choruses of *Parsifal* appear weaker to him than certain other portions of the work. Regarded as pure music, a passage of this kind

Tenors and Basses.



is child-like in the extreme. It is monotonous in tonality and repetition, and unrelieved by any web of choral harmony or counterpoint. And, *apropos* the same movement, Mr. Newman objects to the choral dance of the Knights of the Grail. In an article in *The Birmingham Post*, he wrote: "The sooner we get away from the stiff mechanical march of the Knights of the Grail in the two hall scenes the better we shall be." Mr. Newman should be more careful of his first person plural. He never uses it in the editorial manner and his most sympathetic readers differ from him at times. In the present case, I venture to say that if some of "us" have been disappointed by that music and annoyed by that dance of the chorus, there are others of "us" who equally strongly hold that it is one of the most beautiful and enthralling moments in the course of the work.

Reverting to the actual weaving of the music and the relation of simplicity to the body of sound makers, we find that Wagner does not altogether abjure that delicate chromatic method which is perhaps the most distinctive external feature of his music as a whole. The following passage



for example, comes with wonderful poignancy when the Knights of the Grail refer to the sufferings of their redeemer. But the significance of the passage for our present study lies in the fact that it is written for a very small number of voices,—just the altos and

divided tenors. In other words, the greater subtlety of the music goes hand in hand with a more intimate mood and therefore can only be interpreted properly by a small body of singers.

Another example of the same kind is the Reine Thor fragment :—



which ushers in Parsifal's first scene and is then sung by four solo voices. But one need not go on quoting examples to prove the desirability of musical simplicity for large bodies of choral tone, and the rightfulness of small choirs when a more subtle mood is demanded. The earnest student may convince himself of Wagner's ripe conviction in that matter by analysing all the choral pieces in *Parsifal* and noting what number of singers he required for a proper effect in each case. At first, the Chorus of Flower-maidens may seem to contradict the idea; but only at first sight, for what appears to be a chorus of considerable intricacy turns out for the most part a comparatively simple affair, looking large because of the duplication of parts. Where the passages are really complex, they are given to just one, two or three Flower-maidens at a time.

We may then take it for an established principle that choral music for large bodies of singers must inevitably be comparatively simple if it is to be effective. Had this principle been properly appreciated by musicians, it would have prevented many evils: to mention only one or two, the preposterous choral exhibitions at the Albert Hall and the Alex-

andra Palace and the cloud of disappointment which begins to hover over the competitive choral movement. Some folk had expected that every gain in choral technic could be transferred to ordinary choral composition. The fact is that beyond a certain point choral complexity turns to mud, like the mingling of too many coloured pigments. If men and women are to meet and make music together in considerable numbers, they must bring with them the hearts of children and sing with a childlike simplicity. That principle must be recognised in all festival work. It is enunciated most definitely in *Parsifal* by the greatest master of musical colour and complexity.

### Chapter III.

ATTENTION has been drawn by certain writers to the varying musical characteristics of the dramas of Wagner. *The Ring* is all of a piece in its elemental passion and splendour; *Tristan* is a masterpiece of spiritualised sensuality; *The Mastersingers* stands for that quality of jollity and sane sentimentality which we at once recognise as typically German. And these characteristics, of course, give distinctive quality to the music of each separate work: though they sometimes have a common ground in detail, the music evolved from the one could never serve for the other. Thus, the final scene of *The Dusk of the Gods*