

# **On Poetry and Composition**

**By Richard Wagner**

**1879**

**Translated by William Ashton Ellis**



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# About this Title

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By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis

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# Translator's Note.

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# On Poetry and Composition

PERHAPS also, "On the Book and Music Trade"?—

To some that may seem too outward a view of the matter. Yet the departed Gutzkow has divulged to us the awful secret that the unbounded popularity of Goethe and Schiller is simply due to the energetic speculation of their publishers. (1) Though this explanation should not hold water in the present case, its very advancement will teach us at least that our writers hold it possible for their own publishers to manœuvre a like success. In this way it would take a largish capital to duly plant the German "Poets'-grove"; accordingly we need not be surprised if the publisher assigns to himself the lion's share in the production of poetic works, especially of such as aim at notoriety. And thus we may assume a queer relation between poets and their publishers, in which but little mutual esteem would figure. A famous poet once assured me that publishers were the most knavish of dealers, their commerce being with none but fantastic producers, whereas all other middlemen did business exclusively with folk as cunning as themselves. At anyrate the case seems pretty bad. To ensure renown, the poet or composer thinks best to seek the aegis of some great firm of publishers. Such a firm has to spend a fortune on enormous establishments for printing or note-engraving; these must be always kept at work, with result that the publisher is obliged to risk the manufacture of a deal of useless stuff; often no journalism in the world can help him to dispose of it: but for once he hits on a remarkably happy article, the work of a brain above the common. With the success of this one article the publisher recoups himself for all his previous losses; and if the author wants to have his portion [134] of the profits, the publisher can coolly shake him off with the retort that he had borne no part in the expenses attending a perpetual output of rubbish. On the other hand, it is just this perpetual output that hoists the publisher to eminence. Everybody nowadays writes poetry or music, whilst the big firm must be constantly printing and issuing: the two habits and necessities complete each other; but the publisher has the advantage, in that he can shew his clients how much he loses and at like time prove his generosity by declaring himself quite ready to proceed with further issues, thereby making the "fantastic" author his very humble servant. Thus the book and music publisher, the poet and composer's wage-giver—nay, their populariser, under circumstances, as alleged of Schiller and Goethe—may with some reason be regarded as the patron-saint, if not the creator, of our poetic and musical literature.

Maybe it is this flourishing state of the book and music printing-

house, to which we owe the strange phenomenon that almost every person who has heard or read a thing must promptly fly at poetry or composition. Often have I heard the complaint from university-professors that their students no longer will learn what they should, but mostly play at scribbling or composing. This was peculiarly the case at Leipzig, where the book-trade so closely elbows erudition that one almost might ask *which* strictly has our modern education most in hand, the University or the Book-mart; for plainly one can learn from books the same or even more than from professors, whilst these latter are so short-sighted as to print in low-priced monographs their whole stock-in-trade of information. The passion of our lecture-glutted students for writing verse and tunes, upon the other hand, we might compare with that extraordinary love of play-acting which from the dawn of German histrionic art to the commencement of our present century lured sons and daughters from the best-respected families. In the last regard our young people appear to have grown more philistine, perchance from fear of making themselves ridiculous upon the [135] boards; a personal discomfiture now more and more relinquished to the Jews, who seem to take less account of unpleasant experiences. But poetry and composition can be plied quite quietly and peaceably at home: nor do we notice how foolish our lyric spoutings make us look in type, since luckily no reader finds us out. The thing does not become perceptibly absurd, till read aloud. In my time the Leipzig students made a butt of a poor devil whom they would get to declaim his poems in return for the settling of his score; they had his portrait lithographed, above the motto: "Of all my sufferings Love is cause." Some years ago I told the story to a well-known poet of our day, who since has taken a strange dislike to me: too late I learnt that he had a new volume of poems in the press at that very moment

Touching the "German Poets'-grove," one latterly finds that, despite the need of keeping their machinery in constant motion, the publishers are growing more and more averse to lyric poems, since the lyrical musicians still keep composing nothing but "*Du bist wie eine Blume*" or "*Wenn ich dein holdes Angesicht*," and so forth. How matters stand with "epic poetry," is also difficult to judge: a mass of it is thrown upon the market, and moreover set to music for our Subscription-concerts by composers who still have a bone to pick with Opera—a course alas! found hitherto impossible with the "Trompeter von Säckingen." (2) —That all this "brings in" much, it is not easy to believe; for there still are very many dwellers in Germany who never subscribe to such concerts. "Dramatic poems," on the contrary, have certainly a larger public; that is to say, when they are produced on the stage. But among theatrical directors one meets the wildest craving for returns; here still prevails the barbaric justice of "God's verdict," and that is not so lightly "bought." Only to [136] English publishers has it been possible to use the theatre for bold and most ingenious advertisement. The sole article of any service to the English music-

trade is a "Ballad" modelled more or less on the street-singer's genre, which, fortune favouring, is sold in several hundred-thousand copies to all the colonies as "the very latest." To get this ballad duly famed the publisher spends money on the composition of an entire opera, pays the manager for its performance, and then proceeds to give the mounted ballad out to all the barrel-organs of the land, till every pianoforte yearns at last to have it in the house. Who calls to mind our native "Einst spielt ich mit Zepter," might think that German printers also were no fools, and knew what they were about with a full-fledged "Zar und Zimmermann": (3) the "Czar" finds work for the engravers, and the "Sceptre-player" pays them.

Nevertheless the penning of complete dramas appears to have a mighty charm for old and young, and it is remarkable how every author believes he has done wonders with the stalest subject, under the illusion, maybe, that it had never been rightly treated by his predecessors. The five-foot Iambic, jogging on in honour indestructible, must still confer upon the diction its true poetic flavour; though naked prose, the less select the better, affords more chance of the piece's acceptance by Directors. The five-footed dramatist has therefore to depend, in general, on the favour of the publisher who must always be printing; so that one may assume his only interest is "a hobby." I scarcely think that very great poets thus come to light: how Goethe and Schiller began, God only knows—unless some information could be gleaned from the firm of Cotta, who once declined to issue my *Gesammelte Schriften* because they still had their hands so full with Goethe and Schiller.—

But the above, are they not all mere foibles of our poets? Though a true inhabitant of our Poets' grove in [137] youth may twitter his verse and rhymes in childlike imitation of the songsters on the branches, with the *toga virilis* he blooms into a *novelist*, and learns at last his business. Now the publisher seeks out *him*, and he knows how to put his price up: he is in no such hurry to hand his three, his six or nine volumes to the lending libraries; first comes the journal-reader's turn. Without a "solid" Feuilleton, with theatrical criticisms and thrilling romances, even a political world-sheet cannot well subsist; on the other side, what receipts these newspapers drag in, and what a figure they can pay! Engrossed in true creation, my friend *Gottfried Keller* forgot in his day to heed those paper birth-throes of his works; it was most obliging of an already-famous novelist, who regarded Keller as his equal, to instruct him how to make a novel bring in money: manifestly the officious friend beheld in the unbusinesslike poet a terrible case of wasted energy, on which he could not look without a pang. The incorrigible poet (in jest we called him "Auerbach's Keller") did not at anyrate get very far in the race for issues: it was only the other day that a second edition appeared of his romance "der grüne Heinrich," first published thirty years ago; in the eyes of our

wideawake authors a manifest failure—in fact, proof positive that Keller had not risen to the level of the day. But they, as said, know better. And so the swarm in our Poets'-grove is so thick that one cannot see the trees for numberless editions.

In this highly prosperous activity of our modern poet-world, however, we light upon that element to which all poetry owes its source, its very name. The *narrator* in truth is the "poet" proper, whereas the subsequent elaborator of the narrative should rather be regarded as the *artist*. Only, if we are to accord to our flourishing novelists the boundless significance of genuine poets, that significance itself must first be somewhat more precisely defined.

The old world, speaking strictly, knew but one poet, and named him "*Homer*." The Greek word "*Poietes*," which [138] the Latins—unable to translate it—reproduced as "*Poeta*," recurs most naïvely among the Provençals as "*Trouvère*," and suggested to our Middle-high Germans the term of "*Finder*," Gottfried von Strassburg calling the poet of *Parzival* a "*Finder wilder Märe*" ("finder of strange tales"). That "*poietes*"—of whom Plato averred that he had found for the Greeks their gods—would seem to have been preceded by the "*Seer*," much as the vision of that ecstatic shewed to Dante the way through Hell and Heaven. But the prodigy of the Greeks' sole poet—"the"—seems to have been that he was seer and poet in one; wherefore also they represented him as blind, like Tiresias. Whom the gods meant to see no semblance, but the very essence of the world, they sealed his eyes; that he might open to the sight of mortals that truth which, seated in Plato's figurative cavern with their backs turned outwards, they theretofore could see in nothing but the shadows cast by Show, This poet, as "*seer*," saw not the actual (*das Wirkliche*), but the true (*das Wahrhaftige*), sublime above all actuality; and the fact of his being able to relate it so faithfully to hearkening men that to them it seemed as clear and tangible as anything their hands had ever seized—this turned the Seer to a Poet.

Was he "*Artist*" also?

Whoso should seek to demonstrate the *art* of Homer, would have as hard a task before him as if he undertook to shew the genesis of a human being by the laborious experiments of some Professor—supramundane, if you will—of Chemistry and Physics. Nevertheless the work of Homer is no unconscious fashioning of Nature's, but something infinitely higher; perhaps, the plainest manifestation of a godlike knowledge of all that lives. Yet Homer was no Artist, but rather all succeeding poets took their art from him, and therefore is he called "the Father of Poetry" (*Dichtkunst*). All Greek genius is nothing else than an artistic *réchauffé* (*Nachdichtung*) of Homer; for purpose of this *réchauffé*, was first discovered and matured that "*Techne*" which at

last we have raised to a general principle [139] under name of *the Art of Poetry*, wrongheadedly including in it the "poietes" or "Finder der Märe."

The "*ars poetica*" of the Latins may rank as art, and from it be derived the whole artifice of verse-and-rhyme-making to our present day. If *Dante* once again was dowered with the Seer's eye—for he saw the Divine, though not the moving shapes of gods, as Homer—when we come to *Ariosto* things have faded to the fanciful refractions of Appearance; whereas *Cervantes* spied between the glintings of such arbitrary fancies the old-poetic world-soul's cloven quick, and sets that cleavage palpably before us in the lifelike actions of two figures seen in dream. And then, as if at Time's last stroke, a Scotsman's "second sight" grows clear to full clairvoyance of a world of history now lying lost behind us in forgotten documents, and its facts he tells to us as truthful fairy-tales told cheerily to listening children. But from that *ars poetica*, to which these rare ones owed no jot, has issued all that calls itself since Homer "Epic poetry"; and after him we have to seek the genuine epic fount in tales and sagas of the Folk alone, where we find it still entirely undisturbed by art.

To be sure, what nowadays advances from the feuilleton to clothe the walls of circulating libraries, has had to do with neither art nor poesy. The actually-experienced has at no time been able to serve as stuff for epic narration; and "second sight" for the never-witnessed does not bestow itself on the first romancer who passes by. A critic once blamed the departed Gutzkow for depicting a poet's love-affairs with baronesses and countesses, "things of which he certainly could never have had any personal experience"; the author most indignantly replied by thinly-veiled allusions to similar episodes that actually had happened to himself. On neither side could the unseemly folly of our novel-writing have been more cryingly exposed.—*Goethe*, on the other hand, proceeded in his "Wilhelm Meister" as the artist to whom the poet had refused his collaboration in discovery of a satisfactory ending; in his "Wahlverwandtschaften" the lyric elegist worked himself into a [140] seer of souls, but not as yet of living shapes. But what *Cervantes* had seen as *Don Quixote* and *Sancho Pansa*, dawned on *Goethe*'s deep world-scrutiny as *Faust* and *Mephistopheles*; and these shapes beheld by his ownest eye now haunt the seeking artist as the riddle of an ineffable poet's-dream, which he thought, quite unartistically but thoroughly sincerely, to solve in an impossible *drama*.

There may be something to learn from this, even for our members of the "German Poets'-grove" who feel neglected by their none too ardent publishers. For alas! one must say of their novels, their spirit's ripest fruits, that they have sprung from neither life nor tradition, but simply from theft and traduction. If neither the Greeks at their prime, nor any later great nation of culture, such as the Italians and

Spaniards, could win from passing incidents the matter for an epic story, to you moderns this will presumably come a trifle harder: for the events they witnessed, at least were real phenomena; whilst ye, in all that rules, surrounds and dwells in you, can witness naught but masquerades tricked out with rags of culture from the wardrobe-shop and tags from the historical marine-store. The seer's eye for the ne'er-experienced the gods have always lent to none but their believers, as ye may ascertain from Homer or Dante. But ye have neither faith nor godliness.

So much for "Poetry."—Now let us see what "Art" can offer in our days of progressed Culture.—

We came to the conclusion that all Greek genius was but an artistic re-editing of Homer, whilst in Homer himself we refused to recognise the *artist*. Yet Homer knew the "Aoidos" (4) nay, he himself perhaps was "*singer*" also?—To the sound of heroic songs the chorus of youths approached the mazes of the "imitative" dance. We know the choral chants to the priestly ceremonies, the dithyrambic choral dances of the Dionysian rites. What [141] there was inspiration of the blind seer, becomes here the intoxication of the open-eyed ecstatic, before whose reeling gaze the actuality of Semblance dissolves to godlike twilight. Was the "musician" *artist*? I rather think he *made* all Art, and became its earliest lawgiver.

The shapes and deeds beheld by the blind poet-teller's second sight could not be set before the mortal eye save through ecstatic palsy of its wonted faculty of seeing but the physical appearance: the movements of the represented god or hero must be governed by other laws than those of common daily need, by laws established on the rhythmic ordering of harmonious tones. The fashioning of the tragedy belonged no more in strictness to the poet, but to the lyrical musician: not one shape, one deed in all the tragedy, but what the godlike poet had beheld before, and "told" to his Folk; merely the choregus led them now before the mortal eye of man itself, bewitching it by music's magic to a clairvoyance like to that of the original "Finder." The lyric tragedian therefore was not Poet, but through mastery and employment of the highest art he materialised the world the poet had beheld, and set the Folk itself in his clairvoyant state.—Thus "mus-ical" art became the term for all the gifts of godlike vision, for every fashioning in illustration of that vision. It was the supreme ecstasy of the Hellenic spirit. What remained when it had sobered down, were nothing but the scraps of "Techne"—no longer Art, but the arts; among which the art of versifying was to present the strangest sight in time, retaining for the position, length or brevity of syllables the canons of the musical Lyric, without an idea of how it had sounded.

They are preserved to us, these "Odes"; with other prosaic conceits of the *ars poetica*, they too are labelled "poet-works"; and down through every age have people racked their brains with filling maps of verses, words and syllables, in the belief that if these only look a little glib in the eyes of others—and finally their own—they have really written "poetry."

We have no need to linger with this *ars poetica*, for we [142] shall never meet the *poet* there. With its practice *Wit* invaded poetry: the old didactic sentence—which still might run on lines of priest's or people's *melody*, as in the Pythia's oracles—became an Epigram; and here the artistic verse, with its really clever rhymes of nowadays, found fit employment. Goethe, who gave to everything a trial, down to his own disgust with the hexameter, was never happier in verse and rhyme than when they served his wit. Indeed one cannot find that the discarding of this artifice of verse has made our "poets" shine more: had it been applied to the "Trompeter von Säckingen," for instance, that epic would certainly not have gone through sixty editions, but probably would have made more dainty reading; whereas the jingling rhymes of H. Heine themselves still yield a certain pleasure. On the whole, our generation's love of verse-making appears to spring from an innate imbecility to which the attention of parents and tutors should be directed; if after thrashing through our youthful poets you light upon a young Ovid who really can write verses, by all means let him off, as we still prefer the witty epigrammist on our field of Literature, though not on that of—*Music*.

Music!—

Unutterably hard as is the task, we have already tried from time to time to throw some light on this, but not as yet upon the special point of "Composition."

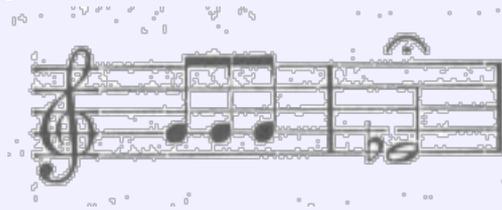
Music is the most witless thing conceivable, and yet we now have wellnigh naught but witty composition. I suppose that this has come about for love of our dear *littérateurs*, Herr Paul Lindau in particular, who only asks amusement from all Art, as I am told, since otherwise it bores him. But strange to say, it is precisely our amusing music that is the greatest bore of all (just think of a piece entitled a "Divertissement" at any of our concerts), whereas—say what you will—a completely witless Symphony of Beethoven's is always too brief for every hearer. Methinks, at bottom lies a fatal error of our newspaper-reporters' system of *Æsthetics*. It is not to be expected [143] that we shall win over our champions of musical amusement to another taste; nevertheless, quite among ourselves, we will once more devote a few words to the un-witty side of Music.

Have not the results of many an inquiry already plainly taught us that Music indeed has nothing to do with the common seriousness of

life; that its character, on the contrary, is sublime and grief-assuaging radiance (*Heiterkeit*); ay—that it smiles on us, but never makes us laugh? Surely we may call the A-major Symphony of Beethoven the brightest thing that any art has e'er brought forth: but can we imagine the genius of this work in any but a state of loftiest transport? Here is held a Dionysos-feast such as only on the most ideal of suppositions can the Greek have ever celebrated: let us plunge into the rushing tumult, the frenzy of delight, we never leave the realm of lofty ecstasy, high as heaven above the soil where Wit rakes up its meagre fancies. For here we are in no masquerade, the sole amusement of our leathern world of Progress; here we accost no privy-councillor dressed up as a Don Juan, whose recognition and dismasking causes boundless fun: no, here appear those truthful shapes that shewed themselves in moving ranks of heroes to *blind* Homer, in ranks which now *deaf* Beethoven makes call aloud the mind's enraptured eye to see them once again.

But look! the amusement-hunting journal-cavalier sits there; his eyes are only for the quite material: he perceives nothing, nothing at all: to him the time grows long, whereas to us the time of respite from all which that man sees was far too short, too fleeting. So give him his amusement! Crack jokes, ye bold musicians too; disguise yourselves and put a mask on! Compose, compose, even though nothing occur to you! Why should it be called "composing"—putting together—if invention too is requisite? But the more tedious ye are, the more contrast must ye put into your choice of masks: 'twill amuse again. I know renowned composers you shall meet to-day at con cert-masquerades in garb of a street-minstrel ("Of all my [144] sufferings" etc.), to-morrow in the Hallelujah-perruque of a Handel, the day after as a Jewish tuner-up of Czardas, and later as solemn symphonist disguised in a number ten. You laugh:—and well you may, you witty hearers! But those gentlemen themselves take things so seriously, nay, strictly, that it became necessary to pick out one of them (5) and diploma him the Prince of Serious Music of our day, expressly to stop your laughter. Perhaps, however, that only adds to it? For this serious music-prince would long ago have struck you as most wearisome, had you sly ones not taken a peep behind the mask, and discovered that it hid no such mighty dignitary, but just a person like yourselves; so you now can go on playing masks again, pretending that you marvel at him, while it amuses you to see the mouths he makes as if he quite believed you. Yet what lies at deepest bottom of all this entertaining game of masks, should also be openly stated. The suave, but somewhat philistine *Hummel* once was asked what lovely landscape he had thought of when composing a certain charming Rondo: to tell the simple truth, he might have answered—a beautiful fugal theme of Bach's in C-sharp major; only, he was still more candid, and confessed that the eighty ducats of his publisher had swum before his eyes. The witty man; with him one might have dealings!

Taken strictly, however, the joke is not in the music, but in the composer's pretence of having written finely, with the resulting quid-pro-quo's. In the aforesaid masque one can scarcely consider *Mendelssohn* included. He was not always frank of speech, and liked evasion; but he never lied. When asked what he thought of Berlioz' music, he answered: "Every man composes as well as he can." If he did not compose his choruses to *Antigone* as finely as his Hebrides-overture—which I hold for one of the most beautiful musical works that we possess—the reason was, that it was the very thing he could not. In view of this instance, and alas! of many similar, his followers may inherit from Mendelssohn the *cold-blooded recklessness* with [145] which they have tackled every kind of composition, resembling that old General of Frederick the Great's who sang whatever was set before him to the tune of the Dessauer March; for the greatest itself they could but squeeze with calm indifference into the diminutive bed of their talent. It certainly was always their intention, to turn out something good; only, their fate has been the opposite to that of Mephistopheles, who ever willed the bad but did the good. Assuredly they each desired to bring to pass for once a real true *melody*, one of those Beethovenian *shapes* that seem to stand complete before us with every member of a living body. But what was the use of all *ars musicæ severioris*, nay, even of *musicæ jocosæ*, when the shape would not be conjured up, still less composed? All that we find recorded there looks so very like the shapes of Beethovenian music, as often to seem copied outright: and yet the most artful concoction declines to produce an effect even remotely approaching the almost ridiculously insignificant



which has not a word to say to art, but at every concert wakes from lethargy to sudden ecstasy an audience never so fatigued before! Plainly a little malice of the public's, which one must correct by strenuous application of the rod. My quondam colleague in the Dresden Kapellmeistership, Gottlieb Reissiger the composer of Weber's Last Thought, once bitterly complained to me that the selfsame melody which in Bellini's "Romeo e Giulia" always sent the public mad, in his own "Adèle de Foix" made no effect whatever. We fear that the composer of the last idea of Robert Schumann would have a like misfortune to bewail.—

It seems we here have quite a curious case: I am afraid, to fully fathom it would lead us to the edge of mystical abysses, and make those who chose to follow us seem [146] Dunces in the eyes of our enlightened music-world, as which—according to Carlyle's experience—the Englishmen regard all Mystics. Luckily, however, the sorrows of our present composing world are largely explicable in the sober light of

sociology, which lets its cheering sunrays even pierce the cosy covert of our Poet-groves and Composer-hedges. Here everything is originally without guile, as once in Paradise. Mendelssohn's fine saying: "Every man composes as well as he can"—is deemed a wise provision, and really never overstepped. Guile first begins when one wants to compose better than one can; as this cannot well be, at least one gives oneself the air of having done so: that is the mask. Nor does that do so much harm: things worsen only when a number of good people—Principals and the like—are actually deluded by the mask, with Hamburg banquets, Breslau diplomas and so forth, as the outcome; for this illusion is only to be compassed by making folk believe that one composes better than others who really do compose well. Yet even this is not so very dreadful, after all; for we may generalise Mendelssohn's dictum into "Every man *does* what and how he can." Why make such fuss about the falsification of artistic judgment or musical taste? Is it not a mere bagatelle, compared with all the other things we falsify, wares, sciences, victuals, public opinions, State culture-tendencies, religious dogmas, clover-seed, and what not? Are we to grow virtuous all of a sudden in Music? When a few years back I was rehearsing the Vienna company in two of my operas, the first tenor complained to a friend of mine about the unnaturalness of my request that he should be virtuous for six whole weeks, and regular in his habits, whilst he knew quite well that so soon as I had gone away he could only hold on by the common operatic vice of looseness. This artist was right in denouncing virtue as an absurd demand. If our composers' delight in the show of their excellence, their chastity and kinship to Mozart and Beethoven, were only possible without the need to vent their spite on others, one might grudge them nothing; nay, even this bad trait [147] does not much matter in the long run, since the personal injury thus inflicted will heal in time. That the acceptance of the empty for the sound is cretinising everything we possess in the way of schools, tuition, academies and so on, by ruining the most natural feelings and misguiding the faculties of the rising generation, we may take as punishment for the sloth and lethargy we so much love. But that we should pay for all this, and have nothing left when we come to our senses—especially considering how we Germans pride ourselves on being somebodies—this, to be frank, is abominable!—

On the side last touched—the ethical, so to speak—of our poetising and composing, enough has been said for to-day. I am glad to think that a continuation of these notes will take me to a region of both art-varieties where we meet great talents and noble minds, and therefore have only to point out failings in the genre itself, not cant and counterfeiting.

# Notes

1

See Glasenapp's article in the *Bayreuther Blätter* for March, 1879, already mentioned on page 116.—Tr.

2

The poem by J. V. von Scheffel (1853), author also of the novel "Ekkehard," etc., etc. A stupid play was made from this poem by E. Hildebrandt and J. Keller, with vocal pieces by one Brenner; but not till the year after Wagner's death did Victor Nessler's washy but popular opera on the same subject appear.—Tr.

3

By G. A. Lortzing, 1837.—Tr.

4

According to Liddell and Scott, "a singer, minstrel, bard; Homer, αἰδοῦσ ἀνηρ, Odyssey 3, 267. In the heroic age they are represented as inspired, and under divine protection."—Tr.

5

Johannes Brahms.—Tr.

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