

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

As far as anyone knows, the composer Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf never visited Switzerland. This fact is of some interest to musicologists, for Dittersdorf made use of alpine themes at least once or twice during his lifetime. The yodel chorus in Dittersdorf's operetta *Hieronymus Knicker*, written in 1787, was clearly inspired by an Alphorn of the Bernese Oberland, for it was only here that the raised, or augmented, fourth tone was commonly used.

Dittersdorf himself was reluctant to discuss Switzerland, since he obviously did not want his contemporaries to learn how inspiring the country could be to anyone who wanted to write music. He took a special interest in the yodel form, particularly as it existed in the area south of Winterthur. Although he never heard the true alpine yodel—as Brahms later did—it is obvious that Dittersdorf had intended to visit Switzerland for this purpose, but apparently could not fit a trip into his busy schedule.

Another composer whose music often reflects the glory of the Swiss Alps was Franz Liszt. Unlike Dittersdorf, Liszt traveled quite often to Switzerland in search of melody and inspiration. He seems to have found both on the Walensee, a rather forbidding body of water which no one else in his right mind would consider musically inspiring. But old Liszt was inspired enough, probably because of the countess who was rowing him around the lake. She was Marie d'Agoult, and she no doubt made up for any inspiring qualities lacking in the general landscape. In any case, Liszt wrote a piano piece on this lake, calling it *Au lac de Walenstadt*, and including it in his cycle, *Années de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). Interestingly enough, wherever he went with the countess, Liszt was singularly inspired. He saw countless things he might never have observed without her. And this is why he called her the "countless countess".

The first year of *Années de Pèlerinage* was reserved for Switzerland, and, in the work, Liszt included some typical Swiss motifs, as in the *Chapel of William Tell*, *Obermann Valley* and *The Bells of Geneva*. As far as can be determined, Liszt was also the only composer of note to be directly inspired by alpine flora. After picking various varieties of gentians and primulas during a visit to Switzerland in 1833, Liszt carefully pressed them in a book of music paper in order to preserve them for later inspiration and memories. When he opened the book some three years later, he noticed that the alpine flowers, with their strong colors, had left their imprint on the blank music paper. With extreme care, he circled the blue and red marks with his music pen. They had formed a perfect series of melodies—a unique case of direct inspiration from flower to paper!

Liszt was beside himself. He rushed down to the dock and called to the Countess d'Agoult, who was rowing her boat in the distance (the name of the lake is unfortunately obscure). Marie apparently thought that too much of this pilgrimage business was getting Franz down, for she rowed as fast as she could to find out what was wrong.

"Countess," Franz cried out as she approached the wharf, "the alpine flowers have for me a melody written!"

"Oh, Franzerl!" said Marie. "What will you name this piece?"

"There is but one name possible," replied Liszt. "I am compelled to call this composition *Fleurs mélodiques des Alpes*. Whatever I in the future will do, or wherever I shall be, I shall always remember the way the Swiss flowers have dirtied up my music paper!"

Richard Wagner also came to Switzerland for inspiration as well as to avoid all the people to whom he owed money. "If I am ever to repay my debts," he is once reputed to have said, "then I must go somewhere where the air is clear, where the pine scent and the sea gulls form a curious admixture for the prolongation of my unique art."

After visiting Switzerland, Wagner realized that this was what he had been seeking. "Let me create more works like those which I conceived in that serene and glorious Switzerland, with my eyes on the beautiful gold-crowned mountains; they were masterpieces and nowhere else could I have conceived them." Here again, as in the case of Franz Liszt, Switzerland was doing its inspirational job. And here again, there was a girl to make the inspiration more believable.

Wagner's friend was Mathilde Wesendonck, and although she had no title—being the daughter of a wealthy Zurich merchant—she owned several rowboats and quite a few houses to put them and anything else in. Mathilde put Wagner in one of her houses so that he could write bigger and longer operas—and the idea apparently paid off. Among other works, *Siegfried*—or at least parts of it—is the result of Wagner's love affair with Mathilde and Zurich. Mathilde was also a poetess, and Wagner, in order not to appear a complete ingrate, set some of her poems to music. They were *Der Engel* (The Angel), *Träume* (Dreams), *Schmerzen* (Pain), *Stehe still* (Stand Still) and *Im Treibhaus* (In the Doghouse). Wagner wrote another well-known song, *Waltzing Mathilde*, while in Zurich, and he dedicated it to the chargé d'affaires from Australia, who took a particular liking to his operatic efforts.

Although he never would have admitted it, Brahms would simply not have been Brahms without Switzerland. Here we think of the plaintive Alphorn melody in the fourth movement of his First Symphony. In 1868, while visiting Switzerland, Brahms heard an Alphorn blow this melody, and he immediately wrote down the notes for posterity and for Clara Schumann, to whom he sent them, along with an accompanying poem:

Hoch auf 'm Berg, tief im Tal
Grüss ich Dich vieltausendmal
(High on the mountains, deep in the valley,
I send you greetings many thousand times)

Brahms would not have liked the way this poem sounds in English, which is why he wrote it in German. But here again we must bow in reverence before the ageless inspiration of Switzerland, which provided the stuff of which great symphonies are made. Brahms had no Countess d'Agoult with him on the Swiss lakes (he preferred to row himself when he lived in Rüslikon, on the Lake of Zurich). Nor was there a Mathilde Wesendonck with her villas and poems. Only Clara Schumann, sitting far away and believing in the greatness of Johannes Brahms.