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Peter Cornelius

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Carl August Peter Cornelius died 100 years ago, on 26 October 1874, in Mainz. He had been born there in 1824 - on Christmas Eve, and he liked to compare himself to a Christmas tree. He certainly had all the gifts.

His family were artists and craftsmen, and he was in every sense a man of parts. His father was an actor; and the son made an early *début*. But he was more at home with the written word (as linguist, translator, critic and poet) and with music (as pianist, violinist, singer and composer). In his teens he wrote librettos as well as lieder; he learnt about theatre from the stage, and opera from the orchestra pit (on tour with a Mainz company). His letters bear witness to his keen eye, whether for life in the streets or art in the galleries. But the boyhood vision failed, literally. Those later bespectacled features look as if Cornelius had lost his way. His gift for poetry was no more than a talent; his acting was hardly even that. Over the years his written style staled into insipid love-letters, family correspondence and album verses. Even the real creative fire of his music often served to ignite the torch he carried for others.

Yet Cornelius still shines with his own light: a resplendent achievement for a lifelong satellite, especially one moving in ever higher artistic circles. On losing his first parent-body he turned for support to the painter and sculptor Peter von Cornelius in Berlin. That celebrated kinsman<sup>1</sup> was more than kind, and contributed to several years of music lessons.<sup>2</sup> Few works survive from this long apprenticeship. Once in the swim of cultural society, Cornelius was overwhelmed by the *nouvelle vague* of Liszt and Wagner. In 1852 he was swept off to serve the former in Weimar. There he translated Berlioz for performance and Liszt for publication. He also found time to write his 30 best-known songs, mostly settings of his own lyrics (e.g. the *Weihnachtslieder* op.8, 1856). But the factotum's masterpiece was *The Barber of Baghdad*, 1856-8. Its minarets and muezzins are a far cry from the church music expected of Cornelius by the future abbé. But Liszt (whose own gravity was leavened by levity) was delighted, and insisted on arranging for a Weimar première. That well-intentioned act dropped the curtain on the opera for many a year. Liszt's many enemies, enraged by his musical and moral standards, turned on his standard-bearer. Cornelius's opera met with organized opposition, and its first (and only) night was a fiasco.

He was accustomed to sacrifice. Liszt was not, and left Weimar in a rage. Cornelius was then drawn to Vienna by the gravitational attraction of Wagner, from whom he was soon inseparable. He became not only copyist and court jester but the only disciple that Wagner loved. Cornelius in turn looked up to the Master-not blindly, but with proper reverence. Even so, this posture was not conducive to original composition. He wrote only 20 songs and half a dozen duets during his six years in Vienna. Instead, he concentrated on a Wagnerian grand opera, *Der Cid*, again to his own libretto. Its 1865 première (at Weimar, where the Grand Duke was commendably anxious to make amends) was successful, but it failed thereafter; a fate at the opposite pole from that of the *Barber*.

Meanwhile Wagner had moved on to Munich, where he persuaded King Ludwig to grant Cornelius first a pension and then a professorship at the newly-founded royal academy. This security enabled Cornelius to marry his long-betrothed Bertha Jung in 1867. Their happy ménage with its two children survived the hostilities among Ludwig, Wagner and Bülow, and the departure of the two last. But his teaching duties left Cornelius less time than ever. A third opera, *Gunlöd*, remained unfinished at his death (from diabetes) in 1874. Another 20 songs, five duets and 20 choral works were written during these Munich years, during which he renewed his friendship with Liszt and maintained his devotion to Wagner.

Though a born adherent or *Anhänger*, Cornelius was no mere hanger-on. His masters Liszt and Wagner liked and respected him; so did his fellow disciples Bülow, Raff, Tausig, Richter and the rest; so did Brahms and Clara Schumann. Despite doubts and difficulties he was able to temper his sharply critical intelligence with a Christian compassion and a quiet serious humour of his own.

Even musically, he was never totally eclipsed. His place is secure, if obscure. There had to be a bisector of the diverging lines Liszt-Wagner and Schumann-Brahms. But Cornelius also stood at a second crossroads, that of music and poetry. No wonder he took so long to find his way. Even at 24 he could still write so callow a song as the Heyse setting *Morgenwind*; only in Weimar, helped by the

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<sup>1</sup> The relation of the Mainz composer to the Berlin painter was (aptly. enough) that of cousin-german once removed, not nephew and uncle as often stated (e.g. in *Grove 5* and *La Musica*)

<sup>2</sup> from Siegfried Dehn (1799-1858), who had also taught Kullak, Glinka, and the brothers Anton and Nicolai Rubinstein.

influence and criticism of Liszt, did he achieve a mature style.<sup>3</sup> Its components can be exemplified from his op.2, written when he was 30. This consists of nine settings of his own poems, each a pious meditation on a phrase from the Lord's Prayer. Each song draws its thematic material from the plainchant notes of the, corresponding Latin text. These are used just as Schumann used cipher, but even more explicitly. Thus no.6, *Vergib uns unsre Schuld*, is prefixed with ex.1. This is transformed into a

Ex. 1



Et di-mit-te no-bis de-bi-ta nos-tra.

Ex. 2 c.f.



prelude (ex.2) evocative of the night and storm mentioned in the poem. The same theme in a more diatonic version is then combined with its own augmentation, a device later used by Brahms in such lieder as *Mein wundes Herz*, op.59 no.7. Ex.2's suggestion of dark winds or lower strings derives from Schubert (*Suleika I*) either directly or via the Wagner orchestra. Wagnerian too is the declamatory treatment of the vocal line. But the central figure of the *Paternoster* cycle was Liszt, to whom it was dispatched (one might almost say addressed). Its main unifying device was new in the lied form, as Liszt was told in a letter – "Neun Lieder über den *Cantus firmus!* Das ist neu ...". Further ideas for songs bound each to each by natural piety came from Liszt himself, e.g. the cyclic form of op.3, six short lyrics the successive moods of which imply a story. The original Cornelian contributions to these Weimar songs are his use of harmony and rhythm. The former is essentially an intensification of Schumann's 1840 song-style, which treated related tonalities as being in effect part of the tonic, e.g. in the key of F, passages in G minor or A minor could be used for colour or contrast without real modulation. Cornelius further extends that idea to cover such secondary relationships as the minor on the same tonic. Thus in no.2 of the *Paternoster* cycle E major is used as a touch of mood-painting within the D fiat major frame (a Cornelian equivalent for his own word "Jubel", "exultation"). There are also longer-range harmonic innovations: e.g. the prelude of *Simeon*, op.8 no.4, is deliberately designed to epitomize the tonal pattern of the song as a whole. But these and other novel song techniques remained largely unexplored, and were either rediscovered independently or else just neglected (as e.g. the idea, also found in the *Weihnachtslieder* op.8, of incorporating a chorale into the lied form).



For this there were three related reasons. The first is Cornelius's personal penchant for spiritual or domestic themes, amid scenes of worship or betrothal, *Weihnachts-* or *Brautlieder*. As a source of musical inspiration this was already outdated; as a source of commercial success, its day had not yet dawned. Cornelius was not widely published, still less appreciated, until some 30 years after his death; and by then his song-writing successors had already learnt their craft far themselves. But perhaps the decisive reason for this lack of influence was his incorrigible habit, contracted in early youth, of setting his own lyrics. "Im Anfang war das Wort" is his solemn description of his own art. Indeed the word should be the genesis of song. But his poems are all too often without form and void. They are as barren of imagery as of other poetic device, as weak in rhythm as in content. Not even the typical iambic dimeter can stand on its own two feet. The sad little girl of op.1 no.1 might be describing her creator's predicament as well as her own when she sings "Mein Lied ist klein, braucht wenig Platz". There, as in op.3 no.2, *Angedenken*, the poetic sequence of short lines produces a melodic line of short sequences.

<sup>3</sup> On both counts, the equally immature *Preciosa* must surely belong to 1848 with the other Heyse songs, not 1854-5 as the Gesamtausgabe conjectures

This typical pattern at least yields a characteristic rhythm which can be used motivically to indicate obsession with one pathetic idea. But such equivalence can be all too effective, as in the voice's single repeated note in the well-known *Ein Ton* op.3 no.3 (and its neglected counterpart no.4 in which the piano has the monotone). To say that these two songs epitomize Cornelius's melodic gift would be unkind rather than unfair. The plain fact is that his own words rarely inspired him, in the lied form.

There are two remedies, and he tried them both. One (discussed later) was to set the words of others. Another was to retain one's own words but to set them in the frame of the opera, not the lied. Any possible handicap is thus minimized; words play a smaller part in dramatic form. Better still, the potential weakness may become an actual strength, as with Wagner. We have already seen that the stage was one foundation of Cornelius's artistic make-up. His father was not only an actor but a reciter and raconteur. Cornelius himself always delighted in stories and tales. The *Arabian Nights* had long been available in several German editions, two of which were reprinted in the 1850s: Even in their bowdlerized versions they were heavily spiced with oriental eroticism, all languorous glance and veiled allusion. In 1854 the young Brahms dreamed of Clara Schumann as the unattainable Princess Badur and saw himself as the thwarted Prince Kamaralsaman. Cornelius, equally romantic at any age, would naturally have looked for his own story. His main material is stitched together from the Tailor's tale, spun out with snippets from the Barber's stories of his six brothers.

Abul Hassan Ali Ebn Bekar, the storyteller, procrastinator and mountebank, seems to have had more than a touch of Carl Cornelius, who by all accounts was better at acting than managing. He was well known and presumably well paid; but his son left school at 14, was supplementing the family income at 16, and was left in need of care and maintenance at 19. From similar circumstances Dickens created Micawber. Similarly, one likely echo of *The Barber of Baghdad* is Dad. There may also be some quiet smiles at Wagner, for example in the self-bestowed title of "Gesamtgenie", and even at Liszt, to whom the work (like its composer) was humbly dedicated. On any reckoning the Barber is a father figure. There may also be a trace-element of autobiography; the self-taught member of a large family is Cornelius junior to the life. But his main self-portrait, wittingly or not, is the ineffectual hero Nureddin, surely the most passive figure in all opera. He is requisitioned like a lackey, bundled about like a parcel, outplayed, outrhymed and outsung by a stronger and older personality. It is Cornelius's story exactly. But (as he well knew) the perspective of humour and the distance of the orient give his music more space and more spice. There is attractive if not authentic local colour in the augmented intervals of the call to prayer in Act 2. The Barber's depth of character, breadth of learning and agility of mind are depicted along *basso cantante* lines of a range and flexibility unheard of in the song writing. The libretto's belletristic felicities are matched throughout. Music and rhyme are made to chime in mood and mime, time after time. Examples range from the broad musical and verbal dactyls of the Barber's opening solo (with diminutive echoes in the orchestra, the stage adaptation of a song-technique already noted) to the repeated curving obeisances in the rising and falling salaams of the famous finale.

Thus Cornelius achieved his declared aim of diverting Wagnerian techniques into comic opera. In this he anticipated not only Humperdinck and Wolf<sup>4</sup> but Wagner himself. The *Barber* was completed and performed long before *Die Meistersinger*, and may well have spurred and inspired that masterpiece. There are thematic affinities. Already in Cornelius's original overture (in B, not the trumpety potpourri in D written later and orchestrated by Liszt) we hear the brass and woodwind melody buoyed on a steady stream of swirling string figurations, an image which in Wagner too serves to suggest the elemental surge of human comedy. The woodenly strummed accompaniment to the Barber's parodied love-song *O Margiana* is very Beckmesserish; so are his vocal flourishes; so is the scene of his beating. Conversely Wagner's David may be a deliberately Cornelian figure—the bullied but beloved apprentice with a light voice and a fondness for older women (Cornelius must be one of the few people to have written love-poetry to his future mother-in-law). It is David who sings about the traditional modes of *Meistergesang*—which Wagner took from an ancient tome located for him by Cornelius.

Meanwhile Cornelius was creating *Der Cid*, which was far less seminal. Like many another deft hand at the lighter touch, he turned to tragedy and came to grief. The short, clipped style that suited the *Barber* ill became the Spanish grandee. Even the local colour turned grey when thus treated. "Es stöhnt in Staub/ Der Mauren Weh,/ Zum Flammenraub/ Wird die Moschee/" are typical lines, in the sing-song metre of op.1 no.1. The score looks like a song cycle inflated to bursting-point. The Tristanesque brass and woodwind must sound similarly overblown. The bass clarinet for example either has no part to play or is just used to thicken the orchestral stock. We are not surprised to learn that Cornelius had an unfortunate habit of adding notes and lines until his scores turned black. This is a sad sign; the overall opacity hides many fine moments of illumination.

The Vienna songs are similarly uncertain. In this period Cornelius turned to the poetry of others, no doubt in quest of a less narcissistic and more fertile musico-poetic relationship. But this sometimes took him beyond his own lyric range and into the realms of rhetoric (as in the ceaseless tremolandos in the 1859 Emil Kuh setting *Mir ist, als zögen Arme*). Sometimes the poem elicits a more personal response, such as the Bürger song *Verlust* (1859) or the Hebbel setting *Abendgefühl* (1862). But the two versions

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<sup>4</sup> The brilliant assignation duet and its canonic imitations may well have suggested the similarly conspiratorial interchange between Frasquita and Repela in Act 3 or *Der Corregidor*.

of each of these songs confirm that the Cornelian vision is either precise but limited, as when setting his own lyrics, or wider-ranging but blurred, as when setting those of others.

As before, opera is an exception. The scoring of *Gunlöd* (1866-74) looks more sharply etched than *Der Cid*. The bass clarinet, to cite the same example, takes a more independent line.<sup>5</sup> But in other respects Cornelius is more dependent than ever. His story line (from the Edda) is a mere tangent to the *Ring*; so is his style ("Odins Liebe wird Gunlöd lohnen", and so on, and on); so is his music. We know that he modestly saw himself as a lesser talent flourishing in a new field made arable by a great genius. But the riper Cornelius grew, the more he was gathered in and carried away by Wagner. Not only the songs and operas but the choral works are affected by this progressive loss of identity. The composer's gifts are turned into charitable donations; his music is doled out for his friends and their choirs and their funerals. Personal love songs yield to concerted hymns or patriotic songs; the original music is replaced by arrangements or revisions.

Cornelius had always known that his was a lesser light. Now he could see that it was burning low. In a song written for his bride in the earlier Munich days, he had (perhaps consciously) defined its quality as "halb Kerzenlicht, halb Dämmererschein" ("half candlelight, half twilight"). Perhaps he also knew that there were many composers more flamboyant and colourful than himself beside whom he would pale into significance.

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<sup>5</sup> This and the other effective solos may however be by courtesy or Waldemar von Bausnern (1866-1931), who orchestrated the posthumous sketches.