

Will renaming the short poem as a “dramatic monologue” result in a growth of the minuscule audience that presently exists for contemporary poetry? Probably not, but Maio’s effort is sound nonetheless. Our literary culture needs to be reminded that some poets still know how to write, still know how to compose *verse*, and still know how to evoke a compelling character and join lyric meditation with the pleasures of plot. Like Dr. Johnson in Krisak’s skillful translation, Maio has responded to the historical determinism and pessimism, so tempting to the literate in an illiterate age, with a confession of faith in the freedom and grace of providence and the poetic voice:

No, God the King—our
 greatest king—commands
 In everything that stirs each part
 Of man with storm. No human chart
 Alone can tame those seas; the will
 Of God shall have them
 surge when He demands.
 And as He calms them by
 His loving hands,
 The tempest of the soul lies still.

1 Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?: Essay on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1992), 15.

A Razor in His Mouth

R. J. Stove

Hans von Bülow: A Life and Times,
 by Alan Walker (New York: Oxford
 University Press, 2010)

A musician courageous enough to express displeasure with his hearers by flinging his piano stool into the auditorium, and bold enough to give his verdict on an unfamiliar composition by publicly vomiting, should not have needed to wait until now for his first English-language biography. But the ill luck that dogged the life of Hans von Bülow (1830–94) has continued after his death. Because he was the first internationally celebrated performer *not* to gain any fame as a creator—since even the stupidest operatic singers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had enough ingenuity to adorn what they sang with numberless original ornaments and cadenzas—his musical renown necessarily became conditional, depending more on marital drama than on his own extraordinary virtuosity. Still, it is best not to stint on literary aptitude in dealing with so eccentric a figure as Bülow: British musicologist Alan Walker has given us a masterpiece of research and attractive presentation in which it is hard to read eight pages without immediately wanting to read the next eighty, and has done so

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without the hints of special pleading that marred Walker's famous three-volume life of Bülow's father-in-law, Liszt.

Of an impenitently aristocratic background (his distant relations included future German chancellor Bernhard von Bülow), Hans adopted from infancy the attitude of Hilaire Belloc's Godolphin Horne, who "was nobly born / [And] held the human race in scorn." On no fewer than five occasions as a boy he was diagnosed with that complaint seemingly ubiquitous among his more highly strung contemporaries, "brain fever," a mysterious condition probably no more connected with medical science than its modern equivalent "Attention Deficit Disorder," but one at least involving genuine affliction on its victim's part and not merely invented to gorge a conscienceless pharmaceutical industry. While no *Wunderkind*, Hans became obsessed with music at an early age, particularly after beginning his piano studies with Clara Schumann's father, Friedrich Wieck; from his young adulthood, once he met Liszt and heard Wagner's *Lohengrin* for the first time, there could be no stopping him. (A portrait on page 84 of Walker's tome demonstrates that Bülow in his early days looked remarkably like Liszt: the same large, soulful, protuberant eyes, the same long face and long hair. Afterward this resemblance vanished beneath Bülow's goatee.) Already it had become obvious that Bülow's pianism possessed exceptional virtues that dovetailed nicely with those of other virtuosos: Bülow had all Liszt's bravura without Liszt's lapses into trashiness, and all Mendelssohn's superbly controlled fingering without Mendelssohn's sense of emotional inhibition.

Perhaps more memorable than even the greatest of Bülow's musical gifts was his stunning invective, which probably did more than any other talent to keep him sane amid the traumas of his middle years. "You don't

shave," a Russian sympathizer once told him, "but you always have a razor in your mouth." He assured an inept trombonist: "Your tone sounds like roast beef gravy running through a sewer." Few environments, however benign, failed to draw from him some insult: he described Chocieszewice Castle (not far from Wrocław or, as pre-1945 Europeans usually called it, Breslau) as a "Polish swamp"; he recounted his visit to Britain in a diary under the title "A Journey in a Fog"; and he referred to Munich (where he directed a local music school) as "this damned city." His dealings in Hanover's opera house with Wagner singer Anton Schott—"A tenor," Bülow observed, "is not a man but a disease"—culminated in his ringing denunciation of Schott's attempts to sing *Lohengrin*'s title role: "You are no Knight of the Swan [*Schwan*] but a Knight of the Swine [*Schwein*]." Yet Walker sheds new light on the internal anguish, both physical and spiritual, that goaded Bülow into such tirades: persistent bodily ill-health, which included migraines and strokes, compounded by the torture of seeing Liszt's daughter Cosima (whom he had wed in 1857) flaunt more and more blatantly her liaison with Wagner. Even as Bülow magnificently conducted the latter's music—notably the first performances of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*—he underwent the miseries of watching his marriage being undermined, all too slowly, by the composer of these masterpieces. Throughout the resultant miseries, Bülow remained steadily loyal to everything that was meritorious in Wagner while, as far as possible, disdaining public criticism of everything that was not. Walker well sums up Bülow's enviably fair-minded outlook: "His refusal to confuse Art with the artist who created it reveals a sense of discrimination so rare among human beings that we have no hesitation in describing it as one of Bülow's finest achievements."

Far from being destroyed by Wagner's betrayal, Bülow went on to further pianistic and conducting feats once Cosima had left him in 1868. Evincing afresh his gift for what Dorothy Parker would call "shrieking quarrels and florid reconciliations," he followed up his verbal abuse of Brahms with wild advocacy of that genius, and popularized the habit of referring to him alongside Bach and Beethoven as one of "the three Bs." At Meiningen in Thuringia—which town, when Bülow arrived in 1880, dwelt in such soporific circumstances that it had a grand total of five cabs and no restaurants—he took over the local orchestra and turned it from a third-rate ensemble of purely local interest into a stunningly accomplished group that evoked an eighteenth-century British visitor's description of Mannheim's band as "an army of generals." There Bülow unselfishly championed the early pieces of Richard Strauss, despite his long-established and well-justified aversion to Richard's horn-playing father, Franz, from Bülow's Munich days.

So it continued until he fell too sick to champion anyone or anything; in a not particularly long career, he gave more than three thousand concerts on both sides of the Atlantic. When appearing both at the piano and on the rostrum in New York during 1889, he is said to have made recordings—on wax cylinders—which "surprised and delighted a host of musical experts." Alas, their current whereabouts are unknown, as is the ultimate destination of the cylinder that Liszt, according to rumor, recorded in old age.

Bülow's end makes for fairly harrowing

contemplation. While never actually insane—as the *New York Times* insisted he was, in an early example of that awesome journalistic deceit that the world would come to recognize over the next century and more—he suffered dreadfully in his last year. Worst of all, he fell into the grip of Freud's satanic and cocaine-headed colleague Wilhelm Fliess, who proved as incapable of curing Bülow as of giving lasting help to any of his other wretched victims. The true cause of the musician's final illness seems to have been the flare-up of a long-standing tumor, "pressing on the base of a nerve close to the brain stem."

At least Bülow's interpretative triumphs have now been belatedly vindicated, even if his efforts as a composer might constitute a lost cause. We should hesitate before passing final judgment on these efforts' quality, since so few of them have ever been publicly performed, and he himself remained bashful about them. Recent years (and a handful of enterprising CD manufacturers) have shown us that the symphonies written by two far younger great conductors—Wilhelm Furtwängler and Felix Weingartner—yield much unsuspected gold; Walker devotes five and a half closely printed pages of his book to listing Bülow's own original works, not counting his arrangements of other men's output. It is an indication of Walker's lively enthusiasm for his subject that the reader inevitably wants to know more about Bülow's creative endeavors than any mere printed page can communicate. Thanks to Walker's scholarship, Bülow's life and times will never be more convincingly recounted than they are here.