Hans von Bülow is a key figure in 19th century music whose career path was as broad as it was successful. Music history’s first virtuoso orchestral conductor, Bülow created the model for the profession—both in musical brilliance and in domineering personality—which still holds forth today. He was an eminent and renowned concert pianist, a respected (and often feared) teacher and music critic, an influential editor of works by Bach, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Beethoven, and a composer in a variety of musical genres. As a student and son-in-law of Franz Liszt, and estranged friend of Richard Wagner (for whom his wife Cosima famously left him), Bülow is intricately connected with the canonical greats of the period. Yet despite his critical and lasting importance for orchestral music, Bülow’s life and significant achievements have yet to be heralded in biographical form.

In Hans von Bülow: A Life and Times, Alan Walker, the acclaimed author of numerous award-winning books on the era’s iconic composers, provides the first full-length English biography of this remarkable musical figure. Walker traces Bülow’s life in illuminating and engaging detail, from the first piano lessons of his boyhood days, to his first American tour, to his last days as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. Unearthing Bülow’s extensive and previously unavailable correspondence and writings, Walker conveys amusing and informative anecdotes about this unique musical legend—from his sardonic and clever personality to his meticulous devotion to his work—and reveals enlightening insights on the still-contested sensibilities of musical-compositional style and idea at play in the vibrant musical world of which Bülow was a part.

My Personal Review:
This is an exceedingly well written account about the life of Hans von Bülow, by Alan Walker, a music scholar that seems to have a gift for writing a page turner, unusual for those in his field who usually write dull, technical treatises. Von Bülow’s travails and accomplishments have enough melodrama to fill a long running soap opera. Mr. Walker details these with an obviously carefully researched account.

Great performers and conductors achieve fame in their own time; great composers survive to eternity. There were some that did both well, such as
Mahler or Mendellsohn. Von Bulow was not one of them. He was a towering figure in the 19th Century era of Western Music known as the Romantic Period as a great conductor and one of the best concert pianists of his time. Unfortunately his compositions, few as they were, have not withstood the test of time and thus he is not well remembered any more. Those who have heard of Bulow only associate him with the notion that he was one of the great cuckolds of the 19th century, losing his wife Cosima (Franz Liszt's daughter) to none other than Wagner, his mentor.

While Walker brings this unfortunate episode of Bulow's life to his readers in full color, he balances the slate with an equally colorful account of the remainder of Bulow's life and the magnitude of his accomplishments. At times the prose gets technical, but it never bogs down to the thick unintelligible music-soup often encountered in Symphony concert programs.

I would highly recommend this book not only for those interested in music history, but also those who enjoy reading biographies of colorful, larger-than-life, historical figures.

Moris Senegor M.D.