

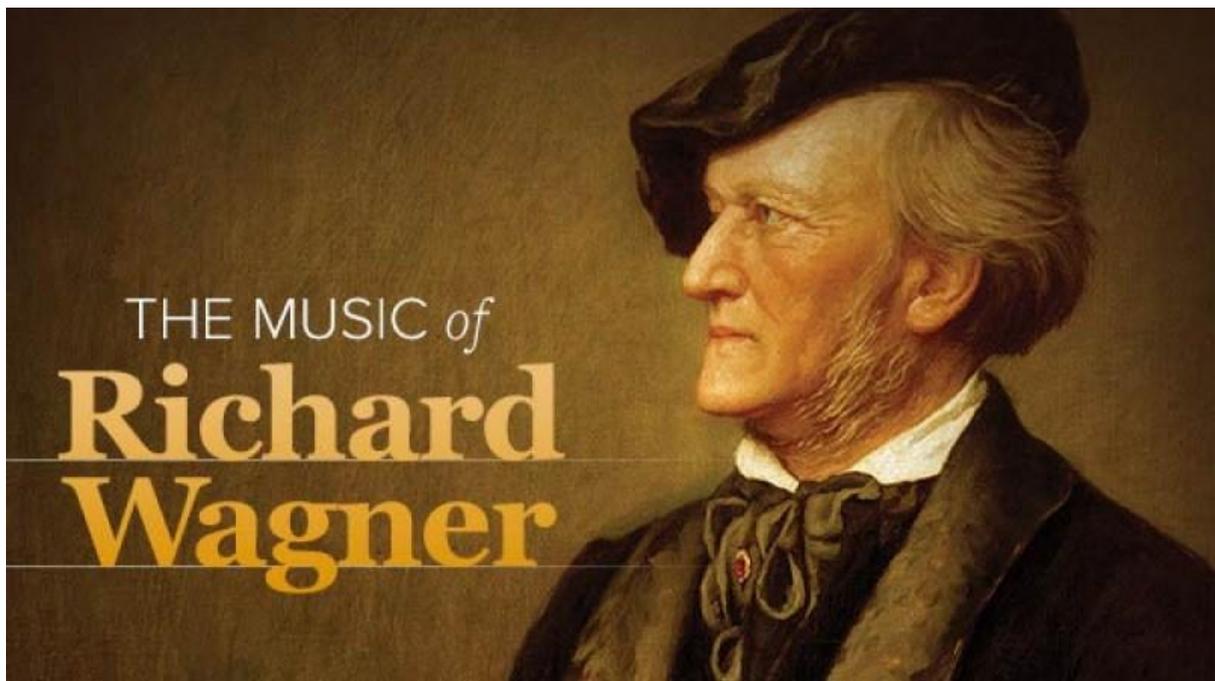


UNIVERSITY OF
THE THIRD AGE

Benalla & District Inc.



Programme Notes 12th July, 2019



“The essence of higher instrumental music lays herein that one is able to express in tones that what one is unable to say in words.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads 'Richard Wagner'.

Richard Wagner

(22nd May, 1813 Leipzig, Germany. – 13th February, 1883 Vienna, Italy.)



Portrait of Wagner for the newspaper "Der Spiegel"

Richard Wagner is one of the most controversial composers in history – and this is genuine controversy. He is not controversial in the way some rock star engages in promiscuity or drug use. He is not a common thug who happens to be a musician. Beginning as something of a political radical, Wagner eventually became heavily associated with anti-semitism and Nazis, and the connection is stronger than you may suppose.

Wagner, as well as having a strong career as a composer and theatre director, was a noted polemicist, and it is from his writings that the darker elements of his personality and ideas come through. Some are revolutionary, leading to a change in music and performance that impacts to this day. Others are so reactionary and hateful that they muster contempt from those of moral constitution and praise from those who are morally contemptible.

(Acknowledgement: www.gentlemansgazette.com)

But forget the stories, the words, the stagings and the politics, the music is what matters most – the music of the man who changed opera for good. Forget the cliches about the Nazis and fat women in Norse helmets with spears. Wagner needs no apologies. He was, quite simply, one of the most important composers to have ever lived. He transformed western music, and opera in particular, with lasting consequences to this day. He remains – with Bach – the largest enduring contemporary presence of all the great composers.

Wagner's impact was and is immense. He wrote the most discussed and analysed opera of all time – the four-part Ring of the Nibelung, more commonly known as the Ring cycle; he wrote arguably the most influential opera of all time – his often exquisite final work, Parsifal; he also wrote the opera which, because of its eroticism and advanced musical language, can claim to be the most important of the lot – Tristan und Isolde. In addition, I am tempted to say, he wrote the most misunderstood opera of all time – Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. By any standards, he is a big, complex figure (www.theguardian.com)

Wagner's Early life and Operas

Born in Leipzig on 22 May 1813 to a police clerk and a baker's daughter. Wagner's biological father died when he was six months old and his mother eventually started a relationship with Ludwig Geyer, an actor and playwright. Wagner came to share his step-father's love of the theatre, and his early studies feature both music and drama. He was taught basic piano education from his Latin teacher at Pastor Wetzel's school near Dresden. He had trouble with technical exercises although had demonstrated strong aural abilities, playing theatre overtures by ear.



Wagner's birthplace in the Jewish quarter of Leipzig.

Young Richard Wagner entertained ambitions to be a playwright, and first became interested in music as a means of enhancing the dramas that he wanted to write and stage. He soon turned toward studying music, for which he enrolled at the University of Leipzig in 1831. One of his early musical influences was Ludwig van Beethoven.

In 1833, at the age of 20, Wagner had finished composing his first complete opera, *Die Feen*. This opera, which clearly imitated the style of Weber, would go unproduced until half a century later. Meanwhile, Wagner held brief appointments as musical director at opera houses in Magdeburg and Königsberg, during which he wrote *Das Liebesverbot*, based on William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. This second attempt was actually staged at Magdeburg in 1836, but met with little acclaim.



Christina 'Minna' Planer

On November 24, 1836, Wagner married actress Christine Wilhelmine 'Minna' Planer, and they moved to the town of Riga where he became the musical director at the local opera house. A few weeks afterward, Minna ran off with an army officer who left her penniless. Wagner accepted her back, but it was the start of a troubled marriage that would end, three decades later, in misery.

By 1839, the couple had amassed such a large amount of debt that they were forced to flee Riga to escape their creditors (the recurring problem of debt would plague Wagner for the rest of his life.) During their flight, they took a stormy sea passage to London, from which Wagner obtained the inspiration for *Der Fliegende Holländer*.

The Wagners lived in Paris for several years, where Richard made a living writing articles and making arrangements of operas by other composers.

Dresden

Wagner completed writing his third opera, *Rienzi*, in 1840. Fortuitously, it was accepted for performance by the Dresden Court Theatre in the German state of Saxony. In 1842, the couple moved to Dresden, where *Rienzi* was staged to considerable success. Wagner lived in Dresden for the next six years, eventually being appointed the Royal Saxon Court Conductor. During this period, he wrote and staged *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, the first two of his three middle-stage operas.

The Wagners' stay at Dresden was brought to an end by Richard's involvement in left-wing politics. An uprising in which Wagner played a minor supporting role was quickly crushed by an allied force of Saxon and Prussian troops and warrants were issued for the arrest of the revolutionaries. Wagner had to flee, first to Paris, and then to Zürich.

Exile, Schopenhauer, and Mathilde Wesendonk

Wagner spent the next twelve years in exile. He had completed *Lohengrin* before the Dresden uprising, and now wrote desperately to his friend Franz Liszt to have it staged in his absence. Liszt proved to be a friend in need, eventually conducted the premiere in Weimar in August 1850.

Nevertheless, Wagner found himself in grim personal straits, isolated from the German musical world and without any income to speak of. The musical sketches he was penning, which would grow into the mammoth work *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, seemed to have no prospects of seeing performance. His wife Minna, who had disliked the operas he had written after *Rienzi*, was falling into a deepening depression. Finally, he fell victim to *erysipelas* (an infection typically with a skin rash, usually on any of the legs and toes, face, arms, and fingers), which made it difficult for him to continue writing.

In the following years, (still in Zurich) Wagner came upon two independent sources of inspiration, leading to the creation of his celebrated *Tristan und Isolde*. The first came to him in 1854, when his poet friend Georg Herwegh introduced him to the works of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. One of Schopenhauer's doctrines was that music held a supreme role amongst the arts, since it was the only one unconcerned with the material world. Wagner quickly embraced this claim, which must have resonated strongly despite its direct contradiction with his own arguments, in 'Opera and Drama', that music in opera had to be subservient to the cause of drama. Wagner would remain an adherent of Schopenhauer for the rest of his life, even after his fortunes improved.



Mathilde Wesendonck

Wagner's second source of inspiration was the poet-writer Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of the silk merchant Otto von Wesendonck. Wagner met the Wesendoncks in Zürich in 1852. Otto, a fan of Wagner's music, placed a cottage on his estate at Wagner's disposal. By 1857, Wagner had become infatuated with Mathilde. Though Mathilde seems to have returned some of his affections, she had no intention of jeopardising her marriage, and kept her husband informed of her contacts with Wagner. Nevertheless, the affair inspired Wagner to put aside his work on the Ring cycle (which would not be resumed for the next twelve years) and begin work on *Tristan und Isolde*, based on the Arthurian love story of the knight Tristan and the (already-married) lady Isolde.

The uneasy affair collapsed in 1858, when Minna intercepted a letter from Wagner to Mathilde. After the resulting confrontation, Wagner left Zürich alone, bound for Venice. The following year, he once again moved to Paris to oversee production of a new revision of *Tannhäuser*.

In 1861, the political ban against Wagner was lifted, and the composer settled in Biebrich, Prussia, where he began work on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Remarkably, this opera is by far his sunniest work.

In 1862, Wagner finally parted with Minna, though he (or at least his creditors) continued to support her financially until her death in 1866.

Patronage of King Ludwig II

Wagner's fortunes took a dramatic upturn in 1864, when King Ludwig II assumed the throne of Bavaria at the age of 18. The young King, an ardent admirer of Wagner's operas since childhood, had the composer brought to Munich. He settled Wagner's considerable debts, and made plans to have his new opera produced. After grave difficulties in rehearsal, *Tristan und Isolde* premiered to enormous success at the Munich Court Theatre on June 10, 1865.



Cosima Wagner

In the meantime, Wagner became embroiled in another affair, this time with Cosima von Bülow, the wife of the conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner's most ardent supporters and the conductor of the *Tristan* premiere.

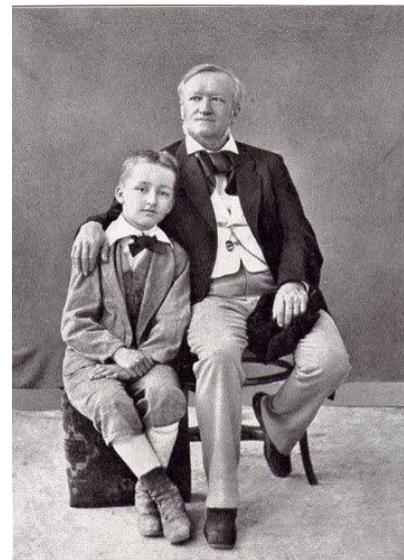
Cosima was the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and the famous Countess Marie d'Agoult, and 24 years younger than Wagner. In April 1865, she gave birth to Wagner's illegitimate daughter, who was named Isolde.

Their indiscreet affair scandalized Munich, and to make matters worse, Wagner fell into disfavour amongst members of the court, who were suspicious of his influence on the King. In December 1865, Ludwig was finally forced to ask the composer to leave Munich.

Ludwig installed Wagner at the villa Tribschen, beside Switzerland's Lake Lucerne. *Die Meistersinger* was completed at Tribschen in 1867, and premiered in Munich on June 21 the following year. In October, Cosima finally convinced Hans von Bülow to grant her a divorce.

Richard and Cosima were married on August 25, 1870. In December of that year, Wagner presented the *Siegfried Idyll* for Cosima's birthday. The marriage to Cosima lasted to the end of Wagner's life. They had an additional daughter, named Eva, and a son named Siegfried.

Wagner, settled into his newfound domesticity, turned his energies toward completing the Ring cycle, which Wagner wanted to be performed as one complete work in a purpose-built opera house. Wagner decided on the small town of Bayreuth as the location of his new opera house and the family moved there in 1872 and the foundation stone for the Festspielhaus ('Festival House') was laid the same year.



Wagner & son Siegfried

Final years

In 1877, Wagner began work on *Parsifal*, his final opera. The composition took four years, during which he also wrote a series of increasingly reactionary essays on religion and art.

Wagner completed *Parsifal* in January 1882, and a second Bayreuth Festival was held for the new opera. Wagner was by this time extremely ill, having suffered through a series of increasingly severe angina attacks. During the sixteenth and final performance of *Parsifal* on August 29, he secretly entered the pit during Act III, took the baton from conductor Hermann Levi, and led the performance to its conclusion.

After the Festival, the Wagner family journeyed to Venice for the winter. On February 13, 1883, Richard Wagner died of a heart attack in the Palazzo Vendramin on the Grand Canal. His last words were recorded as: 'I am fond of them, of the inferior beings of the abyss, of those who are full of longing'. His body was returned to Bayreuth and buried in the garden of Wahnfried - his villa at Bayreuth. Today that villa houses the Wagner museum.

Works

Wagner composed 10 major stage works, for all of which Wagner composed the music and wrote the libretto. Four of these comprise the famous “Ring Cycle”,

Today, however, we will consider the other six (Die Fliegende Holländer, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Tannhäuser, Parsifal, Lohengrin and Tristan and Isolde). The Ring Cycle will be a topic for separate study, and other works (Wagner composed music other than opera) for another occasion again.

For most of these six our listening approach will be to the opening prelude to the opera. Wagner’s music is, in the main, “programmatic”, that is it tells a story. Wagner also pioneered the idea of theme music with his use of leitmotifs. Leitmotifs are short musical phrases with meaning — each melody applies to a character or idea (e.g. ‘spring’ or ‘love’), and reappear throughout the opera to signify that character or idea. Wagner introduces many of these in the prelude to each opera.

Die Fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman)



The Flying Dutchman is a one-act opera (though sometimes split into three) telling a scary story of a sailor and his daughter caught in a storm on the sea. It takes place off the coast of Norway during the 18th century. It premiered January 2, 1843 at Semper Oper in Dresden.

By the beginning of 1839, when he was 26-year-old, Richard Wagner was employed as a conductor at the Court Theatre in Riga (today the capital and the largest city of Latvia, in 1839, it was an industrialized port city of the Russian empire). But, extravagant lifestyle plus the retirement from the stage of his actress wife, Minna, caused him to run up huge debts that he was unable to repay.

At that time, he was writing Rienzi, one of his early operas, and hatched a plan to flee his creditors in Riga, escape to Paris via London and make his fortune by putting Rienzi on to the stage of the Paris Opéra. But, the plan failed as his passport having been seized by the authorities on behalf of his creditors. Wagner and Minna had to make a dangerous and illegal crossing over the Prussian border, during which Minna suffered a miscarriage.

The couple boarded a ship and started their journey – which was hindered by storms and high seas. At one point, The ship took refuge in the Norwegian fjords at Tvedestrand, and a trip that was expected to take eight days finally delivered Wagner to London three weeks after leaving Riga. It was like their ship would never make any port again, like the “Flying Dutchman” in the legend. This inspired Wagner to write his opera.

1

The Story behind the story of The Flying Dutchman

The story is part myth, part history, part biblical parable.

According to folklore, the Flying Dutchman is a wandering Jew of the ocean – a Dutch sailor, forever cursed to sail the seas until Judgement Day without hope of release unless he should find a woman who would love him faithfully unto death. Once every seven years he is allowed to go ashore in search of a woman who will redeem him through her faithful love.



Rising heavenwards out of the sea'

At end of one such seven year period he woos Senta – the daughter of a Norwegian sea captain – who promises her undying love. The Dutchman hears of another suitor, however, and thinking himself again forsaken sails away. Senta, though, is distraught and breaking away from those restraining her rushes to the edge of a cliff and throws herself into the sea, thus proving herself faithful till death. The opera ends in the glow of sunset with the forms of Senta and the Dutchman seen rising from the sea in each other's arms and floating upwards.

The Flying Dutchman doesn't yet show Wagner's refined level of leitmotif development. However, some of the motifs can be associated with certain characters, objects or themes in the opera. For example, the French

horn theme at the beginning of the overture can be associated with the Dutchman as it can be heard most often when he is both on stage or when another character is referring to him.

The musical theme of repeated figures that stems from the Dutchman's leitmotif symbolizes the fate that always haunts him. The quickly moving low strings provide the setting of the raging sea with the storm motif. The Dutchman's ghost crew is summoned to the deck [repeated notes played by the trumpets] to steer the wandering ship [rapid notes in the strings]. One cannot avoid the impression of the great ship and its crew being tossed around.

The raging storm gives way to the gentle music of love and redemption that belongs to Senta, [played by the English horn, immediately echoed by the oboe and flute. Senta's love for the Dutchman and her search for a more exciting life is embodied in the music as the theme of constancy which is heard in the English horn.

The peaceful mood is interrupted as Senta's thoughts drift to the storm and the Dutchman. The music changes to a more folk-like motif representing the ship's sailors. The music of the ghost world and physical world are played simultaneously representing the conflict between them.

The overture ends with the return of Senta's redemption theme which brings the listener into the real world where the beginning of the opera is set.

The overture is played by the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra conducted by Marek Janowski. The Youtube link is:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezqen5-UxIQ

Tannhäuser – Overture

The Story – ACT I Wartburg castle and environs, medieval Germany.



The Wartburg

The minnesinger Tannhäuser, having spent a year in the magical underground realm of Venus, the goddess of love, longs to return to the human world. He pays tribute to Venus in a song but ends by asking her to let him go. Surprised, Venus promises him even greater pleasures, but when he insists and repeats his pleas, she furiously dismisses him and curses his desire for salvation.

Tannhäuser cries out that his hope rests with the Virgin Mary—and suddenly finds himself transported to a valley near the castle of the Wartburg.

A procession of pilgrims passes on the way to Rome. Tannhäuser is deeply moved and praises the wonders of God, as horns announce the arrival of a hunting party. It is Landgrave Hermann with his knights. Recognizing Tannhäuser as their long-lost friend, they beg him to return to the castle with them, but Tannhäuser is reluctant. Wolfram, one of the knights, reminds him that his singing once won him the love of Elisabeth, the Landgrave's niece. On hearing her name, Tannhäuser understands what he must do and joins his companions.

ACT II

Elisabeth joyfully greets the Wartburg's Hall of Song, which she hasn't set foot in since Tannhäuser left. He is now led in by Wolfram. Elisabeth, at first shy and confused, tells Tannhäuser how she has suffered in his absence, but then joins him in praise of love. Observing their emotional reunion, Wolfram realizes that his own affection for Elisabeth is hopeless.

Landgrave Hermann is delighted to find his niece in the Hall of Song, and together they welcome their guests who have come for a song contest.

The Landgrave declares love the subject of the competition and promises the victor to receive whatever he asks from the hand of Elisabeth. Wolfram opens the contest with a heartfelt tribute to idealized love. Tannhäuser, his thoughts still on Venus, replies with a hymn to worldly pleasures.



Tannhäuser in the Underground world of Venus

Other singers counter his increasingly passionate declarations until Tannhäuser breaks out into his prize song to Venus, to the horror of the guests. As the men draw their swords, Elisabeth throws herself between the parties to protect Tannhäuser and begs the knights for mercy. The Landgrave pronounces his judgment:

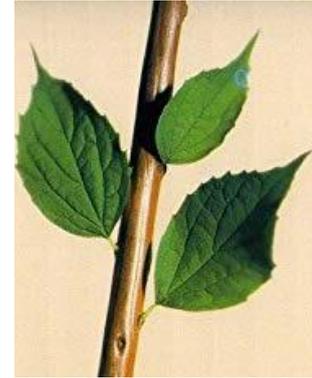
Tannhäuser will be forgiven if he joins the pilgrims on their way to Rome to do penance. Tannhäuser falls at Elisabeth's feet and rushes from the hall.

ACT III

Several months later, Wolfram comes across Elisabeth praying at a shrine in the valley. A band of pilgrims, back from Rome, passes by, but Tannhäuser is not among them. Broken with grief, Elisabeth prays to the Virgin Mary to receive her soul into heaven. Wolfram gazes after her and asks the evening star to guide her way.

Night falls, and a solitary pilgrim approaches. It is Tannhäuser, ragged and weary. He tells Wolfram of his devout penitence on the way to Rome—of his joy at seeing so many others pardoned, and of his despair when the Pope proclaimed that he could no more be forgiven for his sins than the papal staff could bear green leaves again.

Left without hope, all he wants now is to return to Venus. He summons her and she appears, just as Wolfram once again brings Tannhäuser to his senses by invoking Elisabeth's name. At this moment, Elisabeth's funeral procession comes winding down the valley. With a cry, Venus disappears. Tannhäuser implores Elisabeth to pray for him in heaven and collapses dead. As dawn breaks, another group of pilgrims arrives, telling of a miracle: the Pope's staff, which they bear with them, has blossomed.



The Overture

As in *The Flying Dutchman* the Overture is the story of the opera told in music. It opens with the melody of the Pilgrims' Chorus, beginning softly as if coming from a distance and gradually increasing in power and then gradually dying away as if having passed by.

By way of contrast the music then introduces the Venusberg describing the alluring scene of the court of the goddess with its seductive spells and the sinful excitement that pervades her world.

This passes over into the burst of song where Tannhäuser sings the praises of Venus, and immediately after the vigorous and boisterous music which accompanies the threatening action of the Landgrave and minnesingers when they draw swords on Tannhäuser in order to take vengeance on him for his crimes.

The overture finishes with the Pilgrims' Chorus which seems to voice Tannhäuser's final forgiveness.

Then performance we hear is by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Claudio Abbado. The Youtube link is:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvuj5bbwWbM

Lohengrin

A two sentence synopsis of the German legend of Lohengrin, that was made into a full-length opera by Richard Wagner, reads as follows:

A shining-knight arrives on a swan-driven boat to rescue a damsel-in-distress, who must promise never to ask for his true identity. After being rescued, she breaks her promise and the knight departs – never to be seen again.

The Lohengrin opera is significantly more involved than the 2 sentence summary above.

The story line for the opera Lohengrin, as envisioned by the composer and lyricist, Richard Wagner, develops over 3 full acts



ACT 1 The banks of the Scheldt River, in the 10th century, near the town of Antwerp, in present-day Belgium.



Elsa and Gottfried are sister and brother and heirs to the Duchy of Brabant. Gottfried has disappeared. Elsa is accused of murdering her brother Gottfried by Count Frederick von Telramund.

King Heinrich of Saxony presides over a medieval court which relies on God's divine intervention to decide innocence or guilt.

As Elsa, the accused, prays, a shining Knight appears in a boat drawn by a swan. The Knight announces that he has been sent in answer to Elsa's prayers. The Knight's mission is to prove Elsa's innocence.

At the Knight's request, Elsa must promise to never ask him to reveal his origins or his name. Obtaining Elsa's covenant, the Knight defeats Count Frederick von Telramund in combat. Elsa is declared innocent of murdering her brother Gottfried.

ACT 2 In the courtyard of the medieval Antwerp castle.

Count Frederick von Telramund, who accused Elsa is disgraced. He blames his wife Ortrud for his failure. Ortrud, in turn, invokes her pagan gods. She advises her husband, Fredrick von Telramund, that Elsa must be tricked into asking the Knight his name.

Ortrud and Frederick von Telramund conspire revenge and the downfall of Elsa and the Knight.

On the eve of the Knight's and Elsa's wedding, Ortrud taunts Elsa that she is planning to marry someone she doesn't know. Frederick von Telramund plots to take over the dukedom. Together, Ortrud and her husband Frederick accuse the Knight of practicing sorcery.

Elsa and the Knight marry in the cathedral.

ACT 3 The scene shifts to the bedchamber within the castle and then returns to the initial scene on the banks of the Scheldt River.

On the wedding night Elsa is overcome by doubts. She asks the Knight to disclose his name.

At sunrise all gather by the lake. The Knight reveals that he is Lohengrin, son of Parsifal, who protects the Holy Grail. Since his identity is now known, the Knight Lohengrin must return whence he came.



The boat drawn by the swan appears. The Knight Lohengrin prepares to depart.

Ortrud steps out and triumphantly declares that the swan is the missing Gottfried. Ortrud boasts that her pagan magic enchanted the young heir of the Duchy of Brabant.

Lohengrin prays. In answer to his prayers, a Dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, descends from above. Gazing at the Dove, Lohengrin loosens the chain that binds the swan to the boat.

The swan transforms into Gottfried of Brabant. Knight Lohengrin proclaims Gottfried the Duke of Brabant.

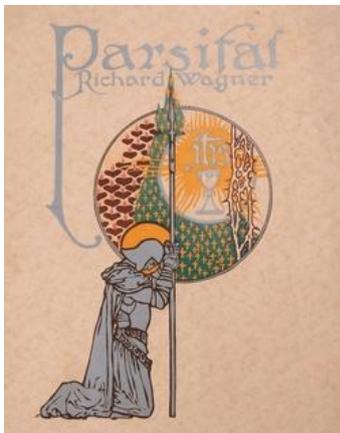
The Dove carries away the boat with the Knight Lohengrin. Elsa falls lifeless into her brother Gottfried's arms.

We watch the wedding scene at the conclusion of the Act 2 and the Prelude to Act 3 which includes the Bridal Chorus leading into the associated bedchamber scene as portrayed by Piotr Beczala as Lohengrin, Anna Netrebko as Elsa with the Dresden Staatskapelle conducted by Christian Thielemann.

The Youtube link for the complete opera (well over 3 hrs in length) is:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeBOfAXpojI&t=9599s

The wedding scene occurs at 2 hours 23 minutes 50 into the opera and the Bridal Chorus and bedchamber scene at 2 hours 31 minutes 15.



Parsifal

The story of Parsifal

The story of Parsifal and the Holy Grail has survived in several forms that date from between 1170 and 1220. Wagner used a mixture of several of these versions of the story to fit his ideas for the opera.

Parsifal is a young man who is a “pure fool”, which means that he is an innocent and good man who slowly starts to understand the world.

The Holy Grail is the cup from which Jesus Christ is supposed to have drunk at the Last Supper.

The Holy Spear is the spear which is supposed to have been the one with which the Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side when he was put on the cross.

The Holy Grail and the Holy Spear are sacred relics which have been given to Titirel and his band of Christian knights to look after.

Titirel has built a castle, Montsalvat, high up on the forest rocks, to guard them. In particular, he has to watch out for Klingsor who lives nearby.

Klingsor is a magician who has a garden full of beautiful flower-maidens. These maidens are in his power. One of them is Kundry. She has already been made to lure several young knights to Klingsor's power. Even Titirel's son, Amfortas, could not resist the lure of Kundry.

The sacred spear he was holding was taken from him and he was badly wounded before being rescued.



At the beginning of the opera he is lying in pain. The only thing that could heal the wound would be the touch of the Holy Spear which Klingsor now has, and the only person who could get that spear back again is a “pure fool”, a young man who knows nothing about the evil of the world and who can resist the beauty of the flower-maidens.

A young man, Parsifal, arrives on the scene having innocently killed a sacred swan. He is taken prisoner by knights who ask him his name, but Parsifal says he does not know his name or where he comes from. Suddenly the knights realize that Parsifal is the pure fool they need who can capture the Holy Spear.

The scene changes. The knights take communion.. When the Holy Grail is shown it sparkles brightly in the hall. The knights sink to their knees. Only Parsifal does not seem to understand the meaning of it all.

Parsifal goes off in search of the sacred spear. Klingsor sees him coming and throws the spear at Parsifal, but magically it stops over Parsifal's head. Parsifal grabs it and makes the sign of the cross. The castle is destroyed, the gardens disappear, and he goes off back to the Grail.

After a journey which takes him many years Parsifal comes back to the Grail forest. He becomes a Knight of the Grail and baptizes Kundry. Titurel has just died, and Amfortas, still in terrible pain, comes out to uncover the Grail. Parsifal enters and touches the wound with the point of the spear. Amfortas's pain changes to happiness, the shrine is opened, the Grail is surrounded by light. The knights kneel down, Kundry dies peacefully. All is forgiven. The music finishes with a climax based on the leitmotifs of the Holy Grail and the Sacrament.

(Acknowledgement: Wikipedia).

The Prelude to Act 1



The prelude is based in three of the most deeply religious motives in the entire work. It opens with the Motive of the Sacrament, over which, when it is repeated, arpeggios hover as you might see in religious paintings of old masters where angel forms float above the figure of the Virgin or a saint.

Through this motive we gain an insight the office of the Knights of the Grail, who from time to time strengthen themselves for their spiritual duties by partaking of Holy Communion once the Grail is uncovered.

This motive leads into the Grail Motive (the so-called 'Dresden Amen'). Here the music swells to forte and then dies away in ethereal harmonies, like the soft light with which the Grail illuminates the hall in which the knight gather for worship.

The trumpets then announce the Motive of Faith – severe but sturdy. The Grail motive is heard again and then the motive of faith is repeated, its severity softened so that it conveys a sense of peace which “passes all understanding”.

The rest of the Prelude is agitated. That portion of the Motive of the Sacrament which appears later as the Spear Motive here assumes through a slight change a deeply sad character, and becomes atypical throughout the work of the sorrow wrought by Amfortas' crime.

Thus the Prelude depicts both the religious duties which play so prominent a part in the drama, and the unhappiness which Amfortas' sinful forgetfulness of these duties has brought upon himself and his knights.

(Acknowledgement: Kobbés Complete Opera Book)

The performance we hear is by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andres Orozco-Estrada, in the historic (12th century) Eberbach Abbey (now secularised) in The Rheingau, Germany. The Youtube link is:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oxtopvf000

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg ("The Master Singers of Nuremberg")

Wagner's grand opera in three acts, his only attempt at comedy, is rich in melody and takes as its subject the joyful art of songwriting itself, and the battle between tradition and novelty.

Completed in 1867 and first performed the following year, the action of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg revolves around a singing contest and the question of what makes a good song. The opera reveals Wagner's bright, joyful, and humorous side—qualities we don't often see in his works. There are no curses, love potions, or murders this time, only a story of rivalry between a good and a bad singer (Walther von Stolzing and Sixtus Beckmesser, respectively) for the hand of a lovely maiden (Eva Pogner). The wise poet Hans Sachs harbours tender feelings for Eva, but willingly steps aside in favour of his young friend Walther. (Sachs, a cobbler and poet, was a historical figure who lived in Nuremberg in the 16th century; many of his works have been preserved.)

Plot in a nutshell



Midsummer's eve, Nuremberg in the 16th century.

The story revolves around the real-life cobbler-poet Hans Sachs and the guild of mastersingers – poets and musicians who pursue their craft according to traditions and rules. A goldsmith's daughter, Eva, and a knight, Walther von Stolzing, fall in love, but Eva's father has promised her to the winner in the forthcoming song contest. Walther must learn the mastersinger's art rapidly,

under the wise tuition of Sachs (considered Wagner's most generous and human character) – and despite a challenge from the foolish town clerk Beckmesser.

Beckmesser is considered by some scholars as a Jewish stereotype and a manifestation of Wagner's anti-semitism, a matter for ongoing debate. The "problem" of Die Meistersinger is how to handle Sachs's final hymn to unsullied German art. This was, perhaps not surprisingly, Hitler's favourite opera. The prelude to Act III was used in *Triumph of the Will*, the 1935 film by Leni Riefenstahl, leading to an association of the work with Nazism. Recent productions have attempted to redeem it as one of Wagner's most approachable, tuneful and likeable works.

The Prelude anticipates four of the opera's main melodies. After devoting a separate section to each of them, Wagner ingeniously combines the four in a final section where they can all be heard simultaneously.

The first two themes are associated with the guild of the master singers. The first a march and the second a fanfare, they are heard throughout the opera whenever Hans Sachs and the other masters enter as a group or the guild is mentioned. The third theme is a variant of the song with which Walther wins the singing contest and, with it, Eva's hand. Finally, the fourth theme is introduced in conjunction with a funny, irreverent version of the master singers' melody as the apprentices imitate the masters and poke fun at them. This episode alludes to the scene in Act III where Beckmesser presents himself as a contender in the singing contest while people in the audience shake their heads in disapproval: *Scheint mir nicht der Rechte* ("Doesn't seem the right one to me"). The combination of these four themes brings the prelude to a glorious climax that, in the opera, leads directly into the beginning of Act I (the congregation singing a chorale in church).

It is performed here by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Klaus Tennstedt.

The Youtube link is:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HERC_gBldA



Tristan and Isolde

Tristan and Isolde's love is more than a mere anecdote. Behind the lover's smouldering eyes and impatient flesh, their ecstatic contemplation of each other aspires to a union that can only exist in the afterlife. By probing the depths of the night, love and death, Wagner explores the mystic incarnation of unadulterated passion. It is the most

full-blooded opera in the repertoire and the apotheosis of musical drama.

Summary

When Tristan brings princess Isolde on his ship to Cornwall, where she is to marry his uncle, King Marke, she becomes irritated by his apparent indifference to her. In fact they are passionately in love, but their relationship is doomed. By substituting a love potion for the poison Isolde and Tristan intend to drink, Isolde's maid, Brangäne, only revives their love and it is in this ecstatic state that they arrive in Cornwall. Despite Isolde's marriage to Marke, the lovers' passion secretly unfolds, until one day they are discovered. Marke feels betrayed and becomes distraught at Tristan's behaviour. Mortally wounded by Melot, King Marke's vassal, who Kurwenal, Tristan's servant, kills in turn, Tristan dies in Isolde's arms. The princess collapses beside her deceased lover and they are reunited in their "love death", the only possible outcome for their mystic union.

Act 1

Aboard his ship, Tristan, and his servant Kurwenal, are bringing the Irish princess Isolde to Cornwall, where she has been promised in marriage to King Marke. While the pair are passionately in love with each other, Isolde is annoyed by Tristan's feigned indifference to her. She explains to her maid, Brangäne, the hopeless state of their relationship.

Isolde orders Brangäne to prepare a deadly brew for Tristan and her to drink, but the maid replaces the poison with a love potion. As the lovers drink, convinced they will surely die, they are consumed with relentless love.

Act 2

During a royal hunt, Tristan and Isolde secretly meet in the castle, while Brangäne keeps watch. Isolde is now married to King Marke. A feverish duet ensues, during which the lovers revel in their passion and declare that only in the long night of death can they be eternally united.

Brangäne warns Tristan and Isolde that the night is ending, but the lovers forget about the world around them. They are surprised by King Marke, who has suddenly returned. In a poignant monologue, Marke expresses his dismay at being betrayed by Tristan.

Act 3

Melot, King Marke's vassal, mortally wounds Tristan. Kurwenal watches over him as he slowly perishes, suffering as well from Isolde's absence. When the princess finally arrives, it is too late and Tristan dies in her arms. Only in the long night of death can Isolde join Tristan in his Liebestod or "love death".

We listen to the final scene –Liebestod (Love/Death) with Waltraud Meier as Isolde and Rene Kollo as Tristan.



The Youtube link is: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjAcVg675ws