

# RICHARD WAGNER

# DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG

Albert Dohmen  
Dietrich Henschel  
Edith Haller  
Robert Dean Smith  
Michelle Breedt  
Georg Zeppenfeld  
Peter Sonn

Rundfunkchor Berlin  
Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin

Marek Janowski

Live recording  
of the concert performance  
in the Berlin Philharmonie  
on June 3, 2011



<b>Hans Sachs</b> , Schuster ( <i>cobbler</i> )	<b>Albert Dohmen</b> , baritone
<b>Veit Pogner</b> , Goldschmied ( <i>goldsmith</i> )	<b>Georg Zeppenfeld</b> , bass
<b>Kunz Vogelsang</b> , Kürschner ( <i>furrier</i> )	<b>Michael Smallwood</b> , tenor
<b>Konrad Nachtigall</b> , Spengler ( <i>tinsmith</i> )	<b>Sebastian Noack</b> , bass
<b>Sixtus Beckmesser</b> , Stadtschreiber ( <i>town clerk</i> )	<b>Dietrich Henschel</b> , bass
<b>Fritz Kothner</b> , Bäcker ( <i>baker</i> )	<b>Tuomas Pursio</b> , bass
<b>Balthasar Zorn</b> , Zinngießer ( <i>pewterer</i> )	<b>Jörg Schörner</b> , tenor
<b>Ulrich Eißlinger</b> , Würzkrämer ( <i>grocer</i> )	<b>Thomas Ebenstein</b> , tenor
<b>Augustin Moser</b> , Schneider ( <i>tailor</i> )	<b>Thorsten Scharnke</b> , tenor
<b>Hermann Ortel</b> , Seifensieder ( <i>soapmaker</i> )	<b>Tobias Berndt</b> , bass
<b>Hans Schwarz</b> , Strumpfwirker ( <i>stocking-weaver</i> )	<b>Hans-Peter Scheidegger</b> , bass
<b>Hans Foltz</b> , Kupferschmied ( <i>coppersmith</i> )	<b>Hyung-Wook Lee</b> , bass
<b>Walther von Stolzing</b> , ein junger Ritter aus Franken ( <i>A young knight from Franconia</i> )	<b>Robert Dean Smith</b> , tenor
<b>David, Sachsens</b> Lehrbube ( <i>Sachs's apprentice</i> )	<b>Peter Sonn</b> , tenor
<b>Eva</b> , Pogners Tochter ( <i>Pogner's daughter</i> )	<b>Edith Haller</b> , soprano
<b>Magdalene</b> , Evas Amme ( <i>Eva's nurse</i> )	<b>Michelle Breedt</b> , mezzo-soprano
<b>Ein Nachtwächter</b> ( <i>A night-watchman</i> )	<b>Matti Salminen</b> , bass

#### Lehrbuben (*Apprentices*)

Alt 1 - Christine Lichtenberg, Kristiina Mäkimattila, Tatjana Sotin

Alt 2 - Roksolana Chraniuk, Judith Simonis, Annerose Hummel

Tenor 1 - Christoph Leonhardt, Ulrich Löns, Norbert Sänger

Tenor 2 - Hans-Christian Braun, Robert Franke, Johannes Spranger

**Rundfunkchor Berlin** | Chorus Master: **Eberhard Friedrich**

**Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin** (Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin)

**Wolfgang Hentrich**, Concertmaster

**Robin Engelen**, Assistant conductor

conducted by **Marek Janowski**

Live recording of the concert performance in the Berlin Philharmonie on June 3, 2011

Executive producers: Stefan Lang, Maria Grätzel & Job Maarse

Recording producer: Job Maarse | Balance engineer: Jean-Marie Geijssen

Recording team: Wolfram Nehls, Ientje Mooij, Thomas Monnerjahn, Henri Thaon,

Johanna Vollus, Annerose Unger & Susanne Beyer

Editing: Ientje Mooij | Design: Netherlads

<b>Act 1</b>	<i>playing time</i>	<i>page</i>
1 Vorspiel ( <i>Prelude</i> )		8. 33
2 Da zu dir der Heiland kam ( <i>Chor/chorus</i> )		3. 20
3 Verweilt! Ein Wort ( <i>Walther, Eva, Magdalene, David</i> )		8. 46
4 David! Was stehst? ( <i>Lehrbuben/apprentices, David, Walther</i> )		1. 59
5 Mein Herr! Der Singer Meisterschlag ( <i>David, Walther</i> )		2. 57
6 Der Meister Tön' und Weisen ( <i>David, Walther, Lehrbuben/apprentices</i> )		10. 17
7 Seid meiner Treue wohl versehen ( <i>Pogner, Beckmesser, Walther, Sachs, Vogelsang, Nachtigall</i> )		4. 20
8 Zu einer Freiong ( <i>Kothner, Pogner, Vogelsang, Ortel, Zorn, Nachtigall, Moser, Lehrbuben/apprentices, David, Eißlinger, Foltz, Schwarz</i> )		2. 07
9 Nicht doch, ihr Meister ( <i>Pogner, Kothner, Lehrbuben/apprentices, Vogelsang, Sachs, Beckmesser</i> )		6. 53
10 Verzeiht, vielleicht schon ginget ihr zu weit ( <i>Sachs, Kothner, Beckmesser, Vogelsang, Nachtigall, Pogner</i> )		5. 14
11 Dacht ich mir's doch! ( <i>Beckmesser, Kothner, Pogner, Nachtigall, Sachs</i> )		2. 21
12 Am stillen Herd ( <i>Walther, Sachs, Beckmesser, Kothner, Vogelsang, Nachtigall</i> )		5. 01
13 Nun, Meister! Wenn's gefällt ( <i>Kothner, Walther, Beckmesser</i> )		2. 22
14 Was euch zum Liede Richt und Schnur ( <i>Kothner, Walther, Beckmesser</i> )		2. 38
15 Für dich, Geliebte, sei's getan – Fanget an! ( <i>Walther, Kothner, Beckmesser, Pogner, Ortel, Foltz, Moser, Nachtigall, Vogelsang, Zorn</i> )		5. 37
16 Halt, Meister! Nicht so geeilt! ( <i>Sachs, Beckmesser, Nachtigall, Kothner, Pogner, Lehrbuben/apprentices</i> )		7. 21

**Disc 2** (5186 419)

<b>Act 2</b>		
1 Johannistag! Johannistag! ( <i>Lehrbuben/apprentices, David, Magdalene, Sachs</i> )		3. 46
2 Laß sehn, ob Meister Sachs zu Haus? ( <i>Pogner, Eva, Magdalene, Sachs, David</i> )		6. 23
3 Was duftet doch der Flieder ( <i>Sachs</i> )		6. 08
4 Gut'n Abend, Meister! ( <i>Eva, Sachs, Magdalene</i> )		8. 09
5 Das dacht ich wohl ( <i>Sachs, Magdalene, Eva, Pogner</i> )		2. 03
6 Da ist er! ( <i>Eva, Magdalene, Walther</i> )		3. 48
7 Geliebter, spare den Zorn ( <i>Eva, Magdalene, Walther, Nachtwächter/night-watchman</i> )		1. 57
8 Üble Dinge, die ich da merk ( <i>Sachs, Walther, Eva, Nachtwächter/night-watchman</i> )		2. 36
9 Jerum! Jerum! ( <i>Sachs, Beckmesser, Walther, Eva</i> )		12. 30
10 Den Tag seh' ich erscheinen ( <i>Beckmesser, Sachs</i> )		5. 30

11 Mit den Schuhen ward ich fertig schier (Sachs, Beckmesser, David, Chor/chorus, Magdalene, Lehrbuben/apprentices, Pogner, Walther, Nachtwächter/night-watchman)	5. 39
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### Disc 3 (5186 420)

#### Act 3

1 Vorspiel (Prelude)	6. 02
2 Gleich, Meister! Hier! (David, Sachs)	7. 03
3 Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn! (Sachs)	7. 14
4 Grüß Gott, mein Junker (Sachs, Walther)	9. 03
5 Morgenlich leuchtend (Walther, Sachs)	10. 17
6 Ein Werbelied! Von Sachs! (Beckmesser, Sachs)	6. 13
7 Das Gedicht? Hier ließ ich's (Sachs, Beckmesser)	7. 17
8 Sieh, Evchen! Dacht ich's doch (Sachs, Eva, Walther)	5. 57
9 Hat man mit dem Schuhwerk (Sachs, Eva)	4. 11
10 Mein Kind, von Tristan und Isolde (Sachs)	3. 45

### Disc 4 (5186 421)

1 Die 'selige Morgentraum – Deutweise' (Sachs)	1. 09
2 Selig, wie die Sonne (Eva, Magdalene, Walther, David, Sachs)	4. 38
3 Sankt Krispin, lobet ihn! (Chor/chorus, Lehrbuben/apprentices)	5. 01
4 Ihr tanzt (David, Lehrbuben/apprentices, Chor/chorus)	5. 42
5 Wacht auf! Es naht gen den Tag (Chor/chorus)	2. 06
6 Euch macht ihr's leicht (Sachs, Pogner, Beckmesser, Kothner, Chor/chorus, Lehrbuben/apprentices)	7. 02
7 Morgen ich leuchte (Beckmesser, Chor/chorus, Kothner, Nachtigall, Vogelsang, Ortel, Foltz, Sachs, Lehrbuben/apprentices)	8. 12
8 Morgenlich leuchtend (Walther, Chor/chorus, Sachs, Pogner, Eva)	7. 33
9 Verachtet mir die Meister nicht (Sachs, Chor/chorus)	3. 57
10 Ehrt eure deutschen Meister (Chor/chorus)	1. 56

Total playing time disc 1:	79.54
Total playing time disc 2:	67.25
Total playing time disc 3:	58.34
Total playing time disc 4:	47.22
Total playing time:	4.13.15

### Plot: Nuremberg, in the mid-16th century

#### Act 1

Walther von Stolzing, a young nobleman from Franconia, has travelled to Nuremberg, in order to become a citizen and member of the urban community. In the house of the goldsmith, Veit Pogner, he spontaneously falls in love with his daughter Eva. Finding it hard to constrain himself according to etiquette, he finally asks Eva bluntly if she is already betrothed at the conclusion of a church service. Her father, Pogner, has already hinted at the response, declaring in public that whoever sings best at the singing competition on the following St. John's day may ask for the hand of his daughter. If accepted, the lucky suitor will not only be entitled to marry the fair maiden, but also to inherit the goldsmith's impressive fortune. And Eva has also fallen for Walther's charms. He now decides to do whatever is necessary to win the prize, even though he has had no previous experience with the art of the Meistersinger (= mastersinger). At the urgent request of Eva's nurse, Magdalene, the young cobbler David (who is an apprentice of Hans Sachs as well as Magdalene's lover), bombards the poor knight with the intricate rules of the Meistersinger profession.

Even before he has finished his lecture, the Meistersinger gather

in the church to prepare the St. John's day celebrations. In a long-winded manner, they ensure that each member is present. Once again, Pogner solemnly establishes the live (as well as the material) prize for the singing contest. Newcomer Walther boldly requests permission to participate in the contest, much to the delight of Pogner. With due severity, Master Fritz Kothner once again informs the courageous candidate on the rules of the "Tabulatur" (= law-book of the guild). But basically, all the Meistersinger present doubt his suitability, apart from one: Hans Sachs, the cobbler and respected poet. He wishes to hear Walther's song. Thus, a "marker" is summoned to chalk up on his "marker board" the errors and violations of the rules committed by the young knight. The marker for the audition is the town clerk, Sixtus Beckmesser, himself a secret contender for the prize. Walther starts singing, improvising as he goes along, and the marker chalks up one violation after the other. His song is almost drowned out in the turmoil, especially as Sachs subsequently makes the heretical suggestion that the people – not just the guild of the Meistersinger – should be allowed to choose the winner the following day. Hot tempers aroused, the masters immediately crush Sachs' suggestion. In the same breath, they dismiss Walther. He has "versungen und vertan" (= his song was out-of-tune and botched up).

#### Act 2

An intrigue is required. Ironically, it is the venerable Sachs who hatches a plot to aid Walther and Eva, after overcoming the temptation of courting the young woman himself as consolation for his widower state. Eva's naive eroticism and Sachs' courageous self-denial form an essential message of the opera. Sachs gives Walther a chance; but first, he manages to prevent the two young lovers from eloping, which would have caused a scandal. Then another would-be suitor arrives on the scene, Beckmesser, just in time. He is sneaking through the alley where the Pogners also live, in order to try out his song in advance on Eva, as it were. However, she manages to avoid the irksome serenade: earlier on, she had stationed her confidante Magdalene at her window in her place, in disguise. While working (on Beckmesser's shoes!), neighbour Sachs is disturbed by the man's singing. Thus he himself starts singing as loudly as he can, finally making a deal with the poor devil: he would hold his tongue if allowed to mark Beckmesser's attempt. But Sachs does not use chalk to mark; he hammers the soles of the shoes at every fault. This is turning out to be a fine song! The situation becomes critical. In his desperate attempt to drown Sachs out, the lovesick fool Beckmesser is disturbing the calm of the night by screeching at the wrong Eva

[accompanied by a “steel harp”, as Wagner named it). David thinks his Magdalene is being besieged by Beckmesser. Sachs hammers away lustily. The good townsfolk jump out of bed, dashing into the streets, where they start creating absolute havoc, beating wildly at one another. Eva slips back into her father’s house, and Walter escapes to Sachs’ domicile. The night watchman’s horn finally puts an end to the ruckus.

### Act 3

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D-day is dawning. In Hans Sachs’s house, a song is produced early in the morning, based on a loving scene that appeared in Walther von Stolzing’s dream the previous night. With the aid of the poet-cobbler, it is turned into a masterpiece, fully in accordance with the rules of the guild. There is a good balance between individual creativity and craftsmanship. Enthusiastically, Sachs scribbles down the song invented by his chivalrous student. As soon as they finish, Beckmesser appears. The unfortunate man is covered in scratches and plans to complain about his colleague’s ruse the previous night. Discovering the recently completed poem, he believes the old man Sachs to be setting himself up as a rival. In his turn, Sachs catches out the town clerk in an attempt to steal the paper. Instead of demanding its return, he generously allows the pathetic clerk to keep the song, and even gives him permission to perform it at the festival. Confident of victory, Beckmesser departs with the song he believes to have been written by Sachs. First Eva and Walther, then also Magdalene and David praise the great Meistersinger Sachs and sing of the pure love they feel for him. Showering his apprentice with roughly affectionate blows, Sachs promotes him to journeyman, and baptizes Walther’s inspiration as “the blessed morning dream-interpretation melody”.

The various guilds and the Meistersinger begin to gather at the festival site. Hans Sachs is duly honoured as the spokesman. Then Beckmesser turns up to sing his song. He stumbles and bungles his way through the strange song, which he clearly does not understand. The people deride the hopelessly disgraced man. Now the way is clear for Walther von Stolzing. All present fall under the spell of his song, both the Meistersinger and the people, and most importantly of all, Eva. The young man happily accepts the victor’s prize, but rejects the title of Meistersinger. However, Hans Sachs vividly evokes the worthiness of art and its corresponding responsibilities; and thus, the aristocratic rebel finally joins the guild of the commoners.

### Wrong Conclusion

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*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* [= the Mastersingers of Nuremberg]. An opera in three acts. Is it a bourgeois parody of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or of the Minnesinger contest at Wartburg? Initially, Wagner had intended his *Meistersinger* to serve as a kind of satyr play to his *Tannhäuser*. But quite soon he realized that it would not work out as such and bring him any joy. Even to him, it was only too obvious that irony is “the last manifestation of the hedonistic desire that wishes to become reconciled to an environment of triviality” (Wagner, “A communication to my friends”, 1851). Indeed, it would be most absurd to imply that the *Meistersinger* and its pseudo-medieval spinner of yarns Richard Wagner were “funny”. Unless one enjoys laughing out loud at the tragedy of an unhappy man; or joining in with the oh-so seducible “common” folk (and their equally “common” habits), whom Wagner first caricatures as an “undignified” rabble indulging in an orgy of violence, and subsequently celebrates – while yet in a state of arousal – as the “dignified” citizens of Nuremberg at the festival site; or contributing to the shameless derision of the people towards the predetermined loser Beckmesser, joining in the mischievous joy at the successful intrigue of Hans Sachs, or agreeing with the self-complacent chauvinism of Veit Pagner. However, it is strangely odd that, for once, Wagner does not doom the two protagonists Eva and Walther to a tragic ending.

### Sheer malice

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What exactly is the narrow-mindedly bourgeois, historically romantic, playful love drama about mastersingers and poets doing in the midst of *Tristan* and *The Ring*? Undoubtedly, the *Meistersinger* possesses a hearty earthiness, unlike any other music-theatrical work by Wagner. But for precisely that reason, it has always provided a “highly welcome opportunity for ideological alienation and caricaturing” (Bayerischer Rundfunk), it is particularly easy for people to underestimate the work, with the best of intentions, as a simple, unsophisticated comedy, or likewise, to dangerously exaggerate it as a “*Stahlbad* (= steel bath) in C major” (Hans Richter), in the sense of a nationalistic German blood-and-soil ceremony. Ever since its première in 1868, any staging of the work is received in either one of the two above-mentioned manners, with only a very few exceptions. For example, Frank Piontek – a philologist, not even a professional musician – made the following remark in 2010: “Yes, there are objectively, i.e. verifiably false interpretations of the work that occur whenever the director

disregards the ambiguities, the conflict of emotions, and whenever the most important factor – the music – is ignored, in favour of a mere idea. After all, as clearly demonstrated by the most varied interpretations, the music still contains that essential strength, humour and magic, that profundity, which exposes all vacuous interpretations from the outset.”

In the *Meistersinger*, Richard Wagner provides a kind of self-explanation. But does he not do just that in all his works? However, the difference here is that he clearly believes that the seemingly specifically historical Nuremberg opera allows him to enter a field that is more accessible to the public than the psychological dramas in his remaining oeuvre, which contain little actual action. Nevertheless, his *Meistersinger* is an enigmatic work. Or rather, its multiple, conflicting layers and network of characters and situations will never permit a clear and simple division between good and evil. (The fact that this is still attempted with great persistence in various productions of the work in no way alters Wagner’s original intentions.) Thus, with its subtle musical characterization, the *Meistersinger* is totally on a par with its fellow operas and certainly no less serious a work.

### Cross-references

The references to the song contest at Wartburg are evident at first glance, regardless of the differences between the world of *Tannhäuser* and *Stolzing/Sachs* on the one hand, or that of *Elisabeth/Venus* and *Eva* on the other. Wagner himself made the allusion to *Tristan und Isolde* in the libretto and the music of *Die Meistersinger*, even if the replication of the role of King Marke was basically off-target. For Sachs was not in the same situation as King Marke: at best, he should perhaps be considered a kind of *Tristan*: yet, a *Tristan* who is doomed to live, doomed to “normalcy”. The love at first sight experienced by *Eva* and *Walther*, the manner in which fate destined each for the other naturally reminds one of *Elsa* and *Lohengrin*, of *Sieglinde* and *Siegfried*, of *Brunnhilde* and *Siegfried*, of *Senta* and the Dutchman, who in their turn have a role model in *Pamina* and *Tamino*. And finally *Parsifal*, who consciously abstains from the mental anguish of physical love, is an “up-dated” version of *Hans Sachs*. Let us just fleetingly touch upon the “*Deutschmeisterei*” (*Deutschmeister* = grand master of the Teutonic Order) here, at the very end of the opera, which was inserted at a later date (in 1867). It has two polemic cores, both of an artistic nature. On the one hand, *Wagner-Sachs* defends the flagging German art against the powers of attraction exerted by popular Italian and French opera. This may well have been an appropriate stance, given the situation at the time in Germany: the country was divided into many small states, each

with their own political squabbles, which were also responsible for holding back the development of art. “As a national opera, Wagner’s *Meistersinger* is a document of the German sense of inferiority,” (Egon Voss). On the other hand, Sachs-Wagner uses his influence specifically – and quite selfishly – in order to implement a fascinating and devious substitution of the “versungen und vertan” [= out-of-tune and botched-up] political (and religious) structures by artistic structures. “The German spirit meant everything to him, the German state nothing,” (Thomas Mann, 1937). And, indeed, all this would become even more obvious later on with the construction of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, and the messages passed on through *Parsifal* and the *Ring* tetralogy.

### **The true Nuremberg**

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In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Nuremberg was Germany’s third largest town, with about 30,000 residents, a thriving trade centre in a strategic location. It had a powerful town council (which in Wagner’s opera is portrayed only as a shadow of itself in the person of the town clerk, Beckmesser) and a tightly run community (in which a punch-up like the one described in *Die Meistersinger* would have been unthinkable). Furthermore, the artisans were not organized in guilds in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Nuremberg. In 1530, the real poet Hans Sachs himself described Nuremberg as follows: “In this city there is / A prudent and wise council, / That reigns so prudently / And ordains everything so subtly.” Instead, Wagner elevates the Assembly of the Meistersinger to a patriarchal authority and ignores political power, both secular and sacred: for instance, there is no minister present at the church service in the opening scene. He bases the Meistersinger act on the *Sechseläuten*, a traditional spring holiday festival in Zurich. And a personal experience in Nuremberg in 1835, as well as various carnival traditions about which he had read, served as model for the fight scene. On the whole, books were his main source of information, although he permitted himself a certain artistic freedom as soon as something basically began to interest him.

After completing *Tannhäuser* in the summer of 1845, Wagner travelled to Marienbad in Bohemia for some rest and recuperation. However, leisure did not agree with him, and in no time, he set to work on *Die Meistersinger*, followed immediately by the drafting of *Lohengrin* and extensive preparations for the *Ring des Nibelungen*. Basically, he sketched out all these works in 1845 in Marienbad, and would continue to refine their details until the day he died. However,

*Die Meistersinger* was put on a back-burner for 16 years, until November 1861, when it suddenly took on a specific form, and was given a second and third prose draft. “I decided to elaborate the details of the *Meistersinger*,” thus Wagner wrote tersely in his autobiography. There is a story behind this, and it is closely connected to Wagner’s life.

### **Key figure Mathilde**

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Wagner would have us believe that he made his decision regarding *Die Meistersinger* in Venice in 1861, right in front of Titian’s painting *The Assumption of the Virgin* – and in the presence of Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck. The trip was a generous attempt by the Wesendoncks to resolve the tensions that had existed since Wagner’s enforced renunciation in 1859 of Matilda, his “first and only love ... highlight of my life,” as the composer wrote to Eliza Wille on June 5, 1863. Nevertheless, Wagner was feeling out of sorts and not in the mood to be impressed by the works of art: however, he was taken with the “Assumption”. Perhaps he had just discovered that Mathilde was expecting her fifth child, which could only mean one thing: after the long-lasting “Tristan and Isolde-type frenzy”, Matilda had finally returned to “normal life” as mother of the Wesendonck children. And there was only one way for Wagner to protect himself against the self-destructive frustration caused by the break-up: renunciation. He was inspired by the Virgin Mary – who symbolizes “all that is pure and unselfish, all that is divine love” (Peter Wapnewski) – to transform *Die Meistersinger* from a silly comedy into a truly purifying satyr play.

### **Hans Sachs**

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The catalyst in this transformation was Hans Sachs: in fact, to a greater extent, Wagner’s self-identification with the Nuremberg cobbler-poet. When towards the end of 1861 Mathilde Wesendonck returned to him their 1845 draft libretto of *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner remarked that “the old concept offered little, or perhaps nothing at all.” This is not a matter of vanity, it is due to the increase in significance that he had since imputed to the role of Sachs. In order to “save himself from his wretched existence” (as he wrote in retrospect in 1866), Wagner went into an immediate frenzy of creation. In the train returning from Venice to Vienna, he outlined the prelude to Act I and promoted Sachs from a mere puppet master to the affected party. Not until 1861 did Wagner incorporate the love felt by Hans Sachs for Eva Pogner into his plans for *Die Meistersinger*. Its purpose was to compensate artistically for finally losing Mathilde to Otto Wesendonck,

a fact of which Wagner was well aware. To quote Eva Rieger (2009, 110): “There was no sense in being furious with Otto Wesendonck as an alleged rival – that way, he would just destroy his own life, achieving nothing other than despair. If, however, he were to reinterpret the act of renunciation as a personal initiative, this process would acquire a heroic trait. A woman who absconds to a rival lover injures a man’s pride and damages his self-esteem: however, the act of resignation, of withdrawing voluntarily from a relationship – while fully aware of still being loved – could result in an uplifting experience. Being rejected by Mathilde would have been tantamount to a blow to his virility; however, rejecting her himself gave him a certain strength. He wrote to her as follows while drafting the text for the opera: ‘You will not believe how much better I now feel, knowing that you know that I know what you have known for such a long time now!’ This probably refers to his certainty of still being loved by her.”

Later, Wagner time and again identified himself specifically with his poet by signing his letters and notes as “Sachs”. If Mathilde Wesendonck were no longer amenable to Wagner’s active love, then the entire concept of the “purified” Sachs – and especially his personification in Wagner’s incomparable music – makes the prediction made to her by the composer at the end of 1861 most plausible: “Brace yourself against Sachs: you will fall in love with him!”

To the artist/father-figure Sachs, conservatively traditional yet also inquisitive in his role as the guiding intellectual force of the Meistersinger guild (equally prepared to verbally or literally box the ears of whoever was around), Wagner had now added the role of family/father-figure Sachs, who sublimates his love for Eva into a father-daughter relationship (by comparison, making the biological father Pogner pale into significance), who treats his apprentice David with kindness, and behaves like a father towards Walther von Stolzing. This inner maturation process of Hans Sachs occurs mainly during the rather private second act of *Die Meistersinger*, so that whereas the grand public celebration of his person in the third act is understandable to the Wagner aficionado, this appears as slightly lacking in motivation as far as the cheering crowds are concerned. Why are Fritz Kothner, spokesman for the Meistersinger, or Veit Pogner, generous sponsor of the prizes, not being honoured? Apparently, despite all his meticulous attention to detail, Wagner abstained from pedantry in his plot – in order to duly place Hans Sachs, his own artistic alter-ego, in the limelight.

### **Walther von Stolzing**

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He came, saw, fell in love, and wanted to win. But first of all, he



has to sing. Walther von Stolzing has no real interest in the master-singing, basically he just wants to obtain the prize. In this respect, he differs little from today's "Idol" candidates on television. But he is really highly creative – and as such, Wagner can identify with him: for Stolzing's fresh approach to matters, his demand for changes to traditions and customs (after having studied them thoroughly) – all this was of explosive, yes, of existential concern to Wagner.

Wagner studied various books in order to familiarize himself with the rules of the Meistersinger profession. On the whole, he claims to have borrowed the authentic "Töne" (= melodies) with their names, but most especially the strophic form of the "Bar" (= poem in musical AAB form). These were explained to Walther on three different occasions in the opera: first of all, by David in a truly confusing manner; then by Kothner in an admonitory tone, and finally, by Sachs with purposeful precision. Nevertheless, one can see that Wagner approaches the subject with a healthy amount of ironic humour. The same applies to the frequently invoked counterpoint technique, allegedly established by Johann Sebastian Bach. Apart from the fact that, in the middle of the 16th century – in other words, when Wagner's opera was supposed to be taking place – it would be some 200 years before Bach even established himself as a composer – Wagner's supposed Bach adaptations sound more like incorrectly understood style quotes. Let there be no misunderstanding: Wagner's writing was of the highest level, his counterpoint is at all times dazzling and exuberantly imaginative, for instance, when he is caricaturing Beckmesser as an "inartistic pedant" (Egon Voss). However, it all has little to do with Bach (who was only redeemed to the world of music thanks to Mendelssohn in 1829). After all, neither does the painting by Albrecht Dürer of David and Goliath mentioned in the text really exist.

Walther claims to have learned his art from birds and nature itself. The (only) mention of a real troubadour as an, as it were, spiritual ancestor of the former nobleman Walter is accompanied by his claim of receiving instruction from nature itself. Then follows Walther's first song: an improvisation at his own discretion. Stolzing the nobleman proves himself to be the epitome of the liberally independent thinking and feeling bourgeois citizen. By contrast, the bourgeois Meistersinger behave in a conservatively aristocratic manner. One of Wagner's most brilliant musical chess moves is the clearly audible development of Walther's formal artistry. His "Lenz" song sounds freely rhapsodic, yet already contains the nuclei of his later Meisterlied. The Meisterlied itself literally "outgrows" itself, spreading itself from the cobbler's parlour right up to the festival site. In between, the brilliant parody written by Wagner for Beckmesser on Walter's

competition song is given free reign. Although the music here (as opposed to *Tristan*) is still written in a generally harmonious and sonorous manner, Wagner pioneers the use of both augmented and diminished chords in the score with hitherto unprecedented boldness.

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#### Bachelor Beckmesser

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The town clerk is having a hard time living up to his image as the only intellectual (!) in the opera and, apparently, in the whole of Nuremberg. Wagner does not explain in any way his official position as "marker" (moaner?): in fact, whatever the marker marks up as mistakes by Walther appears to be almost arbitrary. Yet, there is no question about it, Walther is making one mistake after the other! With undisguised malice, Wagner immediately uses a scattering of instruments in the prelude to depict a short-winded little feller, a thinly concealed musical portrayal of a critic. Because that was the person Wagner was targeting. Up until the third draft libretto of 1861, Sixtus Beckmesser was still known as "Veit Hanslich". But probably even Wagner considered the similarity of this surname with that of the leading Viennese critic (and Brahmsian) of the day, Eduard Hanslick, to be too blatantly obvious.

Beckmesser immediately recognizes Walther as a rival, and uses his position to eliminate him. Whether he uses or abuses it, depends on the perspective of the observer. Without further support, he comes up with Hans Sachs as confidante. But the latter decides to take revenge in a very ungallant manner for Beckmesser's chalking up of the mistakes the previous day, and really humiliates him. Despite systematically stylizing himself as a do-gooder, Sachs is quick to beat not only upon Beckmesser's shoes, but also his soul. Beckmesser, torn between last-minute nerves, vanity and self-doubt, is taken in by the deceptive gift of a new song by Sachs. If not his hesitant performance, then surely his slavish, monotonous coloratura in which his voice is continually breaking, interspersed with embarrassed *fermatas*, his helpless chirping on the "steel harp" (lute), his absurd mangling of the text should have been enough to awaken Wagner's noblest sentiments, i.e. compassion. But we have not yet arrived at *Parsifal*. Beckmesser discovers how it feels when the howling masses find a victim. He will probably keep his tail between his legs from now onwards.

Occasional parallels can be found between the role of the marker and the anti-Semitic fairytale "The Jew in the thorn-bush" by the Grimm brothers. There, the Jew is forced to dance to a magic violin, and is unable to stop even after getting caught up in a thorn-bush. In the libretto, Beckmesser's "marking" is

compared to a thorn-bush. But was Wagner aware of the fairytale? No matter. Malice, cruelty, envy among people: all the truly normal insanity from time immemorial are portrayed here.

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#### Pogner, Kothner and the "small" Meistersinger

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During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the art of the Baroque era and its music was idealized as a "bastion of masculinity" (Eva Rieger). Wagner took advantage of this stereotyping by specifically vesting the German men (naturally, there were no female Meistersinger) with distinguished insignia such as majesty, grandeur, strength of mind; but also with art, crafts, wisdom and creativity. He achieved this by deploying pseudo-Bach-like and Baroque stylistic elements, embedding them in a monumental musical entourage.

Wagner was always careful to maintain a balance between dignity and comedy, between that which is worth preserving and that which can be discarded. For on the one hand, he lets the Meistersinger, despite being restricted by traditional rules and regulations, fall for Walther's innovations: and on the other, he needed sufficient reason for Walther to join them at the end – and for both concert hall and festival audiences, together with Hans Sachs, to then honour the German masters. The Meistersinger prove themselves to be guardians of their own privileges, they guarantee the preservation of an elitist group. Well, surely that merits a bow! Pugnacious as ever, Friedrich Nietzsche got to the heart of the balancing act between the ambivalent poles: "What a mix of power and energy, seasons and climes we have here! At times, it strikes us as antiquated, at others strange, harsh and over-young; it is both arbitrary and pompously conventional; often mischievous, but even more often coarse and gross – it possesses fire and courage, yet also the slack, fallow peel of a fruit that is late in maturing. [...] All in all, no beauty, no south, nothing of the brightness of the sky in the south, nothing of grace, no dancing, scarcely even an intent at logic; a certain crudity, even [...] something arbitrarily barbaric and ceremonious; [...] something German in the best and worst sense of the word" (in "Jenseits von Gut und Böse" = Beyond Good and Evil).

Erudition and banality, these are the supporting pillars of performances of *Die Meistersinger*. The elaborate introductory ceremony carried out by the Meistersinger already speaks volumes – it should be easy enough to discover whether one person is missing in a circle of just 12 participants, all of whom are well acquainted with one another. Series of quavers attain a certain fussiness. Pompous final

cadenzas are totally out of proportion to the preceding words. Serious or fun? Wagner leaves it unanswered, a brilliant stroke. Only Pogner acquires a certain individuality in his part. However, he is also concerned with a very personal matter, which fills him with such pride and joy that he never even notices how he shames his daughter by peddling her like goods for sale. Daland does exactly the same with Senta. After all, it was customary practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### David and Magdalene

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The role allotted to Sachs' apprentice David is not particularly small. Free of any class constraints, approaching life's various situations in a refreshing manner, not yet settled down, he does not have to be perfect, and can allow himself (almost) anything. Here, the apprentice instructs the proud-hearted knight – how ironical. There, he gushes over his master – who is not even listening, but that does not matter either. There again, he can choose whether he wishes to enjoy Magdalene's favours – great, when you have no responsibilities. Cleverly, Wagner introduces him right at the beginning with a play on words, first as the spirited slayer of Goliath and then as the loud-mouth head of the guild of rascals. He is, of course, right in the thick of the legendary fight scene.

Together, David and the shrewd Magdalene – Eva's former nanny (as one would probably call her today) represent the role of sympathisers and catalysts (as far as the action is concerned) from the lower class – in other words, Wagner's "carbon copy" of Mozart's Papageno and Papagena.

### Eva

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Compared to the strongly masculine traits, "characteristics qualified as dainty, dilly-dallying, amorous, wheedling (and you might add: the sensually feminine) are given short shrift" (Eva Rieger). Paradoxically, in the *Meistersinger*, Wagner does not personify these characteristics in the role of Eva, who consciously oscillates between the heavenly and the earthly, between the pure and the sinful, but in Beckmesser and the phantom of the "Welsch". But nevertheless Eva continues to be represent a fantasy of masculine desire. Her father Pogner is visibly satisfied when she answers him as follows: "An obedient child speaks only when so requested." The men carry out the action, she is

the prize to be won, the object to be wooed and contested. Forms of address such as "Evchen" and "child" still sound harmless.

Eva's melodies bear the signature of all that is fanciful, timid, finite, chit-chattering. Only once does she come out of her shell, singing with unprecedented passion in a number of wide melodic intervals. In Act 3, she bursts into song in "Oh Sachs, my friend", emphatically praising the "Awakener" of her passions. Yes, she would have chosen him as her husband, had fate not come between them, and carried her away to Walther. Does this outbreak indirectly sully the name of her father Pogner? Does it snub Walter? No, it acclaims no-one other than Wagner himself in the form of Sachs. Once again in this scene, Eva represents an idealized Mathilde. And the words placed by Wagner in Eva's mouth are those he would have wanted his muse to use to thank him. As early as 1858, he had suggested to Mathilde Wesendonck that she should realize when she was needed. "And my sweet muse still remains far away? Silently, I awaited her arrival; I did not want to worry her by requesting it. For it is of her own free will that the muse, like love itself, makes a man happy. Woe betide the fool, the heartless lover, who attempts to gain by force what is not given voluntarily! It can not be forced. Is that not true? Am I not right? How could love itself still be the muse, were it to allow itself to be forced? And my lovely muse remains far from me?"

The only way the self-denying Sachs can reap any benefit from his frustration is through knowing that he is loved. Then kindness, wisdom, and warmth (imitated in the music by the strings) flourish in his heart. And in her strongest musical scene, Eva has one main task: that of heralding the ideal image of himself that Sachs-Wagner wishes to project. "A man will renounce a young woman, because he is thinking more of her than of himself – a claim to which Wagner really did not have any right, but that he nevertheless applied to his forced renunciation of Mathilde. Love is raised to an intellectual level. As was later the case with the Marschallin in Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*, a mature person renounces a young lover, and is not reduced to aggression or self-pity; rather, the person copes with the pain with dignity and largesse. Thus, Wagner rose above himself and created a masterpiece with an outstanding score in all its complexity, which on the other hand, of course, ensures the continuance of the 'natural' male dominance with the massive, block-like structure that describes the *Meistersinger*, and the heroic encomium of the strong man at the festival." (Eva Rieger, 2009, 129f.) But the music of *Die Meistersinger* is not allowed to work up a sweat: aside from all the din, it is presented as lighter and more aggressive, more lyrical and aloof than usual. Although it is more or less impossible to achieve with

the acoustic conditions of a theatre, perhaps a concert performance could achieve what Ernst Bloch demanded back in 1929 (which has not been heard for a long time since): "It should be based on a carpet of chamber music; any conductor who drowns out the subtleties to be found in the music, losing the outlines in the racket, clobbering the kettledrum as loudly as possible, is an enemy of Wagner."

Steffen Georgi

English translation: Fiona J. Stroker-Gale

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