

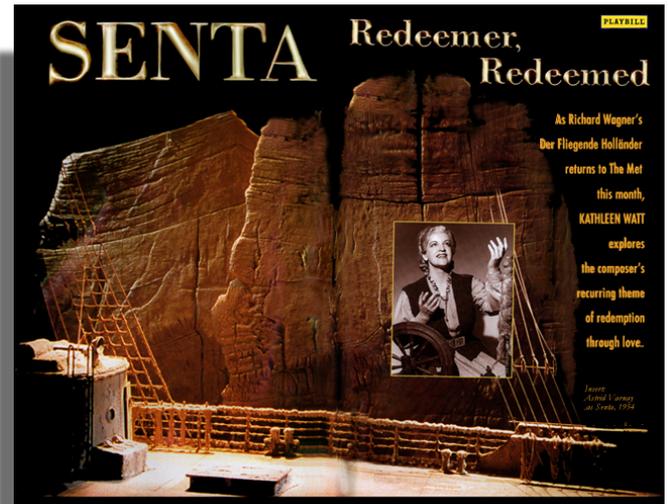
Senta, the Redeemer, Redeemed

By Kathleen Watt

IN 1841, THE YEAR OF *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Richard Wagner was still a young man of twenty-seven, with the early works of his artistic apprenticeship behind him. Already embarked auspiciously upon a career of conducting and composing, steeped in the works of Mozart and Beethoven, Wagner was poised to inherit the mantle of German Romanticism from Carl Maria von Weber and Heinrich Marschner. But Wagner had set himself a mission to rescue the Holy Art of music from the ignominy of mere entertainment to which he felt it was steadily sinking. In May of 1841 Wagner began work on his poem for *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and by November he had completed the entire orchestral score. This was to mark the starting point of a musical and philosophical arc that would culminate in *Parsifal* forty years later, redefining the language of music forever.

Opera of the mid-nineteenth century was typified by set pieces—the concert-style solos and ensembles which establish mood or sentiment, interrupted by spoken or sung recitative to advance plot. In *Der Fliegende Holländer*, for the first time, Wagner begins to employ a system of continuous or “through-composed” music that could advance narrative and evoke emotion at the same time, using thematic imagery, or “leitmotifs,” in a fabric woven continuously from the beginning to the end of the work. It is in *Holländer* also that Wagner begins to develop his “poetical-musical method” in which the vocal line follows a cadence of natural speech, and the orchestra is more than mere accompaniment, communicating to the senses directly—while disseminating ideas, of values both aesthetic and moral, of pathos, of aspiration, and of the relationship of one character or quality to another.

Der Fliegende Holländer retains many elements of German Romanticism, to be sure, but here they function as foil, one milieu for another. In the music of the Dutchman, for example, and that of his doomed crew, Wagner finds a sinewy chromaticism and innovative meters to conjure an otherworldly dimension, by turns lugubrious, longing, and fierce, in portentous



contrast to the jauntily ordinary world of Daland or Erik, the sailors hallojo-ing, and the maidens spinning in happy humdrum. The same ephemeral weirdness characterizes Senta's obsessive premonitions about the Dutchman, setting her apart from her own world before even she realizes that she really doesn't belong. By Act III, when we hear Erik's desperate plea to Senta to remember their erstwhile romance, in a pretty cavatina with its plaintive duplets, his is clearly the voice of quotidian cares, in a spent musical language.

The legend of the Flying Dutchman dates from the early 18th century, in various incarnations, with a link to mythical Ahaseurus—the Wandering Jew—whose curse it is to wander forever, denied the repose of death. This Dutchman's wandering-curse is his penalty for arrogant blasphemy, with a taunting caveat that every seven years he may make landfall to seek a wife. A woman who can “prove true” to him will break the curse, and man and wife will be free—to die together. As rhapsodic as this notion may be to the true Romantic, it does not quite satisfy Wagner, who amplifies its conjugal aspect, investing Senta with a fateful *frisson*, an irresistible desire, indeed a destiny, to save the Dutchman.

And thus Wagner introduces the theme that will recur in almost every one of his operas hereafter—the theme of redemption through love—especially, redemption of a man through the love of a woman. Wagner had seized upon Goethe's concept of the Eternal Feminine, *das Ewig-Weibliche*, who “draws us onward,” in her capacity to transcend—and inspire to transcend—the temporal, the mortal, the physical; in her power to give birth, and rebirth, to the sons of Earth. To Wagner, the redeeming woman was “the woman who does not exist yet...the infinitely womanly woman... the woman of the future...” This hyperventilated version of the Eternal Feminine parallels his bewilderment and vain thrashing over his own relationships. From his youth, Wagner felt at the mercy of his carnal energy, which was prodigious, and it is telling that, during a lifetime of rationalizing, he arrived only at renunciation as a solution.

To an extent unusual even among German Romantics, Richard Wagner compulsively plumbed the *Weltschmerz* of his own afflicted soul, time and again, for the animus that would become his characters. His dilemmas would be theirs, their victories his, and when necessary, he would freely embellish upon natural fact to magnify the impression of autobiography. And the women who attended Wagner's heroes and knights and gods were the women of Wagner's own life. There were many. Their destinies too can be apprehended in the operas. After the Dutchman follow the resplendent Lohengrin and innocent Elsa; ‘death-devoted’ Tristan; the faltering pilgrim Tannhäuser; self-abnegating Hans Sachs in love with Eva. Certainly, there are

no happy marriages in the *Ring*. In Wagner's final, marvelous swell toward transfiguration, Parsifal must vanquish desire altogether, to purify himself for the holy temple, and *das Ewig-Weibliche*, who has become both Succubus and Magdalene in Kundry, again must die. But there is also, in each of these maiden deaths, much of the redemption of self—herself—and more to be made of the fierce conviction that, each time, exalts her desperate act above mere madness, or surrender to feminine function. For what alchemy allows Brunhilde, the woman, to leap onto the raging pyre? Why must Elsa know? What does it take for Senta to hurl herself into the abyss?

Addressing the Wagnerian teleology, Nietzsche writes frankly, “Scarcely anyone has the character sufficient to resist...being ‘redeemed’ when he perceives himself being treated as a god; thereupon he *condescends* to woman. A man is cowardly before the Eternal Feminine, and the women know it.” There is, after all, power, consciously wielded, in her realized self.

Still, Wagner struggled authentically on the Wanderer's path to epiphany. To the degree that the composer often grasped the dynamics of his own life only after his characters had accomplished their dénouement, Wagner's life often imitated his art. When his characters suffered reversals or demise, an escape hatch of some sort often appeared in the composer's own turbid circumstances. “My poetic conceptions have always been so far ahead of my experiences,” wrote Wagner, “that I can only consider these conceptions as determining and ordering my moral development.”

At the time of *Holländer*, Wagner was living outside Paris with his wife of four years, the beautiful Minna Planer. Minna had already won a measure of independence as a successful, if untalented actress. Her strength was her tumescent charm, and her pragmatic application of it. She was never Wagner's intellectual or creative equal, nor was her love for him the worshipful dedication he would later treasure in second wife Cosima. But Wagner had fallen in love with Minna, and the idea of a stable domestic life was so important to young Richard Wagner's idea of himself, that he pursued her histrionically and relentlessly. Once won, Minna proved loyal beyond reproach, especially in their difficult Paris years, which Wagner never forgot, even as his behavior became increasingly eccentric.

Wagner had conceived of Minna as the self-sacrificing Senta to his own brooding Dutchman, although Wagner's wandering in 1841 was not that of Ahasuerus—nor flight from creditors and political enemies, nor even from cuckolded husbands. Rather Wagner's wandering was that of the artist, able to find neither succor nor sympathy. His quest for artistic quarter

became ever more tempestuous, as he turned biliously upon colleagues, and insatiably toward a succession of other women to quicken his Muse, all the while refining his true devotion to *die heilige Kunst*—Holy Art. “I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven,” wrote Wagner, “and likewise their disciples and apostles; I believe in the Holy Spirit and the truth of the one, indivisible Art. . . I believe that he who once has bathed in the sublime delights of this high Art, is consecrate to Her for ever, and never can deny Her; I believe that through Art all men are saved...” But Minna had expected, not unreasonably, that her husband would pursue the path of eminent conductor and composer, and consecrate himself to their marriage. When he persistently and willfully jeopardized their fortunes and their marriage, he fell under her ever more bitter complaint. Nevertheless, Wagner’s attachment to Minna, and hers to him, seems to have been deep and genuine, in spite of himself. Until the end of her life, as long as they lived apart, and he was free to follow his tortuous quest, Wagner stayed nominally married to Minna, and supported her.

Minna appears again, more mature, as Elsa to his own Lohengrin, and yet again, in Wotan’s scolding wife, Fricka. Like Lohengrin, Wagner came from another world—the Montsalvat of his own art. Like Lohengrin, Wagner demanded unquestioning devotion, and like Elsa, Minna could not resist trying to know him. As Lohengrin abandons Elsa for the monastery, declaring that “the Grail will be angry if I stay,” we may guess that Wagner would leave Minna. And her voice is in Fricka’s castigation of husband Wotan, errant master of the universe.

But not yet. And we may ask, as Wagner began his poem for *Der Fliegende Holländer*, attended by beautiful Minna, the woman he had hounded to wife, what was required of her, to throw her lot in with the arrogant and bombastic, manipulative and humiliating genius? To hurl herself into his abyss? Courage was called for, certainly, and clarity, and commitment. In Senta, the wife as the composer would have her, there is also the longing to redeem, as ineluctable as the Dutchman’s longing to be redeemed. Thus Senta’s leap from the storm-swept cliff, her wildly selfless act of redemption is also one of purposeful self-realization. So Parsifal’s *Erlösung dem Erlöser* (redemption for the redeemer), the apotheosis of Wagner’s extraordinary *oeuvre*, discloses itself already in the fledgling work, at the beginning of the long arc. And Senta/Minna is but the first of Wagner’s attempts to create *das Ewig-Weibliche* who might somehow redeem himself.