

The Once and Future *Tannhäuser*

By Kathleen Watt

Richard Wagner's Tannhäuser made an auspicious debut, in 1845, in Dresden. Revised for Paris, fifteen years later, it caused a riot. It's the so-called "Paris" Tannhäuser which we usually hear, and it bears the signature of two distinctly different composers—both of them Richard Wagner.

BARELY THIRTY when he began *Tannhäuser*, Wagner was enjoying a rare period of stability. He'd been named

Dresden Kapellmeister on the strength of his conducting, and of his unremarkable

opera, *Rienzi*, in the romantic style. Then followed *Der Fliegende Holländer*, in which Wagner began to employ motifs in symbolic ways, and a sinewy chromaticism to give voice to the drama of the human psyche. He was developing what Robert Gutman called “. . . that mysterious Wagnerian *sortilège*, which, attacking the senses, provokes the subconscious . . .” The *Tannhäuser* of 1843-45 is justly celebrated for brilliant arias and choruses. But here, meaningful motifs are woven throughout *Tannhäuser's* orchestration, rather than transferred in chunks, or tacked onto phrase endings, as they are in *Holländer* (listen for this in the preludes and *Tannhäuser's* “Rome Narrative” in Act III). By the time his next opera, *Lohengrin*, premiered in 1850, with its flowing lyricism, Wagner had taken German romanticism to the limit of its expressive capacity, and was already pressing on toward the “music dramas” of his creative maturity. *Tristan* would be next.

Between the Dresden *Tannhäuser* of 1845, and the Paris revisions of 1861, Wagner developed his theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (all-encompassing artwork which engages an audience on every level), and *Zukunftsmusik* (music of the future). During political exile in Switzerland after the German social revolution of 1848, Wagner wrote a series of dense, self-contradictory tomes, expounding without much clarifying his philosophies. He composed. When he again took up the *Tannhäuser*, Wagner had finished *Tristan und Isolde*, *Das Rheingold*, *Die*



Tannhäuser on his Way, mural, Neuschwanstein Castle, Bavaria

Walküre—and *Siegfried* was underway. He had discovered Arthur Schopenhauer, whose concept of “self-determining Will” would figure so importantly in the Wagner world view. And he philandered, cleaving evermore imperiously to Goethe’s conceit of *das ewig-Weibliche*—the eternal feminine—which “draws us on.” All this came between the two *Tannhäuser*s. And it shows.

Tannhäuser, or the Song Contest at the Wartburg is cobbled of at least two discreet tales—one legendary, one historical. Once upon a time, poetry and song were considered the province of great men—kings, nobles, knights. The Wartburg Song Contest was one of the most illustrious, where a chivalrous song won a generous prize—a woman, say—like Wagner’s Elisabeth. Historical minnesinger Tannhäuser was a famous Crusader, of celebrated appetites, and one of the finer poets of his time, whose struggle with temptation became a Medieval morality tale. But why does Wagner attach the Tannhäuser story to this song contest? The moral lesson is accommodated by the Tannhäuser legend alone. The answer, in part, is a typical Wagnerian device—to enhance the impression of authenticity by stretching history over a scaffolding of myth. The relationship between Elisabeth and Tannhäuser is wholly invented. In the legend, after his renunciation of Venus, Tannhäuser joins a procession of pilgrims to Rome, and his redemption—through his *own* faith and contrition—is portended by the miracle of the Pope’s flowering staff. Wagner make’s Elisabeth’s *death* the redemptive catalyst, *causing* the papal staff to flower, and Tannhäuser to die, redeemed. But this too is strained. Again, to what end?

It is especially a mistake to read Christianity too much into Wagner’s religiosity. Wagner turns any credo to his shifting requirements with the conviction of epiphany. His overarching devotion, always, is to *die Heilige Kunst*, holy art, created by himself, worshipped at his Festspielhaus. By “redemption” he means something like purification through his own world view. He is animated equally by mythology and Greek humanism, and by *das ewig-Weibliche*—the eternal feminine.

For example, here’s how *das ewig-Weibliche* works in *Tannhäuser*: Wagner’s Elisabeth is a pastiche of Saint Elisabeth (heroine of Franz Liszt’s oratorio), who in 1221 married a Landgrave’s son at fourteen, and was widowed at twenty. Tannhäuser’s comrade in minnesong, Wolfram von Eschenberg, had indeed loved such a widow from afar, though her name was Matilda. And when historical Tannhäuser faced the drawn blades of the knights outraged by his sexy song (Wagner puts this in Act II), according to the tale, he was indeed preserved by the cloak of a good woman—Sophie, who was the Landgrave’s wife. Abloom with the virtues of all

these historical women, and two gorgeous arias, Wagner's Elisabeth is ideally acquitted, not just to reward the winning minnesinger, but to complete the mission of *das ewig-Weibliche*—i.e., to die in despair over a hero's folly, thus inspiring him to expire, with her, "drawn on" to his own redemption, rather than continue his sinful ways. Wagner creates this rarified ideal again and again. And when Tannhäuser erupts in his delirious paean to Venus, we hear his outpouring as Elisabeth hears it—pierced to the heart—while everyone else is doing something else. Carl Dahlhaus suggests that Wagner appended the pageantry of the Wartburg Song Contest expressly to screen the tragedy developing between Tannhäuser and Elisabeth—the story that most interests and moves him, and that "...the soundless inner collapse of Elisabeth is the important event...."

Of course Tannhäuser, harried by carnal desire, represents Schopenhauerian Cosmic Will—a senseless, cyclical pattern of self-destruction. Tannhäuser craves the pleasures of Venus, mythical goddess of erotic love, who leads him into sensual surfeit, which leads him into misery and shame. Misery leads him to crave solace in Venus, who leads him into sensual surfeit, which leads him into misery and shame.... Maybe Tannhäuser should have known better, and Wagner gives us gentle Wolfram to suggest something nobler, in his beautiful hymn to chaste love. But Tannhäuser protests rightly that anyone who hasn't been to the Venusberg doesn't know what he's talking about. Certainly Wagner's sympathy at the time was with the errant knight. For Wagner himself was stuck in a virtual Venusberg with real-life paramour Cosima Liszt von Bülow. When his then-wife, Minna, died in Dresden, Wagner found himself released, even somewhat redeemed, to marry Cosima, whereupon he himself would "die" into sexual epiphany—and, alas, begin to crave Venus anew.

In 1861, an imperial command for the *Tannhäuser* in Paris gave Wagner another opportunity to perfect his opera. The revisions, perhaps tellingly, expand the dialogue between Venus and Tannhäuser, giving to Venus sybaritic dimension, new seductions lusciously orchestrated, as in the magic grotto scene, and a wide new gamut of passions, from righteous indignation through tender reproach to despair. And, satisfying French convention, Wagner added a ballet in the Venusberg scene. For Wagner, the ballet was a luxurious indulgence, and became a frenzy of erotic debauch, sometimes called the "Parisian Bacchanal." Now, in itself this would likely not have distracted Parisian audiences unduly. But French grand opera had the ballet in the *second* act, allowing opera-going dandies all of Act I to finish dinner comfortably, before easing into an evening's diversion with Act II. To Wagner, of course, this was sacrilege.

The Bacchanal remained in the first act where it belonged dramatically. And in 1861, that was enough to provoke riots. The opera was withdrawn after three disastrous performances.

But time has proven the treasure of Wagner's revisions, perhaps more in spite of, than because of Wagner's constructs. For regardless of any theory, philosophy or gassy solipsism from the composer, *Tannhäuser* transports us in the splendor of its music, coursing in revolutionary currents over its romantic swells. Nevertheless, a few weeks before he died in 1883, twenty-two years after the Paris debacle, second wife Cosima wrote that Wagner believed he "still owed the world *Tannhäuser*." The spirit quails at what he may have had in mind.

—*Kathleen Watt writes frequently on the performing arts.*