

“Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg,” Act III

BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE PLOT

ACT III

Scene 1: Hans Sachs’s workshop

Reading a book in his study, Sachs forgives David his unruly behavior of the night before and asks him to recite his St. John’s Day verses. Alone, the cobbler ponders the world’s madness (“Wahn! Wahn!”), then greets Walther, who tells of a wondrous dream. Sachs recognizes a potential prize song. Taking down the words, he helps the knight fashion them with an ear for form and symmetry (“Morgenlich leuchtend”).

When they depart, Beckmesser limps in and noses around. Pocketing Walther’s poem, he is caught by Sachs, who tells him to keep it. Beckmesser, certain of victory in the imminent song contest, rushes out.

Eva now visits Sachs on the pretext that there is something wrong with her shoe. Walther returns, dressed for the festival, and, inspired by Eva’s presence, completes the song he had been working on with Sachs. Eva is torn by her affection for Sachs (“O Sachs! Mein Freund!”), but the wise older man turns her to the younger man. When Magdalene comes in, Sachs promotes David to journeyman with a box on the ear and asks Eva to bless the new song (“Ein Kind ward hier geboren”); all five reflect on their happiness (“Selig wie die Sonne”). Then they go off to the contest.

Scene 2: The St. John’s Day festival, outside Nuremberg’s walls

In a meadow outside the city, the guilds and citizens assemble under festive banners. After a joyful dance, the Masters file in, Sachs getting a spontaneous hand from his people, which in turn inspires a moving address from him (“Euch macht ihr’s leicht”).

The contest opens as Beckmesser nervously tries to fit Walther’s verses to his own music, but he forgets the words and distorts them, earning laughter from the crowd. The clerk turns furiously on Sachs and stumbles off, missing the rightful delivery of the song by Walther. The people are entranced, but Walther refuses the Masters’ medallion. Sachs, however, convinces him to accept (“Verachtet mir die Meister nicht”), extolling tradition and its upholders as well as its fresh innovators. Youth makes its pact with age, Walther has won Eva, and the people hail Sachs once more as Eva crowns him with Walther’s wreath.

Courtesy of OPERA NEWS

BRIEF NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

“Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,” Act III

*First performance of the opera:* June 21, 1868, Munich, Hans von Bülow cond. (the Act I Prelude having already been conducted by Wagner on November 1, 1862, in Leipzig, composition of the opera having extended from March 1862 until his completion of the orchestral score in October 1867). *First American performance of the opera:* January 4, 1886, Metropolitan Opera (in its third season), Anton Seidl cond., with Emil Fischer (Hans Sachs), Albert Stritt (Walther von Stolzing), Auguste Seidl-Kraus (Eva), “Herr Krämer” (David), Marianne Brandt (Magdalene), Otto Kemnitz (Beckmesser), and Josef Staudigl (Pogner). *First BSO performances of orchestral music from the opera:* November 1881 (Act I Prelude) and February 1882 (Act III Prelude, Dance of the Apprentices, Procession of the Mastersingers, and Homage to Hans Sachs), Georg Henschel cond. *First Berkshire Festival performance of music from the opera:* August 16, 1936 (Act I Prelude), Serge Koussevitzky cond. *First Tanglewood performance of music from the opera:* August 12, 1939 (Act I Prelude), Koussevitzky cond. *Most recent Tanglewood performance of music from the opera:* July 17, 2004 (extended excerpts from Acts I, II, and III: Act I Prelude and Opening Chorale; Act II Prelude and Apprentices’ Chorus; Hans Sachs’s monologues from Acts II [“Was duftet doch der Flieder”] and III [“Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!”]; Act III Prelude; Entrance of the Guilds, Apprentices, and

Mastersingers; End of the opera, from Sachs's "Verachtet mir die Meister nicht"), Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos cond., Bryn Terfel, bass-baritone; Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor.

Like *Tristan und Isolde*, the opera that immediately preceded it in Wagner's output, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (*The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*) was written during the years following Wagner's break from work on his massive *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. By the summer of 1857, hopes for the production of his *Ring*-in-progress were all but gone, and negotiations with his publishers were getting nowhere. There was no regular source of income, he had had no new work staged since the premiere of *Lohengrin* under Liszt at Weimar in 1850, and so it was obviously time for something more likely to be produced than the *Ring*. This he thought he had found in *Tristan und Isolde*. Even when this proved not to be the case, Wagner expressed naively similar sentiments as he turned to work on *Die Meistersinger*, assuring the publisher Schott that his next opera would be "light, popular, easy to produce," requiring neither a great tenor nor "a great tragic soprano," and well within the abilities of any small opera company. Once more, Wagner proved himself wrong. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is one of the longest operas in the repertory; and, like *Tristan*, it is hardly ever performed without cuts. It requires no fewer than seventeen solo performers, including a leading tenor and leading bass of remarkable stamina, and the ensembles that close the first two acts are among the most complex and difficult ever written. The opera as a whole clocks in at about four-and-a-half hours; the third act alone runs just over two hours, representing one of the longest uninterrupted spans of music in Wagner's output.

Considered in a very broad sense as something of a companion piece to *Tristan*, the other major product of Wagner's break from work on the *Ring*, *Die Meistersinger* reflects not only his growth as a composer, but also his considerable versatility, his ability to employ contrasting musical vocabularies as called for by contrasting subject matter. The intense chromaticism of *Tristan* is perfectly suited to that work's depiction of heightened longing, both physical and spiritual. *Die Meistersinger*, on the other hand, is full of down-to-earth humanity in its portrayal of characters, community, situations, and emotions, and is largely written in a prevailingly direct diatonicism, embodied as much in the overture as it is throughout the opera. Wagner's libretto, too, is for the most part much more straightforward in its approach to language than is his text for *Tristan*. And the subject matter will also have harmonized with Wagner's own needs at the time. Just as *Tristan und Isolde* took inspiration from his passionate involvement with Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of an important patron, so *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* mirrored a concern always close to the self-promoting Wagner's heart: the need for (read, his desire for) acceptance, by public and critics alike, of the New in art, particularly his own.

In a nutshell, the story of *Die Meistersinger*—set in mid-16th-century Nuremberg—is this: the young knight Walther von Stolzing (who has arrived in Nuremberg hoping to learn the art of mastersinging) and Eva, daughter of the Mastersinger/goldsmith Veit Pogner, have (before the curtain rises) fallen in love. But Pogner decrees that Eva can only marry a Mastersinger—and specifically the Mastersinger chosen as winner of the annual Contest of Song held on the Feast Day of St. John the Baptist (June 24 by the Christian calendar), though Pogner does grant Eva veto power should she be unhappy with the choice. Coached by David—the young apprentice to the Mastersinger/cobbler/philosopher/poet Hans Sachs—as to the Masters' strict rules of singing, Walther, at the end of Act I, attempts a trial run before an assemblage of the Mastersingers and their apprentices, but confounds everyone who hears him, leading to general havoc—although Sachs has sensed that there was something new and important to be heard in Walther's song.

As it happens, the situation is further complicated by the fact that Sachs himself has strong feelings for Eva, even as she confides in him her own hope of marrying Walther. Also vying for Eva's hand is the town clerk Sixtus Beckmesser (himself also a Mastersinger), who, in addition to his irritation over Walther's appearance as a suitor for Eva's hand, is also concerned that Sachs, too, may be interested in winning her. (Another character whose name you need to know is Magdalene, Eva's companion, who is romantically linked to David and serves as occasional intermediary between Eva and Walther.) Following a complex sequence of comings, goings, and interactions on the part of everyone involved (culminating, at the end of Act II, in a late-night riot in the street outside the homes of Sachs and Pogner), the final (third) act of *Die Meistersinger* concludes with the St. John's Day gathering of the townspeople on the meadow outside Nuremberg to witness the Contest of Song, in which Walther finally wins Eva's hand. (For a general summary of Act III, see page 20.)

Just a few quick words about some highlights of Act III. The orchestra's third-act Prelude anticipates Hans Sachs's musings, later in that same act (his monologue "Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!"), on the events that have transpired thus far. As the late Boston University professor John Daverio once wrote in these pages: "Not easily translatable in a single word, 'Wahn' is both the destructive illusion that can bring on disorder and confusion, and the productive illusion necessary for the creation of lasting works of art." Recognizing that he himself (the man who "heeds not his own advice") has been a participant in the confused, sometimes crazed proceedings of the previous day, Sachs now resolves to turn the tide of activities from disorder and confusion to something more noble and artful—i.e., something that would not be possible without at least a touch of madness.

Key passages of dialogue as Act III continues include those between Sachs and Walther (immediately following Sachs's "Wahn!" monologue), when Sachs suggests to the young knight how, in composing a song, the notions of art, expectation (i.e., rules), and inspiration can, in the right circumstances, work hand in hand; and, later, the scene between Sachs and Eva in which, each of them still somewhat confused over their feelings for the other, it finally becomes clear to all involved—when Eva's presence inspires Walther, who enters the room, to complete the song he had fashioned earlier with Sachs's help—how things must go. This soon leads to an ensemble unique in Wagner's output—the celebrated quintet for Eva, Sachs, Walther, David, and Magdalene in which each simultaneously expresses his or her own innermost thoughts, after which the scene changes to the meadow outside Nuremberg where the Contest of Song will take place.

At the start of this final scene, all gather to witness the contest, including the Shoemakers', Tailors', and Bakers' guilds, the apprentices, the townsfolk, and, finally, the Mastersingers themselves, who arrive to their theme music introduced hours before, in the opera's overture. Beckmesser, who earlier in the act, after sneaking into Sachs's workshop, had ended up with the words of Walther's song—a happenstance that of course plays well into Sachs's intentions—now fails miserably in his attempt to make any sense of either words (which he completely garbles) or music (trying to fit his own song, first heard in Act II, to Walther's words), and is laughed off the contest platform. Sachs invites Walther to step forward and prove himself the true author of the song, and the young knight's inspiration takes full and further flight in a musical and poetic outpouring that leaves the stunned and entranced assemblage in no doubt as to who the winner of Eva's hand must be.

Walther, however, despite his success, is by this point so extremely put out by the difficulties he has faced that he disdainfully refuses the title of "Master," whereupon Sachs concludes the proceedings—supported in the orchestra by an even more substantial and resounding return of music from the overture—with an address on the importance of the tradition preserved in the Masters' art, following which general rejoicing heralds Walther's acceptance of his hard-won prize, the union of Walther and Eva, and the generosity and wisdom of "Nuremberg's cherished Sachs."

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