

# Contemplating *Die Meistersinger*

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Richard Wagner once said of Johann Sebastian Bach's music: "That made me what I am. My unending melody is predestined in it." In *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Wagner demonstrated to post-*Tristan* sceptics his mastery of traditional musical forms. Sonorous chorales, a fugally-inspired toccata, an unforgettable quintet and counterpoint worthy of Bach all feature in this magnificent score celebrating the marriage of inspiration and tradition.

Incredibly, Bach's major works had been ignored and forgotten until Mendelssohn presented the *St Matthew Passion* in Leipzig in 1829. The neglect of Bach for at least fifty years was symptomatic of a much wider problem. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Austro-German ruling classes had been indifferent to (Lutheran) German culture and were inclined to rubbish anything that was not neo-classical and French or Italian inspired. The Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II experimented with a German theatre in 1778, the National Singspiel, for which Mozart wrote *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. However, this project failed after only five years and the emperor (famously complaining of "too many notes") turned instead to melodious, lightly scored Italian alternatives.

Even in Prussia, Frederick the Great, champion of the Enlightenment, regarded German culture as being inferior to that of France and Italy. In the 1780s a new edition of the *Nibelungenlied* (the 13<sup>th</sup> century 'Song of the Nibelungs', which would play an important part in Wagner's plans for a drama on the death of Siegfried and later *Der Ring des Nibelungen*) was dedicated to Frederick, but the king responded in the following terms:

*Dear faithful scholar,*

*You judge far too favourably these poems. In my view, such things are not worth a shot of powder and do not deserve to be dragged out of the dust of oblivion. In my book collection at least, I would not endure such wretched stuff; rather I'd toss it out.*

This was precisely the kind of ‘cultural cringe’ that Wagner had in mind when, in the closing scene of *Die Meistersinger*, Hans Sachs speaks of foreign mists and foreign vanities. He makes the additional point that if a community’s art is to survive political and social upheavals, it must remain true to itself and in touch with its roots – an idea that still resonates in our era of global communications and cultural competition.

*Die Meistersinger* is set in the Holy Roman Empire of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Franconian knight Walther von Stolzing attempts to qualify as a Mastersinger and win the hand of Eva in a song contest, but is disqualified by his rival, the pedantic Master, Sixtus Beckmesser. The cobbler and poet Hans Sachs, who also has feelings for Eva but recognizes the quality of Walther’s song, uses his cobbling to ‘mark’ Beckmesser’s serenading. The noise awakens the town, and a riot ensues. Afterwards, Sachs overcomes his despair at human folly and helps Walther turn his dream into a master-song. Beckmesser passes the song off as his own in the contest and makes a fool of himself. The people judge Walther to be the winner but, still smarting from his earlier treatment, he rejects the offer to become a Mastersinger. Sachs urges him not to despise artistic traditions which can survive the rise and fall of empires. Walther acknowledges this, and the people rejoice in their art and in Nuremberg’s dear Sachs.

*Die Meistersinger* was first performed in 1868, but in recent decades it has become a target of unrelenting revisionism. Since the Second World War, directors have struggled with questions about the relationship of art to society, an issue that was exploited by the National Socialists in the 1930s and ‘40s. Heinz Tietjen’s production was staged sixteen times at Bayreuth in 1943 and twelve times the following year, and for the final scene it used hundreds of people on stage including extras from loyalist organisations such as the Hitler Youth. The official propaganda of the day described the production as “a talisman and a contribution to victory”.

Perversely, but not surprisingly, the composer’s descendants have also exploited *Die Meistersinger* in their efforts to exorcise family

demons. Wagner's grandson Wieland, whose early talent had been nurtured under the flag of the Führer, had good reason to look for a new way forward. His solution in the 1950s was to create "The Mastersingers without Nuremberg" as one wag put it, an atmospheric setting devoid of all but the most essential items and props. Nevertheless, Wieland's influence on modern production practice and design was considerable. His brother and successor at Bayreuth, Wolfgang, returned to more literal types of staging, stressing the universality of the drama's themes.

The present family incumbent, Katharina, Wolfgang's daughter by his second marriage, made a much-publicised break with her forebears in her 2007 debut, contradicting her great-grandfather's text and music with gratuitously shocking images. She wanted to make her own political statements, one of which involved turning the *Wach auf* chorus with its text by the historical Sachs (1494-1576) celebrating Martin Luther and the Reformation, into a vignette on the burning of the books in Berlin in 1933. In Katharina's version, the people of Nuremberg became disembodied voices while a grim-faced Sachs and six henchmen warmed their hands over the flames of burning texts. Characterisations were reversed, with the poet Hans Sachs and the Franconian knight and minstrel Walther von Stolzing joining the reactionaries, and the town clerk Sixtus Beckmesser - Wagner's personification of hidebound pedantry - becoming the avant-garde hero. The work could not have been more miserably traduced.

Outside Bayreuth, productions of *Die Meistersinger* moved in different directions. In 2011 the Scottish director Sir David McVicar staged a fine production at Glyndebourne which transferred the action to the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the time of Wagner's youth. The idea of setting the work in Wagner's lifetime rather than in the 16<sup>th</sup> century also attracted Norwegian director Stefan Herheim whose Salzburg production of 2013 adopted the intriguing conceit of setting the whole performance in a wistful, dream-like state on the widower Sachs's writing desk and in other parts of his workshop. The historical Sachs had lost his seven children, possibly to the plague, and his first wife died in 1560. He married again the following year,

and so these events fix Wagner's drama firmly during the poet's widowhood in 1560.

Danish director Kasper Holten's production at Covent Garden in March 2017 was his farewell project as Director of Opera there. It was a co-production with Opera Australia and the National Centre for Performing Arts, Beijing. The Beijing performances took place in May this year, and Melbourne will see it in November. The setting for all three acts of this staging is not 16<sup>th</sup> century Nuremberg but a contemporary, traditionally run gentlemen's club. Holten's dramaturgical inspiration seems to have been largely personal. He saw himself as a latter-day Walther von Stolzing, perceived as an outsider with bold ideas who upsets the Establishment.

On taking up his appointment in London, Holten was surprised to encounter the world of gentlemen's clubs (not found in Scandinavia apparently) and their practice of excluding women from membership. He saw parallels between London's Garrick Club (affiliated with the arts, especially theatre) and the closed, male-dominated institution of the Mastersingers. It is doubtful though that a club like the Garrick would contemplate membership for furriers, tinsmiths, bakers, pewterers, grocers, tailors, soap-boilers, stocking-weavers or coppersmiths - all trades specified by Wagner - or a wandering minstrel. Ultimately, *Die Meistersinger* is about art! It is not about class, and it is not about politics. As Wagner's Sachs himself says: "Whether lord or peasant doesn't matter here. Here it is only a question of art".

Kasper Holten was horrified by Veit Pogner's offer of his daughter's hand in marriage as a prize in the Midsummer Day song contest, interpreting this as symptomatic of an elitist, male-dominated society. The point of Pogner's gesture though is to demonstrate that the citizens of 16<sup>th</sup> century Nuremberg (not 21<sup>st</sup> century London) valued art above all else. He is prepared to give that which he values most - the hand of his only child in marriage (if she agrees) - in the cause of art. "I grew tired of the fact", he says, "that no-one cared that we, alone in the broad German Empire, cherish art and all that is beautiful and good."

Australian director Barrie Kosky, Artistic and General Director of the Komische Oper Berlin, applied his disarming Offenbachian style to a new production of *Die Meistersinger* at Bayreuth in the summer of 2017. He set the action initially in Haus Wahnfried, Wagner's home after 1874, and there were also visual references to the 1945-46 Nuremberg war crimes trials and to anti-Jewish caricatures of the kind frequently seen in 19<sup>th</sup> century newspapers. In publicity coverage, attention was drawn to Kosky's own Jewish heritage. Hans Sachs, Walther von Stolzing and Sachs's apprentice David were all made to look like Richard Wagner in different phases of his life. Kosky seemed to be implying that Wagner was several different personalities rolled into one and therefore an enigma. Other characters were depicted as Wagnerian family members and close associates. Some costumes were inspired by 15<sup>th</sup> century paintings, including those of Nuremberg's most illustrious son, Albrecht Dürer.

The juxtaposition of wildly incongruous images, perpetual activity and meticulously choreographed tableaux made for entertaining theatre.

The sources of musical inspiration for *Die Meistersinger* have attracted close study, but the extent to which Wagner's libretto drew on earlier poetical and theatrical works (other than technical descriptions of the Mastersingers and their art) is less understood. These dramaturgical connections are especially valuable in determining Wagner's motivations.

Hans Sachs (like Bach) had been almost forgotten after the Baroque era, and we have Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to thank for his return to public awareness. Goethe wrote a poem in 1776 called *An explanation of an old woodcut representing Hans Sachs' poetical calling*. Passages in *Die Meistersinger* relating to Eva's visit to Sachs by the Elder bush outside his door, the reference in Sachs's cobbling song to Adam and Eve's flight from paradise, the *Wahn* monologue, Eva's crowning of Sachs with a wreath, and the final humiliation of Beckmesser, can all be traced to Goethe's poem.

An important connection between Wagner's text and earlier literature is to be found in the poems of the most famous Minnesinger of the

12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Walther von der Vogelweide. The Minnesingers were drawn from the lower nobility, and their songs ranged from the wistful yearnings of lovers to exultation at the return of spring after the trials of winter. Wagner saw a clear connection between Walther von der Vogelweide and the young knight Walther von Stolzing who brings to *Die Meistersinger* the simple, lyrical style of a bygone era. “Walther von der Vogelweide” says Stolzing, “he was my Master”.

Wagner’s intention when he first sketched out the plot for *Die Meistersinger* in 1845, was to balance the serious *Tannhäuser* with a contrasting comedy focusing on the down-to-earth bourgeois Mastersingers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The latter were committed to “poetry-by-Tabulatur pedantry”, as Wagner put it. It is Beckmesser’s obsessive attachment to the ethos and rules of the guild, and his contortions in trying to apply them regardless of context, which make him a figure of fun in the eyes of the people at large. The role of Hans Sachs, “the last manifestation of the artistically productive folk spirit”, was to reconcile the opposing forces of lyrical inspiration and formal constraint; to reconcile “poetry and pedantry” as Wagner explained in 1863.

Stolzing’s Trial Song in Act One, owes much to the poetry of Vogelweide. The comparison of the bickering masters to screeching crows comes straight from the latter, as does Sachs’s recognition of the hopelessness of Stolzing’s efforts to be heard.

One response to Goethe’s poem came in the form of a play called *Hans Sachs* by the writer and imperial official, Johann Ludwig Deinhardstein, first performed in 1828. Goethe wrote a prologue for it. The young Richard Wagner was aware of this play. Another influence was a comic opera of 1840 - *Hans Sachs* by Albert Lortzing, based on Deinhardstein’s play but with variations. Wagner was familiar with Lortzing’s work too, although he probably did not see it performed. Both play and comic opera give prominence to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who plays a key role in resolving the drama. This contrasts with Wagner’s work where no political figures appear at all, not even councillors, and the happy ending is brought about by a poet.

Deinhardstein's play is set in 1517. A young Hans Sachs is in love with Kunigunde, daughter of the wealthy goldsmith Steffen who disapproves of Sachs as a mere cobbler. Kunigunde is the equivalent of Wagner's Eva, and Steffen is the equivalent of Pogner. Sachs is a poet and a Mastersinger as well as a shoemaker, but the other masters criticise him for never keeping to the rules. "At a recent meeting of the guild", says one of them, "there had been so many faults in his recitation of a poem that the rafters had rung with laughter and he had fled in embarrassment." This anticipates events involving Walther in Act One of *Meistersinger*. "It is the observance of the rules, not talent, that makes the poet", says another of Deinhardstein's masters in Beckmesser mode.

While several dramatic elements in Deinhardstein's play influenced the plot of *Die Meistersinger*, Lortzing's comic opera took the subject even closer to Wagner's work. One of Lortzing's characters recites for the emperor the same words that Wagner set in the *Wach auf* chorale.

Wagner's Beckmesser combines two of Lortzing's characters - Eoban Hesse, an opinionated, classically educated councillor from Augsburg, and the First Marker, Meister Stott. Stotterer means 'stutterer' - and stutter he does. So, associations between the Marker and vocal mannerisms pre-date Wagner and have nothing to do with perceived 'Jewishness' as some writers have speculated.

In both *Die Meistersinger* and Lortzing's *Hans Sachs* we have a scene in which singing is accompanied by the rhythmical strokes of a hammer, while nonsensical words are used as a refrain between verses. There is also a song contest in Lortzing's opera in which Eoban attempts to pass off a poem as his own although it had in fact been written by the young Sachs. He confuses it with an earlier poem and makes a fool of himself. His bungled performance and the crowd's reactions clearly anticipate the scene in *Die Meistersinger* when Beckmesser confuses Walther's "morning dream" with his own ludicrous serenade from the night before. Lortzing's Sachs then intervenes and declaims the poem properly, as does Walther in *Meistersinger*.

The emperor gives Eoban a dressing down and sends him packing. Lortzing goes further than Wagner in rubbing in the fraudster's humiliation. Far from gloating over Beckmesser's embarrassment, Sachs acknowledges the very things that he holds dear - the devotion of the masters to the poetic arts, and the importance of tradition.

Sachs's closing homily in *Die Meistersinger* has been the subject of much conjecture, especially when viewed retrospectively through the events of the last century. He tells Walther not to despise the Mastersingers, because they have kept Nuremberg's arts alive through difficult times. A day might come, he says, when foreign influences will prevail, but:

*Tho' the Holy Roman Empire dissolve in mist,  
yet for us will Holy German Art persist.*

This couplet can be traced to Friedrich von Schiller who, fifty years earlier had written: "While the political empire totters, the spiritual empire has become increasingly secure and more perfect."

Sachs's speech is akin to what the ancient Greeks in their dramas called *parabasis*, literally 'stepping aside', an ode addressed to the audience by the chorus on behalf of the author. Both Deinhardstein and Lortzing ended their dramas with an ode on the role of the emperor in restoring social equilibrium and artistic harmony. Wagner's perspective was very different, and he gave a poet, not an emperor, responsibility for articulating that difference.

PETER BASSETT