

Der fliegende Holländer

(The Flying Dutchman)

Commentary and analysis by Peter Bassett, from a talk to members and guests of the Wagner Society on Saturday 19th October 2024.

The drama of *The Flying Dutchman* functions on three levels. Firstly, there is the external world represented by Daland, Erik, Mary and the villagers. Theirs is a prosaic existence governed by the conventions of village life and traditional ways of doing things. Their music follows styles and forms that were familiar to audiences of the day.



Scenes from the 2016 staging of *The Flying Dutchman* by Seattle Opera

Secondly, there is the internal world of the Dutchman and Senta, for which Wagner wrote a new type of music that dispensed with traditional forms and foreshadowed what was to come in his later works. The Dutchman comes from beyond the horizon – he is from the past *and* the future - condemned by his own hubris to sail the seas until the day of judgment. He can find redemption only through the love of a faithful woman.

Senta, the daughter of the Norwegian merchant captain Daland, hankers for a life beyond the suffocating constraints of the village. Marriage to the young hunter Erik would simply perpetuate this claustrophobia, and it is not what she has in mind. In fact, Senta has long been obsessed with the story of the Flying Dutchman, and she is convinced of her destiny to save this tragic figure. Erik thinks she's been possessed by the devil.

Thirdly, there are forces beyond the control of any of the characters. These are natural forces – the forces of fate - expressed through orchestral depictions of sea, storms and wind. Even the famous spinning chorus in the second Act is not a folkloric episode but the domestic equivalent of the gales encountered in the First Act. The girls sing of the whirring spinning wheels that will generate the wind to blow their boyfriends home.

The songs of the Norwegian sailors and the Dutchman's ghostly crew also reveal the forces of nature and the supernatural. Both crews are men of the sea who will soon return to it, but the Dutchman's sailors have been at sea for centuries, making landfall only once every seven years. They are tragic figures, condemned with their captain to roam the vast oceans of the world for eternity. In some of the stories on which the opera was based, we learn that whenever the Dutchman's ship encounters other vessels at sea, its crew try to pass on letters for loved ones ashore, only to be told that those loved ones have been dead for generations – and the sailors weep. They are figures to be pitied, not rejected or scorned - victims of the curse of eternal wandering.



Bengt Rundgren as Daland in a 1975 film with the Bavarian State Opera

When Daland and the Dutchman meet for the first time in Act I, when their ships have taken shelter from a storm on the Norwegian coast, they find that they have an interest in common – the marriage of Daland's daughter Senta. Daland will receive a valuable dowry, and the Dutchman will find a wife to be the instrument of his salvation. So, Senta's marriage is the desired outcome of both Daland and the Dutchman (though for different reasons) and this explains their lively exchange in the First Act. Daland says: "What? Do I hear rightly? Make my daughter his wife? Could any son-in-law be more welcome? I'd be a fool to pass up the good luck. I'm delighted to agree." And overlapping these short phrases, the Dutchman sings in long *cantilenas*: "Ah, I'm without wife, without child, and nothing binds me to this earth. Consent to this marriage, and you may take all my riches."

Although *The Flying Dutchman* had its musical roots in German romantic opera, it was the work in which Wagner found his voice. Many years later he insisted, rightly, that it marked the beginning of his career, and he returned to its dramatic themes again and again. But it is hard to imagine a less likely 'Wagnerian' musical style than the duet between Daland and the Dutchman. In Paris in the early 1840s, musical style shaped dramatic substance and, in those days, the young Wagner still followed that practice. He continued to do so with *Tannhäuser* described as a 'Grand Romantic Opera' and *Lohengrin* described as a 'Romantic Opera', both composed in the 1840s. But his ideas were evolving, and, by 1850, he took a very different view, which manifested itself in the first parts of the *Ring* and in *Tristan und Isolde*. By then he was insisting that formal musical structures should evolve spontaneously from within a work, and not be imposed upon it. In his treatise *Opera and Drama* of 1850-51, he argued that the error into which opera had fallen was that music, the means of expression, had been made the end, while the true end, which is drama, had become merely the means. This was at the heart of his criticism of composers like Meyerbeer.

The Dutchman is certainly other-worldly; he comes from another age, another century. There must have been other visitors to the village from time to time as ships came into port or took shelter from storms, and they passed virtually unnoticed. But not the Dutchman. The stage directions describe him as a pale man dressed in a Spanish costume - a reference to his origins in the 17th century when the Netherlands was ruled by the Spanish Habsburgs, something that we recall from Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Beethoven's *Egmont*.

Only Senta understands this strange man and his predicament, and that is the key to the drama. "*He flies on like an arrow*", she says, "*without goal, without rest, without peace.*" The other girls have probably heard the tale of the Flying Dutchman before. Mary, the housekeeper certainly knows it but, in Act II, we'll hear it recounted once again, not by Mary but by Senta.

And so, to the Spinning Chorus. "My love is out on the sea" sing the girls, "thinking of home and his beloved child. My good wheel - hum and buzz. Ah, if you could summon up the wind, he'd quickly be here." Then Senta sings her ballad. To the girls it's just a spooky folk tale, but to Senta it's an article of faith, and the portrait has become a religious icon. She gets to know the Dutchman through the portrait, just as Tamino in *The Magic Flute* gets to know Pamina from *her* likeness.

Senta's Ballad was my introduction to *The Flying Dutchman* and to Wagner, and I have never forgotten that first encounter. As a boy, I used to stay after piano lessons to practice my sight-reading and turn pages during a soprano's singing lessons. On one occasion she sang Senta's Ballad, and this came like a bolt from the blue. 'What *is* this music?' I wondered, and I was hooked for evermore.

"*Yohohoe!*" she sings, "have you met on the sea the ship with blood-red sails and black mast? High up on deck, the pallid man, master of the ship, keeps watch without rest. *Hui!* How the wind shrieks! *Yohohe! Hui!* How it whistles in the rigging! *Yohohe! Hui!* It flies like an arrow, without goal, without rest, without peace. Yet this pale man may one day find salvation, if he can find a wife who would remain true to him on this earth, until death!"



Catarina Ligendza as Senta in the 1975 film.

Senta encounters the Dutchman when her father brings him home. Daland's jaunty aria is reminiscent of Berlioz. "*Mögst du, mein Kind*" – "Will you, my child, be friendly to this man? From your heart he asks a holy gift. Give him your hand - for bridegroom you should call him. If you agree with your father, tomorrow he'll be your husband. See this bracelet, see these buckles, these are but the smallest part of his possessions. Surely, dear child, you would love to have them? They are yours, when you exchange rings. ... But no one speaks. Am I an intruder here? ... May you win this noble man. Believe me, such fortune will not come again."

The music keeps stopping and starting as if something is amiss – which indeed it is. As Daland expects, Senta is drawn to the Dutchman, but there is a tension in the air that her father doesn't understand, and eventually he leaves the room.

For all its tenderness, the duet between Senta and the Dutchman that follows is not a 'love duet' in a conventional sense. It's a moving expression of the Dutchman's hope for salvation and Senta's determination to be its instrument through 'faithfulness until death'. The Dutchman is looking for the peace of 'eternal oblivion'.

"The sombre glow that I feel burning here" he says, "should I, wretched one, call it love?"

Ah no! It is the longing for salvation. Might it come to me through such an angel!"

And she says:

*"That for which you yearn, salvation,
Would that you could achieve it, poor man, through me."*

This is no ordinary courtship.



Donald McIntyre as the Dutchman in the 1975 film.

The duet is full of Italianate melody and French orchestration, but with an ominous feel to it. “Have you no objection to your father’s choice?” asks the Dutchman. “Shall I, after a life of torment, find in your faithfulness, my long-sought rest?”

“Whoever you are” she replies, “and whatever the fate to which cruel destiny has condemned you, and whatever I may bring upon myself, I shall always be obedient to my father.”

“You are an angel” says the Dutchman, “and an angel’s love can comfort even the rejected. Ah, if hope of salvation still remains, eternal God let it come through her.”



Rosalie Wagner (1803-1837)

Rosalie Wagner was the composer's elder and favourite sister, an accomplished musician and actress. She was a steadying and inspiring influence on Richard, the youngest boy in the family. She married late and, tragically, died in childbirth in 1837 when Richard had just gone to Riga. There is perhaps something of Rosalie immortalised in the character of Senta.

Wagner excelled in creating strong, single-minded, even visionary women, whereas so many of his complex men struggle to reconcile conflicting forces within themselves. Many are outsiders, and many are engaged on long journeys – think of Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Wotan, and Parsifal – and the Dutchman. A psychoanalyst might look to Wagner's own childhood for an explanation - the loss of his father and then stepfather at an early age, the maternal affection that he craved but rarely received, and dependence on his talented sisters during his formative years. He needed the company of women throughout his life - especially women who believed in him and could be his soulmates - women like Mathilde Wesendonck and Cosima von Bülow.

Personally, I don't think Wagner ever stopped being the Flying Dutchman. Forever wandering, he made landfall every so often before moving on again, always yearning for stability and, dare I say it, salvation.



Central to the opera is a number of dramatic themes that keep reappearing in the composer's later works. Take for instance the role of dreams and illusions. Senta and the Dutchman inhabit the realm of dreams. Senta's deeply troubled suitor Erik catches a glimpse of this through a dream of his own in which he has seen her leaving with the dutchman and sharing his watery fate. Erik relates this vision as a warning, but his words merely strengthen Senta's resolve.

Sixty years later, Sigmund Freud and a small group of his friends took an interest in Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* and in Erik in particular, and they published a paper on it. *The Interpretation of Dreams* was a seminal work published in 1899. Freud considered dreams to be 'the *royal road to the unconscious*' because, through them

the ego's defences are lowered and repressed ideas turn into 'awareness'. Perhaps Erik's dream signifies that if *he* can't have Senta, then no one else can.

Senta is mesmerised by the vision of how her father brings a mysterious stranger to the house, but when Erik recounts how she flees with the stranger across the ocean, she realises that *she* must be the woman the Dutchman is looking for! Erik, in despair, accuses her of being ensnared by Satan.



Catarina Ligendza as Senta and Hermann Winkler as Erik in the 1975 film.

As was often the case, Wagner was ahead of his time in introducing philosophical and psychological ideas into his dramas.

Dreams feature in many of Wagner's works – think of Elsa's dream in *Lohengrin* and the lovers' dream of eternal union in *Tristan und Isolde*. There is Walther's 'Morning Dream' in *Die Meistersinger*, and Sieglinde's nightmare in *Die Walküre* when she anticipates the death of Siegmund.

Then we have the Dutchman's nihilism and yearning for death. He has tried many times to hurl himself into the abyss, to run his ship onto the rocks and to fall victim to pirates, but the sea always rejects him, and the pirates cross themselves and flee in terror. In Senta he seeks not a wife but the peace of 'eternal oblivion'. Eventually, Wagner will find a philosophical explanation for this in Schopenhauer's '*The World as Will and Representation*' and in the Buddhist notion of Nirvana – a state of peace that marks the end of desire and the insatiable working of the will.

This awareness is anticipated in the Dutchman's great monologue *Die Frist ist um* ('The Term is up') in Act I. It finds parallels in Tannhäuser's yearning for death, Wotan's desire in *Die Walküre* for 'the end, the end', Tristan and Isolde's longing for unity beyond time and space, and the determination of Amfortas in *Parsifal* to end his unbearable suffering. The fact that the Dutchman has lived for centuries, foreshadows the plight of Kundry whose damning act of hubris had trapped her in an endless cycle of rebirth. And what was the Dutchman's act of hubris? According to the legends, he had sworn by all the devils in hell that, despite a raging storm, he would round the Cape of Good Hope even if he had to keep on sailing until the day of judgement. And so, it came to pass.

Then we come to the notion of redemption through the love and constancy of a woman. The redeeming quality of a woman's love is an idea with roots in the Faustian idea of the 'the eternal feminine', which continued to fascinate Wagner for another forty years. We find parallels with Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* and Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*. In *Lohengrin* we see the disastrous results of a lack of constancy.

There are links too to Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which had a formative influence on Wagner. In assuring the Dutchman of her devotion, Senta uses the words: '*Wer du auch seist*' ('*whoever you are*') – the same words used by Leonore in the dungeon scene in *Fidelio*. When Senta tells the Dutchman that she would ease his suffering, he, like Florestan in his prison cell invoking an angelic Leonore, describes Senta as an angel. The singer who created the role of Senta – Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient – had also been a famous Leonora and had made a lasting impression on the young Wagner.

And then there is the symbolism of the sea.

*"Ha, proud ocean" says the Dutchman,
"Your challenge is ever-changing, but my torment is eternal."*

Water is an ever-present symbol in Wagner's works. Pristine gold is stolen from the Rhine, and the cursed ring is ultimately returned to it; *Tristan und Isolde* begins on the sea and ends within sight of it; in *Die Meistersinger*, reconciliation (personal and artistic) is achieved on the banks of the river Pegnitz; in *Lohengrin*, the waters of the Scheldt bring the Grail Knight to the people of Brabant and then separate him from them, and the sacred lake in *Parsifal* is the site of Parsifal's lesson in compassion.

The image of a ship at the mercy of the sea can be compared with the storm-tossed human soul in its earthly existence; and so, the Dutchman becomes a metaphor for all mankind. But if the sea is the place of the Dutchman's torment, it is also the medium through which redemption is finally attained. He had emerged from the sea and Senta follows him back into the sea. We can speak of the sea in metaphysical terms as the unknown reality beyond our familiar world of illusion - an idea that is at the very heart of *Tristan und Isolde*.

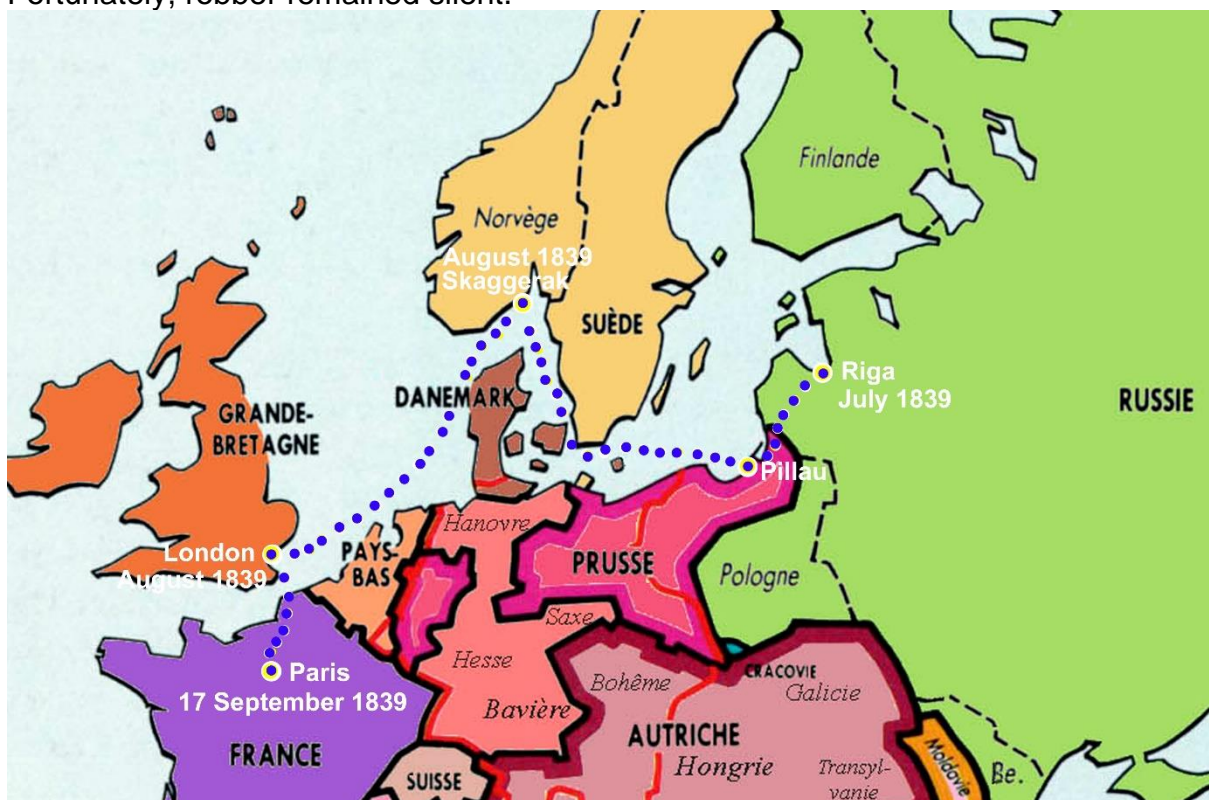
There is one dramatic scene in *The Flying Dutchman* involving three contrasting groups who interact with each other at the quayside of a Norwegian village. Sailors on the deck of Daland's ship, relieved to be home after their long voyage, flirt with village girls who are setting up food and wine on the quay. Then both groups take an interest in the mysterious Dutch ship, dark and silent, that lies nearby. The banter between sailors and girls is tossed back and forth like a verbal dance, starting with light-hearted teasing and ending with speculation that the Dutch seamen are silent because they are ghosts and their sweethearts are long dead. When the ghostly crew does finally answer, the rollicking tone of the music is swept away in a terrifying battle of nerves.

Let's look at the history behind Wagner's creation of the drama. In 1837 he'd been appointed music director of the theatre in Riga and began a short but colourful time in what was then part of the Russian empire. He had married Minna one year earlier,

although she had promptly run off with a local merchant, and Richard had to pursue her and bring her back. Not a great start to their marriage!

The end of Wagner's time in Riga came after he fell out with the German theatre director, Karl von Holtei. Wagner wanted to perform serious works to a high standard, but Holtei preferred harmless fripperies. Singers and orchestral musicians complained bitterly that their efforts were never good enough for Wagner. His dismissal came as a shock and, of course, without any income he couldn't pay his bills. So, he and Minna, and their huge Newfoundland dog, Robber, fled in the middle of the night, across the border into Prussia. He could only have got permission to leave legally by publicising his departure in advance so that debts could be collected. There was no way that he was going to do that! And so, escape during the night was the only option.

Richard, Minna and Robber left Riga by coach in late July 1839. Robber had to run along-side the coach until he became tired, and then Wagner, who was devoted to animals, stopped the coach and insisted that the huge dog be squeezed inside. They stopped near the border and, while the guards were distracted, ran for the fence and threw themselves into a ditch from where they wriggled through to the Prussian side. Fortunately, Robber remained silent.



During the journey to the Gulf of Danzig that followed, the rustic cart in which they were travelling toppled over and Minna was thrown out, causing her shock and superficial injuries. A necessary stop-over at an inn followed, before they continued on to the Prussian port of Pillau. There, the three of them boarded the *Thetis*, a small merchant vessel with a crew of just seven sailors, bound for London.

The ship was obliged to shelter from a storm in a Norwegian fjord at Sandwike in the Gulf of Skaggeak, and Wagner described the impact of this experience as follows:

“The passage among the crags made a wonderful impression on my fancy; the legend of the Flying Dutchman, as I heard it confirmed from the seamen’s mouths, took on within me a distinct and peculiar colour, which only the sea-adventures I was experiencing could have given it.” He drew inspiration from the songs of the crew echoing around the fjord. Robber, on the other hand, was fed up and started nipping the sailors.

They arrived in London and stayed for eight days in a rather dull boarding house in Old Compton Street. Minna used the time to recover from her traumatic journey, but Richard explored the city and visited the House of Lords, sitting in the public gallery and watching a debate that included the Duke of Wellington. Then they carried on to Paris, arriving there on 17 September.

In many ways *The Flying Dutchman* is a young man’s opera, with strong ideas and a vigorous musical treatment. In 1839, before fleeing Riga, Wagner had convinced himself that his works would soon be appearing on a Paris stage but, in reality, the man who ruled the French operatic scene, Giacomo Meyerbeer, although friendly, was very protective of his own position. Wagner was just 27 when he drafted the prose scenario, and he conceived the work as a single Act. Initially, he didn’t intend to write the libretto himself, and hoped that Eugène Scribe, Meyerbeer’s librettist, would write it for him, but this didn’t happen. When Meyerbeer took the young Wagner to meet Léon Pillet, the director of the Paris Opéra, it was suggested that he should collaborate with another composer in writing some music for a ballet - which wasn’t at all what Wagner had in mind! For a desperately needed fee of 500 francs, he left his *Dutchman* scenario with Pillet who promised to arrange auditions for three numbers. But the young Wagner was being patronised and no auditions ever took place. Pillet then commissioned two librettists and the composer Pierre-Louis Dietsch to create a pallid opera called *The Phantom Ship* that had a limited run and is now long forgotten.

In the end Wagner decided on three Acts without a break, and to write both the libretto and the music himself. The music was composed and orchestrated in three months when he was going through an unbearably stressful time trying to persuade the Parisian musical establishment to take him seriously. In Riga he had conducted ten operas by French composers and four by Italian composers. So, he knew the French and Italian repertoire intimately and he was confident he could make his name in the French capital. He went to no end of trouble to ingratiate himself with the French musical establishment, creating songs that used French texts by poets such as Victor Hugo and Pierre de Ronsard. But these efforts led nowhere, and a debtors’ prison loomed. For Richard and Minna, Paris was a hand-to-mouth struggle, and, in the end, their dog Robber ran away because he couldn’t stand it any longer! From the 1860s onwards, after composing the truly extraordinary text and music of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner shied away from setting other writers’ texts to music, believing that words and music had to be the product of the same creative impulse - the same creative mind.

At first, Wagner was well disposed towards Meyerbeer and, for his part, Meyerbeer wrote: “This young man interests me, he has both talent & enthusiasm, but fortune has not smiled on him.” Wagner turned to Meyerbeer whenever he was in need, and his appeals became, quite frankly, sycophantic. In 1841 he even wrote about *Les Huguenots* in the following terms: “Is not the strong impulse for religious expression

in Meyerbeer's works a striking manifestation of the master's deep, inward intentions? Is not this feature precisely one that reminds us movingly of his German origins? ... There is no longer any need to compose grand, learned, liturgically correct masses and oratorios; we have learned from this son of Germany that religion can just as well be preached from the stage Thus, we must stand by our view that the most recent great epoch in dramatic music has been brought to a close by Meyerbeer. ... And yet he is still alive among us, and at the height of his powers. So let us not get ahead of ourselves, but rather wait and see what new things his genius will yet produce!"

Meyerbeer was embarrassed by such language and refused to allow it to be published, but it shows how far Wagner was prepared to go to win Meyerbeer's favour and to copy Meyerbeer's style. A few years earlier though, in 1837, Robert Schumann had published an article in his *New Journal for Music*, in which he was scathing about *Les Huguenots*. "I am no moralist" wrote Schumann, "but it enrages a good protestant to hear his dearest chorale [Luther's *Ein feste Burg*] shrieked out on the stage; to see the bloodiest drama in the whole history of his religion degraded to the level of an annual fair farce in order to raise money and noise with it. Yes, the whole opera, from the overture with its ridiculously trivial sanctity, enrages him ... In vain we seek one pure, lasting idea, one spark of Christian feeling in it. To startle and to tickle is Meyerbeer's maxim. ... How overladen yet empty, how intentional yet superficial!" Later, Wagner chastised Schumann for his attitude, telling him: "You mustn't be rude about Meyerbeer! He is my protector and – joking apart – an amiable person."

The fact is that the literary campaign against Meyerbeer and, by extension, other Jewish composers, began *not* with Wagner but with Schumann in 1837 when the Jewish ghettos of Western Europe were opening in the wake of the French revolution and Jewish composers were integrating into the wider society.

But as Wagner became increasingly bitter about the failure of the French to embrace him as a composer, his attitude started to change. After he left Paris in 1842 for Dresden, he was obsessed with the idea that art must be divorced from empty virtuosity, and Meyerbeer became a convenient whipping boy.

Wagner's smouldering resentment burst into the open in 1843 when Schumann wrote to him saying that a good deal of *The Flying Dutchman* seemed to him to be 'Meyerbeerian'. That was all that it took. "In the first place", replied Wagner, "I do not know what in the whole world is meant by the word 'Meyerbeerian' except perhaps a sophisticated striving after superficial popularity. No existing work can be 'Meyerbeerian' because, in this sense, not even Meyerbeer himself is 'Meyerbeerian', but Rossinian, Bellinian, Auberian, Spontinian etc etc. I confess that it would have required a wonderful freak of nature for me to have drawn my inspiration from *that* particular source, the merest smell of which, after wafting in from afar, is sufficient to turn my stomach." Ouch!

From that time onwards we can trace the young Wagner's antipathy towards Meyerbeer, contemporary Jews and Frenchmen. Treatises such as *Art and*

Revolution of 1849, *The Artwork of the Future* of 1850, and *Opera and Drama* of 1850-51 gave expression to his ideas. In *Opera and Drama* he went so far as to say: “In Meyerbeer’s music there is shown so appalling an emptiness, shallowness and artistic nothingness, that – especially when compared with by far the larger number of his musical contemporaries – we are tempted to set down his specific musical capacity at zero.” Meyerbeer was shocked at how the young composer had changed, and he dug out the sycophantic essay of 1841 on *Les Huguenots* to remind himself that this was indeed the man he’d known. The notorious essay *Jewishness in Music* was written in 1850 during Wagner’s exile in Zurich and, appropriately, it was published in Schumann’s *New Journal for Music*. In his desperation to win friends and influence people in Paris, Wagner had already succumbed to the temptation to write *Rienzi*, which Hans von Bülow labelled “Meyerbeer’s best opera”. Despite *Rienzi*’s popularity, Wagner eventually disowned it, and it has never been performed at Bayreuth although, typically (since she has little else to offer), Katharina Wagner has scheduled it for the first time in the 2025 season. As far as Richard Wagner was concerned, *The Flying Dutchman*, not *Rienzi*, was his first distinctive and authentic drama.



Wagner (Alan Badel) meets Meyerbeer (Charles Régnier) in Paris. Clip from the 1955 film *Magic Fire*.

In the movie ‘*Magic Fire*’, made in 1955, there is a scene in which Wagner calls on Meyerbeer in his home. *The Flying Dutchman* is discussed, Franz Liszt plays its overture on the piano, and Meyerbeer is condescending towards the young Wagner.

The first performance of *The Flying Dutchman* took place in Dresden in January 1843. The audience had been expecting another *Rienzi* and didn’t know what to make of the new work, but *The Dutchman* is undoubtedly the better opera, and that was Wagner’s opinion too. Nevertheless, after just four performances, *The Dutchman* was withdrawn from the Dresden repertoire and replaced with more performances of *Rienzi*.

A version of the *Dutchman* story that particularly influenced Wagner was a cynical tale by Heinrich Heine, whom he had met in Paris. In that story, written originally in French in 1833, the fictitious Schnabelewopski describes a play that he once saw in Amsterdam on the subject of the Flying Dutchman. Heine lets the reader follow the plot until the Dutchman meets with Katharina, the daughter of a Scottish sea captain. Then, Schnabelewopski slips out of the theatre with an attractive girl from the audience (for who knows what) returning just in time to witness Katharina throwing herself into the sea, redeeming the Dutchman's soul from the grip of Satan. The play is treated ironically by Heine, and his cynicism is encapsulated in the final moral that women should beware of marrying a Flying Dutchman.

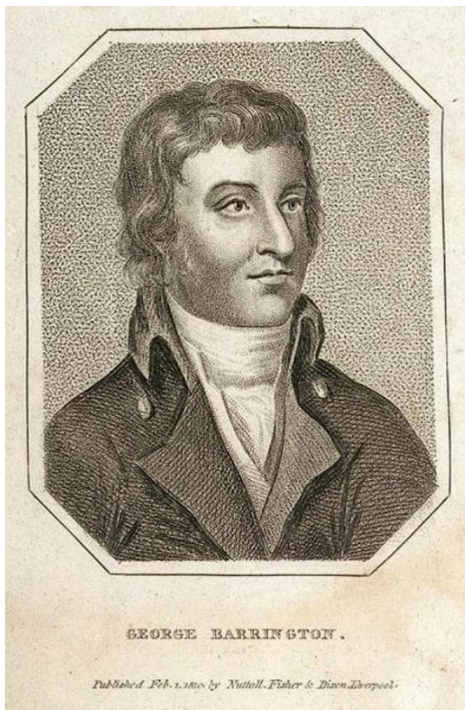
In his early drafts, Wagner, following Heine, set the story not in Norway but in Scotland, and the characters had Scottish names. Senta was called Anna, and her father was Donald, not Daland. Her fiancé was Georg (that is, George) not Erik, Donald's ship was manned by Scottish sailors, the ship was anchored near the village of Holystrand (not Sandwike), and Donald greeted the stranger with the words: "The Scotsman knows hospitality". Connections between the Scots and Scandinavians went back centuries - Edvard Grieg, for instance, had a Scottish great-grandfather – and comparisons have been drawn between Hebridean airs and Senta's Ballad.

Two months before the first Dresden performance of *The Flying Dutchman* in 1843, and more than two years after the original libretto had been written, Wagner relocated the action to Norway and changed all the names. He admitted that he'd been influenced by the stormy voyage from the Gulf of Danzig to London, and by the crew's shouts and songs in the fjords.

I'd like to finish with some thoughts on *The Flying Dutchman in Australian Waters* and a link to Brisbane in the 1880s – which has some relevance to the Queensland Symphony Orchestra's concert next month. The stories originated during the heyday of the Dutch trading empire in the East Indies and during the wars between the Netherlands and Britain in the seventeenth century. It was then that Dutch navigators charted the west coast of Nova Hollandia (Australia), Anthoonij van Diemenslandt (Tasmania) and Nova Zeelandia, which explains the sightings of the Flying Dutchman in southern waters. The tales may have been inspired by the inexplicably swift journeys between the Netherlands and the East Indies by certain Dutch captains, who were rumoured to be in league with the devil. In some of the old stories the mysterious Dutchman was named Vanderdecken, but Wagner called him simply *Der fliegende Holländer*. In the midst of battle, Dutch fire ships would loom out of fog and smoke with 'blood red sails and blackened masts' to terrify superstitious sailors. They were usually manned by skeleton crews who steered them onto targets before escaping in small boats at the last moment.



The earliest literary mention of the legend is to be found in George Barrington's *A Voyage to Botany Bay*, published in London in 1795.



George Barrington (1755-1804)

Barrington was a 'gentleman pickpocket' and charlatan who was transported in 1791 to New South Wales – which of course included the whole east coast of Australia in those days. Barrington rose to become Chief Constable at Parramatta, and his account of his journey includes the following:

“About two in the morning I was awaked by a violent shake by the shoulder, when starting up in my hammock, I saw the boatswain, with evident signs of terror and dismay in his countenance, standing by me. ‘For God’s sake, messmate,’ said he, ‘hand us the key of the case, for by the Lord I’m damnably scarified: for, d’ye see, as I was just looking over the weather bow, what should I see but the Flying Dutchman coming right down upon us, with everything set — I know ’twas she — I cou’d see all her lower-deck ports up, and the lights fore and aft, as if cleared for action. Now as how, d’ye see, I am sure no mortal ship could bear her low-deck ports up and not founder in this here weather: why, the sea runs mountains high. It must certainly be the ghost of that there Dutchman, that foundered in this latitude, and which, I have heard say, always appears in this here quarter, in hard gales of wind.... When I called to Joe Jackson, who was at the helm, to look over the weather-bow, he saw nothing; tho’, as how, I saw it as plain as this here bottle,’ - taking another swig at the Geneva.”

There were other occasional ‘sightings’ of the Flying Dutchman, one of the more celebrated being recorded by Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale, and his younger brother Prince George, later King George V.



Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale, and his younger brother Prince George, later King George V.

This sighting took place on 11 July 1880 when the two princes were cadet midshipmen on the corvette *HMS Bacchante*. They were travelling with their tutor John Dalton on a three-year voyage and were on their way to Brisbane where they arrived a year later. While they were at sea between Melbourne and Sydney, the following event occurred, as recorded in their published account:

“At 4 a.m. the Flying Dutchman crossed our bows. A strange red light as of a phantom ship all aglow, in the midst of which light the masts, spars, and sails of a brig 200 yards distant stood out in strong relief as she came up on the port bow, where also the officer of the watch from the bridge clearly saw her, as did the quarterdeck midshipman, who was sent forward at once to the forecastle; but on arriving there was no vestige nor any sign whatever of any material ship was to be seen either near or right away to the horizon, the night being clear and the sea calm. Thirteen persons altogether saw her, including others from the other ships in the squadron, the *Cleopatra* and the *Tourmaline*.”

There is a surviving photo of the two princes at old Government House Brisbane in what is now the botanic gardens, after their encounter at sea with the Flying Dutchman. The princes' account also quotes eight lines of Senta's Ballad. Wagner had given concerts in London three years earlier, when he'd been received by Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) the princes' father.



The two princes at Government House Brisbane in 1881.

In 1860 a crucial change was made to the orchestral ending of *The Flying Dutchman* and, consequently, to the ending of its overture. Wagner had just composed the music of *Tristan und Isolde* and now felt able to deal convincingly, by music alone, with the concept of redemption through love. As he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck:

“Only now that I have written Isolde’s final transfiguration, have I been able to find the right ending for *The Flying Dutchman*.”

I’m assured that this is the version that we’ll hear next month in the concert to be given by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra.



The Dutchman and Senta rise above the waves.
By Ferdinand Leeke (1859-1925)



For information on *The Flying Dutchman* and Wagner’s other finished and unfinished works, see:

www.peterbassett.com.au

