

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



8. THE ARTIST'S DILEMMA

7 November, 2023

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THE FIRST OF HIS OPERAS BASED ON MEDIEVAL GERMAN MYTH, **Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*** (1845) nonetheless showed two other influences: the *bel canto* operas of Bellini, and the *grand opéra* of Meyerbeer. Wagner in fact went head to head with Meyerbeer in 1861, producing a version in Paris adapted to French tastes; it was a failure. But *Tannhäuser* is a difficult opera to produce under any circumstances because its binary opposition of purity and sensuality leads to stereotyping on both sides, and because the sexual morality of our own age is a great deal more nuanced than Wagner's text easily allows.

We shall look at two recent productions of the opera that both avoid the simple portrayal of sex as one pole of this duality: **Robert Carsen** in Barcelona makes Tannhäuser a painter; **Tobias Kratzer** at Bayreuth gives him a hippie past. One production is pristine and almost monochrome; the other revels in color, surprise, and even humor. Neither is entirely easy to understand at first viewing. But both in the end make serious and relevant points about artistry and life. *rb.*

Wagner: *Tannhäuser* (revised version). Barcelona 2012 (DVD).

Petra Maria Schnitzler (Elisabeth), Béatrice Uria-Monzon (Venus), Peter Seiffert (Tannhäuser), Markus Eiche (Wolfram); Sebastian Weigle (c), Robert Carsen (dir)

Wagner: *Tannhäuser* (original version). Bayreuth 2019 (DVD).

Lise Davidsen (Elisabeth), Elena Zhidkova (Venus), Katharina Konradi (Boy), Stephen Gould (Tannhäuser), Markus Eiche (Wolfram), with Manni Laudenbach & Le Gateau Chocolat; Valeri Gergiev (c), Tobias Kratzer (d)

The items below are listed in the order in which they appear in the opera. In class, however, I will play the Acts I and II excerpts from the Carsen production first, then those by Kratzer. The second hour will be devoted mainly to Kratzer's Act III, but will end with Carsen's final scene.

ACT ONE

Heinrich Tannhäuser is a *Minnesinger*, or courtly poet and singer. But before the opera begins he deserted the noble Wartburg Castle for the Venusberg, a cavern of delight where he has fallen under the spell of **Venus** herself. But he misses his former life, and although he sings Venus' praises, he begs her to set him free. When he rejects her enticements to stay, she eventually throws him out—with the warning that he will never find happiness.

Overture, excerpt (Kratzer, Bayreuth)

Venusberg scene, excerpt (Carsen, Barcelona)

Act I, scene 1 opening (Kratzer, Bayreuth)

Tannhäuser wakes in a meadow near the Wartburg, to the sound of a young Shepherd playing on his pipe. A group of Pilgrims passing on their way to Rome gives him hope that he too may find redemption. The Landgrave and a few of his former friends enter on a hunt. [*They urge Tannhäuser to return to them; he refuses at first, but agrees when his friend **Wolfram von Eschenbach** tell him that the Landgrave's niece **Elisabeth** has been pining for his return.*]

Act I, end of scene 1 and start of scene 2 (Kratzer, Bayreuth)

ACT TWO

[*The Hall of Song at the Wartburg. Elisabeth greets it as the place where she fell in love with Tannhäuser's voice. But when Wolfram (who also loves her) reintroduces the returned knight, she at first rejects him...*] but then confesses how she has suffered in his absence.

Elisabeth's confession (Kratzer, Bayreuth)

Chorus of guests (Carsen, Barcelona)

The guests arrive for the song contest. [*Each Minnesinger presents a song of love. Wolfram's is pure and idealistic; the others show other qualities, but Tannhäuser protests that none of them knows true love. When he launches into his Act I song in praise of Venus, the others are horrified and call for his blood—until Elisabeth intervenes, saying that he has merely fallen under a spell, and might yet be restored if he goes to Rome with the Pilgrims and asks absolution from the Pope.*]

ACT THREE

[*Outside the Wartburg. After a long orchestral introduction, Wolfram comes upon Elisabeth alone in prayer.*] The Pilgrims pass by, returning from Rome; Elisabeth is devastated to see that Tannhäuser is not among them. She prays to the Virgin to protect him and to take her to heaven on her own death, which she implies will be soon. She leaves and Wolfram, full of foreboding, begs the Evening Star to shine upon her.

Act III, Elisabeth and Wolfram (Kratzer, Bayreuth)

[*Tannhäuser comes in, worn and haggard. He tells Wolfram that the Pope has called his crime unforgivable, and said that he can only be redeemed if fresh leaves bloom on the papal staff—that is, never.*]

Despite Wolfram's pleas, Tannhäuser calls once more to Venus to take him back, and she enters. Just then, a chorus is heard, mourning for Elisabeth, who has died as she predicted. Falling to his knees, Tannhäuser cries out "Holy Elisabeth, pray for me!" and dies too. As he breathes his last, another group of Pilgrims announce that there has been a miracle: fresh leaves have sprouted on the Pope's staff, and Tannhäuser is therefore redeemed.

Act III finale (Kratzer, Bayreuth)

Act III finale (Carsen, Barcelona)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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