

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Tannhäuser



Music and libretto
by Richard Wagner

Based on two Teutonic legends:
“Tannhäuser” and
“The Song Contest at Wartburg”

Opera in Three Acts

Place: Eisenach, Germany
Time: Early 13th century

Characters

Tannhäuser, a Minnesinger (tenor) Richard Cassilly
Elisabeth, the Landgrave’s niece (soprano)Eva Marton
Venus (soprano or mezzo-soprano)Tatiana Troyanos
Wolfram von Eschenbach, a Minnesinger (baritone) Bernd Weikl
Herrmann, Landgrave of Thuringia (bass).....John Macurdy
Walther von der Vogelweide, a Minnesinger (tenor) Robert Nagy
Biterolf, a Minnesinger (bass).....Richard J. Clark
Heinrich der Schreiber, a Minnesinger (tenor) Charles Anthony
Reinmar von Zweter, a Minnesinger (bass) Richard Vernon
Nobles, knights, ladies, pilgrims, sirens, naiads, nymphs, bacchantes; In the Paris version,
also the Three Graces, youths, cupids, satyrs, and fauns

Conducted by James Levine

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Chorus and Ballet

Première performance at the Royal Theater in Dresden, Germany on October 19, 1845

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Synopsis

Background: In the early 13th century the Landgraves of the Thuringian Valley ruled the area of Germany around the Wartburg Castle. They were great patrons of the arts, particularly music and poetry, holding contests between the minnesingers at the Wartburg Castle. Across the valley towered the Venusberg, in whose interior, according to legend, dwelt Holda, the Goddess of Spring. In time, Holda became identified with Venus, the pagan Goddess of Love, whose grotto was the home of sirens and nymphs. It is said that the Goddess would lure the Wartburg minstrel-knights to her lair where her beauty would captivate them.

The minstrel-knight Heinrich von Ofterdingen, known as Tannhäuser, left the court of the Landgrave of Thuringia after a disagreement with his fellow knights. Since then he has been held by as a willing captive through his love for Venus, in her grotto in the Venusberg. Having lived there over a year Tannhäuser has become weary of monotonous joys and sensual bliss and longs to return to earthly life, with its mingled pains and pleasures.

ACT I

Scene 1: The Venusberg — The Subterranean Grotto of Venus



Tannhäuser lies sleeping in Venus' arms as nymphs and youths are engaged in a wildly erotic orgy, which rises to an even greater pitch of frenzy as satyrs, fauns and bacchantes join in. [*Ballet scene; a bacchanale*]

Tannhäuser awakens as if from a dream. He longs to leave Venus' timeless and changeless realm of sensual pleasure and to return to the mortal world. Venus reproaches him for his ingratitude and invites him to sing to her. Halfheartedly Tannhäuser takes up his harp and, in a passionate love song, praises the goddess of beauty who, for more than a year, has bestowed her love upon him. He ends each verse with an ever more urgent plea to be allowed to leave the Venusberg.

Venus reprimands, cries and cajoles Tannhäuser, hoping to make him change his mind and remain with her. Eventually she reluctantly yields to his request, inviting him to return to her to seek his salvation when he is rejected in the world of men. Tannhäuser replies that his salvation lies with the Virgin Mary. At the mention of her name, the Venusberg suddenly vanishes.

Scene 2: A sunny valley near the Wartburg Castle

Tannhäuser suddenly finds himself in a sunny valley near the Wartburg, the castle of the Landgrave. A young shepherd [*soprano*] sits upon a rock, playing his pipe and singing an ode to spring. A band of pilgrims pass by, setting out on their journey to Rome. Tannhäuser falls to his knees, overcome with emotions of gratitude and repentance.

Horns announce the Landgrave Hermann and his companions, who are returning from the hunt. They recognize Tannhäuser as their old friend, and invite him to return to their circle of minstrel knights. Tannhäuser had cut himself off from them because he was shamefully bested in the prize-singing contest. He initially refuses to join them, but Wolfram von Eschenbach, reminds Tannhäuser that he had once won the love of Elisabeth, the Landgrave's beautiful niece. On hearing her name, Tannhäuser embraces his companions and agrees to join them.

ACT II

The Hall of Song in the Wartburg Castle



The Wartburg Castle in Germany

Elisabeth enters the Minstrels' Hall, rejoicing over Tannhäuser's forthcoming return. It was the place where she had first heard Tannhäuser's voice, and she has not entered the room since he left.

Wolfram leads Tannhäuser in, reuniting the happy pair. Elisabeth describes the conflicting feelings which his song aroused in her. Tannhäuser, in his turn, explains how love gave wings to his song and now brings him back to her. (He dare not tell her about the evil he has done.) They both praise the power of God, which has brought them together again. Wolfram, who secretly loves Elisabeth, looks on in silent resignation.

The two men leave as the Landgrave enters. He suspects Elisabeth's love for Tannhäuser and tells her of the "Tournament of Song," which is about to take place in the Hall.

Horns announce the arrival of the guests. The long parade of knights and nobles, each accompanied by ladies and attendants, enter the Hall in solemn procession. The knights competing in the Tournament include Tannhäuser, Wolfram and other friends, who enter with harps, and are ceremoniously seated before the assembly. [*March and chorus.*] The Landgrave proposes the subject of the tournament: "the true nature of love." Elisabeth herself will award the prize.

The pages command Wolfram von Eschenbach to begin. Wolfram sings about the purity of love and delivers an idealized tribute to Elisabeth. He describes love as a miraculous spring, a source of spiritual refreshment, which should never be sullied with impure thoughts.

Tannhäuser jumps up, out of turn, and counters with a frenzied hymn, that though it is fitting to worship God and his marvels, here on earth the highest love consists only in the pleasure of the senses.

The assembly is astonished. Biterolf draws his sword, branding Tannhäuser a blasphemer against true love, and challenges him for insulting the honor of women. Tannhäuser, inflaming the situation even further, retorts that Biterolf knows nothing of sexual love and should remain quiet. The Landgrave intervenes and orders Biterolf to put up his sword.

The crowd rises in agitation. Wolfram prays that the pure thoughts of his song may quiet the situation. Tannhäuser forgets himself completely, and grabs his harp to sing a lusty paean — to Venus!



Everyone is shocked. The women, with the exception of Elisabeth, leave the hall in horror. The knights are about to hurl themselves upon Tannhäuser, when Elisabeth runs forward to protect him. She manages to subdue the men by explaining that Tannhäuser may well be a singer, but it is not for them to judge him — it is God's will that he be allowed to find his path to salvation.

Tannhäuser, once again remorseful and repentant, expresses his apology. The Landgrave then orders Tannhäuser to join a band of pilgrims leaving for Rome, where he may perhaps seek forgiveness from the Pope [Urban IV]. The pilgrims are heard off-stage, and Tannhäuser runs off to join them with the cry, “To Rome!”

Note: A recent reinterpretation of Wagner’s opera is offered by three economists who argue that, in their analysis of Tannhäuser’s dilemma, his outburst in the song tournament can be viewed as a rational act of solving the dilemma he faces once the tournament is underway — if he wins the contest he aggravates his sins as he would violate the sacrament of penance before a marriage to Elisabeth; if he loses, he loses his beloved Elisabeth.

ACT III

In the Valley of the Wartburg Castle



Several months later, it is autumn and evening is approaching. It has been three days since Tannhäuser has left. Elisabeth is at prayer before the statue of the Virgin, awaiting his return. *[Orchestral music describes Tannhäuser’s pilgrimage.]*

Wolfram enters. He notices Elisabeth praying and sings of her anguish. In the distance is heard the chant of the returning pilgrims. They enter slowly, a few at a time, singing of their absolutions received in Rome.

Elisabeth combs the crowd for Tannhäuser, but he is not among them. The pilgrims depart. In despair, Elisabeth prays to the Virgin to receive her soul into heaven, where she might intercede for her beloved, who has not yet found absolution. Broken-hearted, she returns to the Wartburg. Wolfram, fearing the worst, implores the Evening Star to guard Elisabeth in her journey, wherever it may lead. *[This also hints of Elisabeth’s approaching death.]*

Night has barely fallen. Tannhäuser appears, ragged, pale and haggard, walking feebly leaning on his staff. Wolfram suddenly recognizes him. To Wolfram’s horror Tannhäuser explains that he is once again seeking the way back to the realm of Venus, since there is nowhere else for him to go.

Wolfram anxiously questions him about his pilgrimage to Rome. *[This begins the “Rome Narrative.”]* Tannhäuser tells Wolfram that, although he had surpassed the other pilgrims in penance and self-mortification, there was to be no forgiveness for him. He had told the Pope of his stay at the Venusberg, and begged for release from the passions that enslave him. But, despite his abject penitence, the Pope replied that he had no more chance of being forgiven than the Pope’s staff had of sprouting leaves.

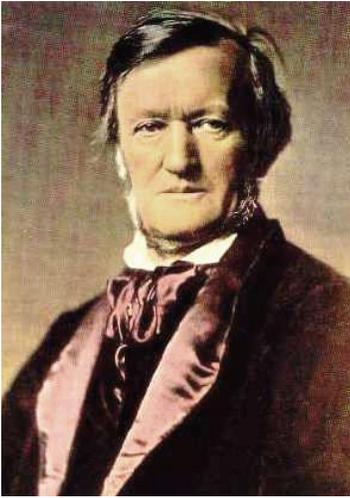
Tannhäuser desperately calls to Venus to take him back. Venus appears and beguilingly welcomes him back to her realm. But the spell of her enchantment is suddenly broken when Wolfram sees torches descending the hill bearing the body of Elisabeth on a bier *[a framework for carrying a corpse to the grave]*. Wolfram calls out her name, “Elisabeth!” Tannhäuser races to Elisabeth’s side and collapses on her body and cries out, “Holy Saint Elisabeth, pray for me.” He then dies under her bier.

As the growing light bathes the scene the younger pilgrims arrive singing of a miracle. They are bearing the Pope’s wooden staff which is covered with new green shoots, a sign that Tannhäuser has received God’s forgiveness. The entire ensemble sings praise to God, “The Holy Grace of God is to the penitent given, who now enters into the joy of Heaven!”

(Note: With true medieval sternness, Tannhäuser is not redeemed in the old legend, but is doomed to return to the domain of Venus, where conscience-stricken, he finds everlasting wretchedness.)

Richard Wagner

Born: May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany; died February 13, 1883 in Venice, Italy



Wilhelm Richard Wagner was a German composer, theater director, polemicist, and conductor who is primarily known for his operas (or, as some of his later works were later known, “music dramas”). Unlike most opera composers, Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music for each of his stage works. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer of works in the romantic vein of Weber and Meyerbeer, Wagner revolutionized opera through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”), by which he sought to synthesize the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, with music subsidiary to drama. He described this vision in a series of essays published between 1849 and 1852. Wagner realized these ideas most fully in the first half of the four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

His compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for their complex textures, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of leitmotifs — musical phrases associated with individual characters, places, ideas, or plot elements. His advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centers, greatly influenced the development of classical music. His *Tristan und Isolde* is sometimes described as marking the start of modern music.

Until his final years, Wagner’s life was characterized by political exile, turbulent love affairs, poverty and repeated flight from his creditors. His controversial writings on music, drama and politics have attracted extensive comment, notably, since the late 20th century, where they express anti-Semitic sentiments. The effect of his ideas can be traced in many of the arts throughout the 20th century; his influence spread beyond composition into conducting, philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre.

Schopenhauer’s influence. In 1854 Wagner’s poet and friend, Georg Herwegh, introduced him to the works of philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. Wagner would later call this the most important event of his life. His personal circumstances certainly made him an easy convert to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which was centered on a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition. He would remain an adherent of Schopenhauer for the rest of his life, even after his fortunes had improved. One of Schopenhauer’s doctrines was that music held a supreme role among the arts, since it was the only one unconcerned with the material world. Wagner quickly embraced this claim, which must have resonated strongly, despite its direct contradiction with his own arguments in *Opera and Drama*, that music in opera had to be subservient to the drama. Wagnerian scholars have since argued that Schopenhauer’s influence caused Wagner to assign a more commanding role to music in his later operas, including the latter half of the *Ring* cycle, which he had yet to compose.

Mathilde Wesendonck. Another source of inspiration for Wagner was the poet-writer, Mathilde Wesendonck. Though Mathilde seems to have returned some of his affections, she had no intention of jeopardizing her marriage, and kept her husband informed of her relationship with Wagner. Nevertheless, the affair inspired Wagner to put aside his work on the *Ring* cycle (which would not be resumed for twelve years) and begin work on *Tristan und Isolde*. The uneasy affair collapsed in 1858, when Minna intercepted a letter from Wagner to Mathilde. After the resulting confrontation, Wagner left Zürich alone, and headed for Venice. The following year, in 1861, he once again moved to Paris to oversee production of a new revision of *Tannhäuser*, which was an utter fiasco, due to disturbances caused by aristocrats from the Jockey Club. Further performances were cancelled and Wagner hurriedly left the city.

King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Wagner’s fortunes dramatically improved in 1864, when King Ludwig II assumed the throne of Bavaria at the age of 18. The young king, an ardent admirer of Wagner’s operas since childhood, had the composer brought to Munich. He settled Wagner’s considerable debts, and made plans to have his latest opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, produced. After grave difficulties in rehearsal, the opera premiered to enormous success at the Munich Court Theatre on June 10, 1865.

Cosima von Bülow. In the meantime, Wagner became embroiled in another love affair, this time with Cosima von Bülow, wife of conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner's most ardent supporters, and première conductor of *Tristan und Isolde*. Cosima was the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and 24 years younger than Wagner. In April 1865, Cosima gave birth to Wagner's illegitimate daughter, who was named Isolde. Their indiscreet affair scandalized Munich and, to make matters worse, Wagner fell into disfavor among members of the Bavarian court, who were suspicious of his influence on the king. In December 1865, King Ludwig was finally forced to ask the composer to leave Munich. He apparently also toyed with the idea of abdicating the throne in order to follow his hero into exile, but Wagner quickly dissuaded him.

King Ludwig set Wagner up at the villa Triebtschen, beside Switzerland's Lake Lucerne. Wagner completed *Die Meistersinger* in 1867, and it premiered in Munich on June 21st the following year. In October, Cosima finally convinced Hans von Bülow to grant her a divorce. Richard and Cosima were married on August 25, 1870. On Christmas Day of that year, Wagner presented to Cosima the chamber music, *Siegfried Idyll*, for her 33rd birthday. The marriage to Cosima lasted to the end of Wagner's life. They had another daughter, named Eva, and a son named Siegfried.

Wagner, now happily settled into his newfound domesticity, turned his energies toward completing the last two operas of the *Ring* cycle, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Much against Wagner's wishes, the first two operas, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* were both premiered in Munich before the rest of the operas were finished. King Ludwig insisted on these "previews," while the furious composer looked on helplessly in the face of the King's privileges and his own dependence on the King's funds.

Wagner wanted the complete *Ring* cycle to be performed in a new, specially-designed opera house. In 1871, Wagner decided on the small town of Bayreuth as the location of his new opera house. The Wagners moved there the following year, and the foundation stone for the Festspielhaus (Festival House) was laid. In order to raise funds for the construction, "Wagner societies" were formed in several cities, and Wagner himself began touring Germany conducting concerts. However, sufficient funds were only raised after King Ludwig stepped in with another large grant in 1874. Later that year, the Wagners moved into their permanent home in Bayreuth, a villa that they named "Wahnfried" ("Freedom from Illusion").

Der Ring des Nibelung was produced in its entirety at the opening of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus on August 13, 1876. Although Wagner himself would have been more than competent to conduct the world première of the *Ring*, he chose instead to remain as stage director. Present at this unique musical event was an illustrious list of guests: Kaiser Wilhelm (King of Prussia), Dom Pedro II of Brazil, King Ludwig (who attended in secret, probably to avoid the Kaiser), and other members of the nobility. Accomplished composers who also attended were Anton Bruckner, Edvard Grieg, Peter Tchaikovsky and Franz Liszt.

Artistically, the Festival was an outstanding success. Attending the Festival as a Russian correspondent, Tchaikovsky wrote, "Something has taken place at Bayreuth which our grandchildren and their children will still remember." Financially, however, the opera was an unmitigated disaster. Wagner abandoned his original plan to hold a second festival the following year, and traveled to London to conduct a series of concerts in an attempt to make up the deficit.

In 1877 Wagner began work on *Parsifal*, his final opera. The composition took four years, during which he also wrote a series of increasingly reactionary essays on religion and art. Wagner completed *Parsifal* in January 1882, and a second Bayreuth Festival was held for the new opera. Wagner was, by this time, extremely ill, having suffered through a series of increasingly severe angina attacks. During the sixteenth and final performance of *Parsifal* on August 29th, Wagner secretly entered the pit during Act III, took the baton from conductor Hermann Levi, and led the performance to its conclusion.

After the Festival, the Wagner family journeyed to Venice for the winter. On February 13, 1883, at the age of 70, Wagner died of a heart attack in the Palazzo Vendramin on the Grand Canal. Franz Liszt's memorable piece for pianoforte solo, *La Lugubre gondola*, evokes the passing of a black-shrouded funerary gondola bearing Wagner's mortal remains over the Grand Canal. His body was returned to Bayreuth and buried in the garden of the Villa Wahnfried. (Cosima would later be buried there in 1930, 47 years later.)

Tannhäuser



Tannhäuser (full title *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg / Tannhäuser and the Singers' Contest at Wartburg*) is an opera in three acts, based on the two Teutonic legends of Tannhäuser and the song contest at Wartburg. The story centers on the struggle between sacred and profane love, and redemption through love (a theme running through almost all of Wagner's mature works).

The original version. Heinrich Heine provided Wagner with the inspiration for *Der fliegende Holländer* and Wagner drew on the same source for the plot of *Tannhäuser*. Heine's sardonic poem, *Elementargeister*, telling of the lure of the grotto of Venus was published in 1837 in *Der Salon*. Wagner also drew material from E. T. A. Hoffman's story *The Singer's Contest* and Ludwig Tieck's 1799 story, *Faithful Eckhart and Tannhäuser*. Wagner wrote the prose draft of *Tannhäuser* between June and July 1842. He wrote the libretto in April 1843, constructing a plot involving the 14th century Minnesingers and the myth of Venus and her realm of Venusberg. Because both the historical and the mythological are united in Tannhäuser's personality, half of the opera takes place in

a historical setting and half takes place in the mythological Venusberg.

Wagner began composing the music during a vacation in Teplitz in the summer of 1843, and completed the full score on April 13, 1845. The opera's famous overture, often played separately as a concert piece, was written last. The instrumentation also shows signs of borrowing from French operatic style. The score includes parts for on-stage brass; however, rather than using French brass instruments, Wagner uses twelve German waldhorns. Wagner also makes use of the harp, another commonplace of French opera.

The first performance of *Tannhäuser* was given in the Royal Theater in Dresden on October 19, 1845. The part of Elizabeth was sung by Wagner's niece, Johanna Wagner, which he had intended to premiere the opera to mark Johanna Wagner's 19th birthday on October 13th. However, she was ill, forcing the opera to be postponed for six days. The performance, which was conducted by Wagner himself, was not the success that *Rienzi* had been, and Wagner almost immediately set to modifying the ending and tinkering with the score. This version of the opera, as revised for publication in 1860, is generally known as the "Dresden" version.

The Paris version. Wagner substantially revised the opera for a special 1861 performance at the Paris Opéra, which was requested by the French emperor Napoleon III at the instigation of Pauline von Metternich, wife of the Austrian ambassador to Paris. This revision forms the basis of what is now known as the "Paris version" of *Tannhäuser*.

Wagner had originally hoped that the Parisian première would have taken place at the Théâtre Lyrique; however, since the work was to be presented at the Paris Opéra, according to the traditions of the house, the composer was required to insert a ballet into the score. Wagner agreed to this condition, since he believed that a success at the Paris Opéra represented his most significant opportunity to re-establish himself following his exile from Germany. However, rather than perform the ballet in the traditional Act II, he chose to place it in Act I, where it could at least make some dramatic sense by representing the sensual world of Venus' realm where the ballet could take the form of a bacchanale and orgy.

The Paris première of *Tannhäuser* was given on March 13, 1861. The composer had been closely involved in its preparation and there had been no less than 164 rehearsals. However, there was also a significant planned assault on the opera's reception by members of the wealthy and aristocratic Jockey Club. Their custom was to arrive at the Opéra in time for the traditional Act II ballet and, more often than not, to leave as soon as the ballet was over. They objected to the ballet being performed in Act I, since it meant that they would have to be present for the beginning of the opera. They also disliked Princess von Metternich, who had promoted the performances, as well as her native country of Austria. Members of the Jockey Club therefore led a rowdy and disorderly group of audi-

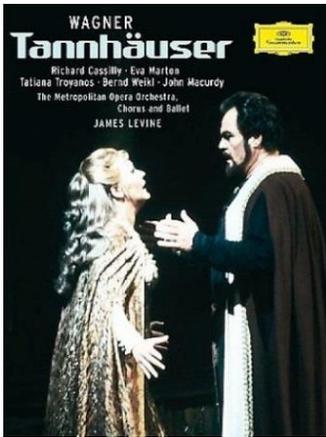
ence participants with whistles and cat-calls. By the third performance of *Tannhäuser* this uproar was causing several interruptions of up to fifteen minutes long. As a consequence Wagner withdrew his opera after its third performance. The now legendary event pitched artists, music lovers and critics in both Paris and Europe against each other for months to come. It also ended Wagner's hopes of establishing himself in Paris, which was at that time the center of the operatic world.

Wagner made a few further revisions to *Tannhäuser* for an 1875 performance in Vienna, which was carried out under his supervision. This Vienna version is the one normally used in modern productions of the "Paris" version. Wagner continued to remain unsatisfied with *Tannhäuser* until his death. Three weeks before he died, Cosima wrote in her diary, "He says he still owes the world *Tannhäuser*" (January 23, 1883).

Note: Although the libretto and the score always use the single name Tannhäuser, in stage directions involving the title character, or in indicating which passages are sung by him, that name never appears in the libretto. Rather, each character who addresses Tannhäuser by name uses his given name, *Heinrich*.

Tannhäuser: The Video (1982)

Starring Richard Cassilly, Eva Marton and Tatiana Troyanos; James Levine, conductor



This recording of the Paris version of *Tannhäuser*, taken from 1982 Met performances of November 22 and December 20, is considered to be one of the most gorgeous and gloriously romantic productions in the Met's repertory. The collaboration of conductor James Levine, director Otto Schenk and designer Günther Schneider-Siemssen have strictly adhered to the composer's wishes, which were clearly spelled out during his lifetime and rigorously enforced at Bayreuth long after his death. It was also the first time the Met used Wagner's later Paris version of the score, with its expanded Venusberg scene and revised Song Contest.

A distinguished cast is headed by the late American heldentenor, Richard Cassilly, who was perhaps the leading exponent of Tannhäuser at the time; Hungarian-born dramatic soprano, Eva Marton, who plays the radiant Elisabeth; and the late Greek mezzo-soprano, Tatiana Troyanos, who plays a musically and dramatically stunning Venus.