



WAGNER

Overture to *Tannhäuser*

Richard Wagner (22 May 1813 – 13 February 1883) was a German composer, conductor, theatre director and polemicist primarily known for his operas (or "music dramas", as they were later called). Wagner's compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for their complex texture, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of *leitmotifs*: musical themes associated with individual characters, places, ideas or plot elements. Unlike most other opera composers, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for every one of his stage works. Perhaps the two best-known extracts from his works are the *Ride of the Valkyries* from the opera *Die Walküre*, and the *Wedding March (Bridal Chorus)* from the opera *Lohengrin*. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer of works such as *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* which were in the romantic traditions of Weber and Meyerbeer, Wagner transformed operatic thought through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). This would achieve the synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts and was announced in a series of essays between 1849 and 1852. Wagner realized this concept most fully in the first half of the monumental four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. However, his thoughts on the relative importance of music and drama were to change again, and he reintroduced some traditional operatic forms into his last few stage works, including *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Wagner pioneered advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, which greatly influenced the development of European classical music. His *Tristan und Isolde* is sometimes described as marking the époque of modern music. Wagner's influence spread beyond music into philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre. He had his own opera house built, the *Bayreuth Festspielhaus*, which contained many novel design features. It was here that the *Ring* and *Parsifal* received their premieres and where his most important stage works continue to be performed today in an annual festival run by his descendants. Wagner's views on conducting were also highly influential. His extensive writings on music, drama and politics have all attracted extensive comment in recent decades, especially where they have anti-Semitic content. Wagner achieved all of this despite a life characterized, until his last decades, by political exile, turbulent love affairs, poverty and repeated flight from his creditors. His pugnacious personality and often outspoken views on music, politics and society made him a controversial figure during his life, which he remains to this day. The impact of his ideas can be traced in many of the arts throughout the twentieth century.

Tannhäuser is an opera in three acts and is based on the two German 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 most of Wagner's mature work. Drawing on Heinrich Heine's inspiration for *Der fliegende Holländer*, the original version of Tannhäuser combines the mythological element of German opera and the medieval history of French Grand Opera. By bringing these two elements together, Wagner constructs a plot involving the 14th century Minnesingers and the myth of Venus and her realm of Venusberg ('the mountain of Venus'). Both the historical and the mythological are united in Tannhäuser's personality. The instrumentation 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 was given in the Royal Theater in Dresden on 19 October 1845. The storyline of Tannhäuser starts off with Tannhäuser being held a captive through his love for Venus. He takes up his harp and pays homage to the goddess in a passionate love song, which he ends with an earnest plea to be allowed to depart. The Landgrave announces the subject of the contestants' songs is to be "love's awakening". Elisabeth will grant the victor one wish, whatever it may be. Wolfram performs first; he declares that love is like a pure stream, which should never be troubled. Tannhäuser then expresses his penitence for his outburst, and the Landgrave allows him to join a band of pilgrims bound for Rome, where he may perhaps obtain forgiveness and redemption from the Pope. Orchestral music describes the pilgrimage of Tannhäuser. Tannhäuser is now seeking the way back to the Venusberg and calls to Venus, who appears before him and bids him welcome back to her cavern. Tannhäuser races to her side and collapses upon her body with the words, "Holy Elisabeth, pray for me" upon his lips. The younger pilgrims enter and announce that the Pope's staff has sprouted young leaves, a sign that Tannhäuser has obtained God's forgiveness.