

# The noble comedy

WAGNER'S *MASTERSINGERS* AND THE SERIOUS ART OF LAUGHTER

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Wagner's output is mind-boggling. That any one man could create The Ring Cycle alone is unprecedented; it stands arguably as the only world wonder created by a single man. It is more believable though no less astonishing that one man could create *Tristan and Isolde*. It is of equal fascination and superhuman virtue as Bach's *Art of Fugue*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, da Vinci's *Last Supper* and Homer's *Iliad*. In addition to both of these, Wagner gave us *Lohengrin*, the greatest Romantic opera ever composed, *Parsifal* which changed for ever the art of orchestration and *The Mastersingers*, a six-hour comedy of manners about of all things musical composition. As if that weren't enough, in every moment in which he was not absorbed in a score or libretto (which of course he also created himself), Wagner was working either as an author (with mixed success, but with undeniable impact) or conductor (modern conducting owes nearly all its innovations to Wagner and his immediate disciple, Hans Richter). The practice of modern stage-craft is also of Wagnerian origins. The term "impressionist" would not have been applied to Debussy at all if not for Wagner. The symbolists revelled in Wagnerian ecstasy and freely adapted his leading motif in their work. Nietzsche, the most important philosopher of the twentieth century, for all his genius, could never have begun his theories if not for his conversations with Wagner and familiarity with his work. For all these reasons and more, the subject of Wagner in any stratum is almost insurmountable. Every text no matter how extensive or detailed somehow falls short of its own premise when faced with this figure or his art. It is therefore offered self-consciously that this examination shall be an utter failure. It is only in this strain of humility, a term many would find distasteful in connection with the man, that a semblance of usefulness may hopefully be garnered. It is entirely plausible that any of Wagner's mature works beginning with *The Flying Dutchman* may be seen and analysed as the artistic culmination of a single genius. Wagner offered us this seminal work no less than seven times, the most intricate of which is the Ring. Each work is, stemming from the same genius, a living part of the other like a great network of meaning and motive drawn across a lifetime of experience; this network is not unlike the fabric of Wagner's own masterful musical tapestries; "[he] saw his opera heroes as being united through a transmigration of souls."<sup>1</sup> To examine one on its own is to rob it of an essential life-force which depends upon this network. Thus the premise in itself of examining *The Mastersingers* is definitively futile and self-defeating; again may it be said this shall be an utter failure. However, by the same token, an examination of said work offers a unique insight into Wagner's particular power as a composer. As his only enduring comic work, it has about it a brightness and cleanness which shall serve to illumine the labyrinthian magician in the yellow hues of a summer's day.

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*The Mastersingers* is in fact not Wagner's only comedy. The first was the now-forgotten young work *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Prohibition of Love*), an Italian transplantation of a plot from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* written when the composer was nineteen. It is a far better work than either Mozart or Verdi produced by that age and is strikingly un-Wagnerian in its particular exuberance. It reminds one more "of Gilbert and Sullivan, though the explicit celebration of sex is un-Victorian." The yearning this young opera expresses for unbridled sexuality will find its maturest and deepest embodiment nearly a quarter-century later in *Tristan*,<sup>2</sup> but the theme of the populace conferring its

1. Kropfinger, pg. 25

In an 1860 letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, "According to the beautiful Buddhist doctrine, the spotless purity of Lohengrin is easily explicable in terms of his being the continuation of Parzifal—who was the first to strive towards purity. Elsa, similarly, would reach the level of Lohengrin through being reborn."

2. Magee, *The Tristan Chord*, pg. 26

wisdom upon an imposed establishment is most evident in the expressions of *The Mastersingers*. “[Wagner's] fortunes were at their nadir when he embarked on his sunniest work. The adversities he had were on the same scale as everything else about him. He had abandoned *The Ring* two thirds of the way through, and done the same with *Siegfried*. He had completed *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Valkyrie* and *Rhinegold* without seeing any of them, since none had been performed or had any visible prospect of performance. The production of the revised version of *Tannhäuser* in Paris in March 1861 had turned into the biggest fiasco of his career. (The composer Gounod had said of this: 'if only god would grant it to me to write a flop like that!') He was hopelessly in debt. During the first year of work on *The Mastersingers* he broke finally with his wife, Minna, after what he described as 'ten days in hell'. His life was in a mess on all fronts—and he was just coming into his fiftieth year, an age that was seen and felt to be a great deal older than, when few people lived beyond their sixties, than it is now. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that he should describe the central character of his new opera as a resigned man who showed a cheerful, energetic face to the world.”<sup>3</sup> In terms of its relationship to Wagner's personal life, *Tristan* emerged from an excited and decidedly youthful affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, a work which is obsessed with suicide beyond any which preceded it, including its own legendary constituents.<sup>4</sup> It would seem a great irony then that the character of Wagner's works seem to violently defy his countenance. It must be remembered that Wagner devised the idea for *The Mastersingers* more than twenty years before he drafted the poem and set it to music. At the time of its original synthesis, Wagner had just completed *Tannhäuser* and decided that the grave and serious tone of his work demanded a Satyr play to balance it.<sup>5</sup> The satyr appealed to his affinity for Greek traditions as well. He chose to balance the fourteenth-century Minnesinger song contest of that work with a sixteenth-century Meistersinger contest. The subject of Sachs was becoming a popular one in Germany and appealed to Wagner's sensibilities about unification and national identity. The call of *Lohengrin* was too loud however and so he set aside his comedy for another day.

Among his mature works (those beginning with *The Flying Dutchman*), *The Mastersingers* is unique not only for its mode, but its complete lack of mythical figures as well. “[Wagner] discovered myth...as a distinct category of human thought, as open to us, [he] thought...as to the inhabitants of ancient Greece or Iceland. Myth dawned on him as a form of social hope.”<sup>6</sup> It was this “social hope” which propelled him to participations in the political actions of The Young Germans in the 1840s (landing him in exile). It also drove him to strive for a recreation of the Greek-style drama for a modern audience. Wagner's art sought to reunite religion with drama and music. More than that, “it looked forward to a new and better way of doing what the Greeks had done—better, because it would draw on resources which the Greeks had not had,”<sup>7</sup> namely the machinations of the stage and the orchestra.

What can be said then of Wagner's ideal society in regard to comedy? The satyr, it has been shown, was considered an integral part of a complete dramatic experience, but it was also the smallest part. It is only fitting then that Wagner would write one great comedy to satisfy this proportion to his other work.<sup>8</sup> While his complete theory on comedy is lost, Aristotle (whom Wagner read repeatedly and voraciously throughout his life) says of drama, “the pleasure...belongs rather to Comedy, where the bitterest enemies...walk off good friends at the end, with no slaying of any one

3. Magee, *The Tristan Chord*, pg. 243

4. See Scruton

5. This plan is announced in *A Communication to My Friends*. In ancient Athens, a Satyr was a comic play offered after a trilogy of tragedies as a means of lightening their weight upon the people. Satyrs themselves are mythological creatures, revelrous companions of Dionysus and Pan.

6. Scruton, pg. 4

7. Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, pg. 20

8. It should be acknowledged that not all of Wagner's other works were tragedies. In fact, the only one which truly fits that definition in terms of the libretto is *Twilight of the Gods*, modelled after Shakespeare. The other works are however grave and saturated with tragic elements and characters. In all Wagner's works, progressively as he matured, the music seeks apotheosis rather than conclusion in the familiar dramatic sense.

by any one.”<sup>9</sup> Pleasure, it can be seen, was no less a virtuous attribute to the religious experience of drama than any other. But Wagner was too meticulous in his intentions to compose pleasurable music for pleasure's sake; the music is pleasurable, it does not make the emotional demands (with few exceptions) that *Tristan* does. It was not enough after *Tannhäuser* to write a simple Satyr, it could certainly not be enough after *Tristan*. It shall be seen that as the idea of *The Mastersingers* lived with him through the twenty years before he took it up again, the character of Sachs became the vessel in which all his new ideas and difficult experiences could dwell. Sachs would come to dominate the opera even though Walther was the hero.<sup>10</sup>

“Aristophanes' *Clouds* serves as an excellent illustration of Aristotle's theoretical pattern for comedy. Until the reversal in the final scene, the play is a *memesis* of the ignoble actions of Strepsiades, Pheidippides, and Socrates. Each manifestation of ignobility provokes responses of indignation in the play's characters and in its audience until we reach the ultimate ignobility of the play...[which leads] to a moment of powerful illumination, to a catharsis in the intellectual sense. The meaning and 'lesson' of the *Clouds* involves Strepsiades' final recovery of lost rustic innocence as he burns the *Phrontisterion*, and all it stands for, to the ground...what is so interesting about Aristophanic comedy is how easily it transcends the specific historical circumstances which nurtured it into existence and addresses universal human weakness.”<sup>11</sup> All this can be said of *The Mastersingers* as well. The final point about universality is often refuted by critics, but this is only so in comparison to his tragic works which transcend the bounds of time and space in a religious sense rather than a dramatic one. Within the quintessential Greek comedy, Wagner's Ragnarok<sup>12</sup> is to be found along with the timelessness which obsessed all his other works. No detail of the Greek ideal is lost on Wagner. In fact, “Wagner's Nuremberg is modelled on his idea of the ideal of the self-governing city-state, in which art is created as a public expression of communal pride” very much like the idealised ancient Athens.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle insists on the equivalent validity of tragedy and comedy, but also makes reference to the greater ease with which comedy falls into uselessness (in answer to Plato's famous challenge from *The Symposium* to justify poetry as useful at all): “Comedy in its early stages passed unnoticed, because it was not as yet taken up in a serious way.”<sup>14</sup> The image-obsessed Wagner could not resist this challenge any more than Aristotle could resist Plato's. The text of *The Mastersingers* is the most arduously wrought and revised text of any Wagner opera and most of it for the sake of comic charm. “Edward J. Dent wrote in his book *Opera*: ‘...it may be that he was mistaken in supposing that the modern world could ever recover the attitude of ancient Greece to the religious aspect of musical drama, but he certainly induced it to take music, and especially opera, far more seriously than it had ever done before.’”<sup>15</sup>

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A select few inhabited Wagner's genetic Olympus along side his beloved Greeks. One of the greatest of these was Shakespeare, “a genius the like of which was never heard of.”<sup>16</sup> One of his biographers, William Wallace says, “he pinned his faith to Greek literature and Shakespeare.”<sup>17</sup> David Eisenbach once said that the end of every Shakespeare comedy with its wedding bells and smiling faces lays the seeds for one of his tragedies, most of which revolve around a long-married couple. Shakespeare's characters have a similar sense of “transmigration of souls” as do Wagner's. It makes perfect sense as both of them created their dramas from extant sources; they both “built [their] fabric[s] upon foundations which others before [them] had wrought.”<sup>18</sup> Each time

9. Aristotle, section 13

10. It can be argued that the same is true of the Ring, that Wotan dominates its soul throughout even though Siegfried is the hero.

11. Golden, pg. 289

12. Ragnarok is the Norse myth of Armageddon which served as the capstone to Wagner's Ring.

13. Stambaugh, pg. 82

14. Aristotle, section 5

15. Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, pg. 35

16. Wagner's words, *Ibid.* pg. 20

17. Wallace, pg. 23

18. *Ibid.* pg. 253

Shakespeare encountered the shell of a character like Juliet or Macbeth or Ariel, he filled it with himself, so every play expresses a similar if evolving single genius. Unlike the Greeks or Wagner however, he put out as many comedies as tragedies in his career. We know infinitely less about Shakespeare the man than Wagner and he certainly never wrote about his art (except, tellingly within the plays themselves) so it is difficult to provide a solid rationale for this. One may speculate about the Elizabethan Theatre-goers differing tastes to those of Victorian Germans, but it's all so much guess-work.

One must also consider the profound change Wagner underwent in response to Schopenhauer when addressing any of his influences, a topic we shall return to. But it is relevant to note that in *Opera and Drama* Wagner plans to create his total-artwork (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) against the mould of Shakespearian structure. In typically Wagnerian gusto, he goes as far to say, “the ugliness of [iambic verse] ... is purely and simply an offence to our feelings.”<sup>19</sup> “Music drama would be about the opposite of [Shakespeare's conjurations of courts, governments, feuding families, classes and the rest] in almost every respect. It would be concerned with their emotions, not their motives. It would explore and articulate the ultimate reality of experience, what goes on in the heart and soul...[it] would also be the reverse of traditional opera, for in traditional opera the drama was merely a framework on which to hang the music—drama was the means, music was the end—whereas the object of music drama was the presentation of archetypal situations *as experienced by the participants*, and to this dramatic end music was a means, albeit a uniquely expressive one.” With the great exception being *Siegfried's Death*, which would become *Twilight of the Gods*, Wagner fulfilled this bent all the way until he discovered Schopenhauer and wrote his *Tristan* in response to it. “*The Mastersingers* is an exception to these rules [of music drama] on many counts, all springing from the fact that it was about the one subject that he regarded as of fundamental importance yet 'political', namely the artist's relations to his art, and to tradition, and to society...The context is...human, and yet the subject, though not mythical, had a quasi-religious significance for Wagner, and was intended to have so for the audience, '[they] being very much the 'folk', the whole community.”<sup>20</sup> After the music drama obsession was superseded by Schopenhauer, Wagner was free to return to Shakespearian forms and violate his own rules. Who could forget the play-within-a-play of *Midsummer Night's Dream*? It is no coincidence that the at the centre of *The Mastersingers* is in fact midsummer night's eve (both Shakespeare and Wagner draw on the same folklore superstitions about this night and its magical significance; this too shall be returned to). Rather than a play, Wagner presents us with the act of musical composition (one is inclined to think a poor subject for dramatisation) within the drama, not once but thrice.

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“William Shakespeare was the soul companion, his drama the equivalent in Wagner's life to Beethoven's melody.”<sup>21</sup> If Wagner revered any one man as much as Shakespeare, it was certainly Beethoven. Beethoven's music laid the foundations for Wagner's attitudes about music and audience, foundations which would suffer setbacks (as all things did) after his conversion to Schopenhauerianism but survive it also: “Beethoven's last symphony is the redemption of music from its most individual element into universal art. It is the human gospel of the art of the future. Beyond it there can be no further progress...[except my] universal drama, to which Beethoven has forged the artistic key.”<sup>22</sup> Wagner was not alone in his double love for Shakespeare and Beethoven; it was almost a Romantic cliché. Berlioz, Brahms and even Tchaikovsky were all called to unify the two in some significant way. But only Wagner succeeded. “It was this combination of [Shakespeare's] poetry and [Beethoven's] symphony that provided the take-off point for Wagner...he recognised [the Ninth Symphony] as the starting point of his own work.”<sup>23</sup> As a conductor, Wagner took up Beethoven more than anyone else. “It was vital to [Wagner] that there

19. Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, vol. IV, pg. 106

20. Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, pgs. 21 – 23

21. Anderson, pg. 1002

22. Wagner, *Artwork of the Future*, vol. III, pg. 96

23. Magee, *Aspects*, pg. 25

should be an intensive communication between an interpreter and his audience. And so he wanted a further purpose of his programme [a performance of the Ninth Symphony in 1846] to be the union of all the work's performers and listeners in 'joy', or in other words the brotherhood of men...the idea of 'joy' [from Schiller's poem] merged with the idea of a better, truly honourable existence."<sup>24</sup> Much like Sachs in Act II, falling in and out of a reverie with Walther's birdsong, Wagner "read [the Ninth] as a progression from Beethoven's 'communicating with God' to his 'glances to the outer world' and then back again to his inner vision."<sup>25</sup> When Wagner was a young man, it is easy to see that Beethoven was the Sachs to his Walther. He wrote in 1840 a short (for him) dandy entitled "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven" in which the narrator "R" (Wagner's stand-in for himself) meets the ageing composer approaching deafness: "But perhaps you see, Herr R., that I am not quite a madman yet, though unhappy enough to make me one.—People want me to write according to *their* ideas of what is good and beautiful; they never reflect that I, a poor deaf man, must have my very own ideas,—that it would be impossible for me to write otherwise than I feel. And that I cannot think and feel their beautiful affairs is just what makes out my own misfortune."<sup>26</sup> This idea of madness in the old sage will have relevance in our discussion of Sachs' character. "In studying Wagner's response to Beethoven, we can see his autobiographical writing as being based on the same structure as that used by him as librettist and composer to organise the mythical [in the case of *The Mastersingers*, pseudo-historical] subjects of his music dramas."<sup>27</sup> Wagner's souls' transmigrations extended beyond his fiction. Over the course of his life and self-conscious writings, Wagner's story about his experience of Beethoven changed from believable (if vague) accounts to an improbable, though a far more poetic and satisfying, progression.<sup>28</sup>

After Schopenhauer, Wagner apparently spoke of plans to rewrite the Ninth Symphony finale with the words "Lovely pain, the hell-descended."<sup>29</sup> Wagner's attitude about the finale changed when his conversion demanded of him a new hierarchy in which music superseded text: "If we take the total impression of Shakespeare's world of shapes [Platonic, or Schopenhauer's Ideas] with the exceptional pithiness of every character moving in it and hold up to this the sum total of Beethoven's world of motifs with its ineluctable incisiveness and precision, we become aware that one of these worlds [Beethoven's] covers the other so completely that each is contained in the other, even though they seem to move in completely different spheres."<sup>30</sup> In 1870, not five years after his conversion, Wagner wrote another piece on the master entitled simply "Beethoven" in commemoration of the centennial of his birth. This commemoration is a disguise however for a matter of philosophical consistency. It was not three years *before* his conversion that his theories on total-artwork were published and now he needed a means to exculpate his change in attitude. His "chief aim in 'Beethoven' was to justify a *Gesamtkunstwerk* [the next of which he was to compose was *The Mastersingers*] constructed upon Schopenhauer's theories."<sup>31</sup> He could not cast aside Beethoven as he had Shakespeare (though we have seen he never completely did that either) from his ethos. In fact, "when Sachs sings 'Mein Freund, in holder Jugendzeit' ['My friend, in dulcet youth']...the increasingly condensed string writing is reminiscent of the second theme in the opening movement

24. Kropfingher, pg. 43

What was originally a revolutionary impulse during the germination of Wagner's ideas in *The Mastersingers* is reconditioned in the final form through Schopenhauerian renunciation in the character of Sachs to a different kind of "honourable existence."

25. Knittel, pg. 68

26. Wagner, *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven*, pg. 43

27. Kropfingher, pg. 29

28. *Ibid.* pgs. 15 – 17

Kropfingher continues on pg. 27, "Wagner's accounts of his Beethoven experience contain inconsistencies and errors. But to regard them as indicating a general tendency towards untruth and distortion, and to lump them together as failings of which he alone was guilty, would be to misunderstand the task and function of autobiographical writings."

29. Anderson, pg. 1004

30. Wagner, *On Actors and Singing*, vol. IX, pg. 107

31. Stein, pg. 159

of Beethoven's op. 132.”<sup>32</sup> He can also be heard prominently as an influence in “Siegfried's Rhine Journey” from *Twilight of the Gods* and elsewhere after Schopenhauer. The extent to which Wagner is rationalising as opposed to presenting a genuine feeling about the matter is ultimately unknowable. However, it can be seen that in different ways, Beethoven, especially in the Ninth Symphony, influenced the genesis of *The Mastersingers* before and after Schopenhauer. Before him, it provided the starting point for his total-artwork of which *The Mastersingers* began to form (and was given a first draft). After Schopenhauer, Beethoven's lasting musical influence shaped the libretto reforms as well as the musical realisations of them. “Wagner's mental image of Beethoven [was] an integral part of that myth of himself, or persona, at which he worked all his life and which he handed on to posterity as something binding and sacrosanct.”<sup>33</sup>

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Beethoven may have been Wagner's musical progenitor, but he offered very little in terms of operatic models, certainly nothing of comedies. Bach drew him as much as any intelligent composer familiar with him, but even “in the latter part of his life, the music of Mozart...drew enthusiastic and thoughtful comments from [Wagner].”<sup>34</sup> Wagner admits himself that he was drawn technically to him as well. Through the contrapuntal skills he acquired from C.T. Weinlig, Wagner had learnt to appreciate and tried to copy the “light and flowing manner in which Mozart handled the most complex technical problems”<sup>35</sup> There is a deeper, unspoken connection to the technical developments of Mozart as well, seen most vividly in *The Mastersingers*. For Wagner, the musical fabric of the comedy required that the chromatic techniques of *Tristan* be reserved in the structural sense to phrase-endings and confined to a single voice in the linear sense. What emerges sonically is something very much like what one could imagine from Mozart had he lived as long as Wagner. He too developed a linear chromaticism to emphasise emotional currents in his operas (and used it in his instrumental music as well). Only those structural chromatic shifts point harmonically squarely at *Tristan*. Fascinatingly, “Mozart once had the notion of writing a libretto of his own in the style of the Viennese popular [three act] comedy entitled *Die Liebesprobe* (*The Trial of Love*).” The time of life in which Mozart contemplated this (how seriously is a matter of speculation and debate) was marked with the creation of some of his gravest works (paralleling Wagner's own life at the time he created *The Mastersingers*)<sup>36</sup>, the c-minor Piano Concerto, the g-minor Quintet, *Don Giovanni*, and the extremely taxing and quickly-written *Figaro*.<sup>37</sup> The subject and execution of the work had it been endeavoured upon bears striking similarities to those of *Das Liebesverbot*. This is less important historically, as it is unlikely Wagner knew of this, but more for the archetypal implications inherent in the composers' view of comedy. Within a much shorter span than Wagner (Mozart grew as an artist at a superhuman rate in his short life), the youthful impulses of his early idea find an ennobled expression in his mature work, *The Magic Flute*.

“[It was] typical of most Viennese popular dramas during the eighteenth century [for] the traditional combination of comic and serious elements. At the court opera it was banished by the reforms of Apostolo Zeno and remained banned throughout Metastasio's reign as court poet; it returned more or less secretly to the Viennese court stage in Mozart's serio-comic operas of the 1780s.” In the Viennese tradition, the bulk of materials which made their appearance on stage originated in improvised form, very much like their *commedia dell'arte* originators.<sup>38</sup> This improvisation will be important in our discussion of The Prize Song. First however, let us take *The Magic Flute* as a model noble comedy and examine the parallels in *The Mastersingers*. Tamino falls in love with Pamina at first sight (of her portrait no less). It is vaguely melodramatic in the context of

32. Kropfinger, pg. 207

33. Ibid. pg. 1

34. Ibid. pg. 30

35. Wagner, *My Life*, vol. II, pg. 57

36. See page 2

37. Badura-Skoda, pgs. 197 – 198

38. Ibid. pg. 185

*The Magic Flute* is properly categorised as a *Maschinenkomödie*, a reference to the effecting of the stage machinery it employs.

the comedy and reminds one that the “sight” between the lovers Tristan and Isolda is a key feature to metaphysical nature of their love which leads ultimately to their destruction. Hans Sachs makes direct reference to *Tristan* when he imparts on Eva the wisdom of avoiding the destructive path of not only the lovers but King Mark's for himself (here, Wagner's comedy is very much in the tradition of the eighteenth-century moral instructionists). Tamino himself is from the familiar world of ordinary human affairs in a strange new land of odd rules and conventions. At first, these rules anger him and it is only in pursuit of his love that he confronts them in all their strangeness. Walther is a knight from the more ordinary outside world of feudal laws who enters Nuremberg, the strange and wonderful Greek polis with its strange rules concerning musical composition. He too becomes angry and critical, and only attempts a semblance of participation in them in pursuit of Eva. Both are tenors, both are heroes and outsiders. The supernatural character of the art each of them wields (the flute and the song) bears a direct connection to nature. A Freemason, Mozart's invocation of the natural spirits (the animals respond to the music of the flute) is clear. For Wagner, the fact that Walther improvises his first contest song (in Act I) from images of nature connected with his love for Eva falls into his archetype of the redeeming hero. Siegfried and Parsifal both possess the tools for reform because they emerge from the natural realm unaffected by the machinations of society. Sarastro's primary connection to *The Mastersingers* it shall be shown is in the character of Sachs, but there is an important parallel with Pogner as well. Both men are of good nature and well-meaning, but caught to some extent in the traditions of their societies—loving father or no, Wagner does not look favourably on his offering Eva as a prize in a competition. Sarastro is similarly sexist in his treatment of Pamina. In *Parsifal*, an “opera” which sees the ceremony of communion performed twice, the name of Jesus is never mentioned (only obliquely referred to as “him” or “the Redeemer,” that is until Parsifal himself becomes the new redeemer). In *The Mastersingers*, Wagner is very careful in spite of the saturation of historical Lutheran elements to avoid a truly Christian manifestation. Wagner appropriated symbols from extant religious orders in order to construct with them the “true” religion of Art and Sacrifice. Although Act I takes place entirely within St. Kathryn's, only the end of an actual Christian service is heard there. The rest is the ceremony and sacred ritual of the Meisterlied. At the behest of different motivations, Mozart's religious world in *The Magic Flute* is that of the dead Egyptian beliefs. Many view the opera as a summons to atheism<sup>39</sup>, but just like in *The Mastersingers*, the only supernatural element of real consequence is the music of Tamino and Papageno. It is a summons to cast off traditional religion certainly, but Mozart is too aware of the metaphysical power of his own art to deny a noumenal realm (though of course he wouldn't call it that having lived before Kant and Schopenhauer). Though in Wagner, the point is a central issue, Mozart does not miss the opportunity for a little music lesson in his opera, namely the interaction between Tamino's flute and Papageno's pipes (“Das ist Papagenos Ton”). In Wagner's hands, the interactions between the piccolo (pipes) and flute would have been flushed out in such a way as to develop their psychological import fully. The result would mean a lot more music dedicated to that interaction, a symphonic development. He had learnt from Beethoven never to throw away a musical motive, but to give it a life after it is born. Walther's prize song is born through the midwife Sachs, baptised and brought to adulthood before the eyes of Nuremberg. A few other details are worth mentioning; Papageno and David are both mezza characters treated lovingly as butts (they are young and uninterested in enlightenment or real love, only comfortable love in the persons of Papagena and Magdalene respectively); the finales of both are life-lessons for the folk, beginning with a grand Lutheran hymn (in Wagner's case, the melody to which was composed by the historical Sachs himself).<sup>40</sup>

In many productions of *The Magic Flute* various words and numbers are changed or removed due to their chauvinist or racist insensitivity to the modern vernacular. Those productions grossly misinterpret Mozart's intentions which are precisely the opposite of what those producers assume. It may be that Tamino and Papageno regard their women as prizes to win, but this notion stems from

39. Georinger, Part II

40. Although Badura-Skoda dismisses its Masonic element, *The Magic Flute* belongs to an emerging class of stage-works designed for the populace, addressing them and their concerns, in contrast to the court theatres. (pg. 187)

either the noble (Tamino) or comic (Papageno) instinct to redeem them and themselves (Schopenhauer would call it the Will). The fact that the Metastasian convention of lover-pairs is maintained in such starkness here is precisely to the end of exemplifying parallels between the noble and the comic; at once one cannot take Tamino's melodramatic pinnings too seriously and one finds the butt Papageno far more sympathetic than his motivations would seem to allow. Standing in the centre is Sarastro, a man a deep conviction, spirit and love, torn between the rituals which give his world order and his own naturalistic instincts for justice. Ostracised from the group is Monastatos for whom one may certainly empathise, but must not forget that he is as self-centred and quick to murder as the Queen. It is this geometric model upon which the characterisations of *The Mastersingers* lay. At the crux before the coda-like recapitulatory section of the barform which the opera is<sup>41</sup>, lies the most Mozartian thing Wagner ever wrote, the quintet. Therein the balance of characters reveals itself totally; Magdalene and David are both elevated as symbolised by the latter's promotion to journeyman and the promise of their eventual marriage; Walther and Eva's almost out-of-place passion is finally absorbed into the fabric of the Nuremberg social sphere as they too are bound to marry, Walther's song newly baptised (the allusion to John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus is not accidental; Sachs is the baptist and the *Song*, the *Art*, is the peoples' saviour);<sup>42</sup> and the venerable Sachs comes to terms fully with his renunciation becoming the perfect Schopenhauerian man, the ideal Platonic leader of an art-driven society. Beckmesser, the ostracised, is left out of course as his selfishness is at odds with the sacred order now established. For those who see the same chauvinism in Eva's being presented as a prize to whomever wins the contest, let it be remembered that most of Wagner's works include a strong and explicit defiance of any such convention including marriage itself (the most poignant I believe is the depiction of poor Sieglinde in *The Valkyrie* in which Siegmund rescues her from what is essentially a rape-marriage made legitimate by the law<sup>43</sup>). Sachs finds the means to appease both the fearful traditionalists who desire a prize and his own sense of justice which demand that Eva marry whom she chooses by ensuring that Walther shall win the contest. The entire remainder of the opera (nearly an hour) is entirely a pageantry depicting events which have all been determined by this point. It is Wagner's means of expressing more fully than he has yet the sheer joy his work embodies. It is his 'Freude' finale, a coda to his great *Wahn*-symphonic web.<sup>44</sup>

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“[The opportunities for fun his reading of Gervinus' account of the historical Mastersingers provided him] caught [Wagner] on the rebound, as it were, from the deeply serious mood induced in him by his absorption in the ethical milieu of the Lohengrin and Parsifal epics.” As discussed, the composition of the music also caught him on the rebound between that most emotionally and philosophically intense *Tristan* and the completion of his monolithic Ring Cycle.<sup>45</sup> It is these “opportunities for fun” which dominate the surface of *The Mastersingers*. Unlike in Wagner's other mature overtures and preludes, the feeling in that to *The Mastersingers* is utterly light. It has its broad

41. Acts I and II are the 'Stollen,' of similar length, each beginning with a choral number, proceeding through a trial song of sorts and ending in a chaotic crowd scene, capped by a brief moment of strange silence. Act III is the 'Abgesang,' twice as long, beginning in a totally new character and ending with reminiscences of the 'stollen' (trial song, crowd scene and choral). The homage to the epitomal barform is found everywhere in the libretto as well as the music, in countless carefully-rhymed poetic verses, in Beckmesser's serenade, in other scene proportions and most prominently in Walther's prize song's original form. One very telling exception to this is the fact that the final portrayal of Walther's song is marked by Kothner dropping the parchment on which the song is written, giving license for Walther to change his song, just enough to be something not quite containable within the Masters' confines, but connected to that first 'stollen' which has already won them over.

42. Shaw, L., pg. 108

43. Sieglinde's transmigration into Eva is further presupposed by Pamina's dream, a scene which is taken to its tragic apex in *The Valkyrie*. In Mozart, it is a budding emergence into psychological realms he would never have the opportunity to fully realise. In Wagner, it became such a permeating factor of his libretti that it deeply influenced the dream-analysis school of psychology in the early twentieth century.

44. 'Freude' in reference to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. For a discussion of *Wahn*, see page 17.

45. Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, pg. 280



and uniquely Wagnerian sweep, but it is structured in such a way as to introduce the themes of the characters and places in no particular order or narrative (save the predominance of the Masters' own themes and pageantries) very much like an older-styled, naïve, Rossinian overture. Compare this to the previous preludes written for any of the three acts of *Tristan*, in which one is forced to endure almost blinding psychological torment in one form or another pulling one into the minds and hearts of the characters like an undercurrent.<sup>46</sup> Given the depths to which Sachs will plunge himself (almost incredulously) and the audience in the third act of *The Mastersingers*, the jovial number in C major with its Bach-style contrapuntalisms and Mozartian fancy can only be seen as a deception; Wagner has used the comic mode to invite a comfortable and relaxed absorption of the ideas at hand only to deceive the listener into an entrenched contemplation of life in all its complexities and near-pessimistic colourations. This descent (or ascent depending upon one's perspective) reaches its apex in a direct and self-conscious quotation of *Tristan*.

But this surface deception is as rich as any of the mythical worlds Wagner created in his other works, informed by his reading of Gervinus and Jakob Grimm as well as personal experiences of his own and musicology. “The street scene...was a reminiscence of an experience of his own...in Nuremberg itself” during the original genesis of the poem. The preceding moonlit walk between Eva and Pogner is also claimed as a reconstituted memory.<sup>47</sup> “It was in September of [1861] that Wagner visited Nuremberg again, and the project came forcibly back to his mind.”<sup>48</sup> The street scene itself ends with a recapitulation of the Night Watchman's song (the modulatory pivot on the Watchman's horn pitched on G<sub>2</sub> is an harmonic device only possible through Wagner's musical innovations and will later be used at the same pitch by Debussy as the bell in *Pelléas et Mélisande*). The song itself seems to be of quasi-historical origins. As a youth, the tradition of the Watchman was still alive in Wagner's childhood Dresden. “Perhaps the words and melody [to the Night Watchman's song] were to some extent the same everywhere [in the German cities of Wagner's youth], for [one] of the mid-sixteenth century has come down to us...the similarity between [it]...and Wagner's...is too close to be accidental.”<sup>49</sup> As already mentioned, the hymn to Sachs is a real melody of the master himself, but the other traditional musical forms (the opening hymn, David's saint's day song, the various dances in the third act) are original to Wagner, successful in their period evocation. In addition to the original scenery and the brass choir in the top of Act III (Nuremberg was a centre of brass-instrument-making in the sixteenth century), “the verse is in comic imitation of the sixteenth-century *Knittelvers* of the mastersinger period” itself.<sup>50</sup> May it be remembered once more that Wagner's attitudes about musical composition changed between the original impetus for the opera and its final realisation. Walther, the only character without historical precedent,<sup>51</sup> and David express in Act I the tension between the establishment (the old ways) and the reform (the new ways). Which is first, the music or the poetry? David insists it is the poetry (as did the younger Wagner) while Walther sings the music of his heart (expressing the Will of the nouminon). This Walther is also the younger Wagner (as the exuberant reformist) who shall meet his older self in the person of Hans Sachs. Wagner's use of Hans Sachs was itself partially coloured by a desire to appeal to his German folk, for he was becoming more and more a subject of dramatic treatment.<sup>52</sup>

It has been mentioned the ways in which the score is redolent of Mozart: “emphasis is placed on rapidity; no other work of Wagner's has such a preponderance of sixteenth-notes in the

46. “If anyone claims *Tristan und Isolde* as Wagner's most important work, caution is advisable, because one is dealing either with a woman who is seeking a cultural substitute for eroticism or religion, or else with a connoisseur who is alive to the historically epoch-making character of the work.” The words of Herbert Rosendorfer. (van Amerongen, pg. 45)

47. Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, pg. 281

48. Stambaugh, pg. 58

49. Newman, *TWO*, pg. 341

50. Stein, pg. 178

51. Wallace, pg. 257

52. “The earliest play in which [Sachs] figures was called *Hans Sachs*, a comic opera, written by Adalbert Gyrowetz...around 1800.” (Wallace, pg. 256)

vocal line.”<sup>53</sup> They also frequently feature non-functional decorative phrase-endings which confer to them a charm and subtle irony, totally unprecedented in Wagner's other works.<sup>54</sup> After the completion of the libretto, Wagner himself (a man misconstrued by popular opinion as someone severely lacking in all but the cruellest humour) recounted: “[Countess Pourtalès]<sup>55</sup> kindly expressed a great wish to hear me read [the libretto to *The Mastersingers*], and invited me to spend an evening with her. She was the first person to whom I had the opportunity of reading my now completed work, and it made such a lively impression upon us both, that we were many times compelled to burst out into fits of hearty laughter.”<sup>56</sup> More than anything else, Wagner's use of humour in his text and music was as manipulative as Mozart's; his goal, the “goal of comedy[, was to emancipate] affected individuals from the bonds of rigidity into which they [had] fallen, so that they [could] respond with the flexibility and grace that is inherent in their human nature and which is very much valued and needed by society in general.”<sup>57</sup> But it is also a valuable insight into the complex psyche of this man who had given us *Tristan*. “Without [*The Mastersingers*] we would be at a loss to account for some of the things, so unlike [the] Philoctetes-image,<sup>58</sup> that we read of in Cosima's diaries: Wagner's often sunny disposition, his sometimes overwhelming charm, his astonishingly wide reading interests, his endless curiosity about everything in life...[In Act III, Hans Sachs reflects, in Robert Donnington's words], 'sadly on the mad streak [*Wahn*], the manic streak, that runs through human nature like some tragic flaw in bright metal,' and then resolves to use this potentially destructive flaw for constructive ends.”<sup>59</sup>

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It is as unfortunate as appropriate and necessary to discuss the issue of race and antisemitism in Wagner, as in all creditable writings on him. “Like so many of his philosophical ideas, Wagner's hatred of the Jews is for the most part pure theory.<sup>60</sup> When brought face to face with the reality, he was as flexible as anything. Are musical Jews really [in his words] not capable of anything other than 'synagogue gurgling'? As soon as anything of such outstanding musical talent as the young [pianist] Carl Tausig announced himself, Wagner forgot everything that he had previously maintained and towards his visitor he was pleasantness, mildness and paternalism itself.”<sup>61</sup> “[About Wagner's rantings, Cosima's] diaries cannot always keep a straight face. Fidi [Wagner's son, Siegfried] would have to be provided a hooked nose and Wahnfried [their home] would probably end up as a synagogue there were so many Jewish adherents.”<sup>62</sup> Particular to *The Mastersingers*, “[Some] Wagner critics insist that Beckmesser, the town clerk,...is a Jewish caricature, and his singing a parody of a synagogue cantor; but 'quite apart from the fact that, in their professional status and social rôles, town clerks and Jews were never one and the same’<sup>63</sup> in sixteenth-century Germany, Sixtus

53. Stein, pg. 179

54. Ibid. pg. 183

55. Hélène, Countess de Pourtalès, born Helen Barbey, mother to writer Guy, hosted Wagner in Paris in the 1860s.

56. Wagner, *My Life*, vol II. pg. 811

57. Golden, pg. 284

58. In Greek mythology, Apollo, the god of music, gives Heracles a mighty bow that would never miss its mark. Heracles is granted godhead and his faithful follower, Philoctetes, is charged with immolating him. He is also bequeathed the bow of Apollo in gratitude. After winning many battles for the Achæans in the Trojan War, Philoctetes is bitten on the foot by a serpent in tutelage at Apollo's shrine. The wound festers and refuses to heal. Philoctetes becomes a deeply pessimistic figure, bound to an existence of constant pain from the wound which of course is the symbolic manifestation of his possession of the divine bow; his gift from the gods to transcend ordinary human capacity costs him the ease of a life without constant pain. This figure is to be found represented poignantly in Wagner's Tannhäuser, Tristan and Amfortas characters, but Lee draws the comparison to Wagner himself, where Beethoven's motivic and symphonic development is likened to Apollo, Wagner's astonishing musico-dramatic gifts to the bow, and his plagued (psychologically and physically) life to the wound. Jung, who like Freud owes a debt of insight to Wagner's work, is credited with famously making the observation that all great artists suffer in this manner.

59. Lee, *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art*, pgs. 18 – 19

60. The implication here is no that it is false, but that it resided not in Wagner's actions, but his mind.

61. van Amerogen, pg. 58

61. Anderson, pg. 1004

62. Here Lee quotes from Dieter Borchmeier's *The Question of Anti-Semitism*, translated by Stewart Spencer, 1992.

Beckmesser...must for the purposes of *The Mastersingers* stand for the finicky German pedant familiar to most of us in academe. Beckmesser becomes the subject of ridicule in Wagner's comedy not because Wagner thought him a Jew, but because (as any classical scholar can tell you) comedy from its origins—and Wagner read deeply into those origins—has demanded a figure of fun, an *alazon*, a *miles gloriosus* from within society on whose correction the survival of society depends.”<sup>64</sup> Remember also that Beckmesser was originally named by Wagner “Hanslick,” making his most spiteful critic (not a Jew) the butt of this comedy. “He is [also] the dramatic counterpart to Shakespeare's Shylock, whose greatest sin was that he demanded satisfaction for the insults which he had frequently suffered at the hands of Venice's tradesmen. He is also the second cousin to Mozart's Moor Monostatos, whose only fault [on this point, the author is mistaken]<sup>65</sup> is that he is inflamed with love for a young and attractive-looking girl ('Have I, too, not got a heart? Am I not made of flesh and blood?'). [They three] are the outcasts of classical culture.”<sup>66</sup> Beckmesser, like they, is pitiable, but his derided nature does not make him a stereotype of anything other than his *comic* type, the Vecchio. Bryan Magee provides I think the best and most complete analysis of Wagner's antisemitism in the the appendix to *The Tristan Chord*. Suffice it to say it has always been a source of controversy for the composer and has resulted in numerous complications to the promotion of his works. In fact, if not for the ugly fact of his beliefs in this respect (and naturally the most terrible end to which rampant antisemitism led in Germany) Wagner's place as the most influential and greatest composer after Beethoven or since would most likely be widely acknowledged. Thus, Wagner's antisemitism has hurt no one more than himself and his legacy.<sup>67</sup> I feel it important to make it absolutely clear, that while Wagner's antisemitism was both complex and inexcusable, to equate it with the sort of antisemitism of the Nazis is to fundamentally misunderstand the beliefs of the man and his art at every stage in his life. While the man himself became more embittered and vocal in his distaste for Jews in his later years, Wagner's final work, *Parsifal*, was in fact banned in Nazi Germany due to its pacifist and Buddhist assertions. *The Mastersingers* was celebrated by the Nazis and became the artistic symbol for the “new Germany” Hitler intended to create. But Wagner is very explicit in its text that it is the duty of the German people to honour above else art and renunciation, and hardly the Nazi values of birth-right and militarism. Let the final word on the matter go to one of the most famous Jewish musicians of our time, Leonard Bernstein: “Wagner is long dead and buried, as is the Third Reich, but we music

64. Lee, *WTMTA*, pgs. 45 – 6

65. See page 8

66. van Amerogen, pg. 74

67. Karl Zänker for one asserts that the “traditionalist” defence of the separation between the man's values and his art's is untenable. However (as is typical of this sort of writing), this is besmirched from the onset with half-truths and inconsistencies; for one, he quotes Daryck Cooke's account of Wagner as a “proto-fascist”, which is quite simply the opposite of Wagner's beliefs both during his revolutionary days and his later days in Ludwig's financial care. The article is quick to remind one that indeed Wagner was antisemitic (no intelligent person could deny this) and that he was Hitler's favourite composer. Zänker also throws about words like “well-known Jewish stereotypes” which, also quite typically, betrays more prejudice in the author than his subject. It also contains one of the most unique translations of Beckmesser's attempt at the prize-song I've ever read, made to appear like a series of references (and thereby celebrations) of the various ways in which Jews were persecuted throughout their European history (pgs. 7 – 8). It is a thing which is possible to do especially with a language so laden with strange homonyms as German, but it requires a real conscious effort on the part of the interpreter to find and, if he wishes, to highlight, which again would only serve to demonstrate either the prejudice of the interpreter or the ability of art to mean an infinitude of things at once, of which Wagner's is certainly not the only one. Finally, the author correctly points out the fact that on one level Sachs and Beckmesser are foils for one-another. While Zänker asserts that Sachs' Christian-ness essentially bedevils and Jewish-ises Beckmesser, it is useful to recall that Sachs and Beckmesser represent microcosmically Wotan and Alberich of the Ring, in which both characters are seen to be fundamentally flawed, be they the light and dark sides of the same tendency. Wagner created the latter two before discovering and accepting Schopenhauerianism as his religious doctrine whose central tenant is that in the noumenal realm there is no dichotomy between anything “tormentor and tormented are one,” no good and evil to oppose one another. Thus the assertion that Beckmesser is somehow evil and Sachs good in a Christian sense ignores the most fundamental feature of Wagner's philosophy, one which excited his passions more frequently and strongly than his antisemitism. Zänker harshly criticises his predecessors for ignoring aspects of the libretto which he arbitrary associates with Jewish stereotypes and again is himself guilty of a far more grave ignorance of the very same text.

lovers are alive and hungry for great music. And if Wagner wrote great music, as I think he did, why should we not embrace it fully and be nourished by it?"<sup>68</sup>

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It has been shown in our discussion of Mozart how Wagner's comedy is in one dimension a take on the popular modes of comic opera with its *commedia* characters (classically mixed with mezza and seria characters), frenetic act finales, humorous verse and charming musical structure. Newman says "he was writing a lusty comedy."<sup>69</sup> In its own way, the comic form also enabled Wagner to obey one of the rules he had reversed from *Opera and Drama*: "Only in the full tide of lyric outpouring, when all the participants have been led to a joint expression of feeling, can the composer make use of the polyphonic mass of voices, to which he may transfer the manifestation of harmony. But even here it will remain the task of the composer to make the character's share in the outpouring of feeling not mere harmonic support for the melody...he must see to it that the individuality of the participants makes itself felt in definite melodic expression."<sup>70</sup> The crowd scenes ending each act provide this context.

As discussed earlier, the Viennese tradition upon which the noble comedy model, *The Magic Flute*, is built has its deepest and profoundest origins in the improvised theatre of the *commedia dell'arte*. Aristotle himself speculated that all dramas had their origins in improvisation, a fact to which Wagner would be instinctually drawn.<sup>71</sup> Having grown up in and around the theatre, it was widely remarked that Wagner was a deeply moving actor in his own right (this may partially explain the appeal his personality had for those around him). On the subject, the master says, "The combining intellect must have nothing to do with the dramatic work of art. In the drama we must become knowers through feeling...This feeling, however, becomes intelligible to itself only through itself; it understands no other language but its own. Things which can be explained only by the infinite accommodations of the intellect are incomprehensible and disturbing to the feeling."<sup>72</sup> Like blind Homer, Wagner's instinct for drama came out of the sensuous experience of the improviser. In fact, Wagner's unchecked need for sensuous experiences was throughout his life the major cause of both his debt and affairs. Wagner's affinity for improvisation could hardly be divorced from the clairvoyant nature of many of his own observations. While his inability or disinterest in true scholarship frustrate his critics, in two substantial cases, his natural insight, while unsupported by any offered evidence, proved pointedly accurate; he was among the first to assert that Beethoven's deafness allowed him to "hear" for the first time and thus his late works express something to be praised rather than scorned for their incomprehensibility (a trend which grew and extended into twentieth-century music criticism);<sup>73</sup> he also apprehended the rise of excellent Jewish musicians in Europe before anyone else<sup>74</sup> (this further elucidates the way in which Wagner's antisemitism is wrongly perceived). Golden expounds upon the Aristotelian idea that ideal tragedy is *memisis*.<sup>75</sup> As it has been shown, Wagner's own theory of opera changed radically in response to his absorption of Schopenhauer and one of the new tenants was centrality of the mime, that the words were bound to the phenomenal world and the actions on stage *mimed* the total and complete undercurrent of the orchestra, as the purest expression of the will. Walther's songs are born naturally without any prior consultation of rules or prescriptions; they are improvised. In fact, the ease with which the scenes in *The Mastersingers* transition is so natural (in spite of its careful design) that it is nearly impossible to

68. *Wagner's Music Isn't Racist*. New York Times, published posthumously 1991, excerpted from a script written and filmed on the occasion of Bernstein's conducting and all-Wagner programme at the Wiener Staatsoper in 1985.

69. *The Wagner Operas*, pg. 279

70. Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, vol. IV, pg. 164

71. Aristotle, section 4

72. Wagner, *OD*, vol. IV, pg. 78

73. On the c#-minor Quartet, op. 131, he described, "the picture of a day from our 'holy one's life'" (*Beethoven*, p. 97). It should again be noted that three years after *Beethoven*, Wagner reversed his view (as he often did). However, it was Wagner's 1870 assertion which stuck in the minds of critics after him and to which they owe their rhetoric for discussing late Beethoven.

74. See Lee, *WTMTA*, pg. 40

75. Golden, pg. 286

distinguish the changes without looking for them outright. On one level, the opposition of the Masters' rules and Walther's improvisation and their eventual synthesis is representative of the paradox of Schopenhauer's noumenon; at their deepest level, the most honest and artistically venerable cores of both approaches are the same, thus the noble artist finds a suitable representational, phenomenal outlet for this force through the act of renunciation; the renunciation of those things which bind one to either camp, be it the pride of the Masters or the love of Eva. “*The Mastersingers* is...the very embodiment of Wagner's paradoxical fixed improvisation.”<sup>76</sup> “[Wagner] practised for his audience precisely what his operatic hero, Sachs, preaches and practises before the Masters and townspeople of Nuremberg,” namely by honouring the traditions so engrained in the minds of the Germanic peoples through Bach, Mozart and Beethoven whilst subtly justifying his own radical torrents in *Tristan* and *The Ring*.<sup>77</sup>

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It may be that “*The Mastersingers* is all summer, warm and over-flowing with human affection and the love of life and art,”<sup>78</sup> but there is a dimension in the character of Sachs in which it is quite a tragic work. It is a long established tradition that comedies should parody their tragic counterparts, in fact the satyr plays themselves often treated the same myths as the tragedies they followed. But Wagner was not about to parody himself for the sake of laughter. He may wish to induce laughter, smiling and genuine joy, but it is a joy won with pessimism. At its community scale, Nuremberg needs an artistic messiah, a hero. “The Wagnerian hero [in one of its two versions of *agape*] renounces his desires for the sake of others, and thereby redeems and renews the social order [sic].”<sup>79</sup> Carter likens the performing arts in their highest stratum to “doing justice. [Great performances] create and make plausible new ideas and visions...the public justification succeeds not by following rules but by thinking persuasively about the relationship between the rules and the political community that created them. This process is simultaneously innovative and traditional, poetic and prosaic, serious and playful.”<sup>80</sup> In her diaries, Cosima remarks on the tears Wagner shed during the compositional process of *The Mastersingers*. Her involvement with him was at that time a great contributor to his pain. The lovers' infidelities to their spouses were public knowledge and a cause for much derision and shame. As happened typically in his life, the mythological forces at work in his operas seemed to be affecting his life, for his clairvoyance somehow enabled him to choose the proper time of life for each of his dramas. “The first three aspects of the [Eros/Thanatos] pattern reassert themselves in the case of Wagner and Cosima, at least from the standpoint of the lovers. As for the third aspect, the violent reaction against the pair was certainly the strongest such reaction that Wagner had to face in his life...the tragedy of the [final “Thanatos”] was to be supplanted by comedy...by the 'happy ending' which implies marriage and children instead of fleeting passion and death.”<sup>81</sup> The end of Wagner's composition would see the composer blessed with the Victorian dream, wealth, wife, children and a devoted king to help him see all his artistic dreams come to life. Walther embodied his youthful lustiness and arrogance, but his deep-felt pain is given over fully to Sachs. “[Sachs] belongs to a Wagnerian archetype: that of the authority figure, guardian of the social order, who recognises that the youthful transgressor [Walther] is a redeemer... [he] guards us against the crowd of emotions...[he] so movingly deprecates at the beginning of act 3...[his] dramatic rôle is to hold the world in place while at the same time recognising and making

76. Stein, pg. 174

77. Carter, pg. 285

78. Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, pg. 79

79. Scruton, pg. 9

80. Carter, pgs. 276 – 277

82. Stambaugh, pg. 70

- Eros/Thanatos pattern:
1. Rescuing Hero (Siegfried, Tristan, Walther, Parsifal, Wagner himself)
  2. Redeeming Woman (Brynnhilde, Isolda, Eva, Kundry, various lovers)
  3. Eros Ascendent (the love is consummated)
  4. Eros Thwarted (the lovers are found out and face the social order)
  5. Thanatos (the lovers die, or in Wagner's case the love dies)

room for the one who renews it.”<sup>82</sup> Sachs must sacrifice the love of Eva, whom he loves and whom he could win with a superior Master's Song of his own. But to do so would deny his Nuremberg the opportunity to learn from the new Art of Walther. “When Sachs refers to Tristan and Isolde in Act III...it seems as if the old disturbing pattern is smiled away in a moment of poignant renunciation. But it only seems so—Wagner will still need to create a true palinode to *Tristan* in order to balance its powerful influence, and that he will do in *Parsifal*.”<sup>83</sup> Wagner was self-conscious in other ways than we have already discussed about the interconnectivity of his work. In *Beethoven*, he speaks of his forebear, “his rebellion consisted in nothing but the exuberant unfolding of his inner genius, unrestrained by those outward forms themselves. Never did he radically alter an existing form of instrumental music; in his last sonatas, quartets, symphonies, and so forth, we may demonstrate beyond dispute a structure such as of the first. But compare these works with one another; compare e.g. the Eighth Symphony in F and the Second in D, and marvel at the wholly new world that fronts us in wellnigh the identical form!”<sup>84</sup> We may regard the comedy of *The Mastersingers* in the same way, radically different in the world it paints from any other work of Wagner's, but essentially of the same “form,” that is expunging Schopenhauer from the depths and communicating a special kind of oneness to the audience. In *Tristan* it is the oneness of the lovers, in *The Ring*, the oneness of the natural world, in *Parsifal*, it is the oneness of the soul, in *The Mastersingers* it is the oneness of great art.

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In more ways than can probably ever be accounted for, Wagner rests as the single greatest pivot between the classical world and the modern. In a cultural sense only perhaps Einstein and Marx have had as great an impact. It seems a menial labour to catalogue the specifics of such a claim, but we must provide a lineage to *The Mastersingers* a little more fully than as yet. Aristophanes', Mozart's and Beethoven's influence on the work are evident, but of course how could such enormous figures not affect the work of any person in the nineteenth century or after with his eyes and ears open at all? Indeed, Wagner's positions on artistic synthesis in *The Artwork of the Future* and *Opera and Drama* bear striking similarities to the writings of Lessing and Herder who were among a growing school of romantic literates striving for something like Wagner's ideal.<sup>85</sup> Schopenhauer was a growing influence on nearly all the learned of Europe, most especially Nietzsche, though perhaps on none so personally as Wagner. It is also worth mentioning in relation to Mozart's never-executed *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Die Liebesprobe*, Goethe (one of the few other Olympian predecessors whom Wagner considered an equal genius to himself) wanted to write with the composer Philipp Christoph Kayser “a through-composed Singspiel, a mixture between *commedia dell' arte* and an *opera seria*.”<sup>86</sup> Remember also that Berlioz and many lesser-known composers also saw the union of Shakespeare and Beethoven to be the ultimate expression to which art was heading. Of course, politically, the tides were beginning to rush terrifyingly to the greatest expressions of the modern sensibility, The Great War. As a member of The Young Germans, Wagner had once ambitious aspirations of grand political change and sweeping liberal-anarchist reforms to the state. While he never completely gave up his idealism, after Schopenhauer “Wagner's [political] concern was...art—his real objection to existing society was that it was bad for art...he [was disgusted] with industrialism...the bourgeois hegemony and their alliance with the Christian churches.”<sup>87</sup> Had he remained in political spheres, who knows whether he or Bismarck would be as remembered for his lasting influence on geography and governance, but as it is he ought to be remembered far more auspiciously for his art.

“Professional students of literature have been curiously indifferent to Richard Wagner. They have granted him a place in the development of theatre, to be sure, but not in the history of drama.”<sup>88</sup> A scattered few scholars like Dr. Shaw recognise at least a portion of the strange absence

82. Scruton, pgs. 61 – 62

83. Stambaugh, pg. 71

84. Wagner, *Beethoven*, pg. 77

85. Stein, pg. 4

86. Ibid.

87. Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, pg. 31

88. Shaw, L., pg. 97

from circles of learning outside Romantic opera connoisseurs. Taking *The Mastersingers* alone, as a comic work, one cannot forget that the great comic mind of the twentieth century, G. Bernard Shaw wrote an entire dissertation on *The Ring*, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, whose influence can be seen in myriad works of his most especially *Methuselah*. “It has become almost trite” says Martin Kornbluth “to comment on the absence of overt action in Shaw. He has been accused of writing plays in which absolutely nothing happens.”<sup>89</sup> I can think of few criticisms more commonly thrust upon Wagner's plots, which are all about the inner-workings of the psyche and not the actions of the characters onstage. While Wagner's great comedy has more action than any of his other mature works (unless one takes the *Ring* in its entirety), it hardly seems to contain enough plot to cover nearly six hours of music. The text in *The Mastersingers* even has the unique status of being sung the most quickly in the expository and dialogue sections, and it still takes that long. For what it is worth, for he is often obscure in the sincerity with which he takes his own work, Shaw “took Wagner seriously in political terms.”<sup>90</sup> The ‘political terms’ of *The Mastersingers* were of course originally meant to be far more overt than they ended up being, very much like *The Ring*. The weight of Schopenhauer's influence overshadowed this intention musically in *The Ring* and in both music and text of *The Mastersingers*. West himself illuminated Shaw's own assertions that he was in his own way a musician, a connection made manifest by his relationship to Mozart and Wagner.<sup>91</sup>

There are two ways in which *The Mastersingers* is particularly relevant to the legacy of Western art, the view of the suffering romantic artist epitomised in Beethoven and the meaning of the madness of the crowd. On the first point, it was in fact Wagner who romanticised Beethoven's deafness for the modern world,<sup>92</sup> and the parallels to Philoctetes again cannot be ignored. The legacy of this image endures in figures like Mahler, Ravel, Kandinsky, Rothko, Martha Graham, Poe, and Joyce to name a few. “The festival that opens the last scene of Act III is a medley of incomplete closed forms, a technique that later would be employed by Stravinsky in *Petrushka*, Gershwin in *Porgy and Bess*, and Britten in *Peter Grimes*.”<sup>93</sup> It is an image that is peculiarly twentieth-century, conjuring images of student rebellions and war protests which defined the century, but the vision of it, the archetype, is found in the score to *The Mastersingers*. It is difficult at times to escape a certain *bête noire* in reaction to Wagner's clairvoyance. Leon Golden draws the line from the ancient Greeks to beyond Wagner (and more importantly *through* Wagner) in the following quotation of Schopenhauer, itself an acknowledged extension of Kant, “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.” He states later in the theories of Freud, a man as indebted to Wagner as the latter is to Schopenhauer, “comedy aims at humiliation and degradation and this would include not only works of social satire, but other kinds of comic expression that would not have social correction and improvement as their goal, but would simply be manifestations of aggression.” There are few better descriptions to accompany the *Wahn* of the crowd scene in Act II. Further emphasising the point, Erich Segal gives the following description to *Menæchmi* (it along with Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* are the emblems of comic fantasy), “To a society with a fantastic compulsion for hierarchies, order, and obedience, he presents a saturnalian chaos...to a people who regarded a parent's authority with religious awe and could punish any infringement with death, Plautus presents an audacious irreverence for all elders.”<sup>94</sup> In the real sixteenth-century Nuremberg, the political and social implications are magnified from this parental image to the stratum of the city-state and its interconnected guilds; in Wagner's own Victorian era and our own, the magnification is universal, drawing parallels in politics, art, family life, and religion. Newman insists that the natural conclusion to Wagner's legacy is not opera at all but tone-poetry, in which the mythological significance imparted by words is assumed rather than dictated to less-than-expressive sorts of music. It is also

89. Kornbluth, pg. 11

90. Berry, pg. 665

91. Holt, pg. 102

92. Knittel, pg. 51

93. Stambaugh, pg. 83

94. Golden, pgs. 284 – 85

worth noting here that Newman's title is a direct reference to Shaw's manner comedy *Man and Superman* which takes its cue from Nietzsche's übermensch be it in the comic mode, which takes its cue from Siegfried.<sup>95</sup> Finally, the philosopher Bryan Magee “[takes] it no one is going to maintain that there have been many other [more important artists] since...Proust, Joyce, Lawrence...Mann, Baudelaire, Eliot, Nietzsche, Shaw, Debussy, Mahler, Strauss, Elgar and Schönberg...[all of whom were profoundly affected and influenced by Wagner's prose and operas]...if no more than this is agreed it means that Wagner has had a greater influence than any other single artist on the culture of our age.”<sup>96</sup>

\* \* \*

Let us paint a less obscure picture of Wagner's new connection to Schopenhauer. Though he was many things, Wagner was never a philosopher. Nor of course was Mozart. Wagner had a keen instinct about art, theatre and life (hence his respect for improvisation), but his writings on pretty much everything save those which were personal and without airs of the academe are opaque and difficult, running on and on about seemingly nothing.<sup>97</sup> “No doubt there are many reasons for [the difficulty and haziness of Wagner's prose writings], but I think the chief is that new things were beginning to form inside him which he was trying to articulate as a theoretical system when all the time their unconscious, autonomous development was towards works of art, namely the later operas.”<sup>98</sup> When he discovered Schopenhauer, he had found the man to confirm his instinct in genuine philosophical terms.<sup>99</sup> Wagner's views on the connection between music and poetry began with of course with the Greeks: “Just as form and colour are used as means by some, who...imitate and portray many things by their aid, and the voice is used by others; so alas in the above-mentioned group of arts, the means with them as a whole are rhythm, language, and harmony—used, however, either singly or in certain combinations.”<sup>100</sup> This philosophy took him two-thirds the way through the Ring. His affair with Wesendonck took him from it to the myth of Tristan, which, in combination with his new philosophical hero, was to generate the great Schopenhauerian opera, *Tristan*. His instincts never failing him, Wagner's ending to his opera refutes this philosophy as he retains the mythological ending wherein Tristan and Isolde do not unite into one undistinguished being after death, they remain Tristan *and* Isolde, transfigured as individuals. Wagner actually wrote a letter of apology to Schopenhauer for this ending. His perfect Schopenhaurian music-drama would be the un-dramatic festival play, *Parsifal*, which for its philosophical adherence is a weaker work than *Tristan*. Through his intervening comedy, Wagner would find the means to vindicate himself of his “mistake” through Sachs. “It is impossible that you should not have sensed, under the opera's quaint superficialities of popular humour, the profound melancholy, the lament, the cry of distress of poetry in chains, and its reincarnation, its new birth, its irresistible magic power achieving mastery over the common and base.’ This [in a letter to King Ludwig II in 1868] was a vast expansion and a decided re-tinting of his own first feeling with regard to the work some twenty-three years earlier.”<sup>101</sup> Cosima's remark about Wagner's tears comes to mind once again.

Schopenhauer wrote, “we always picture a very noble character to ourselves as having a certain trace of silent sadness that is anything but constant peevishness over daily annoyances (that would be an ignoble trait, and might lead us to fear a bad disposition). It is a consciousness that has resulted from knowledge of the vanity of all possessions and of the suffering of all life, not merely one's own. Such knowledge, however, may first of all be awakened by suffering personally experienced, especially by a single great suffering.”<sup>102</sup> Sachs is perfectly this “noble character.” As

95. Newman, *Wagner and Super-Wagner*, pg. 87 (a rather comical observance Wagner's successors work with the form he bestowed upon them)

96. Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, pg. 100

97. Wagner attempted theoretical justifications of his work in *The Mastersingers* (as usual) in “On State and Religion” and “German Art and German Politics.” (Stambaugh, pg. 72)

98. *Ibid.* pg. 15

99. From the fall of 1854 for the rest of Wagner's life, Arthur Schopenhauer became one of the most pervasive influences over his thinking, writing, and composing. (Stein, pg. 113)

100. Aristotle, section 1

101. Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, pg. 280



was seen, it is through him in the Act III quintet that ennoblement is achieved, through his sacrifice.<sup>103</sup> It is actually the comedy for Wagner which provides the allegory to the substantial, in which the microcosm to the myth is the ordinary town with its populace concerning itself over things hardly so dire as any of Wagner's other characters. "The hero satisfies the community demand for the experience of order and meaning, yet he does so not by discovering objective principles but by creating, through performance, the experience of meaningfulness itself."<sup>104</sup> "In *The Mastersingers* [Wagner] tells his Germans that it is not mindless adherence to the past, not arrogance or pride of noble birth, and certainly not military might, that they should look to for their future. They should value above all art that looks deeply into the soul and offers understanding."<sup>105</sup>

Returning to the opera, "the personal dimension [between Beckmesser and Walther] is identical with the artistic situation, for the failure of both suitors is essentially a failure to create a master-song. In Wagner's particular terminology, the force impelling them to create (*Wahn* as drive)<sup>106</sup> has deceived them (*Wahn* as delusion) about the process of creation; Walther erroneously supposes art is a natural expression of the emotions, Beckmesser that it is the product of formal techniques. Neither notion is sufficient in itself."<sup>107</sup> Sachs is the intermediary (though the derision of the comic butt seems to indicate that Beckmesser shan't benefit from the intervention) who guides Walther to a refinement of his instincts, and through it an ennoblement of his art. Early in his writings, Wagner already felt, that "when the composer and dramatist are one and the same person, his clairvoyant vision of the essence of the Universe is the single impulse which is simultaneously transmitted to us...in terms of visual drama and in terms of music."<sup>108</sup> This is Wagner speaking as Walther, a robust visionary. Before Sachs can guide the youth, the great *Wahn* monologue elucidates the connection between the creative impulse and nature (Wagner's symbolic womb of redemption). *Wahn* finds its natural (literally in-nature) expression in Act II which is the eve before mid-summers day; a time when "in German folklore...everything on earth is possible;...one cannot be sure what will happen," with the harvest, lovers, or the spirits of good and bad.<sup>109</sup> Sachs wanders between serious contemplation of this and bemusement at the inevitability of it all until finally he confronts Walther and channels *Wahn* into art. Again, this requires Sachs to sacrifice his Will, the pride of competing himself, the love of Eva and a life in which he can simply enjoy or suffer the *Wahn* of life with everyone else. Sachs' only consolation is the redemptive power of renunciation which shall be expressed fully in *Parsifal*. The ennobling quintet expresses it all in the baptism of Walther's song. "The central image in *The Mastersingers* is baptism, the sacrament which cleanses the soul of original sin. But all of Wagner's works, and especially the mature ones are about the healing of the hurt in, the drawing off of the evil in, the integration of the conflicting forces in, the human psyche."<sup>110</sup> Through his act as sage and guide, Sachs redeems himself along with everyone else.

"[Wagner ingeniously says in *Music of the Future*, that] music...is capable of revelations greater than those of any other art, because it operates in an inner realm beyond the laws of logic and causality."<sup>111</sup> Schopenhauer also said (very pointedly for Wagner) that "music, having no connection with the Ideas [Representations], is independent also of the phenomenal world...it is by no means, like the other arts, an image of the Ideas: but an image of the will itself ['Ding an sich'], whose objectification the Ideas are. It is for this reason that the effect of music is so much mightier and

102. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, vol. I*, pg. 396

103. "What would I be without your love, without you? Wouldn't I always have remained a child if you had not awoken me? Through you I have won what people prize, through you I learnt the workings of the mind; by you awoken, only through you did I think nobly, freely and boldly: You made me bloom!" (Eva's loving words to Sachs in Act III)

104. Carter, pg. 273

105. Lee, *WTMTA*, pg. 21

106. 'Wahn' means all kinds of things in different connections—'eroneous', 'illusion', 'delusion', 'hallucination', 'error', 'monomania', 'folly', 'madness/craze', etc. (Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, pg. 359)

107. L. Shaw, pg. 100

108. Wagner, *On Actors and Singing, vol. IX*, pgs. 109 – 11

109. Shaw, L. pg. 101

110. Lee, pg. 20

111. Stein, pg. 151

more penetrating than that of the other arts; for these speak only of the shadow, music however of the essence.”<sup>112</sup> Taken together, is it any wonder that even Wagner could boldly proclaim to the masses: “Hear my creed: music can never, regardless of what it is combined with, cease being the highest, the redeeming art.”<sup>113</sup> It sounds very much like Sachs final speech to the crowd. Be it remembered that Beckmesser's courting song to Eva is accompanied only by the phenomenal agent of the visualised lute. Both of Walter's songs, though different in their level of maturity, grow out of the leviathan orchestra, and carry with them the weight of the unconscious noumenal force of pure music.<sup>114</sup> This new music-centred music-drama also provides a partial explanation for all the musical filigree, which, in addition to their comic effect, provide Wagner an opportunity to be a symphonist in his developmental extremes like the Rhinegold era operas never could. Schopenhauer emancipated him from his *own* rules and restrictions, just like Walther emancipates Nuremberg. “[The] semi-philosophical [I would say outright philosophical] tone [of Sachs' 'Wahn' monologue in Act III]...interrupts the lighter mood of the comedy and marks a dramatic turning point in the action.”<sup>115</sup> Without such moments, without Sarastro's prayer to the gods or that terrifying pyre at the end of the *Clouds*, it is a comedy only, void of the redemptive value of the noble human spirit. As G. Bernard Shaw famously said, “when a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth.”

\* \* \*

While *Wahnvermögen* (capacity for *Wahn*) finds expression in both patriotism and religion, enough to be sure “for the ordinary man,...the extraordinary man, or 'truly noble spirit,' who knows the actuality concealed by such *Wahn* (the *Wahn*-as-Will behind the *Wahn*-as-deception [Idea]) needs relief from his insight, 'a periodic but complete diversion from the ever-present gravity or seriousness of life.’”<sup>116</sup> This *The Mastersingers* can be, but just like the grave plunge into King Mark's monologue, one easily finds oneself deceived into the gravest of human contemplations. Like every one of his works from Rhinegold onward, that he created them at all is preposterous. “Truly of Wagner we might exclaim, '*Credimus quia incredibile*' (we believe because it is beyond belief).”<sup>117</sup> Wagner created the contemporary model of sexual love in *Tristan*; in *The Ring* he created the contemporary model of the epic; *The Mastersingers* is not the contemporary model of what we think of as the comic, but is it a model for us in any way? It is no doubt as Franz Liszt humorously called it “a master-piece,” after reading through it.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps it is better to follow the advice of his wise biographer, William Wallace and “release our minds in the flood of sound, careless about what he meant, more solicitous about and concerned with the magician who captures and enthralls us by the spell of his music.”<sup>119</sup> Let us recall for a final time the myth of Philoctetes; up until the composition of *The Mastersingers*, Wagner had been caught in the Eros/Thanatos pattern, the suffering image of a Romantic artist possessed of divine vision and an accompanying wound which would not heal. Through his classically comic marriage to Cosima and the realisation of the Victorian dream, it seems he became numb to the pain once and for all. Wagner has transfigured from Philoctetes to Hercules, destined to ascend to Mount Olympus himself alongside his progenitors. In the decade of his life which remained him, Wagner created the non-drama *Parsifal* the emblem of Schopenhauerianism and completed his world wonder, *The Ring*. In *The Mastersingers*, we have seen how the future of *Parsifal* is expressed; Sachs delivers his *Wahn* monologue during a reading of a tome which encompasses the history of the world itself, a homage to *The Ring*; and we have seen already how *Tristan* plays a rôle in the opera. *The Mastersingers* is Wagner's jovial farewell to the world. He has given his gifts, the greatest expressions of German Art to the folk, to us for ever. It was time for someone else to be Philoctetes, and there have since been many who took up the challenge, in the spirit of Aristotle's response to Plato so many centuries earlier.

112. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, pg. 340

113. Wagner, *Recollections of Spontini*, vol. V, pg. 191

114. Music, since it passes over the Ideas, is also quite independent of the phenomenal world, positively ignores it, and, to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts. Thus music is as *immediate* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself is. (Schopenhauer, vol. I, pg. 257)

115. Shaw, L., pg. 98

116. *Ibid.* pg. 107

117. Wallace, pg. 260

118. *Ibid.* pg. 297

119. *Ibid.* pg. 263

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