

# ***Tannhäuser***

**German opera in three acts**

**Music  
by  
Richard Wagner**

**Libretto by Richard Wagner**

**Premiere: Dresden, 1845**

**Adapted from the  
*Opera Journeys Lecture Series*  
by  
Burton D. Fisher**

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### *Story Synopsis*

The minstrel Tannhäuser has escaped from the mundane world and has been dwelling with the love-goddess, Venus. However, he has wearied of his life of pleasure, and implores the goddess to release him: Venus reluctantly agrees.

Tannhäuser suddenly finds himself in the valley of the Wartburg where he meets the Minnesingers, the minstrel knights whom he had forsaken. The Landgrave welcomes him, and persuades him to rejoin them.

In the *Song Contest*, the subject is love; the prize, betrothal to Elisabeth, the niece of the Landgrave. Tannhäuser's song celebrates the erotic revelry he shared with Venus. The Minnesingers condemn him, but Elisabeth, who is in love with Tannhäuser, pleads with them to spare him punishment. They agree, but only on the condition that he join a pilgrimage to Rome to seek absolution for his sins.

In Rome, Tannhäuser meets with the Pope and is deemed unworthy of absolution. Accused of blasphemy and spurned by his peers, Tannhäuser decides to return to live with Venus.

Tannhäuser learns that Elisabeth died while praying for his salvation. Conscience stricken and tormented by guilt, Tannhäuser dies, his soul redeemed by Elisabeth's prayers and sacrifice.

***Principal Characters in the Opera***

Venus, Goddess of Love                      Soprano

Tannhäuser, a minstrel knight              Tenor

Herrmann, Landgrave of Thuringia,  
leader of the minstrel knights              Bass

Elisabeth, niece of the Landgrave        Soprano

Wolfram von Eschenbach,  
a knight and minstrel                      Baritone

Walther von der Vogelweide,  
a knight and minstrel                      Tenor

Biterolf,  
a knight and minstrel                      Bass

Heinrich der Schreiber,  
a knight and minstrel                      Tenor

Reinmar von Zweter,  
a knight and minstrel                      Bass

A Young Shepherd                          Soprano

Thuringian knights, counts, nobles, ladies,  
pilgrims, sirens, nymphs, bacchantes, Three  
Graces, cupids, satyrs, fauns.

TIME: Beginning of the Thirteenth century  
PLACE: Thuringia

## Story Narrative with Music Highlights

### Overture:

### Pilgrim's Chorus:

Andante maestoso



### Venusberg music:

Allegro



### Hymn to Venus:

Andante



## ACT I – Scene 1:

### The Hörselberg near Eisenach

In the Venusberg, all celebrate love. Tannhäuser, resting with Venus, feels discontent and indolent: he is guild-ridden and yearns to abandon the wretched life he has led for the past year. Venus pacifies him by urging the minstrel knight to sing to her. Tannhäuser, accompanied by his harp, extols Venus: *Dank deiner Huld!*, “Thanks for your grace!

### Tannhäuser: Dank deiner Huld!

Allegro  
TANNHÄUSER

*Dank dei - ner Huld! ge - prei-sen sei dein Lie - ben!*  
Thanks for your grace! I praise your love!

Venus appeals to Tannhäuser, characterizing all the allurements of the Venusberg.

***Venus: Geliebter, komm!***

Moderato  
VENUS



Ge - lieb - ter, Komm! Sieh dort die Grot - te,  
Beloved, come! Come into the grotto,

Despite Venus's seductive pleas, Tannhäuser is determined to leave her and return to earthly life. Angrily, Venus dismisses him, threatening him that he has no hope to save his soul. Nevertheless, Tannhäuser's places his faith in the Virgin Mary, at the mention of which, Venus and the Venusberg disappear.

*Act I – Scene 2: A valley below the Wartburg*

A shepherd boy sings; in the background, pilgrims are heard chanting. As the pilgrims appear, Tannhäuser becomes deeply moved, falls to his knees, and raises his voice in fervent prayer. After the pilgrims disappear, the Landgrave (ruler) of Thuringia and his minstrel knights appear before Tannhäuser.

One of the knights, Wolfram, recognizes Tannhäuser, greets him, and begs him to return to the Minnesingers at the Wartburg. Tannhäuser, overcome with guilt for his transgressions, feels unworthy, but after he is told that the Landgrave's niece, Elisabeth, still loves him, he agrees to reunite with the Minnesingers.

## ACT II: The Song Contest at the Wartburg

Elisabeth, alone in the Minstrels' Hall, rejoices that her beloved Tannhäuser has returned. She addresses the Hall, and recalls with pride her lover's former triumphs.

*Elisabeth: Dich, teure Halle,*Allegro  
ELISABETH

Tannhäuser is greeted by Elisabeth and Wolfram: Wolfram is Tannhäuser's rival for Elisabeth's love. Elisabeth and Tannhäuser celebrate their reunion: she inquires about his long absence, and becomes confused by his vagueness. In the background, Wolfram overhears them, and laments his hopeless passion for Elisabeth.

The Landgrave greets all the arrivals who have come to celebrate the Minnesinger's *Song Contest*.

The theme of the *Song Contest* is "love": the winner will receive Elisabeth's hand in marriage. Elisabeth draws the first contestant's name: it is Wolfram. His song is simple and restrained, a tribute to spiritual love: he implies that his noble song was inspired by the saintly Elisabeth; the Minnesingers express their approval. Walther follows, and likewise sings about the nobility and purity of love.

Tannhäuser rises impatiently and startles the Minnesingers with his song that ennobles love's fulfillment as sensual delight; the minstrels become outraged and accuse him of blasphemy. After the Landgrave and Wolfram restore peace, Tannhäuser resumes his song, this time singing impassioned praises to Venus. The Minnesingers find Tannhäuser's song scandalous: they draw swords, curse, and threaten him. Elisabeth intercedes and invokes Christian decency: she places herself between Tannhäuser and the minstrels, pleading passionately that they spare Tannhäuser and grant him an opportunity to repent and save his soul.

In deference to Elisabeth, Tannhäuser is spared: the Landgrave decrees that Tannhäuser

must join the pilgrims and seek absolution from the Pope in Rome.

As the chanting of pilgrims is heard in the distance, to cries of *Nach Rom!*, “To Rome,” Tannhäuser rushes off to join the pilgrims.

### ACT III:

*The valley beneath the Wartburg.*

*It is near sunset.*

Elisabeth kneels before the Virgin’s shrine in the valley near the Wartburg, praying for the absent Tannhäuser’s redemption and return. Wolfram observes her, and reflects on his deep love for her. The chant of returning pilgrims is heard: Elisabeth and Wolfram search for Tannhäuser, but he is not among them. Elisabeth kneels again in prayer.

#### *Elisabeth’s Prayer:*

*All mächtge Jungfrau,*

*“O blessed Virgin, hear my pleading!”*

Lento

ELISABETH



As night falls, Elisabeth departs. Wolfram, accompanied by his harp, sings praises to Elisabeth, comparing her to the brightness of the evening star.

*Wolfram: O du mein holder Abendstern,*

*“O evening star, so pure and fair”*

Moderato

WOLFRAM



A group of ragged and weary pilgrims appear. Among them is Tannhäuser,

desperately seeking the path to the Venusberg. Wolfram greets him, and Tannhäuser relates the ordeals of his pilgrimage: the Pope sternly denied him absolution; he will be redeemed only if the Pope's barren staff flowers. Now in despair, and resigned to eternal damnation, Tannhäuser announces that he is returning to Venus.

As Tannhäuser invokes Venus, her beguiling vision appears, and she calls to him. Wolfram tries to restrain him. As they struggle, Wolfram recalls Elisabeth, the mention of her, causing Tannhäuser to become enraptured. Tannhäuser abandons all thoughts of Venus who condemns him as she disappears: *Mir verloren!*, "I have lost him!".

A funeral procession approaches, attended by the Landgrave, nobles and Minnesingers: they carry Elisabeth's bier; Elisabeth died while praying for Tannhäuser's soul. Tannhäuser approaches her bier; falls to his knees, and dies.

As day breaks, a group of pilgrims arrive and announce that the Pope's staff has miraculously burst into flower. All praise God for the miracle that has saved Tannhäuser's tormented soul: in death, Tannhäuser has been redeemed and absolved of his sins.

## Wagner.....and Tannhäuser

During Wagner's first creative period, 1839-1850, his opera style was fundamentally subservient to existing operatic traditions: he faithfully composed in the German Romantic style of Carl Maria von Weber (*Die Freischütz*), Giacomo Meyerbeer's grandiose French style (*Le Prophète*, *L'Africaine*, *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*), and the Italian *bel canto* style. The operatic architecture within those traditions was primarily concerned with effects, atmosphere, characterization, actions, and climaxes, all presented with formal arias and ensemble numbers, choruses, scenes of pageantry, and in *Tannhäuser*, even a ballet.

Wagner's operas from this early period were: *Die Feen*, "The Fairies," based on Carlo Gozzi's *La Donna Serpente*, "The Serpent Woman," an opera that was never performed during the composer's lifetime but premiered in 1888, five years after his death; *Das Liebesverbot*, "The Ban on Love," (1836), a fiasco based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; *Rienzi*, *Der Letzte Der Tribunen*, "Rienzi, Last of the Tribunes" (1842), a resounding success that was based on a Bulwer-Lytton novel; *Der Fliegende Holländer*, "The Flying Dutchman" (1843); *Tannhäuser* (1845); and *Lohengrin* (1850).

During Wagner's second period, 1850-1882, he composed the *Ring* operas, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*. In those later works, he fully incorporated his revolutionary theories about opera: Wagner eventually created a new architecture for the lyric theater; "music drama."

In 1839, at the age of 26, Wagner was an opera conductor at a small, provincial opera company in Riga, Latvia, then, under Russian domination. In a very short time, he was summarily dismissed: his rambunctious

conducting style provoked disfavor, and his heavy debts became scandalous; to avoid creditors and debtors' prison, Wagner fled, en route to Paris, the center of the European opera world.

Wagner arrived in Paris with the lofty ambition to become its brightest star, imagining fame and wealth: he appeared with letters of introduction to the "king" of opera, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and his yet uncompleted opera, *Rienzi*.

During Wagner's three years in Paris, from 1839 to 1842, he experienced agonizing hardships, living in penury and misery, and surviving mostly by editing, writing, and performing musical "slave work" by transcribing operas for Jacques Halévy. The leading lights of French opera were Meyerbeer and Halévy, but Wagner was unsuccessful in securing their help and influence in having *Rienzi* produced at the Paris Opéra. He became lonely and alienated, frustrated by his failures, bitter, suspicious, and despondent. Ultimately, with his dreams shattered, his Paris years became a hopeless adventure, the non-French speaking Wagner considering himself an outsider and a failure.

Nevertheless, during his Parisian years, he completed both *Rienzi* and *The Flying Dutchman*, an incredible accomplishment since both operas possess extremely diverse stories and musical styles. *Rienzi* was a melodrama composed in the Italian *bel canto* style: it portrays the tribulations of its protagonist in conflict with power politics; *Dutchman* was composed in a unified, musically integrated style; it recounts the legend of a sailor doomed to travel the seas until he is redeemed by a faithful woman's love.

In 1842, the omnipotent Meyerbeer, changed the young composer's fortunes, and used his influence to persuade the Dresden opera to produce *Rienzi*. *Rienzi* became a sensation, actually, the most successful opera during Wagner's lifetime; although frequently revived

in the contemporary repertory, it is far overshadowed by the composer's later works,

Nevertheless, *Rienzi* catapulted Wagner to operatic stardom, prompting the Royal Saxon Court Theater in Dresden to appoint him *kappelmeister*: the year was 1843, and Wagner was 29 years old. That same year, *The Flying Dutchman* was mounted at Dresden to a rather mediocre reception, followed by *Tannhäuser* (1845), and *Lohengrin*, introduced by Franz Liszt at Weimar in 1850. Afterwards, Wagner formulated his *Gesamtkunstwerk*; theories and practices designed to transform opera, all of which, were dutifully incorporated into his later works.

Wagner, a prolific reader of German Romantic literature, was well familiar with Heinrich Heine's haunting story of *The Flying Dutchman: Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelewopski*, "The Memoirs of Herr Von Schnabelewopski." (from *Der Salon*, 1834–40), a retelling of the nautical legend about the doomed seaman. Heine, 1797–1856, was one of the foremost German Romantic lyric poets and writers during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wagner was not only inspired to *The Flying Dutchman* from Heine's works, but his next opera, *Tannhäuser*, owes much of its provenance to Heine's poem, *Der Tannhäuser* (1836): Heine's lively evocations of the young Siegfried in *Deutschland ist noch ein kleines Kind* (1840), certainly influenced aspects of the *Ring*.

Heine filled the shoes of two different writers. On the one hand, he was a brilliant love poet whose works were set to music by such famous composers as Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann. On the other hand, he was a gifted satirist and political writer whose fierce attacks on repression and prejudices made him a highly controversial figure. Heine was a German who made Paris his permanent home. While he

witnessed the establishment of limited democracy in France, he became increasingly critical of political and social situations in Germany. Eventually, his popularity enraged and angered the German government: the controversy he sparked prompted them to ban all of his works, and they made it clear that he was no longer welcome to return to his homeland.

Heine was a quintessential lyric poet, the writer of brief poems that were not narrative, but expressed personal thoughts and feelings. Lyric poetry evolved during Medieval times, originally intended to be sung to a musical accompaniment. But in its 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic era transformation, the poems tended to be melodic through their inherent rhythmic, song-like patterns: musical accompaniment was completely abandoned, and their word-play was intended to evoke powerful and energetic sensibilities.

Throughout his life, Heine considered himself an outsider. He was brought up as a Jew in a nation plagued by anti-Semitism, and as a result, developed an inescapable sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness. Heine considered himself, “a Jew among Germans, a German among Frenchman, a Helene among Jews, a rebel among the bourgeois, and a conservative among revolutionaries.”

His *Aus den Memoiren des Herren Schnabelewopski*, the story that became Wagner’s underlying basis for *The Flying Dutchman*, is virtually autobiographical: the alienated, isolated, and lonely Dutchman, was Heine himself; similarly, the alienated and lonely Richard Wagner, who was suffering agonizing frustration and defeat during his Paris years, wholeheartedly identified with the tormented hero of the story.

As always, Wagner’s muse, consciously and unconsciously, was inspired by a personal identification with his protagonists. At the time of *Dutchman*, Wagner was exceedingly unhappy,

bankrupt, unemployed, and a failed composer: the melancholy Dutchman symbolized his own wretched condition, a man persecuted, uprooted, and unfulfilled. Tannhäuser, like the Dutchman and Lohengrin, were tormented souls, isolated and alienated men seeking salvation and redemption. During this period, each of these operatic heroes became Wagner's alter ego: likewise, Richard Wagner was isolated, alienated, and seeking redemption.

The *Tannhäuser* story, although clothed in Medieval times, truthfully mirrors the 19<sup>th</sup> century zeitgeist and cultural conflict. German Romantics were preoccupied with the nature of spiritual truth: Kant scrutinized the relationship between man and God, concluding that man, not God, was the center of the universe; Strauss's very popular *Life of Christ* deconstructed the Gospel; and finally, Nietzsche pronounced the death of God.

The German Romantics were seeking a spiritual renaissance, rebirth, and reawakening: they concluded that the Christian path to redemption and salvation had failed; it was unsatisfactory and deficient. In seeking a new spiritual truth, they reverted to the glory of their mythological gods from pagan antiquity: their powerful mythology and legends possessed universal truths that were waiting to be reborn, waiting to reveal themselves to any mortal who would seek them out and believe in them. Schiller posed the question in his nostalgic invocation of the past: *Schöne Welt, wo bist du?*, "Beautiful world, where are you?", later set to music by Schubert.

The nature of love possessed the Romantics: it was reflected in the "Young Germany" movement, a glorification of the ideal human spirit that was manifested in free sensuality, the emancipation of the flesh, and the idea that sensuality and worldly joys were no longer tied

to bourgeois conventions. For the Romantics, mundane love and spiritual love became disassociated. Wagner, a quintessential German Romantic, expressed those ideals in his operas: *Das Liebesverbot*, adopted from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; the entire dramatic conflict of *Tannhäuser*; and certainly in his later *Tristan und Isolde*.

Most of Wagner's operas are thematically unified: they are concerned with man's redemption through woman's love, faith, and compassion; an alternate path to redemption that precluded theology. In *The Flying Dutchman*, the condemned, egocentric, almost Byronesque Dutchman is redeemed through Senta's love, compassion, and sacrifice. Likewise, in *Tannhäuser*, the errant and tormented minstrel, is redeemed not through his Pope, but through the love and sacrifice of Elisabeth. In Wagner's operas, including *Parsifal*, Christianity does not redeem its suffering heroes: those heroes are redeemed by the ennobled "woman-soul," the treasured feminine ideal that obsessed the German Romantics.

The historical Tannhäuser was born in Salzburg at the beginning of the thirteenth century: he was a Minnesinger, or minstrel knight. These minstrels were lyric poets and poet-musicians, often of knightly rank, who flourished from the 11th to the end of the 13th century and sung about courtly love: they were known in other parts of Europe as troubadours.

Legends speak of Tannhäuser's irresponsibility and the squandering of his patrimony: as a result, he is reputed to have traveled around the courts of Europe in search of patronage. His name became linked with the legend of the Venusberg, the hill where Venus destroyed the souls of men who fell into her power. Wagner incorporated the Venus legend with a song contest; an actual contest took place in 1210 at the Wartburg, a castle in Thuringia in central Germany.

Wagner probably had known the *Tannhäuser* story from youthful readings of the very popular Brothers Grimm; their *Deutsche Sagen* published in 1816. Also, he was no doubt familiar with E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, *Die Serapions-Brüder* (1819), the tale of the minnesinger Heinrich von Ofterdingen, who took part in a song contest at the Wartburg, and whose strange and passionate songs were deemed to be the essence of witchcraft, as well as Heinrich Heine's poem, *Der Tannhäuser* (1836).

In assembling his *Tannhäuser* story, Wagner, like most 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics, integrated historical, mythological, and German legendary texts. He believed that mythological and legendary themes were universal: timeless conflicts and tensions that were uncorrupted by history; power vs. morality, man vs. God, and love vs. duty; themes that were saturated with those basic human passions such as love, hate, and revenge. In one of the older legends, Tannhäuser is not redeemed, but indeed returns to the lure of the Venusberg: nevertheless, for Wagner to be Wagner, he was compelled to transform the story; Wagner could only redeem his hero through a woman's sacrifice.

On the surface, this thirteenth century *Tannhäuser* story seems like a morality play: its story juxtaposes the historical battle between the forces of good, represented by Christianity and the Minnesingers, against the forces of evil, represented by paganism and Venus; in their war, the tormented Tannhäuser is the battlefield. Similarly, *Lohengrin* presents an almost identical conflict: the good and virtuous Elsa is lured and then corrupted by the evil worshippers of the pagan gods, Ortrud and Telramund.

The medieval society in which the *Tannhäuser* story takes place was overwhelmingly Christian: young, nascent, unstable, and insecure; its spiritual values continually challenged by renascent, rebellious paganism. *Tannhäuser's* story clearly portrays the eternal struggle between good versus evil:

in this story, Christian purity, represented by the saintly and spiritual (Elisabeth), is in conflict with the pagan glorification of the flesh and the profane (Venus).

The transition from the Medieval era to the Renaissance was a momentous transformation: it represented the dawn of modern times when Middle Age stagnation ceded to Renaissance progress; suddenly, there was a neo-classical surge, a revival of art and learning. *Tannhäuser*, in its portrayal of its hero's conflicted soul, captures the tension of that historical collision of ideas, bringing into high relief the Renaissance urge for freedom, progress and new ideas, against the humility, stagnation, and resistance to change of the Middle Ages. In the *Tannhäuser* story, society is poised on the brink of change, and Tannhäuser is caught in the middle of the conflict.

*Tannhäuser*, like its operatic creator, Richard Wagner, was an artist, by his very nature, a man obsessed to seek and express truth. Tannhäuser suffers from spiritual conflicts provoked by progress and change that were inherent in the transition from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance: Tannhäuser is torn between his intuitive and instinctive Renaissance belief in progress and new ideas, which are opposed by the stagnation and conservatism of the Middle Ages. In that sense, Tannhäuser was Richard Wagner's alter ego: both struggled against the tyranny of stagnation.

The Minnesinger's Wartburg represents Medieval permanence and constancy: the Minnesingers are morally united, quick to condemn Tannhäuser for invoking sensual pleasure during the *Song Contest*, damning his presumed neo-paganism as evil and blasphemy. As a result, Tannhäuser becomes isolated and estranged from his society, further alienated when the Pope condemns him and withholds absolution. The Minnesingers interpret

Tannhäuser's progressiveness and idealization of beauty as a threat to the very foundations of their civilization: his contemporary society fears new ideas and progress, a paradox to the Renaissance which ennobled progress as the essence of man.

The *Tannhäuser* drama magnifies the Medieval conflict, its story bringing into high relief the reconciliation of two values: the tension in reconciling spiritual love with mundane love, and the tension of progress against stagnation. Tannhäuser's soul struggles within this conflict, wrenched apart by his lust for the pagan goddess, Venus, to his fellow Minnesingers, a violation of everything sacred and pure. Guilt ridden, the hero seeks redemption and salvation from his Christian pontiff, but he fails, damned as a sinner.

*Tannhäuser's* conflict preoccupied the 19<sup>th</sup> Romantics: Was mundane love sinful? Was love only sacred and spiritual? The core of the *Tannhäuser* story captures the conflicted and tormented hero as he struggles between these values: the orgastic pleasures of the mythical world of the Venusberg, and the morally upright world represented by Elisabeth and the Minnesingers.

In the end, Tannhäuser is redeemed through the death of the saintly Elisabeth: it is her love, compassion, and faith, that redeems the conflicted hero. Symbolically, with Elisabeth's death, Tannhäuser soul has been saved. Thus, the Medieval *Tannhäuser* story appealed to 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics: a woman's unbounded love, not God's grace, represented man's path to eternal salvation and redemption.

Wagner's questing Tannhäuser, a quintessential romantic hero, seeks to know himself, driven by powerful instincts that by their very nature, force him into collision with his society: Tannhäuser follows his bliss, like Goethe's Faust, seeking new experiences, searching, experimenting, and striving for new

knowledge. Tannhäuser seeks inspiration from life itself: in the end, his ultimate triumph is the redemption of his soul, achieved through the intercession of the sacrificing woman: the *ewige weibliche*, *la femme éternelle*, the eternal female; the “woman of the future.” To the German Romantics, man may strive, through art or reason, toward a synthesis of human experience, but it is woman - or the feminine in man - who leads him to achieving life’s ultimate fulfillment.

Wagner, paying tribute to Goethe, Schiller, and Beethoven (*Fidelio*), ennobled German Romanticism’s “holy-woman” in his operas. He explained that man’s most profound desire is to desperately seek human warmth, affection, love, and to be understood through love. Through that pure, idealized love – Wagner’s eternal female - man is redeemed from his narcissism and ego, from his loneliness and isolation, from his desires, needs, and yearnings. The *ewige weibliche*, that intuitive, saving woman who is both understanding and sacrificing, provides the path to man’s ultimate redemption. The eternal female became Wagner’s “woman of the future”: Wagner’s idealized heroines, like Beethoven’s Leonora in *Fidelio*, became Senta, Elisabeth, Brünnhilde, and Isolde.

*Tannhäuser*’s saintly Elisabeth possesses *mittlied*: compassion, praying to die, assured that her death will provide absolution for Tannhäuser’s sins. In the opera, Christianity does not redeem Tannhäuser or absolve his sins: the “sacred” woman possessing faith, virtue, and compassion, redeems the hero. Elisabeth serves as the foil against the profane and corruptive Venus: in a metaphorical sense, Elisabeth’s love resolves the struggle between Medieval/Christian values against those of the Renaissance; likewise, her love symbolizes 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism’s values as they struggled against those of Christianity.

Elisabeth is omniscient, fully understanding of Tannhäuser’s conflicting worlds: she recognizes the paganism in Tannhäuser’s songs,

and even admits to her own awakening consciousness and vulnerability, confessing that his songs aroused strange new emotions and longings she had never felt or known before. The saintly Elisabeth suffers from the same societal strictures as those that plague Tannhäuser: she experiences the same inner conflict and turmoil as Tannhäuser, ultimately struggling with guilt, physical longing, yearning, and sexual desire; Elisabeth is a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman representing the Romantic's ideal.

Therefore, Elisabeth becomes the embodiment of Wagner's idealized eternal woman, the woman whom Wagner himself longed for, the woman he thought he had found in Minna, but actually found in Cosima. Wolfram, in contrast, represents the symbol of medieval stagnation: he sees virtues and values only through the preservation of the existing order, eventually concluding that Tannhäuser's songs have cast an evil spell over Elisabeth.

In the end, Elisabeth ascends the Wartburg to die: her death is symbolic, resulting from no apparent physical cause. Elisabeth, like the women in Goethe's poem whose exalted mission was to bring Faust's struggling soul to heaven, through her death, leads Tannhäuser upward – through *mittlied*, (compassion) and love - until all of his struggles and conflicts have become reconciled. Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, is the ennobled redeeming woman, the eternal woman, “the woman of the future,” the “holy” woman.

Venus and Elisabeth are perfect opposites: they symbolize the conflict of good versus evil. They never confront each other on the stage, but each struggles for the hero's soul, their actions representing the engine that churns the drama: sacred love vs. profane love. Venus represents frank sensuality, her pagan entourage including mythological naiads, sirens, nymphs, bacchantes, satyrs, and fauns, prompting Ernest Neuman, the great biographer of Wagner to dub

her abode the “mountain of ill-repute.” Nevertheless, Venus also symbolizes the progressive spirit of the Renaissance; a spirit the German Romantics evoked in their art.

In the Venusberg, Tannhäuser experiences moments of bliss. He sings to Venus, each phrase one-half tone higher, symbolically describing man’s urge to achieve higher goals. But Tannhäuser is saturated in guilt and conflict: he simultaneously wants the bliss of Venus’s world, and at the same time, he refutes it. He tells Venus that he no longer wants to be a slave to her world of erotic pleasure. Venus then provides the essential subtext to Wagner’s story: she tells Tannhäuser to go and find his freedom, seek salvation, and return to that cold world of humanity that is bathed in stupid, idiotic illusions. She warns him that he will never find inner peace: pride will leave his soul, and he will return to her in contrition. Venus speaks the language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics: the language of mundane love.

After Tannhäuser is freed from Venus, her exotic – and erotic - world disappears, and Tannhäuser finds himself before the shrine of the Virgin Mary, the world of a shepherd and pilgrims. For a moment, the evil world of Venus is transformed into the symbolic world of good; for a moment, Tannhäuser believes he has found inner peace: nevertheless, the transformation is momentary and merely feeds his torment.

**T**he *Tannhäuser* legend was extremely popular in Protestant Germany: Germans – and particularly Wagner – were vitriolically anti-Catholic and extremely anti-clerical. In the German mind, Venus – as well as the other pagan gods, those ancient symbols of their glorious past, had been destroyed and driven away by Christianity.

Tannhäuser celebrates a synthesis of opposites: its story is a metaphor for the healing of

a soul torn between the values of two different worlds; as Wagner commented, in the opposing values of the Venusberg and the Wartburg, “The music of the Venusberg sounds amid the hymn of God. Two forces, the spiritual and the sensual, are united.” At the conclusion of the opera, pilgrims arrive from Rome carrying the pope’s staff, now blossoming with green leaves, Tannhäuser dies, like Elisabeth, from no apparent physical causes. Wagner was violent in dismissing “those critics who insist upon reading into my *Tannhäuser* specifically Christian meaning, and a pietistic one at that.” For Wagner, Elisabeth saved Tannhäuser’s soul; not the miracle of the flowering staff.

The ultimate reconciliation within the opera is represented by opposing values: Tannhäuser’s death is represented through the flowering of the papal scepter: the star is Elisabeth’s symbol. Symbolically, they convey the idea that conflicting values have been synthesized: medieval Christendom has accepted the values of the new Renaissance “paganism,” and for Wagner’s purpose, a new path of human redemption has been achieved through mundane love. Nevertheless, in the end Christianity triumphs: the Pilgrims chorus which opened the opera, returns to close the opera with a resounding fortissimo.

The premiere of *Tannhäuser* took place in Dresden in October 1845; Wagner himself conducted, and his niece Johanna, then 19 years old, and on the threshold of a notable career, sang the role of Elisabeth. As Tannhäuser, the trumpet-voiced tenor, Josef Tichatschek, was reputed to have combined vocal brilliance with dramatic incomprehension, so at the climax of the *Song Contest*, he directed his praise of sensual love at Elisabeth rather than to Venus. The Dresden opera performed the work 115 times in its first season, and praise began to grow for Wagner after each subsequent performance.

In 1861, sixteen years after *Tannhäuser's* Dresden premiere, in lieu of establishing more peaceful relations between France, Germany and Austria, Emperor Napoleon III mandated a production of *Tannhäuser* for Paris. Wagner, fresh from his success with *Tristan und Isolde*, enthusiastically prepared revisions of *Tannhäuser*; whether he was obsessed to avenge his horrible experiences in Paris or not, he was determined to make the Paris premiere a spectacular success.

Wagner made drastic alterations in both *Tannhäuser's* text and music. In particular, he acceded to French traditions and introduced an elaborate bacchanale into the ballet in the opening scene: the new Venusberg music was pure *Tristan plus music*, perhaps the most extreme and exotic music Wagner ever composed.

To accommodate the Parisian gentlemen patrons from the Jockey Club - connoisseurs of ballerinas if not of ballet – who dined late, and arrived late at the opera to see the women they were supporting, Wagner was asked to insert the ballet into the second act. Wagner refused, his reasons not necessarily a display of his customary stubbornness: he could not transfer the ballet from Act I into Act II without destroying the dramatic essence of the score. Wagner's refusal prompted the Jockey Club members to become vindictive: they were joined by political conservatives who were anxious to vent their anti-Germanism, and brought hunting whistles to the performance.

Adding to the debacle, the last scene was totally mismanaged: neither the appearance of Venus, nor Elisabeth's bier, was brought back onto the stage, but instead, the idea of their reappearance was conveyed through symbolic lights, something the audience could not relate to nor understand.

The Parisian *Tannhäuser* was a total fiasco. With the clarity of hindsight, its failure had more to do with the French audience's anti-Austrian

sentiments than with Wagner's opera. As a result of the Parisian *Tannhäuser* disaster, Wagner considered himself the scapegoat and victim of international politics. That experience, like those of Wagner's Parisian years of 1839-1842, remained a black mark in his life: it became the catalyst that cemented his hatred of Paris, the justification for his prejudices against what he deemed the frivolous and philistine French, his virulent Franco-phobia, and above all, his conviction that foreigners would never learn to appreciate German art. Nevertheless, it is the Paris version that is performed most often, and the version most audiences now prefer.

Wagner claimed that with *The Flying Dutchman*, he began his career as a true poet: certainly, the opera marked a great step forward from the Meyerbeerian, melodramatic, *bel canto* style of *Rienzi*. *Dutchman* began Wagner's evolutionary musical and dramatic continuum: it possesses a singleness of conception and mood, an appreciable number of leitmotifs that the orchestra treats symphonically and with ingenious virtuoso, and it virtually dissolves set-pieces and "numbers." *Dutchman* began the emphatic synthesis between text and music, the seeds and beginnings of Wagner's ideological "music of the future" that he later transformed into his music dramas.

Nevertheless, existing French and Italian operatic traditions resound in *The Flying Dutchman* as well as in *Tannhäuser*. In *Tannhäuser*, Wagner was indeed still composing within existing operatic traditions: Elisabeth rushes joyously into the Minstrels' Hall and sings *Dich theure halle*, very much an aria in the *bel canto* style; likewise, there is Wolfram's aria, *Evening Star*, what Wagner would later cynically term a "bone for the dog."

In *Tannhäuser*, leitmotifs are sparingly developed: what has become erroneously termed leitmotifs are really "blocks" of music: the

Pilgrim's theme is recalled, as well as the Venus theme representing sensual love. In *Tannhäuser*, Wagner provides the first examples of "narratives" which would become one of his trademarks: the *Rome Narrative*.

More importantly, *Tannhäuser's* musical language sweeps like a tidal wave. Wagner's intensely dramatic expressiveness brings symphonic breadth to the opera's orchestral and vocal writing: the orchestration thrusts its sounds to new extremes, adding blends and ranges of color and sonority heretofore never conceived: those new and wonderful shifting harmonies like those in the *Pilgrim's Chorus* seem to echo continually.

When the tormented Baudelaire first heard *Tannhäuser's* astonishing harmonies, he wrote Wagner to say, "Thank you. You have shown me the way back to myself." Upon hearing *Tannhäuser's* overture, he commented: "What I experienced was indescribable. It seemed to me that I already knew this music. It seemed to me that it was my own music." Theodor Herzl adored Wagner: the first Zionist Congresses were inaugurated with *Tannhäuser's* overture, perhaps symbolizing the underlying message that change was needed in a conflicted world.

Eduard Hanslick, one day to be Wagner's severest critic, was only twenty-two when he attended the *Tannhäuser* premiere in Dresden, at Wagner's personal invitation. He wrote to his Viennese readers that the opera was "a musical experience that carries the listener irresistibly along, so that what occurs in the orchestra and on the stage becomes a part of his life."

In later life, Wagner said much the same: "My whole being was consumed with it, so much so that I became obsessed with the thought that I was going to die before I completed it. And when I had set down the last note, I did feel as if my life had run its course."

Wagner's heroes were always Wagner himself. The Dutchman was the alienated, lonely Wagner from his youthful Paris adventures: *Lohengrin* was the misunderstood artist, like Wagner, representing the reservoir of all creativity. Tannhäuser, like Wagner, was a tormented young protester, gifted in song, a man who defied the society he knew, and profoundly changed it: Tannhäuser was indeed Richard Wagner's alter ego.

The young Wagner, like his tormented hero, Tannhäuser, was soon to enter political exile: he had a price on his head, the aftermath of his political resistance and participation in the 1848 uprising in Dresden. He, like Tannhäuser, was soon to act out his own scenario and reinvent himself and the music world surrounding him. He, like Tannhäuser, would be scorned and attacked for his new music, and shock the bourgeoisie with his scandalous sex life. He, like Tannhäuser, would be driven by his demons to sing ever more fervently about love. In the end, like Tannhäuser, Wagner was a musician who was initially unable to win a hearing because of his unorthodoxy, who, through his art, elevated consciousness.

No one in that contest of nineteenth century music, even Schumann and Brahms, just like the singers at the Medieval Wartburg, could understand the fires that were consuming Wagner. Only Liszt understood Wagner and defied the mainstream: he recognized his genius and adventurously performed *Lohengrin* at Weimar. Fortunately for Wagner, there would be a succession of redeeming Elisabeths to help him through his many crises.

Wagner was the Tannhäuser of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Medieval Tannhäuser, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Wagner/Tannhäuser, symbolized the protesting Romantics, at odds with themselves, with authority, obsessed with sex, flaunting their experiences, and in Wagner's case, raising his art form to unprecedented heights with his radical new music and ideas.

*Tannhäuser's* underlying subtext calls for progress and change: it represents a protest against hypocrisy. It is a timeless message that symbolizes humanity reaching for a level of awareness that will ultimately makes it impossible for him to return to his older, simpler, more innocent, or more conventional ways. Its message speaks to those who are propelled to relate a whole new world of intellectual, spiritual, or sensual revelations to the older, traditional, and conservative values of the world in which he lives.

In *Tannhäuser's* despair, Wagner portrays a soul undergoing transition and experience: in a sense, through *Tannhäuser*, Wagner presents a mirror for self-discovery. George Bernard Shaw, summarized the essence of *Tannhäuser* in a play he wrote: "You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul."

According to Shaw, *Tannhäuser* enables one to peer into his inner soul.











