

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

- its meaning and its message

Poem completed 25 January 1862. Prelude completed April 1862.
Full score completed 24 October 1867. First performed Munich (cond. Bülow), 21 June 1868.

The action is set in Nuremberg, centre of the German Renaissance and an Imperial Free City of the Holy Roman Empire, around the middle of the 16th Century.

Synopsis of *Die Meistersinger*

The Franconian knight Walther von Stolzing arrives in Nuremberg and is attracted to Eva, daughter of the goldsmith Veit Pogner. Eva is offered in marriage to whomever wins the Mastersingers' song contest. Walther, determined to compete for her hand, must first be accepted as a Mastersinger but he is bewildered by the guild's esoteric rules as explained by David, the apprentice of the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs. Walther undergoes a singing 'trial'. Sixtus Beckmesser, the pedantic Town Clerk and a rival for Eva's hand, is the guild's 'Marker' and he quickly fills the slate with disqualifying marks. But the more open-minded Sachs recognizes a fresh, if informal poetry in Walther's attempts. That evening, Beckmesser serenades Eva (in fact it is her nurse, David's sweetheart Magdalene in disguise) and is in turn 'marked' by Sachs who noisily strikes his last with every lapse. The din awakens the townsfolk and precipitates a riot during which Sachs obstructs Walther and Eva's elopement. On the following morning, Sachs, (who harbours a secret love for Eva) overcomes his despair at human folly, sets aside his own ambitions, and helps Walther turn his dream of love into a master-song. Beckmesser finds the text of this song and, believing it to be by Sachs, passes it off as his own in the contest. He makes a complete fool of himself. Eventually, the people judge Walther to be the winner of the contest but, still smarting from his earlier treatment, he rejects the idea of becoming a Mastersinger. Hans Sachs urges him not to despise artistic traditions, which can easily be lost through neglect. If valued, art will survive the rise and fall of kingdoms. Walther acknowledges the wisdom of this argument, and the people rejoice in their art and in Nuremberg's dear Sachs.

Prelude

The prelude begins with the broad, confident theme of the guild of Mastersingers and their dedication to Nuremberg and to the arts of poetry and music.

The lyrical second theme, with its hint of impetuous ardour, is a foretaste of Walther's prize song. It gently ruffles the prevailing mood of self-satisfaction.

Doubts are swept aside by the third theme, a magisterial fanfare derived from an authentic Mastersinger melody of the 16th Century. The guild draws strength from its traditions and from its patron saint, the harpist and poet king, David – a connection emphasised by the prominent use of the harp throughout this passage.

A fourth theme emerges - a soaring expression of the Mastersingers' devotion to poetry and music, which leads directly into a fifth theme – the main melody of the prize song expressing Walther's love for Eva. The implication is clear (to the composer if not to the Mastersingers at this stage) - those who value art should be willing to embrace new forms if these flow genuinely from the heart.

All five themes and related motifs burst into a flowering of different ideas and feelings until the first, third and fifth combine in counterpoint to express the unity of the old and the new. The fourth theme with its soaring paean to poetry and music returns to put its seal on all that has gone before, and to bring the prelude to a radiant close.

On stage, the prelude leads directly into a chorale – the finest example of this genre since the time of Bach. Thus, Wagner introduces an important piece of imagery: the Reformation as a force for social and intellectual renewal. In Act Three there is a return to this idea when the populace uses the words of the historical Hans Sachs (1494 – 1576) to hail the ‘nightingale’ (Martin Luther) and ‘the new day in the east’ (the Reformation).

Reformation, renaissance, renewal – all find expression in *Die Meistersinger* through the metaphor of baptism. The action takes place on and around St John’s Day (John the Baptist) which is the name day of the hero of the work - the cobbler-poet Hans (Johannes) Sachs - whose Baptist-like role facilitates personal reconciliation, the ‘washing away’ of delusions, and a renewal of the arts based on true inspiration.

In the opening scene, the church congregation asks John the Baptist to grant them grace on the banks of the Jordan and, in the final Act, Sachs answers their prayer on the banks of the Pegnitz. The naming of Walther’s prize song by Sachs as ‘the blessed morning-dream-interpretation-melody’ and the ensuing quintet led by ‘the youngest godparent’, Eva, combine two important ideas: the baptism of something new and beautiful, and the role of dreams in inspiring the artist. As Sachs explains to Walther:

‘My friend, that is the poet’s task,
to seek in dreams what comes to pass.
In truth, the deepest wisdom known
has always been what dreams have shown.
All verses that our poets write
are naught but truth that dreams have brought to light.’

In its tiny details as in its vast spans, *Die Meistersinger* is a work of boundless riches, and also one of hope and reconciliation.

Johannes Brahms, with whom Wagner rarely saw eye-to-eye on musical matters, spent several days in 1863 copying out instrumental parts of the unfinished *Meistersinger* for a concert in Vienna. ‘Brahms behaved here in a truly modest and good-natured way’ wrote Wagner in his autobiography. A decade earlier, Brahms had copied, with evident approval, a paragraph from Wagner’s seminal essay of 1851 *Opera and Drama*:

‘The generator of the artwork of the future is none other than the artist of the present, who anticipates the life of the future and longs to be contained in it. Whoever cherishes the longing within himself already lives in a better life; but only one can do this: the Artist.’

Hans Sachs could not have put it better.

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