

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and the art of reconciliation

The Mastersingers of Nuremberg is a 'comedy' (not 'comic' mind you, but a 'comedy') in the Athenian sense, concerned with ordinary people who use the language of everyday speech. It is about events over which human beings exercise control – as distinct from the inexorable workings of fate, or some fatal flaw of character that the ancient Greeks labelled 'tragedy'.

There were many critics in the second half of the 19th century who shared Eduard Hanslick's view that: 'Wagner's most recent reform does not represent an enrichment, an extension, a renewal of music in the sense that the art of Mozart, Beethoven, Weber and Schumann did; it is, on the contrary, a distortion, a perversion of basic musical laws, a style contrary to the nature of human hearing and feeling...there is music in it but it's not music'. Artistic conservatism of this kind became the main issue in *Die Meistersinger*, typified by the rigid rules of the well-meaning but unimaginative guild of Mastersingers, and personified by the pedantic town clerk, Sixtus Beckmesser. The opposite point of view, in favour of artistic freedom – even artistic anarchy – is personified by the outsider Walther von Stolzing, who arrives in Nuremberg and falls in love with Eva, daughter of the goldsmith, Veit Pogner. Walther acknowledges the long dead poet Walther von der Vogelweide as his teacher, but we soon find that his school was really that of meadow (Weide) and bird (Vogel), which is to say, nature. It remains for Hans Sachs to teach the impetuous young man that true art requires both instinctive inspiration *and* structure. Wagner was making the point that his new music was far from formless – it just followed a course that was unfamiliar.

People like Hanslick – and Beckmesser – found this very hard to accept, but it goes to the heart of Wagner's personal struggle. The whole opera is a 'masterwork' (Wagner once referred to it as such) in which the composer demonstrates the rules that guide his art. It is also a hymn to reconciliation. What is it that needs to be reconciled? Firstly, there is the perceived conflict between commerce and art. In order to demonstrate that the burghers of Nuremberg are not just concerned with money-making, Pogner offers his worldly goods and that which he values most - his only daughter - to the winner of the song contest – if she agrees, of course! 'I grew tired of the fact', he says, 'that no-one cared that we, alone in the broad German empire, cherish art and all that is beautiful and good.' Note: his distinction here is between Nuremberg and the other cities of the Holy Roman Empire. Prosperous mercantile communities have a duty to value and champion the arts, says Pogner – and in this he is certainly speaking for Wagner.

The second conflict needing resolution is that between the guardians of tradition - the Mastersingers – and a rebellious advocate of unfettered imagination – Walther. We have seen how Sachs reconciles that conflict. Thirdly, there is the conflict between Sachs and Beckmesser – at least in Beckmesser's eyes. Beckmesser stoops to theft and deceit in his determination to get the better of Sachs. Mistakenly, he thinks that the poem of the prize song was written by Sachs in order to try for Eva's hand, and so he steals it, intending to pass it off as his own. But Sachs resolves their differences by declaring that he has no intention of entering the contest. Beckmesser's pedantry, dishonesty and meanness of spirit make him his own worst enemy, and he – and no one else - is the architect of his humiliation.

The final conflict to be resolved arises from Nuremberg's protestant history. Remember, the action is set at a time when Luther's Reformation was taking hold in northern Europe, and a Counter-Reformation or Catholic revival under Pius IV was about to commence. The chorale that opens Act One harks back to the greatest Lutheran composer of the baroque, J S Bach, and a chorus in Act Three uses the words of the historical Hans Sachs to hail the 'nightingale' (that is Martin Luther) and 'the new day in the east' (the Reformation). Religion and culture are inextricably entwined in this work through the many references to baptism and by contrasting the so-called 'foreign' influence of Rome and the Lutheran attachment to a faith guided by the Bible and unmediated by the Church. The role of a priesthood in matters of religion may be equated with that of the guild of Mastersingers in matters of art. But Hans Sachs urges Walther not to despise artistic traditions that can easily be lost through neglect. The masters, for all their faults, had at least cared for their art through difficult times, and even if the Holy Roman Empire were to disappear (as it did at the hands of Napoleon in 1806) then at least – to use Wagner's play on words – the 'Holy German Art' would survive. These sentiments echo almost exactly those in an unfinished poem by Schiller from 1797.

So, this is the ultimate message of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: whatever the fluctuations of political fortune, a community's art will continue to reflect the lasting values of its people. *Die Meistersinger* is not a celebration of politics but a celebration of art, and we get a clear indication of this from its glorious prelude.

Peter Bassett