

Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg

(Tannhäuser and the Singers' Contest on the Wartburg)

Poem completed April 1843. Full score completed 13 April 1845; rev. 1845, 1847, 1851, 1860-61, 1865, 1875. First performed Dresden (cond. Wagner), 19 October 1845.

The action is set in Thuringia at the beginning of the 13th Century.

The story of *Tannhäuser* is set in and near the Wartburg where, during the 13th Century, the Landgraves of the Thuringian Valley held sway. They were patrons of the arts, especially of poetry and music, and at the Wartburg many contests between the famous Minnesingers took place. *Minne* is the Middle High German word for *love* (in its lofty sense), which was the troubadours' main subject. Near this castle was the Venusberg (identified by Wagner as the Hürselberg) inhabited by Holda, the goddess of spring who, in time, became confused with Venus, goddess of love (in its carnal sense). Her court was filled with nymphs and sirens, and it was her greatest joy to entice into the mountain the knights of the Wartburg and hold them captive to her beauty. Among those lured was the knight and Minnesinger Tannhäuser, who is referred to in the opera as Heinrich.

Overture

The overture begins quietly with the music of the pilgrims' song - pious, reflective and sonorous. In due course it is embroidered with a figure of broken triplets that Wagner called 'the Pulse of Life'. The effect created is of a procession of pilgrims coming gradually into view and just as gradually disappearing into the distance. Then follows a section depicting the seductions of the Venusberg, with feverish revelry leading to a quotation of Tannhäuser's swaggering song in praise of Venus. The bacchanal is resumed, entwined with Venus' invocation to her lover to stay with her. Another stanza of Tannhäuser's song follows in a higher key, leading to more revelry and the feverish gyrations of the Venusberg music.

On stage, the curtain rises at this point on the interior of the Venusberg, with Venus bathed in a rosy light, reclining on a couch. Tannhäuser, half kneeling at her side, has his head resting in her lap while numerous sleeping cupids are huddled together in a tangle - 'like tired children who have fallen asleep after boisterous play' say the stage directions.

Synopsis of *Tannhäuser*

The knight and Minnesinger Tannhäuser, who has succumbed to the pleasures of the Venusberg, enlists the Virgin's aid to escape them. He is persuaded by his fellow Minnesinger Wolfram to return to the court at the Wartburg and to his beloved Elisabeth, niece of the Landgrave of Thuringia. In the Wartburg's Hall of Song, the minstrels compete in honour of Elisabeth on the theme of love. The pious Wolfram sings the praises of courtly love but Tannhäuser impetuously counters with the song he had offered to Venus during their erotic encounter. In the uproar that follows, Elisabeth intervenes on Tannhäuser's behalf. The Landgrave orders Tannhäuser to join the pilgrims on their journey to Rome and seek forgiveness from the Pope. Some months later, the pilgrims return through the Wartburg valley but Tannhäuser is not

among them. Elisabeth prays at the Virgin's shrine, offering her life in return for his forgiveness, and then she returns to the castle to die. Tannhäuser appears, now almost unrecognisable, and tells Wolfram that the Pope had denied him absolution and had pronounced that the papal staff would sprout leaves before such a sinner would find redemption. Tannhäuser is about to return to the Venusberg when Wolfram tells him that Elisabeth has died and is interceding for him in heaven. As Tannhäuser collapses lifeless into Wolfram's arms, new pilgrims arrive from Rome bringing with them the Pope's staff that, miraculously, has burst into leaf.