

Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Die

(‘The Mastersingers of Nuremberg’).

Music drama in three acts by Richard Wagner (see [Wagner family, \(1\)](#)) to his own libretto; Munich, Königliches Hof- und Nationaltheater, 21 June 1868.

Hans Sachs <i>cobbler</i>		bass-baritone
Veit Pogner <i>goldsmith</i>	}	bass
Kunz Vogelgesang <i>furrier</i>	}	tenor
Konrad Nachtigal <i>tinsmith</i>	}	bass
Sixtus Beckmesser <i>town clerk</i>	}	bass
Fritz Kothner <i>baker</i>	}	bass
Balthasar Zorn <i>pewterer</i>	} Mastersingers	tenor
Ulrich Eisslinger <i>grocer</i>	}	tenor
Augustin Moser <i>tailor</i>	}	tenor
Hermann Ortel <i>soapmaker</i>	}	bass
Hans Schwarz <i>stocking weaver</i>	}	bass
Hans Foltz <i>coppersmith</i>		bass
Walther von Stolzing <i>a young knight from Franconia</i>		tenor
David Sach's <i>apprentice</i>		tenor
Eva Pogner's <i>daughter</i>		soprano
Magdalene <i>Eva's nurse</i>		soprano
A Nightwatchman		bass
Citizens of all guilds and their wives, journeymen, apprentices, young women, people		
<i>Setting</i> Nuremberg; about the middle of the 16th century		

Wagner conceived *Die Meistersinger* in 1845 as a comic appendage to *Tannhäuser*, in the same way that a satyr play followed a Greek tragedy. His first prose draft for the work was written in Marienbad (Mariánské Lázně) in July that year, using Georg Gottfried Gervinus's *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* of 1835–42 for historical background. Other relevant volumes in Wagner's Dresden library include Jacob Grimm's *Über den altdeutschen Meistergesang* (1811), J. G. Büsching's edition of Hans Sachs's plays (1816–19) and Friedrich Furchau's life of Sachs (1820). The second and third prose drafts date from November 1861 (the former probably 14–16 November, the latter, containing minor revisions, prepared on 18 November for Schott). At this point, Wagner found J. C. Wagenseil's Nuremberg Chronicle of 1697 a particularly rich source of information on the ancient crafts and guilds and on other aspects of Nuremberg. Also evident are motifs from such contemporary stories as E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Meister Martin der Kufner und seine Gesellen*, which is set in 16th-century Nuremberg. Wagner completed the poem of *Die*

Meistersinger on 25 January 1862 and began the composition in March or April. The full score was not completed until October 1867.

On one level, *Die Meistersinger* is a glorious affirmation of humanity and the value of art, as well as a parable about the necessity of tempering the inspiration of genius with the rules of form. The work may also be regarded, however, as the artistic component in Wagner's ideological crusade of the 1860s: a crusade to revive the 'German spirit' and purge it of alien elements, chief among which were the Jews. It can further be argued that anti-Semitism is woven into the ideological fabric of the work and that the representation of Beckmesser carries, at the very least, overtones of anti-Semitic sentiment (see Millington 1991).

Even after the immensely successful première under Bülow in Munich, *Die Meistersinger* was taken up first by theatres of medium size, such as Dessau, Karlsruhe, Dresden, Mannheim and Weimar (all in 1869). The court operas of Vienna and Berlin followed in 1870. The work was first given at Bayreuth in 1888 under Richter. The first performance in England was also under Richter, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1882, and in the USA under Seidl, at the Metropolitan in 1886. Notable exponents of the role of Hans Sachs have included Edouard de Reszke, Van Rooy, Schorr, Janssen, Hotter, Theo Adam, Stewart, Fischer-Dieskau, Bailey, Ridderbusch, Sotin and Weigl. Walther has been sung by Jean de Reszke, Lorenz, Svanholm, Jess Thomas, James King, Remedios, René Kollo, Cox, Domingo, Peter Hofmann, Jerusalem and Heppner. Eva has been sung by Eames, Destinn, Gadski, Rethberg, Lotte Lehmann, Schumann, Donath, Bode, Häggander and Marton. Notable conductors, besides Richter and Seidl, have included Muck, Mottl, Bodanzky, Leinsdorf, Bruno Walter, Barbirolli, Goodall, Beecham, Kempe, Solti, Karajan, Jochum and Varviso. The prelude opens the work in an emphatic, magisterial C major, with a theme that celebrates the dignity of the Masters, at the same time possibly hinting at their air of self-importance ([ex.1](#)). A more pensive idea ([ex.2](#)) gives way to a pair of themes ([exx.3](#) and [4](#)), the first, of a fanfare-like nature, standing for the Masters and their guild. An elaborate modulation to E major introduces Walther and the theme of his passion ([ex.5](#)), later to form a part of his Prize Song. After an episode in E^b (based on [ex.1](#)) depicting the chattering, bustling apprentices, three of these themes ([exx.1](#), [3](#) and [5](#)) are expansively combined before a grandiloquent coda.

Ex.1



Ex.2



Ex.3



Ex.4





ACT 1 *Inside St Katharine's Church* The act opens with the congregation singing a sturdy C major chorale (of Wagner's invention), the phrases of which are interrupted by [ex.2](#): Walther is urgently trying to communicate with Eva. At the end of the service, the church empties and Walther addresses Eva. He wishes to know whether she is betrothed, and though Eva sends away Magdalene to find first her handkerchief, then the clasp, and then her prayer-book, she never quite manages to stem Walther's impassioned flow with an answer. Magdalene finally tells him that Eva will marry the mastersinger who wins the song contest to be held the next day. Walther is left to be instructed in the rules of the mastersingers by David, Sachs's apprentice, with whom Magdalene is in love.

In scene ii David, after some ribbing from his fellow apprentices, proceeds to initiate Walther into the secrets of his own master's art: a properly fashioned song is, after all, he says, like a well-made pair of shoes. His catalogue of the tones that have to be learnt ('Mein Herr!'), along with the appropriate rules (mostly taken by Wagner from Wagenseil) overwhelms Walther, but he sees that his only hope of winning Eva is by composing a mastersong in the approved manner. The apprentices, who have erected the wrong stage, put up the right one under David's supervision, to the accompaniment of their bustling semiquavers.

Eva's father, Pogner, now enters with the town clerk, Beckmesser (scene iii). Two tiny motifs are heard here, later much repeated both together and individually ([ex.6](#)). Pogner assures Beckmesser of his good will and welcomes Walther to the guild, surprised as he is that Walther wishes to seek entry. Kothner calls the roll, to a contrapuntal working-out of [ex.6](#). Pogner then announces the prize he intends to award to the winner of the song contest the next day ('Nun hört, und versteht mich recht!'). The first part of his address is based entirely on a new motif, [ex.7](#). Then he changes to the style of an old-fashioned recitative, accompanied by sustained chords, to tell how burghers such as they are regarded in other German lands as miserly. Returning to [ex.7](#) and to an important idea derived from [fig. x of ex.1](#), he proposes to counter this slander by offering all his goods, as well as his only daughter, Eva, to the winner of the song contest. His proviso that she must approve the man is not welcomed by all the Masters. Sachs's proposal, however, that the winner be chosen by the populace, as a means of renewing the traditional rules with the good sense and natural instincts of the common people, is laughed out of court.



Walther is introduced by Pogner and asked about his teacher. His reply ('Am stillen Herd') is that he learnt his art from the poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide and from nature itself. In

formal terms, the song is a piece of gentle mockery, on the composer's part, of the *Bar* -form so prized by the Masters. Of the three stanzas, *A-A-B*, the last (*Abgesang*) is intended to be a variation of the others (*Stollen*), but in 'Am stillen Herd' the variation is so florid that no one is able to contradict Beckmesser's opinion that it is but a 'deluge of words'.

Beckmesser withdraws into his Marker's box, ready to pass judgment on the young knight's formal attempt to enter the guild. The syncopated motif accompanying him both here and elsewhere is a churlish version of the dotted motif that first introduced Walther, as befits Beckmesser's cantankerous character. The rules of the *Tabulatur* are read out by Kothner in a style that (as Robert Bailey has pointed out) parodies that of Handelian opera, complete with coloratura (given, unusually, to a bass, for comic effect).

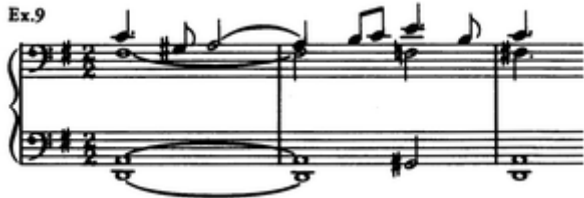
For his Trial Song, Walther takes up the command of the Marker: 'Fanget an! So rief der Lenz in den Wald'. A passionate celebration of the joys of spring and youthful love, it again fails to find favour with the Masters. It is, in fact, a complex *Bar* -form in which each *Stollen* is in two parts – *A-B-A'-B'-C* – though Beckmesser interrupts after *A'*, assuming that the form is ternary (*A-B-A*). Beckmesser's critical scratching of chalk on slate provokes Walther's angry outburst about envious Winter lying in wait in the thorn-bush. (That this is intended as a reference to the Grimm brothers' anti-Semitic folktale *Der Jude im Dorn* is clear from the parallel situation: in the Grimm tale a bird flies into the thorn-bush, in Walther's song it flies out again in an image of liberation. The matter is put beyond doubt by Wagner's pun 'Grimmbewährt', which suggests both 'guarded with anger' and 'authenticated by Grimm'. The identification here of Beckmesser with the stereotypical Jew of folklore has profound implications for the interpretation of the character and of the work as a whole; see Millington 1991.)

Beckmesser leads the chorus of opposition to Walther; only Sachs admires his originality. Walther mounts the singer's chair (a gross breach of etiquette) to complete his song. The hubbub increases as he does so: the Masters, by an overwhelming majority, reject his application to the guild, while the apprentices revel in the commotion. With a gesture of pride and contempt, Walther strides from the stage, leaving Sachs to gaze thoughtfully at the empty singer's chair.

ACT 2 In the street in front of the homes of Pogner and Sachs The orchestral prelude takes up the main theme of Pogner's Address ([ex.7](#)) in a joyous celebration of midsummer's eve: trills and glissandos abound. The curtain rises to reveal a street and a narrower adjoining alley in Nuremberg. Of the two corner houses presented, Pogner's grand one on the right is overhung by a lime tree and Sachs's simpler one on the left by an elder. The apprentices are tormenting David once again. Magdalene asks him how Eva's paramour fared at the Song School and is vicariously disconsolate at the bad news. Sachs arrives and instructs David to set out his work for him by the window. Pogner and Eva return from an evening stroll and sit on a bench under the lime tree. The new motif ([ex.8](#)) to which he expresses his satisfaction with Nuremberg and its customs is reminiscent rhythmically of [ex.7](#). Pogner belatedly realizes that Eva's questions about the knight are no idle curiosity.



As Eva follows her father inside, Sachs has his work bench set up outside his workshop. The tender reminiscences of a phrase from Walther's Trial Song ([ex.9](#)) suggest that the knight's celebration of spring and his embodiment of vital youthful passion have made a great impression on him. Sachs's relishing of the scent of the elder in this solo, 'Was duftet doch der Flieder', has given it the name of the 'Flieder Monologue': it develops into an exquisite evocation of the joys of spring.



Eva approaches Sachs's workshop (scene iv) and, in a long, delicately woven exchange, tries to elicit from him the likely winner of the next day's contest. Sachs playfully parries her questions until Magdalene enters to tell her that her father is calling, and that Beckmesser intends to serenade her.

Walther now turns the corner (scene v) and an impassioned duet ensues, based largely on a demonstrative variant of one of the themes from the previous scene. They are at a loss as to how to obviate her father's conditions for obtaining her hand. Walther suggests eloping, but he gets carried away by his loathing of the Masters' pedantry until he is interrupted by the sound of the Nightwatchman's horn: a single blast on an F# that launches an exquisite transition to the B major of the Midsummer Magic music. Although an F# is sustained over many bars as a dominant pedal, the Nightwatchman's warning to the citizenry, when it starts, is in a conflicting F major. A second blast of F# on his horn then re-establishes B major. Eva has meanwhile followed Magdalene into the house and now re-emerges, having changed clothes with her.

Eva and Walther are about to make their escape when Sachs, who has realized what is afoot, allows his lamp to illuminate the alley they are in. They hesitate and are then pulled up short by the sound of Beckmesser tuning his lute. Walther is for settling his score with the Marker and has to be restrained by Eva: 'What trouble I have with men!', she sighs. She persuades him to sit quietly under the lime tree until Beckmesser has finished his song. But Sachs has other ideas, launching into a noisy, vigorous song of his own ('Jerum! Jerum!'). A simple, ballad-like structure with augmented harmonies spicing the basic Bb major, Sachs's song is permeated with references to the biblical Eve and to shoemaking that are not entirely lost on the listeners. Beckmesser has less time for the poetic subtleties; seeing what he believes to be the object of his wooing come to the window (in fact Magdalene in Eva's clothes), he begs Sachs to stop his clattering. Reminding him that he had been critical of his workmanship earlier in the day, Sachs suggests that both would make progress if Beckmesser were to serenade while he, Sachs, marked any faults with his cobbler's hammer. (The coloratura of Beckmesser's Serenade 'Den Tag seh' ich erscheinen' is a parody of an old-fashioned bel canto aria (see Voss 1981). It is also notable for its obvious and stilted rhymes and its grotesque violations of metre and misplaced accents. Clearly Beckmesser provided a target for Wagner's ill-will towards what he perceived as hostile, insensitive critics – not least Eduard Hanslick, whose name was commandeered for the Marker in the 1861 prose drafts – and other reactionary practitioners. But Beckmesser's artistic failings are also precisely those

ascribed to the Jews in *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, and it may be argued that the serenade is also a parody of the Jewish cantorial style.)

The commotion caused by Sachs's hammering and Beckmesser's attempts to make himself heard above it brings the populace out on to the streets. A riot ensues (scene vii), during which David, under the impression that he is courting Magdalene, cudgels Beckmesser. The music of the Riot Scene, which takes up the theme of Beckmesser's Serenade, and which contains more than a dozen polyphonic lines, is notoriously difficult to perform; a simplified version, initiated by Toscanini, is used in many houses. At the height of the pandemonium, the Nightwatchman's horn is heard again. Everybody disperses, and by the time he arrives on the scene the streets are empty; he rubs his eyes in disbelief.

ACT 3.i–iv *Sachs's workshop* The prelude to the third act, familiar as a concert item, opens with a broadly phrased theme on the cellos, taken up contrapuntally by the violas and, in turn, second and first violins; the theme ([ex.10](#)) has earlier been heard as a counter-melody to Sachs's 'Jerum! Jerum!' in Act 2. The horns and bassoons then intone the solemn chorale that is to become the ode of homage to Sachs sung by the assembled townsfolk at the end of the opera. Announced by the characteristic semiquavers of the apprentices, David enters the workshop. Sachs, deep in thought, at first ignores him but then asks him to sing the verses he has learnt for the festival of St John, celebrated on midsummer's day. His mind still on the events of the previous evening, David begins his ditty to the tune of Beckmesser's Serenade and has to start again: 'Am Jordan Sankt Johannes stand'. David belatedly realizes that it is also his master's name-day (Hans = Johannes). When the apprentice has left, Sachs resumes his philosophical meditation on the follies of humanity: 'Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!' (The concept of *Wahn*, which includes the notions of illusion, folly and madness, lies at the heart of *Die Meistersinger*: by the 1860s, Wagner had come to believe that all human endeavour was underpinned by illusion and futility, though art, he considered, was a 'noble illusion'.) The 'Wahn Monologue', as it is often known, begins with [ex.10](#); [ex.8](#) is heard as Sachs's thoughts turn to Nuremberg and its normally peaceful customs. The memory of the riot returns, but the agitated quavers are banished by the serene music of the Midsummer Magic. The last part of the Monologue, the dawning of midsummer's day, brings back [ex.7](#).



The end of Sachs's reverie, and the beginning of scene ii, is signified by a modulation with harp arpeggios, rather in the manner of a cinematic 'dissolve'; similar gestures occur later too in connection with dreams and reveries. Walther appears and tells Sachs of a wonderful dream. Sachs urges him to recount it as it may enable him to win the Master's prize. (Wagner had readily become a convert to the Schopenhauerian view that creativity originates in the dream-world.) Walther's resistance to the demands of the Masters is overcome in the name of love, and he embarks on his Morning Dream Song – what is to become the Prize Song: 'Morgenlich leuchtend in rosigem Schein'. He produces one *Stollen* and then, at Sachs's bidding, another similar, followed by an *Abgesang* ([ex.5](#)). Under Sachs's instruction, Walther goes on to produce another three stanzas. The last part of the overall structure (*A-A-A*), each section of which is in *Bar*-form (*A-A-B*), is not supplied until scene iv.

In the third scene, Beckmesser appears alone in the workshop. After his beating the night before, he is limping and stumbling, and prey to nightmarish memories and imaginings. All

this is depicted in a ‘pantomime’ notable for its anarchically progressive musical style. Picking up Walther’s freshly penned song, he pockets it on Sachs’s re-entry. He adduces it as proof that Sachs means to enter the song contest, but Sachs denies such a plan and offers him the song. Beckmesser’s suspicions are eventually allayed, and he delightedly retires in order to memorize the song.

Eva enters (scene iv) and under the cover of a complaint about the shoes Sachs has made for her, she expresses her anxieties about Walther and the coming contest. Sachs affects not to understand, and pretends not to notice Walther’s arrival, in spite of Eva’s passionate cry and the orchestra’s thrilling tonal shift on to a dominant 9th chord in B major. Walther delivers the final section of his song and Eva, moved to tears, sobs on the shoulder of Sachs, until the latter drags himself away, complaining about the lot of the cobbler. Eva, emotionally torn between the avuncular shoemaker and her younger lover, draws Sachs to her again. Sachs reminds her of the story of Tristan and Isolde and says he has no wish to play the role of King Mark; the themes of the opening of Wagner’s *Tristan* and of King Mark are recalled here.

Magdalene and David arrive, and Sachs, with a cuff on his ear, announces David’s promotion to journeyman, in time to witness the baptism of ‘a child’ (the themes of the Masters and of the opening chorale are heard at this point). The progeny turns out to be Walther’s new song. The music moves to a plateau of G^b major, a tritone from the C major of the surrounding scenes, for Eva’s introduction to the celebrated quintet, ‘Selig, wie die Sonne’.

3.v *An open meadow on the Pegnitz* The themes associated with Nuremberg ([ex.8](#)) and midsummer’s day ([ex.7](#)), along with [fig. x of ex.1](#), effect a transition to the fifth scene. The townsfolk are all gathered and, to the accompaniment of fanfares on stage, greet the processions of the guilds: first the shoemakers, then the tailors and bakers. A boat brings ‘maidens from Fürth’ and the apprentices begin dancing with them; David, at first reluctant, is drawn in.

At last the Masters arrive, to the music of the first-act prelude. Sachs is hailed by the populace with the chorale from the third-act prelude to the words with which the historical Sachs greeted Luther and the Reformation: ‘Wach auf, es nahet gen den Tag’. Sachs modestly acknowledges the homage and exhorts people and Masters to accord the coming contest and prize their due worth. Beckmesser, who has frantically been trying to memorize Walther’s song, is led first to the platform. His rendering of the song, to the tune of his own Serenade, is marked by grotesque misaccentuations and violations of metre, but it is his garbling of the words, producing an absurd, tasteless parody of the original, that provoke a crescendo of hilarity in the audience. He presses on in confusion, but only makes a greater fool of himself. Finally he rushes from the platform, denouncing Sachs as the author.

Sachs refutes that honour and introduces the man who will make sense of it for them. Walther’s Prize Song, ‘Morgenlich leuchtend in rosigem Schein’, compresses his earlier dry run into a single *Bar* -form of three stanzas (*A-A-B*) but with each stanza expanded. In several details, including the heartwarming plunge into B major (from a tonic of C) in the second stanza, Walther’s prize-winning entry is a greater infraction of the rules than ever. But the Masters are evidently swept away by Walther’s artistic integrity and impassioned delivery, for he is awarded the prize by general consent.

When Pogner proffers the Master’s chain to Walther, he impetuously refuses, and Sachs delivers a homily (to [exx.1](#) and [ex.3](#), together with the Prize Song) about the art that the

Masters have cultivated and preserved throughout Germany's troubled history: 'Verachtet mir die Meister nicht'. Sachs's address concludes with a celebration of the sovereignty of the German spirit – a theme dear to Wagner's heart in the 1860s; that spirit, it is proposed, can never be exterminated so long as the great German art that sustains it is respected. The salient themes of the opera's prelude, notably [ex.4](#), are recalled for the final choral apostrophe to Sachs and 'holy German art'.

The only comedy among Wagner's mature works, *Die Meistersinger* is a rich, perceptive music drama widely admired for its warm humanity but regarded with suspicion by some for its dark underside. Its genial aspect is immensely enhanced by the technical mastery displayed by Wagner at the height of his powers.

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