

Tannhäuser [*Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* ('Tannhäuser and the Singers' Contest on the Wartburg')].

Grosse romantische Oper in three acts by Richard Wagner (see [Wagner family, \(1\)](#)) to his own libretto; Dresden, Hoftheater, 19 October 1845.

Herrmann	<i>Landgrave of Thuringia</i>	bass
Tannhäuser		tenor
Wolfram von Eschinbach	knights and minstrels	baritone
Walther von der Vogelweide		tenor
Biterolf		bass
Heinrich der Schreiber		tenor
Reinmar von Zweter		bass
Elisabeth	<i>the Landgrave's niece</i>	soprano
Venus		soprano
A Young Shepherd		soprano
Four Noble Pages		soprano, alto
Thuringian knights, counts and nobles, ladies, older and younger pilgrims, sirens, naiads, nymphs, bacchantes. In Paris version, additionally the Three graces, youths, cupids, satyrs and fauns		
<i>Setting</i> Thuringia at the beginning of the 13th Century		

Wagner's text is a conflation of two separate medieval legends: those concerning Tannhäuser, believed originally to have been a crusading knight from Franconia, and the song contest on the Wartburg – drawing on a number of 19th-century versions, notably those of Ludwig Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Heinrich Heine, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué and Joseph Eichendorff. The anachronistic linking of the two legends was originally made by Ludwig Bechstein, in *Der Sagenschatz und die Sagenkreise des Thüringerlandes* of 1835–8 (see Spencer 1976), and reinforced by a contemporary scholar, C. T. L. Lucas.

Wagner worked out a detailed prose draft (28 June–6 July 1842) at Aussig (now Ústí nad Labem) in the Bohemian mountains, and versified it the following spring. After making a number of preliminary sketches for the musical setting, Wagner made his 'fragmentary complete draft' (so called because it survives only in fragmentary form, albeit now largely reconstructed) and a continuous complete draft, the two evolving side by side between the summer or autumn of 1843 and December 1844. The overture was completed on 11 January 1845 and the full score on 13 April. As late as the continuous complete draft, there is evidence of Wagner's conception in terms of traditional numbers, despite his suppression of such designations in the autograph score (see Abbate 1984).

The uncomprehending response of the audience at the first performance on 19 October 1845 was largely due to the inability of Joseph Tichatschek, the singer of the leading role, to grasp the principle of *melos* towards which Wagner was progressing. His abnormal vocal demands also took their toll on Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient (Venus), his niece Johanna Wagner

(Elisabeth) and Anton Mitterwuizer (Wolfram). However, by the mid-1850s the work had established itself in the repertory of more than 40 German opera houses. An invitation from Emperor Napoleon III to stage *Tannhäuser* in Paris led to one of the most celebrated débâcles in the annals of operatic history. Revenging themselves on the politically unpopular Princess Pauline Metternich, who had negotiated the invitation, the members of the Jockey Club disrupted three performances at the Opéra in March 1861 with aristocratic baying and dog-whistles before Wagner was allowed to withdraw the production.

The *Wagner Werk-Verzeichnis* (1986) identifies four ‘stages’ of the work: (1) the original version as given at the Dresden première in 1845; (2) the edition published by Meser in 1860, incorporating revisions made (notably to the ending of the work) between 1847 and 1852; (3) the version of 1861 (not published), as performed at the Opéra that year; and (4) the version performed under Wagner’s supervision in Vienna in 1875, incorporating revisions made subsequent to 1861 (vocal score 1876, full score 1888). There is, however, no reason to abandon the convenient traditional labels of ‘Dresden version’ (i.e. no.2) and ‘Paris version’ (no.4), provided it is borne in mind that these terms refer not to what was actually heard in Dresden in 1845 or Paris in 1861 but to revised editions of those performances.

The most noticeable feature of the Paris version (the major differences are described below, and the Paris variants are usefully given in the Dover full score) is the stylistic incongruity arising from the grafting of new sections in Wagner’s mature, post-*Trisian* style on to a work of the 1840s. The characterization of Venus was deepened for Paris in a manner prophetic of Kundry. Where her somewhat plain declamation was punctuated for Dresden by bare chords, her vocal line for Paris is sensually pliable, with richly scored accompaniments ([ex.1](#)).

The title role in the Opéra performance in 1861 was taken by Albert Niemann, who went on to sing it at the Metropolitan (1886–9). Tannhäuser was the role in which Lauritz Melchior made his Metropolitan début on 17 February 1926; he went on to sing it 51 times in New York, as well as in other major opera houses (144 times in all).

Act 1.i–ii *Inside the Hörselberg near Eisenach* One of the primary changes for Paris concerned the opening of the opera. The bacchanal in the Venusberg (identified by Wagner and others with the Hörselberg in Thuringia) was extended to provide the ballet demanded by the management and patrons of the Opéra (albeit in the first rather than the traditional second act). In the original version, the stage directions prescribed a rocky grotto with bathing naiads, reclining sirens and dancing nymphs. Venus lay on a couch in a rosy light, with Tannhäuser, half-kneeling, nestling his head in her lap. Urged on by bacchantes, the dancers reached a peak of orgiastic excitement. The Paris version adds the Three Graces and cupids, while satyrs and fauns cause a riotous frenzy by chasing the nymphs. Prompted by the Graces, the cupids quell the riot by raining down love-arrows on all below (*see* [not available online]). The Paris bacchanal is both longer and more frenzied, with the addition of castanets and a third timpani. At the height of the revelry the rising chromatic four-note phrase ubiquitous in *Tristan* is much in evidence. Orchestral textures are richer, more voluptuous, and transitions are negotiated with the assurance of Wagner’s mature style.

In scene ii Tannhäuser starts, as though from a dream. He is surfeited with the sensual pleasures of the Venusberg and longs for the simple joys of earthly life. Urged on by the love goddess, he sings his Hymn to Venus, the first stanza in D^b with harp accompaniment, the second in D with added strings, both ending with a plea to be released. Venus summons a magic grotto and against an accompaniment of ethereal divided strings tempts him to

surrender to ecstasy: ‘Geliebter, komm!’ Tannhäuser seizes his harp again and, to a full orchestral accompaniment, drives his plea to a pitch by singing the third stanza in *E^b*. Venus angrily releases him (‘Zieh hin! Wahnsinniger!’), prophesying that he will in desperation one day return. When Tannhäuser invokes the Virgin Mary, Venus and her domains instantly disappear. In the Paris version, the voluptuous nature of both vocal line and accompaniment is much enhanced, while two additional passages after Venus’s slightly reworded outburst (‘Zieh hin! Wahnbetörter!’) reveal new aspects of her character as she gives vent to first angry mockery and then despair.

1.iii–iv *A valley below the Wartburg* Tannhäuser finds himself in a sunlit valley; sheep bells are heard from the heights and a young shepherd is playing his pipe (an irregularly phrased monody started on the clarinet and continued by an english horn on or behind the stage). His simple song, ‘Frau Holda kam aus dem Berg hervor’, is followed by the chant of the Elder Pilgrims, wafting from the direction of the Wartburg. The second stanza, in which anguished chromaticisms depict the oppression of sin, is a recollection in quadruple time of the corresponding strain of the overture’s main theme. As the pilgrims approach, the shepherd greets them and Tannhäuser makes a pious exclamation. The procession passes and Tannhäuser takes up the guilt-oppressed strain of the pilgrims. As the chant dies away, hunting horns are heard, at first in the distance, then closer to.

The Landgrave and minstrels approach (scene iv) and, recognizing Tannhäuser, greet him warmly (‘Gegrüsst sei uns’). Tannhäuser’s rejection of the past leads to a brief seven-part ensemble, terminated by Wolfram’s cry of ‘Bleib bei Elisabeth’, an invocation of talismanic force. Tannhäuser, stopped in his tracks, can only repeat the name. Wolfram goes on to reveal how in their earlier song-contests, Tannhäuser had won the heart of Elisabeth, who had subsequently retired from their company – ‘Als du in kühnem Sange uns bestrittest’ – followed by the aria proper, ‘War’s Zauber, war es reine Macht?’. The aria, though of conventional cut, has inspired many superlative performances both on stage and on record, often eclipsing those of the singer in the notoriously taxing title role. To Wolfram’s pleas for Tannhäuser to stay are added those of the other minstrels in a brief sextet. Tannhäuser yields and embraces his former friends (to an orchestral accompaniment made slightly more exultant in the Paris version). He leads them in a final ensemble which brings the act to an end resounding with the blasts of hunting horns.

Act 2 The Hall of Song in the Wartburg The act opens with Elisabeth’s joyous greeting to the Hall of Song, abandoned by her during Tannhäuser’s absence, ‘Dich, teure Halle, grüss’ ich wieder’. The aria is conventional in phrase structure, but its introduction effectively uses repeated quaver triplets to portray Elisabeth’s agitation; an oboe and clarinet also sound the ominous motif first heard when Tannhäuser was dismissed by Venus ([ex.1](#)). The aria avoids closure only by an interrupted cadence on to the flat submediant (first inversion), which chord initiates scene ii. Wolfram and Tannhäuser have entered at the back; the former remains there discreetly while the latter throws himself at Elisabeth’s feet. The chords on pizzicato strings depict Elisabeth’s steps (according to Mottl) and are followed by a rushing semiquaver figure illustrative of Tannhäuser’s gesture.

She begs him to rise and, after regaining her composure, recalls his earlier minstrelsy, ‘Der Sänger klugen Weisen’, against an accompaniment of sustained, muted strings, with flowing viola and serene wind punctuations. The vocal line becomes disjointed and the accompaniment sparer as she relives the pain of Tannhäuser’s departure. Tannhäuser,

enraptured, hails the power of love, and the two break into an ecstatic duet in the old-fashioned style, 'Gepriesen sei die Stunde' (often abridged in performance).

Tannhäuser and Wolfram depart, and an abrupt transition introduces scene iii, in which the Landgrave welcomes his niece back to the Hall but finds her unwilling to divulge her thoughts. Trumpets sound from the courtyard, heralding the arrival of the guests (knights, counts, their ladies and retinue) for the song contest (scene iv). March tunes accompany the long procession, eventually with choral parts added, first male, then female, then both together. When everybody has assembled, in a semicircle, the minstrels enter to a more lyrical theme, still in march tempo, but played *sostenuto* on strings alone. In a passage of recitative interspersed with *arioso* the Landgrave extols the art of song and calls on the minstrels to demonstrate it by singing in praise of love; the worthiest contender will receive his prize from Elisabeth herself. Fanfares and acclamation greet his announcement.

The first contender is Wolfram, who uses the image of a fountain to sing of the purity of love, 'Blick, ich umher'. His simple, unadorned line (which Wagner wanted sung in time, not as free recitative) is accompanied first by harp alone, to which are subsequently added the mellow tones of divided violas and cellos. His song is approved by the assembled company, but not by Tannhäuser, who retorts that the fountain of love fills him only with burning desire. This response was varied in the Paris version, because Wagner also wished to omit the following song for Walther, as the singer assigned the role was inadequate. In the original, Dresden version, Walther picked up the image of the fountain, celebrating it as chastity itself, in an aria similar to Wolfram's in its stiff, formal style and accompaniment, 'Den Bronnen, den uns Wolfram nannte'.

Another minstrel, Biterolf, voices the outraged opinions of the knights and ladies when he challenges Tannhäuser to a combat of more than vocal prowess. He is scorned by Tannhäuser for his inexperience as regards the joys of true love. Wolfram attempts to restore calm with another invocation of pure love, but Tannhäuser responds with what is, in effect, the fourth stanza of his Hymn to Venus from the previous act. The first three stanzas had winched up the tonality successively from D \flat to D to E \flat . The E major tonality of the fourth stanza both continues that sequence and contrasts sharply with the E \flat of Wolfram's last utterance.

There is general consternation, and the ladies, with the exception of Elisabeth, leave the hall in shock. The knights round threateningly on Tannhäuser, but Elisabeth steps between them with the cry 'Haltet ein!', a dramatic moment strongly reminiscent of Leonore's 'Töt' erst sein Weib!' in *Fidelio*, as she protects her husband from Pizarro's knife ([ex.2](#)). The knights are taken aback, but Elisabeth urges clemency, first with some forcefulness, then more touchingly as a woman whose heart has been broken, 'Der Unglücksel'ge'. This section, in B minor and marked *Andante*, gives way to an *Adagio* prayer in B major whose simple eloquence moves everybody. Tannhäuser himself, overcome with remorse, sinks to the ground with a cry of grief. In a double chorus the minstrels and knights take up the theme of Elisabeth's prayer, hailing this intervention by an 'angel'. Tannhäuser's interjections of 'Erbarm dich mein!' were originally intended to carry over the flood of the entire ensemble; later Wagner allowed the other voices to be omitted if necessary. Finally Elisabeth and the knights take up a melodic idea which is brought to a climax rather in the Italian style; indeed, it has been demonstrated that the whole of scene iv (that is, from the assembly of the guests to the end of the act) follows the typical pattern of a mid-19th-century Italianate finale (see Abbate, 1984 and 1988).

The Landgrave steps forward to tell Tannhäuser that his only hope of salvation is to join the band of pilgrims preparing to make their way to Rome. A final chorus, once again in B major, adopts this more optimistic tone and, after the younger pilgrims are heard in the distance, the act ends with Tannhäuser's cry 'Nach Rom!', echoed by Elisabeth, minstrels and nobles.

Act 3 Valley below the Wartburg The introduction, depicting Tannhäuser's pilgrimage, is built from themes already associated with the pilgrims and with Elisabeth's plea for Tannhäuser, to which is added a new, chromatically winding idea soon to form the basis of Tannhäuser's Narration. As the curtain rises, Elisabeth is praying in front of a statue of the Virgin. Both she and Wolfram, who has been observing her from a discreet distance, are alerted by the return of the pilgrims from Rome. Their chorus moves through a stanza of tortured chromaticism (a vulnerable passage in performance) to an exultant climax, after which it recedes again into the distance.

Elisabeth, seeing that Tannhäuser is not among the pilgrims, falls to her knees and sings her Prayer, 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau' (in effect another set-piece aria). The use once again of [ex.1](#), as she sings of 'foolish longing', invests this phrase with something of the force of a motif of reminiscence. Her prayer ended, Elisabeth notices Wolfram but indicates that he should not speak to her. She leaves; Wolfram remains for scene ii. After an introductory section of arioso, he sings his celebrated Hymn to the Evening Star, 'O du, mein holder Abendstern', a number in the old-fashioned style whose conventionality of phrasing and harmony has done nothing to diminish its evergreen popularity.

The pinched tone of stopped horns and a five-note chromatic phrase in the strings ([ex.3](#)) herald the third scene and the reappearance of Tannhäuser; Wolfram initially fails to recognize him. On being told that he has returned from Rome impenitent and unshriven, Wolfram demands to hear the full story. Tannhäuser's Narration, 'Inbrunst im Herzen', is notable on several counts. First, it is the most advanced piece of writing in the opera, in terms of musico-poetic synthesis: that is, the vocal line reflects the natural accentuations of the verse and even changes in character as the narrator's emotional state changes. Second, its formal structure is dictated entirely by the narrative. Third, it is a clear example of the composer's growing recognition of the orchestra's potential for expressive, illustrative purposes. The Narration begins with two stanzas making prominent use of the chromatic winding theme from the act's introduction. A whirr of strings lifts the music into D \flat as Tannhäuser tells how he arrived in Rome, and a celestial wind chorus sounds the 'Dresden Amen'. He describes how he saw the Pope, and the whirring string figure sweeps on into D and E \flat major, the frenzied modulations and formal dissolution aptly reflecting Tannhäuser's state of mind. The climax is reached as he repeats the Pope's words of condemnation: if he has tasted the hellish delights of the Venusberg, he can no more be forgiven than the Pope's staff can sprout green leaves. At these words, [ex.3](#) returns, the pinched tone of the stopped horns transmuted into the Pope's condemnation.

To Wolfram's horror, Tannhäuser declares his intention of returning to the Venusberg. The orchestral frenzy increases and Venus herself appears in a bright, rosy light, reclining on her couch. (In the original 1845 version Venus did not appear at the end, the Venusberg being suggested by a red glow in the distance; similarly, Elisabeth's death was announced only by bells tolling from the Wartburg. These revisions date from spring 1847.) A struggle ensues for Tannhäuser's soul, resolved by another emphatic enunciation of Elisabeth's name by Wolfram. An offstage chorus announces that Elisabeth has died. But her intercession has redeemed Tannhäuser and Venus disappears, vanquished. Elisabeth's bier is carried on, and

Tannhäuser, calling on the saint to intercede for him, falls lifeless to the ground. The final strains of the Pilgrims' Chorus tell of a miracle: the Pope's staff has burst into leaf. Tannhäuser's soul is saved.

Tannhäuser, with its frequently abrupt contrasts and rudimentary motivic integration, falls well short of the mature Wagnerian music drama. Yet it marks a considerable advance over *Der fliegende Holländer* in the deployment of the orchestra, continues Wagner's preoccupation with the dramatic conception or 'poetic intent', and shows some awareness of what he later referred to as 'the beautiful, convincing necessity of transition'.

For further illustration see [Niemann, Albert](#); and [not available online]

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