

## Background to the composition of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

Richard Wagner was 'out of money', as usual. On 30 October 1861 he writes to his publisher, offering a new opera, which will be easier than *Tristan and Isolde*:

I have a desire to make a start upon some easier work, which will be less exhausting and therefore quicker to complete. The opera is called *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and the main hero is the jovially poetic "Hans Sachs." The subject is exceptionally rich in good-natured drollery, and I pride myself that with this original plan, which is entirely my own invention, I have hit upon something quite unexpected and singular. The style of the piece, both in the poem and the music, shall be thoroughly light and popular, and a guarantee of its rapid diffusion to all the other theatres is the fact that on this occasion I need neither a so-called leading tenor nor a great tragic soprano.

This proposal was quickly rejected. Wagner had completed *Tristan und Isolde* in August 1859 and was having a series of problems in mounting a premiere. His first effort, therefore, was to get *Tristan und Isolde* produced; to his great joy, the manager of the Vienna opera accepted the score.

The rehearsals began in the fall, but the tenor, Alois Ander, was taken sick, and the whole winter was lost. When the work was resumed, it dragged along at a snail's pace, and finally, after fifty-four rehearsals, the drama was abandoned as impossible. Wagner travelled in Germany and even into Russia, on a concert tour, where he raised substantial funds. He was in Moscow when he learned that the rehearsals of *Tristan und Isolde* had been abandoned in Vienna.

It should be realized that in 1863, while he was still giving these concerts, he was fifty years old, and that, with a deep feeling within him that he had created immortal works, he was stared at by people wherever he went as a freak and a madman, and was caricatured and ridiculed by almost the whole press of Europe. And all this because he had dared to say that an opera was a 'poetic drama,' and should be so written, so performed, and so received by the public.

Richard Wagner had published his theories in a book called Opera and Drama in 1850. Eduard Hanslick, the leading music critic of the day and Wagner's nemesis, had published his own ideas in The Beautiful in Music in 1854, which were diametrically opposed to Wagner but generally accepted by the music loving public of the day.

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However, in these years of hardship, sorrow, and discouragement, Wagner wrote the text of his most humorous work. He took up and completed the book of *Die Meistersinger*, of which he had made a sketch in 1845. He completed the libretto in Paris in January 1862 and it was published, or rather printed for circulation among his friends, in 1862. The copyright of the drama was sold to Messrs. Schott, of Mainz, and Wagner went to Biebrich, a little town opposite Mainz, to compose the music.

He subsequently continued his labors at Penzing, near Vienna. It was at this time that Wagner's affairs sank into such a state that he was overwhelmed. He decided to go to Russia and remain there the rest of his life. But first he had to finish the score of *Die Meistersinger*. So he wrote to his old friend, Mme. Wille, at Zurich, on March 23, 1864, and asked her to receive him for a short time. Frau Wille agreed and he spent a month at her house. She realized that all Wagner's reminiscings would have some historical importance, so she made notes from which she afterward published a valuable article. Here is an extract.

'What is the use of talking about the future, when my manuscripts are locked up in a drawer? Who can produce the art-work that I, only I, helped by good daemons, can bring into being, that the entire world may know so it is, so has the master conceived and willed his work?' He walked agitatedly up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped in front of me and said, 'I am differently organized; I have excitable nerves; I must have beauty, brilliancy, light! The world ought to give me what I need. I cannot live in a wretched organist's post like your Meister Bach. Is it an unheard-of demand if I hold that the little luxury I like is my due? I, who am procuring enjoyment to the world and to thousands?'

In this state of mind he couldn't sleep. He worked unceasingly at the score of *Die Meistersinger* and, according to Mme. Wille's own account, "with a perfect satisfaction as to its greatness."

Then, at last, a virtual miracle happened so that his scores would sound and the world would learn the true might of Richard Wagner.

A young prince, who had admired Wagner's works for several years, became King Ludwig II of Bavaria after the death of his father. At fifteen he had heard *Lohengrin*, and, like all whose operatic experience began with Wagner, he had become an ardent Wagnerite. He had watched his idol's career of misfortune in helpless pity. One of his first acts was to send a messenger to bid Wagner come to his capital and complete the majestic labors of his life in peace.

On May 4, 1864 Wagner wrote to Frau Wille, "He wants me to be with him always, to work, to rest, to produce my works; he will give me everything I need; I am to finish my *Nibelungen* and he will have them performed as I wish."

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