

# Synopsis

## Act I

SCENE 1 The Venusberg

SCENE 2 A valley near the Wartburg

## Act II

Hall of the minstrels in the Wartburg

## Act III

A valley near the Wartburg

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## Act I

The minstrel Tannhäuser, having spent a year in the magical underground realm of Venus, the goddess of love, longs to return to the human world. He pays tribute to Venus in a song but ends by asking her to let him go. Surprised, Venus promises him even greater pleasures, but when he insists and repeats his pleas, she furiously dismisses him and curses his desire for salvation. Tannhäuser cries out that his hope rests with the Virgin Mary—and suddenly finds himself transported to a valley near the castle of the Wartburg.

A procession of pilgrims passes on the way to Rome. Tannhäuser is deeply moved and praises the wonders of God, as horns announce the arrival of a hunting party. It is Landgraf Hermann with his knights. Recognizing Tannhäuser as their long-lost friend, they beg him to return to the castle with them, but Tannhäuser is reluctant. Wolfram, one of the knights, reminds him that his singing once won him the love of Elisabeth, the Landgraf's niece. On hearing her name, Tannhäuser understands what he must do and joins his companions.

## Act II

Elisabeth joyfully greets the Wartburg's Hall of Song, which she hasn't set foot in since Tannhäuser left. He is now led in by Wolfram. Elisabeth, at first shy and confused, tells Tannhäuser how she has suffered in his absence, but then joins him in praise of love.

Landgraf Hermann is delighted to find his niece in the Hall of Song, and together they welcome their guests who have come for a song contest. The Landgraf declares that it is about "love" and promises the victor to receive whatever he asks from the hand of Elisabeth. Wolfram opens the contest with a heartfelt

tribute to idealized love. Tannhäuser, his thoughts still on Venus, replies with a hymn to worldly pleasures. Other singers counter his increasingly passionate declarations until Tannhäuser breaks out into his prize song to Venus, to the horror of the guests. As the men are about to draw their swords, Elisabeth intervenes herself between the parties to protect Tannhäuser and begs the knights for mercy. The Landgraf pronounces his judgment: Tannhäuser will be forgiven if he joins the pilgrims on their way to Rome to do penance. Tannhäuser rushes from the hall.

### **Act III**

Several months later, Wolfram comes across Elisabeth praying at a shrine in the valley. A band of pilgrims, back from Rome, passes by, but Tannhäuser is not among them. Broken with grief, Elisabeth prays to the Virgin Mary to receive her soul into heaven. Wolfram gazes after her and asks the evening star to guide her way. Night falls, and a solitary pilgrim approaches. It is Tannhäuser, ragged and weary. He tells Wolfram of his devout penitence on the way to Rome—of his joy at seeing so many others pardoned, and of his despair when the Pope proclaimed that he could no more be forgiven for his sins than the papal staff bear green leaves again. Left without hope, all he wants now is to return to Venus. He summons her and she appears, just as Wolfram once again brings Tannhäuser to his senses by invoking Elisabeth's name. At this moment, Elisabeth's funeral procession comes winding down the valley. With a cry, Venus disappears. Tannhäuser implores Elisabeth to pray for him in heaven and collapses dead. As dawn breaks, another group of pilgrims arrives, telling of a miracle: the Pope's staff, which they bear with them, has blossomed.

*Richard Wagner*

# Tannhäuser

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*Premiere: Court Opera, Dresden, 1845 (original version);  
Opéra, Paris, 1861 (revised version)*

After the premiere of *Der Fliegende Holländer* in 1843, Wagner turned for inspiration to German medieval and Renaissance literature, a realm that would eventually provide the sources for all of his remaining works. (His final opera, *Parsifal*, in fact is based on a romance by the medieval poet Wolfram von Eschenbach, who appears as a major character in *Tannhäuser*.) History, legend, and invention are combined in *Tannhäuser*—as in all of Wagner’s operas—to create a unique and powerful drama. The historical title character was a 13th-century Minnesänger, the German equivalent of a troubadour or minstrel, who wrote erotic love poetry but also a notable poem of penance. The legend that grew around him provides the framework of the opera’s story. Wagner changed little but allows the hero to die and be redeemed at the end. He also added the character of the saintly Elisabeth, the object of Tannhäuser’s true affection, as a mirror image of Venus. She is based on the historical Saint Elisabeth of Hungary, wife of Louis IV, Landgraf of Thuringia. Wagner revised the score several times, most importantly when he added the ballet after the overture and greatly expanded the following first scene for the 1861 Paris premiere (which, for political reasons, ended in one of the legendary fiascos in theater history). The opera’s rarely used full title is *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* (“Tannhäuser and the Song Contest on Wartburg Castle”).

### *The Creator*

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was the complex, controversial creator of music-drama masterpieces that stand at the center of today’s operatic repertory. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he was an artistic revolutionary who reimagined every supposition about music and theater. Wagner insisted that words and music were equals in his works. This approach led to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total work of art,” combining music, poetry, architecture, painting, and other disciplines, a notion that has had an impact on creative fields far beyond opera.

### *The Setting*

*Tannhäuser* takes place in and around Wartburg Castle, near the town of Eisenach in central Germany, and in the mythical grotto of Venus, the goddess of love. Wartburg was the setting of a—possibly legendary—13th-century song contest as well as the home of Saint Elisabeth of Hungary (1207–1231). Three hundred years later it would become associated with Martin Luther, who translated the New Testament from Greek into German there. The pagan–Christian dichotomy expressed in the twofold setting is central to the opera’s dramatic core.

## *The Music*

Much of the score of *Tannhäuser* belongs to the tradition of Romantic opera that Wagner developed and transcended over subsequent decades in his mature music dramas. Together with *Lohengrin* (1850), it forms the pathway to a new operatic aesthetic that would be fully expressed for the first time in *Das Rheingold* (completed in 1854 but not performed until 1869), the initial chapter of the *Ring* cycle. In *Tannhäuser*, Wagner's masterful command of the orchestra is immediately apparent in the famous overture and the exciting ballet music that follows—a continuous 20-minute flood of sound that perfectly captures in instrumental terms the conflict of body and spirit that is the central issue of the opera. The full range of dramatic vocalism is expressed in solos ranging from the soprano's rousing salute to the Hall of Song, "Dich, teure Halle," to her ardent prayer in Act III and, in an unforgettable passage of delicate beauty, the baritone's invocation to the evening star, "O, du mein holder Abendstern." The score evokes the art of the medieval bards with *Tannhäuser*'s harp-accompanied odes to Venus in Act I and in the scene of the song contest in Act II. The title character's dramatic Rome Narrative in Act III abandons conventional melodic phrases in favor of a speech-based structure that directly points towards Wagner's later works and remains striking in its modernity.

## *Met History*

*Tannhäuser* was first seen at the Met in 1884, as the opening night production of the company's second season. The performance also marked the first time an opera was performed in German at the Met (Wagner's *Lohengrin* had been given in Italian the previous season). Leopold Damrosch conducted the original Dresden version. In 1889 the Met presented the U.S. premiere of the Paris version, conducted by Anton Seidl, who had worked with Wagner at the inaugural Bayreuth Festival in 1876. Some of the legendary singers to appear in early stagings through the 1940s include Nellie Melba, Emma Eames, Johanna Gadski, Emmy Destinn, Geraldine Farrar, Maria Jeritza, Kirsten Flagstad, Helen Traubel, and Astrid Varnay (Elisabeth), Olive Fremstad (Venus and a few performances as Elisabeth), Leo Slezak (*Tannhäuser*), Lawrence Tibbett (Wolfram), and, most notably, Lauritz Melchior, who sang 70 performances of the title role between 1926 and 1948. A new production in 1953, directed by Herbert Graf and conducted by George Szell, featured Ramón Vinay, Margaret Harshaw, George London, and Varnay as Venus. The 1960 run saw the company debuts of conductor Georg Solti and Hermann Prey as Wolfram, and in 1966 Birgit Nilsson sang both Elisabeth and Venus in four performances. James Levine led the premiere of the current Otto Schenk production in 1977, with James McCracken, Leonie Rysanek, Bernd Weikl (in his Met debut), Grace Bumbry, and Kathleen Battle (in her Met debut as the Shepherd). Other notable appearances in this production have included Jess Thomas, Richard Cassilly, and Peter Seiffert in the title role, Eva Marton, Jessye Norman, and Deborah Voigt as Elisabeth, Tatiana Troyanos as Venus, and Håkan Hagegård, Bryn Terfel, and Thomas Hampson as Wolfram.

## Program Note

Wagner never completely came to terms with *Tannhäuser*. On the evening of January 22, 1883, less than a month before his death, he ended a conversation with his wife Cosima by playing the Shepherd's Song and Pilgrims' Chorus on the piano. In her diary entry for that day, Cosima quotes her husband lamenting that, "he still owed the world a *Tannhäuser*."

Even if Wagner was merely referring to a production suitable for Bayreuth (where the opera would be posthumously introduced under Cosima's direction in 1891), he remained anxious long after *Tannhäuser's* premiere in 1845 about how to improve what he had created. This anxiety bordered on obsession: *Tannhäuser* stands alone among the canonical Wagner operas as a continual "work-in-progress" over which the composer restlessly fretted, rethinking its premises on the occasion of each new production and periodically subjecting it to revision.

The so-called Dresden and Paris versions—named, respectively, after the world premiere in 1845 and the dramatic overhaul for the Paris Opéra in 1861—have become convenient tags for a rather more extensive and ongoing revision process. This process certainly did not end following the Paris production, which proved to be one of the spectacular fiascos of opera history: the audience's riotous misbehavior led to an abrupt withdrawal of the opera after only three performances. It's also remarkable that, over the years, the voluble Wagner published more advice regarding specific performance instructions for *Tannhäuser* than for the *Ring* or his other stage works.

Why would Wagner expend so much effort on a creation that is still, in its essence, a "Romantic opera"? This seems especially strange since we're used to imagining the composer's early works as way stations on the path toward his real goal of the mature music dramas.

Wagner himself helped foster this biased view through the constant retrospective spin he put on his achievements. Yet musically and dramatically, *Tannhäuser* represents the critical link between the conventional opera world and the radical new artistic possibilities he was beginning to imagine for the medium. This is even more the case with the Paris version, for which he flavo ed Venus's scenes with the revolutionary harmonic language and erotically languishing colors of the recently composed *Tristan und Isolde*. If, as Wagner put it, he took "a gigantic step forward in the direction of my ideal" in *Tannhäuser*, both the old and the new coexist in this opera, generating a fascinating tension—just as the polarized realms of erotic and spiritual love that are conjured by strikingly contrasting sound worlds to drive the drama.

*Tannhäuser's* traditional set pieces—Elisabeth's two arias, Wolfram's popular hymn, the entrance march of the guests, the thrilling ensemble finales to the first two acts—show how thoroughly Wagner had mastered the reigning "blockbuster" style of opera he would come to vehemently reject, while the hero's confrontations with Venus in the first act are a microcosm of the old–new dynamic. *Tannhäuser's* ode, which conveys his desire to return to the "normal"

world, could hardly sound more conventional, even banal, yet from Venus it elicits wildly amorphous responses. This is a score that also encompasses one of Wagner's most frightening depictions of psychological breakdown in the title hero's soul-baring Rome Narrative in the final act

One reason for the special position *Tannhäuser* held among Wagner's works during his lifetime is the circulation it gained following the lukewarm reception of the 1845 Dresden premiere. The first Wagner opera to be produced in the United States, *Tannhäuser* for decades embodied the countercultural challenges of the fearsome specter of "Wagnerism": a guilty pleasure that allowed audiences to indulge in the decadence of the Venusberg while secure in the knowledge of the hero's ultimate redemption.

Another explanation for the opera's significance involves the chronology of its creation. *Tannhäuser* is the inaugural opera Wagner wrote—music and libretto, as was already his custom—after being appointed assistant Kapellmeister at the King of Saxony's court in Dresden in early 1843. *Rienzi*, Wagner's first work modeled after the state-of-the-art grand opera being produced in Paris, had elevated his standing with its triumphant premiere at the Dresden Court Opera in 1842, a few months before his 30th birthday. In the shorter *Der Fliegende Holländer*, unveiled at Dresden in January 1843, Wagner had already shown he was no longer content to pursue *Rienzi's* relatively conventional path. And by virtue of his new job he now had regular access to a first-rate orchestra with which to experiment with unusual sonorities. It's no accident that *Tannhäuser* marks the true emergence of Wagner as an orchestral wizard. Several of the score's most effective moments are the instrumental landscapes Wagner creates to chart the progress of his hero—from the intoxicating, oversaturated allure of the Venusberg to the pastoral balm of the great transformation in the first act to the tormented inner pilgrimage that is the crux of the final act.

In creating the opera's story, Wagner, in typical fashion, enhanced his inspiration by boldly combining strands from entirely different and even unrelated sources. The predicament the protagonist faces when we first encounter *Tannhäuser*—and the primary motivation for the opera's events—derives from a didactic late-medieval ballad. The ballad describes a kind of failed pilgrim's progress that ends with the miraculous story of the Pope's "dry and dead staff" sprouting leaves—though too late, for in this version of the story *Tannhäuser* has already returned to the realm of Venus in his despair. Wagner fused this cautionary tale with an earlier, entirely separate event involving a contest of medieval minstrels (known in German as *Minnesänger*, those who sing about love)—the basis for his opera's second act.

The lore of this legendary contest, said to have taken place around 1206 at the court of Count Hermann I at the Wartburg Castle in Thuringia, in the heart of Germany, had resurfaced along with the *Tannhäuser* ballad as part of the Romantic rediscovery of the Middle Ages, inspiring such authors as E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose *Battle of the Bards* (1818) Wagner knew. Both strands are

included in the opera's full title: "Tannhäuser and the Song Contest on Wartburg Castle." The order of the items hints at Wagner's decision to subordinate the song contest to the story of Tannhäuser's quest for redemption, which provides the frame for it.

Yet another source, only vaguely alluded to by Wagner, was the body of tales surrounding the figure of Saint Elisabeth (1207–1231). She was a Hungarian princess who arrived at the Wartburg court through marriage and, after she was widowed, devoted herself to a life of extreme poverty along the lines of the recent Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Elisabeth attracted several 19th-century composers (Franz Liszt devoted an entire oratorio to her), and Wagner once again freely mingles references to her cult with his fictional heroine.

The resulting character is the most complex in the entire opera: despite her limited appearances, Elisabeth undergoes a process of transformation that arguably outstrips even that of Tannhäuser. Far more than a simple icon of "pure" love, she embodies contradictions of her own that mirror the conflicts tormenting the hero. She is initially presented as almost feverish with desire for her beloved and for the art he brings with him—so different from the routine fare at the Wartburg—and she vigorously defends Tannhäuser after his catastrophic performance in the contest. By the scene of her great prayer in the third act, the now-saintly Elisabeth has been portrayed with charisma sufficient to act as a persuasively dramatic counterweight to Venus.

As it does with elements of old-fashioned opera and a nascent sense of the music drama to come, *Tannhäuser* blends the historical with the mythic in a highly curious way. In this as well, Wagner sensed the opera's significance in pointing him toward the path he should take. His characters amalgamate traits from actual historical figures such as Saint Elisabeth, the Thuringian Landgraf Hermann I, and the Minnesänger, even including the epic poet Wolfram von Eschenbach, whose *Parzival* would serve as the source for Wagner's final opera. Tannhäuser, incidentally, is always addressed as "Heinrich," thus implying his identification with the fictional poet Heinrich von Ofterdingen, who stirs up the wrath of his fellow Minnesänger in the legend of the song contest.

Finally, the Wartburg itself acquires the status of a character. For his German audiences in particular, Wagner knew that the mere name of the castle came loaded with centuries of powerful historical associations for national identity: along with the tradition of the Minnesänger and their song contest, the Wartburg was the site where Martin Luther once took refuge to work on his translation of the Bible (and where legend holds he threw a pot of ink in anger when the devil tried to tempt him).

*Tannhäuser* reimagines these historical and quasi-historical starting points to distill a timelessly valid myth of humanity's struggle to integrate competing drives—a myth certainly of no less relevance today, no matter how differently we label these drives.

—Thomas May