

Three Excerpts from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867)

RICHARD WAGNER

Born May 22, 1813, in Leipzig.

Died Feb. 13, 1883, in Venice.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg is an anomaly among Richard Wagner's mature works. It is the only comedy, the only story fixed in a particular time and place (16th-century Nuremberg), and the only score in which one finds such distinct song and dance numbers. At the same time it is still Wagner: who else could deliver a five-hour aesthetic and nationalistic manifesto of such grandiose lyricism? The opera is based on the real-life tradition of guilds of "Mastersingers," amateur poets and musicians who were usually master craftsmen in their own professions. The Mastersingers prized above all else a song that was well constructed according to their own strict guidelines; for this libretto, Wagner paints them as the guardians of German art. The story centers around a song contest, for which the prize is the right to marry a lovely young maiden named Eva. Her suitor Walther vows to compete, though he is at first overwhelmed by all the rules and constraints of the Mastersingers' style. Eventually, despite his unorthodoxy, Walther does win the contest and the approval of the Mastersingers, and he is rewarded with both his betrothal and entrance to the guild.

This set of orchestral excerpts reveals the full range of the opera's comedy as well as its pathos. The Prelude to Act III is one of the most subdued passages, introducing a pre-dawn morning that follows a riot at the conclusion of Act II. The strings spin out a contrapuntal treatment of a melancholy G minor melody, followed by a chorale of brass and bassoons in a more optimistic G Major; the rest of the Prelude develops further these two thematic areas. The "Dance of the Apprentices" is a rare Wagnerian waltz, occurring in Act III,

Scene 5 as the various guilds arrive for the feast and competition. This dance music has a rustic, peasant character, which gives way to the lofty entrance music of the Mastersingers. In this concert suite, the initial instance of the Mastersingers material, the Act I Prelude, is substituted for the Act III reprise. The opening fanfare, heard here in a heroic C Major setting, is used throughout the opera as a *leitmotiv* for the Mastersingers. The fugal treatment of material in the second half of the overture could be seen as a gentle ribbing of the rigorous formalism of the Mastersingers, but the irony is that Wagner manages to be quite free and fluid in that archaic, contrapuntal style. Perhaps, like his hero Walther, Wagner wants to demonstrate that he can beat the others at their own game.

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67 (1808)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 1770 in Bonn.

Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna.

Forget everything you know about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Release your notions of the Morse code-inspired "V-for-Victory" label for the opening theme, or the apocryphal "fate knocking on the door" explanation for the initial rhythmic figure. Cleanse yourself of the disco monstrosities, answering machine antics, cartoon cameos and television commercials. Imagine that your slate is as clean as those lucky (if overtaxed) few who attended a four-hour concert on Dec. 22, 1808, in Vienna, featuring the world premiere performances of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Sixth Symphony, Fourth Piano Concerto (with the composer as soloist), Choral Fantasy and more. Freed from centuries of baggage, the C minor Symphony is simply a near-perfect expression of that alchemical synergy that occurred at the crossroads of Classical and Romantic styles, at the apotheosis of what we now call Beethoven's middle period.