

About the Music



Richard Wagner (1813-83)

Overture, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

The German composer, Richard Wagner, was one of the most influential figures of the 19th century. Renowned not only for his music, but also his revolutionary ideas, he transformed European culture. His operas are notoriously ambitious in scale and include the monumental cycle, *The Ring of the Nibelung* (1852-1874). As a Romantic, steeped in Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy, Wagner wrote mainly tragic works exploring the dark side of human nature and experience. The notable exception of his mature years was his comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* or *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, completed in 1867 and first performed in Munich, a year later.

The work was a deliberate flight from the suicidal intensity of the composer's ground-breaking opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1859). Gone are the tortured lovers and wild chromatic harmonies, instead light-heartedness and white-note stability predominate. The plot of *Die Meistersinger* revolves around a genuine historical figure; the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs (1494-1576). In the opera, Sachs is a one of the Guild of Mastersingers; a group formed to uphold the standards of song composition. Another member of the Guild, Pogner, offers his daughter Eva in marriage to the winner of a song competition. A young knight, Walther, who is in love with Eva, enters the contest unaware of its complex rules. Despite the opposition of the pedantic and odious Beckmesser (who also aspires to marry Eva), Walther, aided by Sachs, wins the contest with his Prize Song. Wagner's message, aimed at his many hostile critics, especially the arch-conservative Hanslick, was that good music springs from spontaneous vitality and should not be constrained by rigid tradition and pettiness.

While *Die Meistersinger* is sometimes criticised for its German nationalist sentiments, it includes some of Wagner's most lyrical and accessible music. Its Overture (or Prelude) begins with the stalwart C major melody associated with the Mastersingers, and it is followed by several of the opera's principal themes, including the Prize Song. After a passage of dazzling counterpoint, combining many of the main motifs, a jubilant march strides in, uniting everyone through the visionary power of music. Thus we are permitted a glimpse of the opera's final rousing scene which, in a complete performance, reaches its conclusion almost six hours later.