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 0521448956 - Richard Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg
 John Warrack
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I *The sources and genesis of the text*

Wagner has described in *Mein Leben* how the first idea for *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* came to him. Taking the cure at Marienbad in 1845, he tried to obey doctors' orders by abandoning all attempts at creative work and giving himself up to reading. The books he tells us he had with him were editions of Wolfram von Eschenbach and of the *Lohengrin* epic; and he describes how, so as to distract his mind from a full-scale re-engagement with his dormant *Lohengrin* ideas, he thought of writing a light opera.

From a few remarks in Gervinus' *History of German Literature*, I had formed a particularly vivid picture of Hans Sachs and the mastersingers of Nuremberg. I was especially intrigued by the institution of the marker and his function in rating master-songs. Without as yet knowing anything more about Hans Sachs and his poetic contemporaries, I conceived during a walk a comic scene in which the popular artisan-poet, by hammering upon his cobbler's last, gives the marker, who is obliged by circumstances to sing in his presence, his come-uppance for previous pedantic misdeeds during official singing contests, by inflicting upon him a lesson of his own. To me the force of the whole scene was concentrated in two points: on the one hand the marker with his slate covered with chalk marks and on the other Sachs with the shoes aloft, completed as a result of his hammering the marks in, whereby both indicate that the singing has been a failure. To this picture I now added a narrow, twisting Nuremberg alley, with neighbours, uproar and a street-fight – and suddenly my whole mastersingers comedy stood before me so vividly that, on the grounds that it was an especially merry subject, I felt justified in putting it on paper despite the doctor's instructions.¹

As always with Wagner, in tracing the evolution of his ideas it is necessary to read between the lines, and not always to take the lines themselves at face value. But there seems no reason to doubt the truth of the incident described earlier in *Mein Leben* (though perhaps with advantages), when his part in the mockery of a

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certain Lauermann in Nuremberg led to a riot. Lauermann was a carpenter with singing ambitions, and, though suspicious of this tenor-voiced youth, was persuaded that Wagner was the great and influential bass Luigi Lablache. The tale includes an account of repeated mockery and humiliation of Lauermann, which even the half-drunk Wagner seems to have found too much to stomach, though the atmosphere of it survives into the treatment of Beckmesser. But the outcome was a moment of magic that haunted Wagner's imagination and returned to him to make the unforgettable end to Act II of the opera.

Out of this situation evolved an uproar, which through the shouting and clamour and an inexplicable growth in the number of participants in the struggle soon assumed a truly demoniacal character. It looked to me as if the whole town would break out into a riot, and I really thought myself to be once again involuntarily witnessing a revolution of which no-one had the slightest idea what it was all about. Then suddenly I heard a heavy thump, and as if by magic the whole crowd dispersed in every direction . . . One of the regular patrons . . . had felled one of the noisiest rioters . . . and it was the effect of this which scattered everybody so suddenly. Scarcely a minute after the fiercest tumult had been raging among hundreds of people, I was able to stroll arm-in-arm with my brother-in-law through the lonely moonlit streets, laughing and joking.²

The other incident he describes, that of the rival 'markers', seems to have come, as he says, entirely from his imagination.

But it was more than 'a few remarks' of Gervinus which contributed to the detail and atmosphere of the first prose sketch (Text I), which Wagner wrote in Marienbad. Georg Gottfried Gervinus's *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (Leipzig, 1850–4) (a book which, in this edition, Wagner had in his Dresden library) includes, as well as material on the epic subjects that were absorbing him, two long chapters on Mastersong and on Hans Sachs. That on Sachs deals chiefly with his work, especially his religious attitudes, and his relations with Luther's energetic and influential supporter Ulrich von Hutten and with Luther himself. In his *Handbuch der Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (Leipzig, 3rd edn, 1844), another book which Wagner owned, Gervinus also makes a substantial contrast between Sachs and Hutten, the 'schlichte Bürgersmann gegen den gebildeten Rittersmann' ('the simple burgher contrasted with the cultured aristocrat'); and he sets out at some length Sachs's Lutheran stance. Text I retains a reference to them when Sachs advises the young man who has failed in his attempt at a

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Mastersong to go back and study 'Hutten and the Wittemberger'; and there is also a mention of Sachs's most famous poem on Luther, *Die Wittembergisch Nachtigall*, the opening lines of which, hailing the Reformation, were to make the great salutation to Sachs himself in the final text of the *Festwiese* scene. Among Sachs's personal characteristics, we learn from Gervinus chiefly of an increasing irony in his writing as he grew older, coupled with a certain melancholy. He is referred to in the section on Mastersong as 'sitting grey and white like a dove, with a full beard, reading in a beautiful gold-bound book', not answering those who come to greet him but acknowledging their presence with an inclination of the head (this is closely matched in the stage directions for the opening of Act III of the opera). Text I takes up the irony as Sachs's prime characteristic rather than his nature as a dreamer (well-attested in accounts of him), which is also mentioned: only later was Wagner to understand the significance of dreams and dreaming to the work. Gervinus also describes how travelling singers found the courts no longer holding them in respect or giving them board and lodging; and how a healthy new rivalry arose, with artistic exchanges and contests and with prizes offered not by a society or school but by an individual. He declares the highest art to be the invention of a new *Ton*: the same text could be used to a different *Ton*, which must not come closer to that of another Master by more than four syllables. If successful, it would be recognised and the 'father' would baptise it with a name in the presence of 'godfathers'. There are other suggestions, such as the names of some Masters – Hans Folz and Kunz Zorn – and the devotion of the apprentices to their masters, which were to bear fruit at different stages of the growth of the text of the opera.³

The First Draft (Text I) is dated 'Marienbad, 6 July 1845', and includes a rough drawing of the layout of Act II, with a curving street separating the houses of Sachs and the Guildmaster. It runs to something over four thousand words, in the old German *Schrift* which Wagner used until 1848.

In Act I, a young man approaches a young girl from a wealthy bourgeois family (neither is named) in St Sebaldus's Church. The son of an impoverished knight, he has come to Nuremberg to seek membership of the Mastersingers, and the two have promptly fallen in love. The Master also wants to marry the girl, whose father has decreed that she shall only be given to the Master who wins a public singing contest decided by the people. The housekeeper Magdalene calls the girl away, though not before she has made her own amorous exchanges with the apprentice

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David. The Masters assemble as the apprentices prepare the chapel. They do not really trust Sachs, and wonder whether he means well by the Guild. The Marker hopes to win the girl, and the Guildmaster wishes him well, insisting, in the face of the Marker's fears about the people's judgement, that the girl must have a say. Sachs arrives, and the roll is called. The Guildmaster announces his plan for the people to have first vote for once, so as to increase the popular standing of the art, then the Masters, and his daughter the casting vote if they disagree. The young man sings, believing that he is before a group of Minnesingers. Sachs reads out the rules with some irony, to the Masters' disquiet; he also upsets the young man with his sharpness. The young man surprises them by offering Siegfried and Grimmhilde as his subject, then (to further shock) Parzifal, in Wolfram's *Ton*. His song in praise of poetry is too heavily marked before he has even finished. Sachs is sympathetic, and, laughing at the Mastersingers, challenges the Marker to do better. The Marker refuses, claiming that Sachs would not do well, either, were he not held in high esteem, and complaining about the non-delivery of a new pair of shoes for the competition. The meeting breaks up in confusion, with the young man defeated.

In Act II, it is evening and Magdalene returns to her house, passing David on her way. The Guildmaster commends the Marker to his daughter, who is upset to hear of the young man's failure. Magdalene tells her that the Marker wants her to remain at her window so that he may woo her with his trial song as a serenade. Sachs sends David to bed and settles down; he recalls the young man, and falls into a tender, visionary mood. The young man enters, planning to elope with the girl; Sachs, overhearing, feels he must prevent this. The girl asks Magdalene to take her place at the window and to indicate her dislike of the song. The girl returns in Magdalene's clothes, but she and the young man recognise Sachs in the light of his shop: she warns that her father has often told her Sachs is not to be trusted. They are about to go when they hear the nightwatchman's horn, and are obliged to hide. The Marker appears and Sachs, having overheard everything, takes up his place at his last and, when the Marker begins to sing, joins in with a ribald song. He explains to the angry Marker that he must finish his shoes. The Marker agrees to let Sachs mark his song with blows on the last; they are thereby finished, while the Marker manages also to finish his song (to disapproving headshakes from the figure in the window). David misunderstands the situation, and his attack on the Marker precipitates 'general disarray, questions and raging'. Sachs pushes the girl back into her house and pulls the young man into his shop. All is suddenly quiet; the nightwatchman returns to an empty street.

In Act III, Sachs is discovered neglecting his work and surrounded by his books. He reflects on the decline of poetry and wonders if he, a cobbler, is the only man to comprehend the great heritage of German art. Magdalene calls from outside for David, who is told to get on with his work. He interrupts Sachs's musings by singing his cobbler's song; Sachs is at first annoyed, but later joins in. The young man appears, and is reproached by Sachs for trying to elope with the girl; there must be a fair

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contest for her. He confesses his disappointment with the Masters, and tells Sachs that he has written heroic lays and also a love song (played in the orchestra). This interests Sachs, and draws him into further reflections on the decline of poetry, as a weapon against foolishness and superstition, in favour of reason and philosophy, which in turn will have to be defended. Only in the distant future may Sachs himself and earlier Masters be rediscovered: meanwhile, the young man should return to his castle and study Hutten and Luther. The girl returns, and in a trio she reproaches Sachs, who is defended by the young man; they all leave. Two alternative versions of the text are now given. In the original, the Marker appears and pockets the song he finds on the table, admitting his theft on the return of Sachs, who makes him a present of it but warns him to find the right tune for it. In Wagner's second thoughts, written in the margin, the Marker is first angry with Sachs over the previous night's events, and the ruination of his song; Sachs offers him the young man's song, which he says he himself wrote in his younger days, promising not to admit to it and then giving him some malicious advice on how to sing it. In St John's meadow, small festival processions approach from the city. There are games and dances. The Masters enter, and Sachs is acclaimed. The Guildmaster pleases the people with his explanation of what is to take place. The unpopular Marker appears and makes a mess of singing the song, to general amusement; the girl refuses him. He furiously exposes the song as by Sachs, who insists that it only needs good singing to the right melody. He will not sing it himself, as he is too old to be wooing. The young man now steps forward: the people overrule the Masters' objections, and his triumph makes them realise that they must give him the prize. But when he refuses membership of the Guild, Sachs, half-ironically, half in earnest, defends the good things in the Masters' work. All join in praising Sachs, and the bridal procession leads the others back into the city. Added to the MS at a later date is the couplet:

Zerging' das heil'ge römische Reich in Dunst,
 uns bliebe doch die heil'ge deutsche Kunst.
 (Were the Holy Roman Empire to dissolve into mist,
 we should still have holy German art.)⁴

In studying this sketch, and doing so from the vantage point of knowledge of the final work, it is important to remember that it was intended for a light opera (whatever Wagner may have meant by that). We have his own testimony for this, and the MS, on a greenish quarto paper, is headed 'Kom. Oper in 3 Acten'. The document bears signs of the haste with which it was written. The narrative is breathless, expressed partly in note form, partly in complete sentences, and from time to time contains snatches of dialogue, as if phrases for musical setting were appearing in Wagner's mind as he jotted down the plot outline. There are several additions – the final couplet, the extra passage concerning the mechanics of Beckmesser acquiring the Prize Song, and a note

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under the change of scene in Act III making reconciliation between David and Magdalene. There are also some grammatical errors, such as 'der Merker habe ihr begegnet', and, in the footnote providing for Magdalene and the girl to change their clothing, the word 'Begleitung' for 'Bekleidung' (perhaps Wagner's Saxon accent got the better of him).

As it stands, the sketch outlines an opera that pokes fun at the pedantic Masters and allows true love to win through. However, it already implies a good deal more than that. In 1845, Wagner had endured rejection by one operatic establishment in Paris and frustration at the hands of another through the sloppy standards prevailing in Dresden. His irritation was, moreover, increasingly coloured both by his own reforming zeal and by political affiliations that were to lend a revolutionary enthusiasm to his ideas. Even in the sketch, there is a polemic element that carries implications beyond light satire. The only three characters of any substance are Sachs, the Marker and the young man. The latter is also sometimes referred to in Act II as 'the lover' (and the girl as 'the beloved'): he is uncertainly balanced between ardent suitor and impassioned reformer, arriving in Nuremberg filled with *Minnesinger* ideals and notions which make him seem at once more innocently old-fashioned and more creatively exuberant than the Mastersingers. He has, he tells Sachs, written heroic verses praising the Emperors, but also love songs. Standing before the Masters in his first trial, he attempts to sing of Siegfried and Grimmhilde or of Parzifal, and clearly sees himself in the mould of the master he acknowledges in the work's eventual version, Walther von der Vogelweide (who also makes an appearance in the opera Wagner had just finished, *Tannhäuser*). In his person, art and love are in fruitful contact, and this contact is emphasised by the crabbed and warped nature of their relationship in the person of the Marker. However, art and love have not yet found the subtly balanced associations that lie at the heart of the opera.

The character of Sachs is at this stage highly equivocal. Ernest Newman finds that, 'In his first form Wagner's Sachs was a rather cynical, ironic, embittered character, who, apart from his advocacy of the cause of the young Knight, reminds us comparatively little of the wise, kindly, mellow poet-philosopher he ultimately becomes in Wagner's treatment of him'⁵ (that this description says too little about the darker side of Sachs's nature is not at present relevant). Robert M. Raynor describes him as, at this point, 'an unpleasantly

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ironical character who is more or less disliked by all who know him'.⁶ Richard Turner argues that these are misconceptions. Pointing out that the brevity of the sketch could not but make the characters seem more abrupt, he suggests that Sachs's unpopularity with the Mastersingers should indicate not his meanness of spirit but theirs, that the irony with which he reads the *Tabulatur* is directed not against the young knight but against its confining rules, and that his misgivings spring from his concern about the future of poetry. Turner also argues that when the girl beseeches the lover not to trust Sachs, for she has often been told how deceitful he is, it is the voice of her father, the head of the Guild, which she is echoing.⁷ Sachs later defends the Mastersingers against the young man's rejection of them in a tone 'half-ironic, half-serious', as befits a man with a regard for tradition but one who finds that tradition atrophying.

The truth is that Sachs, the subtlest and most complicated character of the three, is at this primitive stage naturally also the least consistent and complete. Moreover, Wagner had yet to read Schopenhauer. Yet he has instinctively set down a number of details whose implications he may not yet have understood but which were there for his later crafting once Schopenhauer had given a centre to his ideas. One of the few passages in which he writes some quite extended dialogue is in the scene in Act III where he makes Sachs argue wryly about the coming decline of poetry: there is already here an old man's more considered engagement with the role of art in human lives than is evinced by the poetic *Schwärmerei* of the young man and his impetuous delight in the *Minnesinger*. Yet Sachs is constantly detached and ironic, lacking the depth of human perspective necessary for the subtle connections Wagner was to make between life (and love) and art. An obvious reason is that the Mastersingers were as yet faceless adversaries, lacking the individual humanity that was to give them a more sympathetic quality, in their ordinary human fallibility, and with it a connection to Sachs himself. They are still propaganda, not art. But Sachs himself is uncertainly set forth. There can as yet be no sense of his integration in the society whose nature and traditions he is to uphold, nor of his friendship with the still uncharacterised Pogner, nor of the delicate feelings between him and Eva. His benevolence to the young man is not in question; but nor is a certain malevolence towards the Marker, and though Wagner was never wholly to expunge this from Sachs's nature, it was to be

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absorbed into a character whose largeness of humanity can embrace it. Already Wagner was aware of the problem, since he tried out two ways of transferring the Prize Song into the Marker's possession. Neither is satisfactory, but nor is the final version; for if one can perhaps account for Sachs's discomfiture of Beckmesser in the serenade scene as his half-latent rivalry for Eva emerging in the form of rough Teutonic humour (recalling Wagner's own part in the mockery of the incompetent singer Laueremann), there is still the uncomfortable matter of Sachs permitting Beckmesser to humiliate himself in the *Festwiese*. Aware of this problem, some producers have tried having Sachs recall Beckmesser after Walther's triumph so as to take part in the reconciliation and rejoicing. Yet seeds of richer fruit have already been sown. In Act II, near the start, Sachs leans out of his shop, reluctant to go indoors, and 'thinks of the young man and falls into a gentle, tender reverie'. There is no way of knowing whether or not Wagner already had an aria in mind here, though the mention of a reverie makes it seem likely: it is, of course, the first glimpse of the *Flieder* monologue. Again, Sachs's melancholy reflections with his great book at the start of Act III are as yet only over the decline of poetry, on which he 'continues to philosophise'. There is the occasion, though not yet the content, of the *Wahn* monologue.

One of the few people to see this sketch was Mathilde Wesendonk, to whom Wagner gave it as a present. He appears then to have forgotten it, or at any rate to have let it recede to the back of his mind; for his next reference to it comes in *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* of 1851. Here he describes how he had decided to write a comic opera, partly so as to win a success on the German stage for his other achievements, and how his eye had fallen on a piece whose song contest would make a light-hearted counterpart to that of *Tannhäuser*.

Just as with the Athenians a comic satyr play would follow a tragedy, so there suddenly came to me the image of a comic piece that could be attached to my *Singers' Contest on the Wartburg* as a richly allusive satyr play . . . This was *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, headed by Hans Sachs. I conceived of Hans Sachs as the last manifestation of the artistically productive folk spirit, and set against him in this quality the petit bourgeois Masters, for whose absurd, poetry-by-Tabulatur pedantry I found embodiment in the Marker. This Marker, as is well known (or, to our critics, perhaps not), was the appointed observer of the singers' guild, who had to 'mark' with strokes the performer's mistakes contravening the rules: someone who had scored a certain number of strokes was 'sung

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out'. The oldest member of the Guild now offers the hand of his young daughter to whichever member of the Guild wins the prize in a public singing contest that is about to be held. The Marker, who is already the girl's suitor, finds he has a rival in the person of a young man of noble birth, who is inspired by reading the *Heldenbuch* and the old Minnesingers to leave his impoverished and crumbling ancestral castle so as to learn the art of Mastersong in Nuremberg. He applies to join the Guild, being further inspired by promptly falling in love with the girl who is to be the prize, 'since only a Master of the Guild can win'; put to the test, he sings an enthusiastic song in praise of women, but this arouses an unprecedented number of objections from the Marker so that the candidate is already 'sung out' with only half his song. Sachs, who likes the young man, then (in his interests) foils his desperate attempt to elope with the girl; Sachs thereby also finds occasion to enrage the Marker. Having previously abused Sachs over an unfinished pair of shoes with the aim of humiliating him, the Marker appears by night under the girl's window so as to try out the song with which he hopes to succeed, as a serenade, and thereby to ensure her deciding voice at the prize-giving. Sachs, whose workshop stands opposite the serenaded house, begins singing loudly when the Marker does because – as he explains to the infuriated man – this is necessary if he is going to stay awake so late over his work; no-one knows better than the Marker that this work is urgent since he himself has pressed so hard for his shoes. Eventually he persuades the wretched man to stop: he will only be allowed to continue if the mistakes which Sachs finds in the song according to *his* feelings can be marked in *his* manner – as a cobbler – with a blow on the shoe for each one. Now the Marker sings: Sachs smites repeatedly on the last. The Marker leaps up angrily; Sachs asks him calmly if he is done with the song. 'Not by any means', shouts the Marker. Sachs laughingly brings the shoes out of the shop and explains that they have just been finished by means of the 'marks'. The Marker bawls the rest of his song uninterruptedly in confusion, beneath the vigorously shaking head of the female form at the window. Disconsolately, he asks Sachs next day for a new song for the bridal contest; Sachs gives him a poem by the young knight without telling him how he acquired it: he only warns him to take care to find a suitable 'Weise' to sing to it. The vain Marker has every confidence in himself, and sings it, before the assembled Masters and people, to a completely unsuitable and distorting melody so that once more he fails, this time decisively. He furiously accuses Sachs of having tricked him with a bad poem; Sachs explains that the poem is good but needs to be sung to an appropriate 'Weise'. It is agreed that whoever knows the right 'Weise' shall be the winner. The young knight succeeds in this, and wins his bride; however, he rejects the offer of admission to the Guild. So Sachs makes a humorous defence of the art of Mastersong, closing with the couplet:

Were the Holy Roman Empire to dissolve into mist,
We should still have holy German art.⁸

There are several changes in detail here, but also a crucial shift in emphasis, showing that Wagner's ideas had matured and

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perhaps also that the subject had never been dislodged from some corner of his mind. In placing greater importance on Sachs as a creative figure, Wagner moves the young man into a somewhat different position in the drama: he now sings, for instance, not of heroic poetry but in praise of women. He is at this stage less the challenger to tradition, ironically observed by Sachs: indeed, there is no longer any mention of irony in connection with Sachs, whose final defence of the Mastersingers is now 'humorous' (*mit Humor*), nor the strong sense of antagonism between him and the Guild. Of course the paragraph in *Eine Mitteilung* is a description of an earlier scheme, not a draft or synopsis; but it indicates that Sachs had moved more decisively to the centre of Wagner's attention, and Wagner himself confirms that he no longer felt irony to be the suitable means for expressing his humorous intentions.

By Wagner's account in *Mein Leben*, his next engagement with *Die Meistersinger* came in a revelatory flash in Venice. Depressed after the notorious *Tannhäuser* fiasco in Paris in March 1861, he spent much of the remainder of the year travelling; and he was glad to accept an invitation from the Wesendonks to meet them that November in Venice, where they were to have a short holiday, and spent the 7th to the 13th with them. He was perplexed to find them more interested in the art of Venice than in the details of his plight, happy though they were to cheer him up by sharing their pleasures with him. 'I have to admit that despite all my apathy Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the great hall of the Doges made a most exalting impression on me, so that by this inspiration I found my old creative powers awakening within me with almost their original primordial power. I decided to write *Die Meistersinger*.'⁹ Apart from wrongly locating the Titian in the Doge's Palace, Wagner was indulging in one of his feats of constructive memory.¹⁰ He liked the idea of the inspirational moment as the starting point for a work of art, as with the radiant Good Friday morning he pretended had set *Parsifal* working in his mind, and also perhaps with the so-called La Spezia vision and *The Ring*; and his good-humoured acceptance of factual correction on some of these matters did not destroy for him their artistic truth. Later, he was to deny the impact of Venetian works of art on him to Mathilde (letter of 21 December 1861);¹¹ however, the inspiration he drew from the Titian was recalled in Schopenhauerian vein many years later, when on his last visit to Venice he stood again before it and (according to Cosima, a great Titian-lover), 'the glowing