

Prelude to Die Meistersinger Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Wagner, in the full maturity of his genius, provides us here with a different facet to his ability. He is able to provide a comedy opera, and supply melody, form, contrapuntal writing worthy of Bach, and other musical moments that are based on their appropriateness to the story without restricting himself on his formidable technique. On first impression, one hears a more traditional genre of writing and might be tempted to make assumptions on form and content based on that. It is true that the lively C major of the opening and close have replaced the intensely dramatic, side shifting, harmonies of *Tristan und Isolde*. However, the true miracle of this work is that what is perceived to be structural tradition is actually a combining of traditional form with the very evolved technical mastery that Wagner had already achieved.

Wagner, in striving for his *super art form* – what is now known as Wagnerian Opera Drama – was at once librettist, conductor, composer, stage director and any number of other roles as necessary. The evolving sense of drama, that is played out in the music, and the words, and the stage direction, and the concepts is absolutely unequalled when they come from the same fountain of inspiration. One may recall debating whether or not Strauss, or Mozart, or Verdi collaborated well or successfully with their librettists. Were the two visions matched out well and did they do each others work a service? Was Mozart happier with the Italian texts of da Ponte?

In the case of Wagner the art of setting text, or writing a melody were interwoven and interchangeable in the creative process. The motifs that would run through the opera were already ready for performance in the overture in April 1862, whilst the work would not be completed until 1867. It seems that when it was completed the original poem was revised a good deal to meet the demands of the music that was flooding out of Wagner's head. He wrote to King Ludwig: "one of these days I shall have to write the words of Walther's Prize Song, the melody is already finished". The opera was performed in Munich in 1868 but Liszt heard the full score played at Triebtschen in October 1867 and wrote to Princess Wittgenstein: "I was amazed by the incomparable sap, audacity, vigor, abundance, verve and mastery of the Meistersinger. No one but he could have produced such a masterpiece." No one has disagreed with Liszt who understands the Wagnerian precept.

In as much as the libretto was shaped by Wagner's quick wit it was also shaped by his almost Dickensian need to have some philosophical or social commentary, imbedded into the fabric. The music similarly exercises the right to be what it needs to be, in the moment, in true dramatic fashion. One is never given the sense that Wagner had short changed himself on any aspect of the work, or

settled for any less of a phrase in either words or music. The honest burghers and citizens portrayed as a whole in the triumphal processional of the opening are contrasted throughout with the dualities and machinations of the human condition. This underpinning detail, commentary and social conscience was a part of Wagner's style and thought process as it was for his ardent admirer George Bernard Shaw.

As Audrey Williamson writes "We use 'comedy' of this work for want of a better word; but its fountain of melody and verse has deeper springs, like some comedies of Shakespeare - musically and often in thought its radiance is shaded by profound emotion and an artist's philosophy of life.