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*Remarks on performing the opera "The Flying  
Dutchman."*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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## About this Title

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[208]

## Translator's Note

The accompanying article was evidently written soon after that on *Tannhäuser*,—at any rate either in 1852 or early in 1853. It does not appear in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.



[209]

## Remarks on performing the opera "The Flying Dutchman."

IN the first place I have to remind the Conductor and Regisseur of what I laid to their heart before, when dealing with the production of "Tannhäuser," as regards the close accord between what passes in the orchestra and what passes on the stage. The ships and sea, in particular, demand from the Regisseur an unusual amount of care: he will find all needful indications at the corresponding places of the pianoforte edition or full score. The opera's first scene has to bring the spectator into that *Stimmung* in which it becomes possible for him to conceive the mysterious figure of the "Flying Dutchman" himself: it must therefore be handled with exceptional kindness; the sea between the headlands must be shewn as boisterous as possible; the treatment of the ship cannot be naturalistic enough: little touches, such as the heeling of the ship when struck by an extra big wave (between the two verses of the Steersman's song) must be very drastically carried out. Special attention is demanded by the lighting, with its manifold changes: to make the nuances of storm in the First Act effective, a skilful use of painted gauzes, as far as quite the middle distance of the stage, is indispensable. However, as these Remarks are not specially directed to the purely decorative aspect of the performance (for which I must refer to the scenarium of this opera as produced in the Berlin playhouse) I content myself—as said—with pleading for an exact observance of my scattered scenic indications, and leave to the inventive powers of the Scene-painter and Machinist the method of their carrying out

I therefore turn simply to the performers, and among these more particularly to the representant of the difficult principal rôle, that of the "*Holländer*" (the "Dutchman"). [210] Upon the happy issue of this title rôle depends the *real* success of the whole opera: its exponent must succeed in rousing and maintaining the deepest pity (*Mitleid*); and this he will be able to, if he strictly observes the following chief characteristics.—

His outward appearance is sufficiently notified. His first entry is most solemn and earnest: the measured slowness of his landing should offer a marked contrast with his vessel's weirdly rapid passage through the seas. During the deep trumpet-notes (B-minor) at quite the close of the introductory scene he has come off board, along a plank lowered by one of the crew, to a shelf of rock on the shore; his rolling gait, proper to sea-folk on first treading dry land after a long voyage, is accompanied by a wave-like figure for the violins and 'tenors': with the first crotchet of the third bar he makes his second step—always with folded arms and sunken head; his third and fourth steps coincide with the notes of the eighth and tenth bars. From here on, his movements will follow the dictates of his general delivery, yet the actor must never let himself be betrayed into exaggerated stridings to and fro: a certain terrible repose in his outward demeanour, even amid the most passionate expression of inward anguish and despair, will give the characteristic stamp to this impersonation. The first phrases are to be sung without a trace of passion (almost in strict beat, like the whole of this recitative), as though the man were tired out; at the words, declaimed with bitter ire: "*ha, stolzer Ozean*" etc. ("thou haughty Ocean") he does not break as yet into positive passion: more in terrible scorn, he merely turns his head half-round towards the sea. During the ritornello, after: "*doch ewig meine Qual*" ("but ever lasts my pain"), he bows his head once more, as though in utter weariness; the words: "*euch, des Weltmeers Fluthen*" etc. ("to you, ye waves of earthly sea") he sings in this posture, staring blankly before him. For the mimetic accompaniment of the Allegro: "*wie oft in Meeres tiefsten Grund*" etc. ("how oft in Ocean's deep [211] abyss") I do not wish the singer to cramp too much his outer motion, yet he still must abide by my prime

maxim, namely however deep the passion, however agonised the feeling which he has to breathe into the voice-part, he must for the present keep to the utmost calm in his outer bearing: a movement of the arm or hand, but not too sweeping, will suffice to mark the single more emphatic accents. Even the words: "*Niemals der Tod, nirgends ein Grab!*" ("Nor ever death, nowhere a grave!"), which are certainly to be sung with the greatest vehemence, belong rather to the *description* of his sufferings than to a direct, an actual outburst of his despair: the latter he only reaches with what follows, for which the utmost energy of action must therefore be reserved. With the repetition of the words: "*diess der Verdammniss Schreckgebot!*" ("This was my curse's dread decree!") he has somewhat inclined his head and his whole body: so he remains throughout the first four bars of the postlude; with the tremolo of the violins (E-flat) at the fifth bar he raises his face to heaven, his body still bent low; with the entry of the muffled roll of the kettle-drum at the ninth bar of the postlude he begins to shudder, the down-held fists are clenched convulsively, the lips commence to move, and at last (with eyes fixed heavenward throughout) he starts the phrase: "*Dich frage ich*" etc. ("Of thee I ask"). This whole, almost direct address to "God's angel's (*den "Engel Gottes"*), for all the terrible expression with which it is to be sung, must yet be delivered in the pose just indicated (without any marked change beyond what the execution necessarily demands at certain places): we must see before us a "fallen angel" himself, whose fearful torment drives him to proclaim his wrath against Eternal Justice. At last, however, with the words: "*Vergeb'ne Hoffnung*" etc. ("Thou vainest hope") the full force of his despair finds vent: furious, he stands erect, his eyes still gazing heavenwards, and with utmost energy of grief he casts all "futile hopes" behind: no more will he hear of promised ransom, and finally (at entry of the kettle-drum and basses) he falls of a heap, as [212] though undone. With the opening of the allegro-ritornel his features kindle to a new, a horrible last hope—the hope of World's-upheaval, in which he too must pass away. This closing Allegro requires the most terrible energy, not only in the vocal phrasing, but also in the mimic action; for everything here is unmasked passion. Yet the singer must do his best to give this whole tempo, despite its vehemence of phrasing, the semblance of a mere gathering of all his force for the final crushing outbreak at the words: "*Ihr Welten! endet euren Lauf!*" etc. ("Ye worlds! now end your last career!"). Here the expression must reach its loftiest pitch. After the closing words: "*ewige Vernichtung, nimm' mich auf!*" ("Eternal Chaos, take me hence!") he remains standing at full height, almost like a statue, throughout the whole *fortissimo* of the postlude: only with the entry of the *piano*, during the muffled chant from the ship's hold, does he gradually relax his attitude; his arms fall down; at the four bars of "*espressivo*" for the first violins he slowly sinks his head, and during the last eight bars of the postlude he totters to the rock-wall at the side: he leans his back against it and remains for long in this position, with arms tight-folded on the breast.—

I have discussed this scene at so much length, in order to shew in what sense I wish the "*Holländer*" to be portrayed, and what weight I place on the most careful adapting of the action to the music. In a like sense should the performer take pains to conceive the whole remainder of his rôle. Moreover, this aria is also the hardest in all the part, and more especially since the public's further understanding of the subject depends upon the issue of this scene: if this monologue, in keeping with its aim, has thoroughly attuned and touched the hearer, the further success of the 'whole work is for the major part insured— whereas nothing that comes after could possibly make up for anything neglected here.

In the ensuing scene with *Daland* the "Dutchman" retains at first his present posture. Daland's questions, from aboard-ship, he answers with the faintest movement of [213] his head. When Daland comes towards him on dry land, the Dutchman also advances to about the middle of the stage, with stately calm. His whole demeanour here shews quiet, restful dignity; the expression of his voice is noble, equable, without a tinge of stronger accent: he acts and

talks as though from ancient habit: so often has he passed through like encounters and transactions; everything, even the seemingly most purposed questions and answers, takes place as if by instinct; he deals as though at bidding of his situation, to which he gives himself mechanically and without interest, like a wearied man. Just as instinctively again, his yearning for "redemption" re-awakes: after his fearful outburst of despair he has grown gentler, softer, and it is with touching sadness that he speaks his yearning after rest. The question: "*hast du eine Tochter?*" ("Hast thou a daughter?") he still throws out with seeming calm; but suddenly the old hope (so often recognised as vain) is roused once more by Daland's enthusiastic answer: "*fürwahr, ein treues Kind*" ("Ay! ay! a *faithful* child"); with spasmodic haste he cries "*sie sei mein Weib!*" ("be *she* my wife!"). The old longing takes him once again, and in moving accents (though outwardly calm) he draws the picture of his lot: "*ach, ohne Weib, ohne Kind bin ich*" ("Ah! neither wife nor child have I"). The glowing colours in which Daland now paints his daughter still more revive the *Holländer's* old yearning for "redemption through a woman's truth," and in the duet's closing Allegro the battle between hope and despair is driven to the height of passion—wherein already hope appears to wellnigh conquer.—

At his first appearance before *Senta*, in the Second Act, the *Holländer* again is calm and solemn in his outer bearing: all his passionate emotions are strenuously thrust back within his breast. Throughout the lengthy first 'fermata' he stays motionless beside the door; at the commencement of the drum-solo he slowly strides towards the front; with the eighth bar of that solo he halts (the two bars "*accelerando*" for the strings relate to the gestures of [214] *Daland*, who still stands wondering in the doorway, awaiting *Senta's* welcome, and impatiently invites it with a movement of his outstretched arms); during the next three bars for the drum the *Holländer* advances to the extreme side-front, where he now remains without a motion, his eyes bent fixedly on *Senta*. (The recurrence of the figure for the strings relates to the emphatic repetition of *Daland's* gesture: at the *pizzicato* on the next fermata he ceases inviting her, and shakes his head in amazement; with the entry of the basses, after the fermata, he himself comes down to *Senta*).—The postlude of *Daland's* aria must be played in full: during its first four bars he turns to depart without further ado; with the fifth and sixth he pauses, and turns round again; the next seven bars accompany his byplay as he watches now the *Holländer*, now *Senta*, half pleased, half curiously expectant; during the subsequent two bars for the double-basses he goes as far as the door, shaking his head; with the theme's resumption by the wind-instruments he thrusts in his head once more, withdraws it vexedly, and shuts the door behind him—so that with the entry of the F-sharp chord for the 'wind' he has disappeared for good. The remainder of the postlude, together with the ritornello of the following duet, is accompanied on the stage by total immobility and silence: *Senta* and the *Holländer*, at opposite extremities of the foreground, are riveted in contemplation of each other. (The performers need not be afraid of wearying by this situation: it is a matter of experience that this is just the one which most powerfully engrosses the spectator, and most fittingly prepares him for the following scene).

The whole succeeding E-major section is to be executed by the *Holländer* with complete repose of outer mien, however stirring the emotion wherewith he delivers his lines; only the hands and arms (and that most sparingly) must he employ to emphasise the stronger accents.—Not until the two bars of the drum solo, before the following E-minor tempo, does he rouse himself, to draw somewhat closer to *Senta*: during the short ritornello he moves a few [215] steps towards the middle of the stage, with a certain constraint and mournful courtesy. (I must here inform the conductor, that experience has shewn me I was mistaken in marking the tempo "*un poco meno sostenuto*": the long preceding tempo, true enough, is somewhat slow at its commencement—particularly in the *Holländer's* first solo—but little by little it instinctively freshens towards the close, so that with the entry of E-minor the pace

must necessarily be somewhat restrained once more, in order to give at least the opening of this section its needful impress of decorous calm. The four-bar phrase, in fact, must be *slackened down* in such a manner that the fourth bar is played in marked "*ritenuto*": the same thing applies to the first phrase now sung by the Holländer). With the ninth and tenth bars, during the solo for the drum, the Holländer again advances one, and two steps nearer to Senta. With the eleventh and twelfth bars, however, the time must be taken somewhat more briskly, so that at the B-minor: "*du könntest dich*" etc., the tempo I really meant—*moderato*, certainly, but not quite so dragging—at last arrives, and is to be maintained throughout the section. At the *più animato*: "*so unbedingt, wie?*" the *Holländer* betrays the animating effect which *Senta's* first real speech has wrought on him: with this passage he must already begin to shew more visible agitation. But *Senta's* passionate interjection: "*o welche Leiden! Könnst' ich Trost ihm bringen!*" ("What tale of grief! O, could I respite bring him! ") stirs him to the depths of his being: filled with astonished admiration, he stammers out the half-hushed words: "*welch' holder Klang im nächtlichen Gewühl!*" ("What gentle strains in Night's most raging storm!"). With the *molto più animato*, he scarce can master himself any longer; he sings with the utmost fire of passion, and at the words: "*Allmächtiger, durch diese sei's!*" ("Almighty, be't through *her!*") he hurls himself upon his knees. With the *agitato* (B-minor) he rises to his feet impetuously: his *love* for *Senta* displays itself at once in terror of the danger she herself incurs by reaching out a rescuing hand to him. It comes over him as a [216] hideous crime, and in his passionate remonstrance against her sharing in his fate he becomes a human being through and through; whereas he hitherto had often given us but the grim impression of a ghost. Here, then, the actor must give to even his outer bearing the full impress of human passion; as if felled to the ground, he falls before *Senta* with the last words: "*nennst ew'ge Treue du nicht dein!*" ("if troth of thine lasts not for aye!") so that *Senta* stands high above him, like his angel, as she tells him what *she* means by troth. (01) —During the ritomello of the succeeding *Allegro molto* the *Holländer* lifts himself erect, in solemn exaltation: his voice is stirred to the sublimest height of victory. In all that follows there can be no more room for misunderstanding: at his last entry, in the Third Act, all is passion, pain, despair. Particularly do I exhort the singer not to drag the recitative passages, but to take everything in the most spirited, most stressful *tempo*.—

The rôle of *Senta* will be hard to misread; one warning alone have I to give: let not the *dreamy* side of her nature be conceived in the sense of a modern, sickly sentimentality! *Senta*, on the contrary, is an altogether robust (*kerniges*) Northern maid, and even in her apparent sentimentality she is thoroughly *naïve*. Only in the heart of an entirely naïve girl, surrounded by the idiosyncrasies of Northern Nature, could impressions such as those of the ballad of the "Flying Dutchman" and the picture of the pallid seaman call forth so wondrous strong a bent, as the impulse to redeem the doomed: with her this takes the outward form of an active monomania (*ein kräftiger Wahnsinn*) such, in deed, as can only be found in quite naïve natures. We have been told of Norwegian maids of such a force of feeling, that death has come upon them through a sudden *rigor* (*Erstarrung*) of the heart. Much in this wise may it go, with the seeming "morbidness" of pallid *Senta*—Nor must *Eric* be a sentimental whiner: on the contrary, he is stormy, impulsive and sombre (*düster*), like every man who lives alone (particularly in the Northern highlands). [217] Whoever should give a sugary rendering to his "*Cavatina*" in the Third Act, would do me a sorry service, for it ought instead to breathe distress and heart-ache. (Everything that might justify a false conception of this piece, such as its falsetto-passage and final cadenza, I implore may be either altered or struck out).—Further, I beseech the exponent of *Daland* not to drag his rôle into the region of the positively comic: he is a rough-hewn figure from the life of everyday, a sailor who scoffs at storms and danger for sake of gain, and with whom, for instance, the—certainly apparent—sale of his daughter to a rich man ought not to seem at all disgraceful: he thinks and deals, like a hundred

thousand others, without the least suspicion that he is doing any wrong.



## Notes

### Note 01 on page 10

"Treue"="trueness, loyalty," and thus *eternal* "troth."—TR.