
*A Report on the Production of "Tannhäuser" in
Paris.*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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[348]

Translator's Notes

The letter on *"Tannhäuser" in Paris* was originally published in the supplement to the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* for April 7, 1861, and reprinted in the *Neue Zeitschrift* five days later.

[349]

A Report on the Production of "Tannhäuser" in Paris.

Paris, 27th March, 1861.

I PROMISED to give you a full report, some day, of my Tannhäuser affairs in Paris; now that they have reached a climax, and can be surveyed in their whole extent, it is some satisfaction to myself to come to a final settlement by a calm review of their leading features—as it were for my own behoof. But none of you can rightly grasp the nature of this business, unless I also touch upon the true motive of my coming to Paris at all. Let me therefore begin with that.

After wellnigh ten years' preclusion from all possibility of reinvigorating myself by assisting at good performances of my dramatic compositions—if only periodically—I felt driven at last to contemplate removal to a spot which might bring this needful living contact with my art within my reach, in time. I hoped to be able to find that spot in some modest nook of Germany itself. The Grand Duke of Baden had already promised me, with most touching kindness, the production of my latest work at Karlsruhe under my personal direction; in the summer of 1859 I pressed him most importunately, in lieu of the projected temporary sojourn, to use his influence to forthwith procure me a permanent domicile in his country, (01) as there would otherwise be nothing for me to do but settle down in Paris for good. My plea's fulfilment was—impossible.

However, when I removed to Paris in the autumn of that same year, I still kept in sight the production of my "Tristan," for which I hoped to be summoned to Karlsruhe for the 3rd December. Once brought to performance under [350] my own supervision, I believed I then could entrust the work to the other theatres of Germany. The prospect of dealing in the same way with the rest of my works, in future, sufficed me; and on this assumption Paris offered me the solitary interest of hearing an excellent quartet, an admirable orchestra, from time to time, and thus keeping myself in refreshing touch with at least the living organs of my art. All this was changed at a blow when I received notice from Karlsruhe that it had turned out impossible to produce my "Tristan" there. My sorry plight at once inspired me with the notion of inviting certain first-rate singers of my acquaintance to Paris for the following spring, so as to bring about the desired model-performance of my new work, with their assistance, on the boards of the "Italian Opera"; to this I also meant to invite the Directors and Regisseurs of friendly German theatres, in order to compass the same result as I had had in eye with the Karlsruhe production. Since the execution of my plan was impossible without the assistance of the larger Paris public, I was bound to bespeak its interest for my music, and to that end I undertook the well-known three concerts in the Théâtre des Italiens. The highly encouraging result of these concerts, in the matter of applause and interest, unfortunately could not help forward the main enterprise I had in view; for it was just these concerts that plainly shewed me the difficulties of any such undertaking, whilst the impossibility of gathering at one time in Paris the singers I had chosen was sufficient in itself to make me abandon the plan.

Hemmed in on every hand, and once more casting a longing look on Germany, I learnt to my intense surprise that my lot had become the subject of animated discussion and advocacy at the court of the Tuileries. It was to the extraordinarily friendly interest—almost unknown to myself before—of several members of the German embassies here, that I had to thank this propitious turn of affairs. It went so far that the Emperor, having also heard the most flattering

account of my "Tannhäuser" (the work most spoken of) from a German princess for whom he entertained [351] a particular esteem, (02) at once gave orders for the performance of that opera in the *Académie impériale de musique*.

Now I don't deny that, though highly delighted at first by this quite unexpected evidence of my works' success in social circles from which I personally had stood so distant, I soon could think with naught but grave misgivings of a performance of "Tannhäuser" at that particular theatre. To whom was it clearer, that this great opera-house had long estranged itself from every earnest artistic tendency; that in it quite other claims, than those of Dramatic Music, had brought themselves to currency; that Opera itself had there become a mere excuse for Ballet? In fact, when of late years I had received repeated invitations to think about the performance of one of my works in Paris, I had never dreamt of the *Grand Opéra*, but rather—for a trial—of the unassuming *Théâtre Lyrique*. And for two definite reasons: firstly, that here no special class of the audience prescribes the tone; secondly, that—thanks to the poverty of its exchequer—the Ballet pure and simple has not as yet become the focus of its whole art-doings. But, after many times returning to the idea, of his own accord, the Director of this theatre had been obliged to renounce a performance of "Tannhäuser," mainly because he could find no tenor competent to fill the difficult chief rôle.

As a matter of fact, my first conference with the Director of the Grand Opéra shewed me that the introduction of a ballet into "Tannhäuser," and indeed in the second act, was considered a *sine qua non* of its successful performance. I couldn't fathom the meaning of this requirement, until I had declared that I could not possibly disturb the course of just this second act by a ballet, which must here be senseless from every point of view; while on the other hand I thought the first act, at the voluptuous court of Venus, would afford the most apposite occasion for a choreographic scene of amplest meaning, since I myself [352] had not deemed possible to dispense with dance in my first arrangement of that scene. Indeed I was quite charmed with the idea of strengthening an undoubtedly weak point in my earlier score, and I drafted an exhaustive plan for raising this scene in the Venusberg to one of great importance. This plan the Director most emphatically rejected, telling me frankly that in the production of an opera it was not merely a question of a ballet, but of a ballet to be danced in the middle of the evening's entertainment; for it was only at about this time that the subscribers to whom the ballet almost exclusively belonged, appeared in their boxes, as they were in the habit of dining very late; a ballet in the opening scene would therefore be of no use to them, since they were never by any chance present for the first act. These and similar admissions were subsequently repeated to me by the Cabinet-minister himself, and all possibility of a good result was made so definitely dependent on the said conditions being fulfilled, that I began to believe I should have to renounce the whole undertaking.

But while I thus was thinking again, more actively than ever, of my return to Germany, and spying out for a foothold to be granted me for the performance of my new works, I was now to discover the full value of the Emperor's command; for he placed the whole institute of the Grand Opéra at my disposal, without conditions or reserve, and allowed me *carte blanche* for whatever engagements I deemed needful. Every acquisition desired by me was forthwith carried out, without the slightest counting of the cost; to the *mise-en-scène* a care was devoted such as I had never conceived before. Under circumstances so entirely novel to me, I soon was more and more persuaded of the possibility of seeing a thoroughly complete, nay, an ideal performance. The vision of such a performance, wellnigh no matter of which of my works, had long occupied my mind since my withdrawal from our Opera-house; what nowhere and never had stood within my power, was unexpectedly to greet me here in Paris, and at [353] a time when no efforts had availed to procure me an even remotely similar privilege on German soil. I openly admit that this thought inspired me with a warmth unknown for many a day, a warmth only intensified, perhaps, by a bitter feeling mixed

therewith. I soon had eyes for nothing but the possibility of a splendid performance, and in the absorbing care to realise that possibility I allowed no other sort of consideration to influence me: if I attain what I may dare hold possible—said I to myself—what care I for the Jockey Club and its ballet?

Henceforth my every thought was for the performance. There was no French tenor to be had, so the Director told me, for the rôle of Tannhäuser. Informed of the brilliant talents of the youthful singer *Niemann*, though I had never heard him myself, I cast him for the title-rôle; after the most careful preliminaries, his engagement was concluded at great expense, especially as he was master of a very fluent French pronunciation. Several other artists, and in particular the barytone *Morelli*, owed their engagement to nothing but my wish to acquire them for my work. Moreover, instead of certain first singers already popular here, whose too settled method alarmed me, I gave the preference to youthful talents whom I might hope to mould more easily to my style. I was surprised by the carefulness, quite unknown among ourselves, with which the voice-and-pianoforte rehearsals are here conducted; under the intelligent and sensitive guidance of the *chef du chant*, Vauthrot, I soon found our studies progressing at a rapid pace. In particular was I rejoiced to see how the younger French artists arrived at a better and better understanding of the thing, and caught a genuine liking for their task.

Thus I myself was taken with a new liking- for this earlier work of mine: I most carefully revised the score afresh, entirely re-wrote the scene of Venus and the ballet-scene preceding it, and everywhere sought to bring the vocal parts into closest agreement with the translated text.

Now, as I had made the performance my unique aim, [354] and left every other consideration out of count, so my real trouble at last began with the perception that this performance itself would not attain the height expected by me. It would be hard for me, to tell you exactly on what points I had finally to see myself undeceived. The most serious, however, was that the singer of the difficult chief rôle fell into greater and greater disheartenment the nearer we approached the actual production, in consequence of interviews it had been thought necessary for him to hold with the reporters, who assured him of the inevitable failure of my opera. (03) The most promising hopes, which I had harboured in the course of the pianoforte-rehearsals, sank deeper and deeper the more we came in contact with the stage and orchestra. I saw that we were getting back to the dead level of ordinary Operatic performances, that all the requirements meant to bear us far above it were doomed to stay unmet. Yet in this sense, which I naturally had disallowed from the first, we lacked the only thing that could confer distinction on such an Operatic show: some noted 'talent' or other, some tried and trusted favourite of the public; whereas I was making my *début* with almost absolute novices. Finally what most distressed me, was that I had not been able to wrest the orchestral conductorship, through which I might still have exercised a great influence on the spirit of performance, from the hands of the official *chef d'orchestre*; and my being thus compelled to mournfully resign myself to a dull and spiritless rendering of my work (for my wish to withdraw the score was not acceded to) is what makes out my genuine trouble even to this day.

Under such circumstances it became almost a matter of indifference to me, what kind of reception my opera would meet at the hands of the public: the most brilliant could not have moved me to personally attend a longer series of performances, for I found far too little satisfaction in the thing. But hitherto you have been diligently kept in [355] ignorance of the true character of that reception, as it seems to me, and you would do very wrong if you based thereon a judgment of the Paris public in general, however flattering to the German, yet in reality incorrect. On the contrary, I abide by my opinion that the Paris public has very agreeable qualities, in particular those of a quick appreciation and a truly magnanimous sense

of justice. A public, I say: a whole audience to which I am a total stranger, which day by day has heard from the journals and idle chatterers the most preposterous things about me, and has been deliberately set against me with wellnigh unexampled care—to see such a public repeatedly taking up the cudgels in my behalf against a clique, with demonstrations of applause a quarter of an hour long, must fill me with a warmth of heart towards it, were I even the most indifferent of men. But, through the admirable foresight of those who have the sole distribution of seats on first nights, and had made it almost impossible for me to gain admission for my handful of personal friends, there was assembled on that evening in the Grand Opera-house an audience which every dispassionate person could see at once was prejudiced in the extreme against my work; add to this the whole Parisian Press, which is always invited officially on such occasions, and whose hostile attitude towards me you have simply to read its reports to discover: and you may well believe that I have a right to speak of a great victory, when I tell you in all sober earnest that this by no means exquisite performance of my work met with louder and more unanimous applause than ever I experienced personally in Germany. The actual leaders of an opposition perhaps almost universal at first—several, nay, very likely all of the musical reporters here—who up to then had done their utmost to distract the attention of the public, were seized towards the end of the second act by manifest terror of having to witness a complete and brilliant success of "Tannhäuser"; and now they fell on the expedient of breaking into roars of laughter after certain cues, pre-arranged among themselves at the [356] general-rehearsals, whereby they created a diversion sufficiently disturbing to damp a considerable manifestation of applause at the curtain's second fall. These selfsame gentlemen, however, had observed at the stage-rehearsals, which I had also not been able to hinder them from attending, that the opera's real success lay guaranteed in the execution of its third act. At the rehearsals an admirable 'set' by Mons. Despléchin, representing the Wartburg valley in the light of an autumn evening, had already exerted on everyone present a charm which irresistibly gave birth to the *Stimmung* requisite for taking-in the following scenes; on the part of the performers these scenes were the bright spot in the whole day's work; quite insurpassably was the Pilgrims' Chorus sung and managed; the Prayer of Elisabeth, delivered in its entirety by Fraulein Sax with affecting expression, the 'fantasie' to the Evening-star, rendered by *Morelli* with perfect elegiac tenderness, so happily prepared the way for the best part of *Niemann's* performance, his narration of the Pilgrimage—which has always won this artist the liveliest commendation—that a quite exceptional success seemed assured for just this third act, even in the eyes of my most determined adversaries. So this was the act the aforesaid leaders fastened on, trying to hinder any onset of the needful mood of absorption (*Sammlung*) by outbursts of violent laughter, for which the most trivial occasion had to afford the childish pretext. Undeterred by these adverse demonstrations, neither did my singers allow themselves to be put out, nor the public refrain from devoting its sympathetic attention, and often its profuse applause, to their valiant exertions; and at the end, when the performers were vociferously called before the curtain, the opposition was at last entirely beaten down.

That I had made no mistake in viewing this evening's outcome as a complete victory, was proved to me by the public's demeanour on the night of the second performance; for here it became manifest with *what* opposition alone I should have to do in the future, to wit, with that of the [357] Paris Jockey Club—whose name I need not scruple to give you, as the public itself, with its cry "*à la porte les Jockeys*," both openly and loudly denounced my chief opponents. The members of this club—whose right to consider themselves the rulers of the Grand Opéra I need not here explain to you—feeling their interests deeply compromised by the absence of the usual ballet at the hour of their arrival, i.e. towards the middle of the representation, were horrified to discover that "Tannhäuser" had *not* made a fiasco, but an actual triumph at its first performance. Henceforth it was their business to prevent this

ballet-less opera from being given night after night; to this end, on their way from dinner they had bought a number of dog-calls and such-like instruments, with which they manœuvred against "Tannhäuser" in the most unblushing manner directly they had entered the opera-house. Until then, that is to say from the beginning of the first to about the middle of the second act, not a single trace of the first night's opposition had been shewn, and the most prolonged applause had undisturbedly accompanied those passages of my opera which had become the speediest favourites. But from now on, no acclamation was of the least avail: in vain did the Emperor himself, with his Consort, demonstrate for a second time in favour of my work; by those who considered themselves masters of the house, and all of whom belong to France's highest aristocracy, the condemnation of "Tannhäuser" was irrevocably pronounced. Whistles and flageolets accompanied every plaudit of the audience, down to the very close.

In view of the management's utter impotence against this powerful club, in view of even the State-minister's obvious dread of making serious enemies of its members, I recognised that I had no right to expect my proved and faithful artists of the stage to expose themselves any longer to the abominable agitation put upon them by unscrupulous persons (naturally with the intention of forcing them to throw up their engagements). I told the management that I must withdraw my opera, and consented to a third [358] performance only upon condition that it should take place on a Sunday: that is to say, on a night outside the subscription, and thus under circumstances which would not incur the subscribers' wrath, while on the other hand the house would be left completely clear for the public proper. My wish to have this performance announced on the posters as "the last" was not allowed, and all I could do was to personally inform my acquaintances of the fact. These precautionary measures, however, were powerless to dissipate the Jockey Club's alarm; on the contrary, it fancied that it detected in this Sunday performance a bold stratagem against its dearest interests, after which—the opera once brought to an unqualified success—the hated work might be forced quite easily down its throat. In the sincerity of my assurance, that in case of such a success I should still more certainly withdraw my work, people hadn't the courage to believe. So the gentlemen forsook their other pleasures for this evening, returned to the Opéra in full battle-array, and renewed the scenes of the second night. This time the public's exasperation, at the attempt to downright hinder it from following the opera at all, reached a pitch unknown before, as people have assured me; and it was only the, as it would seem, unassailable social standing of Messieurs Disturbers-of-the-peace, that saved them from positive rough handling. To put the matter briefly: astonished as I am at the outrageous behaviour of those gentlemen, I am equally touched and moved by the real public's heroic exertions to procure me justice; and nothing can be more distant from my mind, than to entertain the smallest doubt of the Paris Public whenever it shall find itself on a neutral terrain of its own.

My withdrawal of the score, at last announced officially, has placed the Directors of the Opéra in great and genuine perplexity. They frankly and openly confess to regarding my opera as one of their greatest successes, for they cannot remember having ever seen the public side so actively in favour of a contested work. The most abundant receipts appear to them assured with "Tannhäuser," the house [359] being already sold-out for several performances in advance. They are informed of a growing irritation on the part of the public, which sees its rights of hearing and judging a new, much-talked-of work in peace and quietness, denied it by an infinitely small minority. I learn that the Emperor remains thoroughly well-disposed, that the Empress would gladly take upon herself the protection of my opera, and demand guarantees against further disturbances of the peace. At this moment there is circulating among the musicians, painters, artists and authors of Paris a protest against the unseemly occurrences in the Opera-house: a protest addressed to the Minister of State and, as I am told, already numerous signed. Under such circumstances folk think I might well feel encouraged

to let my opera proceed. But a weighty artistic consideration holds me back. Hitherto my work has had no quiet, no collected hearing; its intrinsic character—lying in its intentional appeal to a *Stimmung* foreign to the customary opera-public, a *Stimmung* compassing the whole—has not dawned as yet upon the audience; up to the present they have only been able to catch at certain glittering points which served me, strictly speaking, merely as a garnish (*Staffage*), and to single these out for ready sympathy. But should they once arrive at a calm, attentive hearing of my opera, then, after what I have hinted to you about the character of the performance here, I fear they would soon unearth the latter's inner feebleness and want of verve—for these evils are no secret to those who really know my work, though I have been debarred from intervening personally for their removal; so that I could not dream for this time of a radical, not merely an external, success for my opera. Wherefore let all the inadequacies of this production lie buried decently beneath the dust of those three evenings' warfare, and may many a one, who bitterly deceived my hopes reposed in him, save his honour for the nonce with the belief that he fell fighting for a good cause!

So let us hold the Parisian "Tannhäuser" as played-out [360] for the present. Should the wish of earnest friends of my art be fulfilled; should a project, seriously entertained of late by people who know their business, and aiming at nothing less than the speedy foundation of a new opera-house for the realisation of reforms which I have mooted here, as well as elsewhere—should this be carried out, then perhaps you may hear from Paris itself yet once again of "Tannhäuser."

As to what has been done with my work in Paris till to-day, rest assured that you now have heard the strictest truth. One simple thing may be your warranty: that it is impossible for me to content myself with a semblance, when my inmost wish stays unfulfilled; and that wish is only to be stilled by the consciousness of having evoked a really intelligent impression.

Hearty greetings from yours,

RICHARD WAGNER.

Notes

Note 01 on page 5

Referring to his exile; for the first, the partial, amnesty was not granted until the summer of 1860.—TR.

Note 02 on page 6

Princess Metternich, née Countess Pauline Sandór, wife of the Austrian ambassador.—TR.

Note 03 on page 7

The clause about the reviewers was omitted in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, and therefore in the *Neue Zeitschrift*.—TR.

[403]

Summary

Projects for *Tristan* at Karlsruhe in 1859; amnesty impossible then; removal to Paris in autumn, for sake of hearing good orchestra etc. at last; Karlsruhe plan falls through. Idea of *Tristan* at Théâtre des Italiens, inviting German Directors to a model-performance; the three Paris concerts were to prepare the public, but they proved the plan's impossibility (350). Princess Metternich and the Emperor; order for *Tannhäuser* at Grand Opéra a complete surprise. Difficulties about a ballet in act ii for the late diners; plan for new Venusberg scene; carte blanche for engagements and mise en scene; Niemann, Morelli and young talents; Vauthrot and his pains with pianoforte rehearsals; taken with a new liking for this early work, I carefully revised the .score (353). Gradual disheartenment; reporters prophesy failure to Niemann; spiritless orchestral conducting; offer to withdraw score (354). Performance and false accounts; magnanimity of Paris public proper. First night: clique of reviewers, cues and roars of laughter, especially in third act, which promised so well; uproar, but opposition beaten down at end by public—in reality a victory for the work (356). Second night: Jockey Club and dog-calls for the ballet-less opera. Second offer to withdraw the work, but management persisted, and refused to announce third night as "final." Jockey Club's alarm at stratagem of Sunday performance; scenes of second night renewed, indignation of public; only social standing of Messieurs Disturbors-of-peace saved them from rough handling (358). Definite withdrawal prompted by artistic considerations—the house was sold-out for several nights in advance; circular protest signed by musicians, authors etc.; Empress's offer to intervene. Let the inadequacies of this production lie buried beneath the dust of its three nights' war! Project for a new theatre in Paris, to realise my reforms (360).