
Overture to "Tannhäuser."

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



The Wagner Library

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About this Title

Source

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Reading Information

This title contains 725 words.
Estimated reading time between 2 and 4 minutes.

Notes are indicated using parenthesis, like (1).
Page numbers of the original source are indicated
using square-bracketed parentheses, like [62].

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Translator's Note

Appeared in the *Neue Zeitschrift* for January 14, '53, with a note: "Written by the composer on the occasion of the performance of this work at Zurich". In Letter 56, (*Letters to Uhlig*, Zurich, Feb. 26, '52), Wagner writes: "At the first rehearsal of the *Tannhäuser* overture the orchestra begged me to give them an explanation of the contents, after the manner of the *Coriolanus* overture, as it would enable them to 'play better.'"

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Overture to "Tannhäuser."

To begin with, the orchestra leads before us the Pilgrims' Chant alone (01); it draws near, then swells into a mighty outpour, and passes finally away.—Evenfall: last echo of [230] the chant.—As night breaks, magic sights and sounds appear; a rosy mist floats up, exultant shouts assail our ear; the whirlings of a fearsomely voluptuous dance are seen. These are the "Venusberg's" seductive spells, that shew themselves at dead of night to those whose breast is fired by daring of the senses.—Attracted by the tempting show, a shapely human form draws nigh: 'tis *Tannhäuser*, Love's minstrel. He sounds his jubilant Song of Love in joyous challenge, as though to force the wanton witchery to do his bidding.—Wild cries of riot answer him: the rosy cloud grows denser round him, entrancing perfumes hem him in and steal away his senses. In the most seductive of half-lights, his wonder-seeing eye beholds a female form indicable; he hears a voice that sweetly murmurs out the siren-call, which promises contentment of the darer's wildest wishes. *Venus* herself it is, this woman who appears to him.—Then heart and senses burn within him; a fierce, devouring passion fires the blood in all his veins: with irresistible constraint it thrusts him nearer; before the Goddess' self he steps with that canticle of love triumphant, and now he sings it in ecstatic praise of *her*.—As though at wizard spell of his, the wonders of the Venusberg unroll their brightest fill before him: tumultuous shouts and savage cries of joy mount up on every hand; in drunken glee Bacchantes drive their raging dance and drag Tannhäuser to the warm caresses of Love's Goddess, who throws her glowing arms around the mortal drowned with bliss, and bears him where no step dare tread, to the realm of Being-no-more (*Nichtmehrseins*). A scurry, like the sound of the Wild Hunt, and speedily the storm is laid. Merely a wanton whir still pulses in the breeze, a wave of weird voluptuousness, like the sensuous breath of unblest love, still sougns above the spot where impious charms had shed their raptures, and over which the night now broods once more.—But dawn begins to break already: from afar is heard again the Pilgrims' Chant. As this chant draws closer yet and closer, as the day drives farther back the night, that whir and sougning of the air—which had erewhile [231] sounded like the eerie cries of souls condemned—now rises, too, to ever gladder waves; so that when the sun ascends at last in splendour, and the Pilgrims' Chant proclaims in ecstasy to all the world, to all that lives and moves thereon, Salvation won, this wave itself swells out the tidings of sublimest joy. 'Tis the carol of the Venusberg itself, redeemed from curse of impiousness, this cry we hear amid the hymn of God. So wells and leaps each pulse of Life in chorus of Redemption; and both dissevered elements, both soul and senses, God and Nature, unite in the atoning kiss of hallowed Love.

Notes

Note 01 on page 7

In the *N. Z.* the opening sentence ran thus: "A band of pilgrims marches past us; their chant—of faith, remorse and penitence, mounting to hope and confident assurance of salvation—draws near at the commencement, swells louder, as if close beside us," etc.—TR.

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Summary

Pilgrim's Chant; night falls; magic sights and sounds appear to those whose heart is fired by daring of the senses. Love's minstrel and the siren call of Venus; to *her* he sings the canticle of love triumphant; wonders of the Venusberg; he treads the realm of Being-no-more. A scurry, like the sound of the Wild Hunt; the storm is laid, merely a wanton whir remains; as dawn begins, it blends with the sacred chant. The sun rises in splendour on a world redeemed; soul and senses, God and Nature, united by the kiss of Love (231).