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***Tannhäuser and a Martyrdom on the Wartburg***

*Paula M. Bortnichak and Edward A. Bortnichak are both chilled and thrilled  
by a hard-hitting 'Tannhäuser' in Estonia*

*Tannhäuser.* Jyrki Anttila (Tannhäuser), Aile Asszonyi (Elisabeth/Venus), Rauno Elp (Wolfram von Eschinbach), Pavlo Balakin (Hermann, Landgrave of Thuringia), Mart Madiste (Walther von der Vogelweide), Jassi Zahharov (Biterolf), Andres Köster (Heinrich der Schreiber), Mart Laur (Reinmar von Zweter), Marek Huntsaar (Young Shepherd); Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra/Vello Pähn; Daniel Slater (director), Leslie Travers (designer), Anton Kulagin (lighting), Kati Kivitar (movement). Estonian National Opera House, 19 June 2015

The redemption of the lost hero through the devotion of a heroine is a theme that runs through every Wagner music drama. The problem for modern audiences often centres around the dramatic plausibility of these salvations; neither transfigurations, nor suicide, nor death by heartbreak of these sopranos convinces us as a sufficient *modus operandi* for the resolution of the dilemmas of their respective heldentenors or heldenbaritons. This is especially problematic in the case of the Apollonian–Dionysian struggle raging within *Tannhäuser* which the pining away of the faithful Elisabeth is somehow supposed to resolve. Wagner's multiple performance versions demonstrated his own recognition of the difficulty of getting the balances right in this work.

Daniel Slater in collaboration with designer Leslie Travers provides a compelling solution to this central problem in his elegantly simple and dramatically powerful *Tannhäuser*

The business-suited Wartburg society and Landgrave (Pavlo Balakin) in Daniel Slater's production of *Tannhäuser*. Estonian National Opera, photo Harri Rospu



for Estonian National Opera. In the context of a modern dress, uncluttered, minimalist staging, loaded with fresh, potent imagery, he turns the opera into Elisabeth's search for her identity, as catalysed by her heroic lover, within a brutally repressive Wartburg society. The opera is stripped of anything that distracts us from this new examination of the heroine, who begins each act as a dreaming onstage figure and then assumes both the roles of the sensuous Venus and the saintly Elisabeth. Traditionally seen overtly Christian imagery is replaced instead by metallic X-shaped medallions worn by the dark business-suited Wartburgians. These resemble modified cruciform figures and are soon chillingly revealed to represent the body position of the literally tortured Tannhäuser at the end of the Act I Venusberg Scene and again after his revelations at the Act II Song Contest, and of Elisabeth in Act III as she is crucified onstage by her Wartburg captors/relatives when she reaffirms her bond to Tannhäuser by refusing the hand of Wolfram after his final attempt to make 'an honest woman' of her. The Venusberg exists only in Tannhäuser's mind: his pornographic fantasies in Act I are enacted by dancers portraying different aspects of Venus, and these same seductresses reappear in Act III caged in a wall of translucent boxes signifying Tannhäuser's personalised 'hell' when they are suddenly illuminated with a blinding white light at his pronouncement of the Pope's curse: 'verdammt'. The Wartburg is monotonously white and black, except for the flash of red when Elisabeth's undergarment is revealed as Tannhäuser rips away her blouse at the conclusion of his Act II Hymn to Venus. Her essence – her blood and her passion – are again visible and signified by this bright red undergarment as she is stretched out to die on the cross for the final tableau. In Wagner's and Slater's Wartburg, like in so many historical and contemporary societies, it is either conform or die; the 'other', whether commoner or noble, is not tolerated. At the final curtain, both Wolfram and Tannhäuser are left to mourn their mutual loss as the Wartburg congregation, unchanged from before, stand in block formation to intone the familiar Pilgrim's Chorus as a chorale, which, in context, now seems a banal, formulaic benediction for the executed heroine who has made the ultimate sacrifice for her hero and for the expression of her own humanity. This Tannhäuser is both literally 'saved' and figuratively redeemed by his Elisabeth, and Wagner's grand vision is honoured.

The Nordic operatic tradition is second to none, and that was evident with this consummate ensemble performance by the forces of the excellent Estonian National Opera in their home theatre in Tallinn. The company has been steadily gaining a growing international reputation for Wagner, and the Slater production was first seen as the centrepiece of the Wagner bicentenary celebrations in Estonia in 2013. All the principal roles except that of Tannhäuser were taken by accomplished Wagnerians from the regional company. Among these, special note should be made of the performance of the soprano Aile Asszonyi whose assumption of the roles of both Venus and Elisabeth was a tour de force. The Tannhäuser was a seasoned dramatic tenor from the Finnish National Opera, Jyrki Anttila, who turned in a thrillingly sung and acted complete portrayal. The opera house chorus is renowned in the Baltic region and, as evidenced by this performance, justifiably so. Conductor Vello Pähn led a secure performance of the Dresden version of the score with standard cuts in Acts I and II, but also omitting Elisabeth's Act III Prayer, 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau'. Doubtless this was done to tighten the drama and to spare the soprano doing double duty in this production, but it was still musically regrettable even if it did no harm to the action. All in all, this was an exemplary 'Wagner Night'.

How especially poignant to see this production just as news reached us of the horror in Charleston, South Carolina, as yet again murderous xenophobia was unleashed while a community could only offer its pilgrim's chorus of benediction over the victims but no demonstration of change. It reminded us of the eternal relevance of Wagner's work. The final chords of *Tannhäuser* have always hung in the air as a great musical question mark, but never more so than on that evening. Will the Wartburg eventually embrace all aspects of the human experience? Will we? The question remains as our common human journey is not yet completed. Perhaps Wagner did not still owe us a *Tannhäuser* as he famously claimed; perhaps instead we still owe each other an answer to the question he posed with this opera and that Daniel Slater and his team so brilliantly illuminated.

