



Wagner's *Tannhäuser*

Much has been written about the disastrous presentation of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in Paris, 1861, which was withdrawn after only three performances. I have therefore transcribed an eyewitness account from the music correspondent of the "London Daily News", dated April 18, 1861, in an attempt to set the record straight.

"The mere fact that a work of R. Wagner, a foreigner, has been admitted at the great Paris Opera, while French aspirants are in vain waiting for that honor, has created for its author a host of enemies. The most virulent group against the unfortunate German maestro consists of the greater number of opera attendees, called legitimists, who are accustomed to enter the Opera-house after their dinner, just at the second act, when, for the benefit of their digestion, they require immediately the spectacle of the ballet, which is more gratifying to their taste than the most beautiful music. Though an imperial establishment, this part of the Opera's business is chiefly supported by the so called "Jockey Club", consisting precisely of the above named legitimists – hopeful descendants of the old names with which the great French revolution knew how to deal. They pay from their private purse the officially poorly paid ladies of the ballet; and, in return, feel themselves lords of the Opera house, and peremptorily demand the ballet as soon as they make their appearance, after which they descend to make their verbal criticisms on the stage behind the scenes.

Now, poor Mr. Wagner conceived the unfortunate idea of refusing to split the unity of his dramatic composition to please these admirers of Terpsichore, and for this the punishment of the obstinate composer was decided long before the first performance of the work.

Rarely had the house presented so brilliant an aspect as on the evening of the 13th of March. It was crammed in every corner; tickets had been bought at enormous prices; thousands of persons refused admittance; the most elegant of beauty, rank and fashion,

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all were assembled. The overture, already established as a major work in the musical world, earned warm applause, and the first part of the first act passed without interruption; a burst of laughter and loud talking after the change of the first scene was attributed to the appearance on the stage of a shepherd boy with his runic pipe, which seemed to create hilarity; this ceased, however at the moment the Emperor entered his box, and was received with the usual "Vive l'Empereur."

At the finale of the second act, after the audience had given many signs of genuine satisfaction, the cabal, fearing a complete success (for the third act had created great enthusiasm at the rehearsals), broke into fury, and with roars of laughter, whistling, talking, and hissing, interrupted the performance of what, properly executed, would be the most exquisite production both of genius and art. The third act passed in a confusion of discordant sounds caused by the cabal, and deafening applause from the other side. It was impossible to enjoy or judge the music, and the presence of the Emperor, who appeared indignant at the interruption, imposed no restraint. However, the conspirators failed to prevent the conclusion of the opera; it was performed to the last note, and the singers were called forward.

The second and third performances were distinguished by demonstrations worthy of a street mob of the lowest class, but in truth emanating from the flower of the French aristocracy. Young dukes and marquises, not ashamed of their own disgrace before the elite of Parisian society, sat in groups of five or six in one box with whistles in their gloved hands, which they employed as if they were in reality what they call themselves as members of their club. They could not, with all their efforts procure the fall of the curtain, as the applause of the better part of the public augmented with their indignation at the disturbance. It is astonishing that the police did not interfere to protect, in a public place of amusement, the quiet of 3,000 persons who desired to listen."

*Peter Dundas for the Opera Guild of Rochester
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