

1 Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

- “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg” is Wagner’s longest opera and still the second most performed Wagner opera at the MET. It was telecast worldwide on December 13, 2014 with Michael Volle as ‘Sachs’, Johan Botha as ‘Walther’ and Annette Dasch as ‘Eva’. The conductor was James Levine.
- It was the 36th performance of the original 1993 Otto Schenk and Gunter Schnieder-Siemssen’s picture-book production and a graceful retirement to make way for the new 2013 Stefan Herheim production from the Salzburg Festival, where Michael Volle was so successful as Sachs.
- “Die Meistersinger” centers on the historical character, Hans Sachs, the most famous of the mastersingers of Nuremberg.

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- Walther, the young lovelorn Franconian nobleman has to win the Meistersinger’s prize in order to marry Eva Pogner, the beautiful young daughter of one of the members of the Meistersingers’ Guild, sung by Annette Dasch.
- So, why am I giving this lecture; an almost impossible task of showing and sharing with you in two hours, why I think this opera is so good?
- There are now about 20 DVD performances available of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg; I have watched twelve of them in order to choose the one for this lecture. There are three main characters in the opera, which centers on Hans Sachs, the leader of the Meistersinger Guild in Nürnberg in the 17th Century. He is a widower, aged about 45 and has known Eva since she was a child, now the beautiful 18 year old daughter of Viet Pogner, one of the Meistersingers. Sachs secretly loves Eva.
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- The opera starts when Walther, a young Franconian knight in his twenties, meets Eva, and they both fall in love.
- Many audio recordings have singers who have mastered these demanding vocal roles, leaving to the imagination of the listener, all the actions of the opera. Watching the DVDs, of so many different performances, quickly made me realize that body shape and acting are as important as an accurate and beautiful voice. A 50 year old Walther weighing 300 pounds wooing a 40 year old Eva weighing 200 pounds, both with excellent voices, doesn’t make it for me.
- In this lecture I will first tell you something about how, when and why this opera was written and composed, relying on letters written by Wagner and others at that time, together with books published before 1924 by music and opera experts of the day.

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- The video clips, which will consume about 73 minutes, are selected from the 2011 Glyndebourne production directed by Sir David McVicar, with Gerald Finley as Sachs, Marco Jentzsch as Walther and Anna Gabler as Eva. Mr McVicar has moved the action of the opera from the 17th to the mid 19th century, the time in which it was composed.
- Richard Wagner began writing this opera in 1845. He writes in Volume 2 of “Mein Leben” (“My Life”), published in 1872 that it was a hot summer that year.
- “Full of hope, I started in July on my holiday, which consisted of a journey to Marienbad in Bohemia, where my wife and I intended to take the waters. It was a marvelous summer, almost too hot, and I was therefore in high spirits. I intended to abandon myself to a life

of utmost leisure, as is, in any case, essential when undergoing the exhausting regime of a cure.

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- I had therefore chosen my summer reading with care, taking with me the poems of Wolfram von Eschenbach, as well as the anonymous epic, Lohengrin. With a book under my arm I took myself to the seclusion of the neighboring woods, where I would lie beside a brook communing with Titirel and Parzival, in this strange and yet so intimately appealing poem of Wolfram.
- However, remembering the doctor's advice, I struggled bravely against the temptation of writing down my ideas, and resorted to a most curious and strenuous means to that end. From a few remarks in Gervinus's "History of German Literature" (1842), I had formed a particularly vivid picture of Hans Sachs and the mastersingers of Nuremberg. I was especially intrigued by the institution of the 'marker' and his function in rating mastersongs.

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- Without, as yet, knowing anything more about Sachs and his poetic contemporaries, I conceived, during a walk, a comic scene in which the popular artisan-poet, by hammering upon his cobbler's last, gives the marker, who is obliged by circumstances to sing in his presence, his comeuppance, for previous pedantic misdeeds during official singing contests, by inflicting upon him a lesson of his own."
- Wagner also drew his information as to the manners and customs of the mastersingers from the principal source, a book written by Johann Christoph Wagenseil, Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Altdorf, and published in 1697.
- Not only did the Wagner find his facts there, but he took from the volume also the names of his characters, for Veit Pagner, Fritz Kothner, Conrad Nachtigall, Balthasar Zorn, Sixtus Beckmesser, and the rest of Wagner's mastersingers.

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- Beckmesser, who appears as the "low comedian" of Wagner's work, seems to have been a worthy, though prosaic person in his time. He was certainly not a butt of derision, such as Wagner's character becomes through his own stupidity and vanity. You will hear more of this when I describe the synopsis and the individual video clips.
- The first draft of "Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg" is dated 16 July 1845. Wagner continues in "Mein Leben", "In mid-August we traveled back to Dresden."
- Meistersinger was then put aside and it was not until 1861 that Wagner revised the original draft. As usual he was deep in debt and needed to raise funds. On 30 October 1861 he writes to his publisher, B Schott's Sohne in Mainz
- "I have a desire to make a start upon some easier work (easier than "Tristan und Isolde"), which will be less exhausting and therefore quicker to complete.

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- The opera is called "Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg", and the main hero is the jovially poetic "Hans Sachs". The subject is exceptionally rich in good-natured drollery, and I pride myself that with this original plan, which is entirely my own invention, I have hit upon something quite unexpected and singular.

- The style of the piece, both in the poem and the music, shall be thoroughly light and popular, and a guarantee of its rapid diffusion to all the other theatres is the fact that on this occasion I need neither a so-called leading tenor nor a great tragic soprano"
- He goes on to ask for money, which is rejected by Schott in a telegram, at least until they could see the score.
- Wagner had completed "Tristan und Isolde" in August 1859 and was having a series of problems in mounting a premiere.

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- His first effort, therefore, was to get "Tristan und Isolde" produced and, to his great joy, the manager of the Vienna Opera accepted the score.
- The rehearsals began in the fall, but the tenor, Alois Ander, was taken sick, and the whole winter was lost. When the work was resumed, it dragged along at a snail's pace, and finally, after fifty-four rehearsals, the drama was abandoned as impossible. Ander, the Tristan, told Dr. Hanslick, the opera critic who was opposed to Wagner's new ideas published in "Opera and Drama", "that as fast as he learned one act he forgot another".
- While the Viennese were floundering, Wagner needed to earn more money, and so he arranged a concert tour.
- It began in the winter of 1862. Wagner travelled to Germany and even into Russia, where he received substantial funds.

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- He was in Moscow when he learned that the rehearsals of "Tristan und Isolde" had been abandoned in Vienna.
- It should be realized that in 1863, while he was still wandering about giving these concerts, he was fifty years old. Although he was convinced that he had created immortal works, he was stared at by people wherever he went as a freak and a madman, and was caricatured and ridiculed by almost the whole press of Europe. And all this because he had dared to say that an opera was a poetic drama, and should be so written, so performed, and so received by the public.
- Richard Wagner had published his theories in a book called "Opera and Drama" in 1850. Eduard Hanslick, the leading music critic of the day and Wagner's nemesis, had published his own ideas in "The Beautiful in Music" in 1854, which were generally accepted by most music lovers in mid-19th Century.

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- It was in these years of hardship, sorrow, and discouragement that Wagner wrote the text of his most humorous work. He took up and completed the book of "Die Meistersinger," of which he had made a sketch in 1845. This work was done in Paris during the winter of 1861-62. The text was published, or rather printed for circulation among his friends, in 1862.
- The copyright of the drama was sold to Messrs. Schott, of Mainz, and in November 1862 Wagner went first to Biebrich, a little town across the river Rhein from Mainz, and then, in May 1863, to Penzing, near Vienna, to compose the music. It was at this time that Wagner's affairs, both financial and marital, sank into such a state that he was overwhelmed. He decided to go to Russia and remain there the rest of his life. But first he had to finish the score of "Die Meistersinger."

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- He wrote to his old friend, Madame Wille, at Zurich, and asked her to receive him for a

short time. She agreed and made ready for the great man to arrive. However, she realized that all Wagner's doings and sayings would have historical importance, so she made notes from which she afterward published a valuable article.

- From this we learn that the great musician, while in her home, was the prey of conflicting emotions and was most frequently plunged in despair. He had a deep and passionate conviction of his own powers. He was inspired with an absolute surety of the worldwide glorification that would come to his name, once his works were adequately known.
- And because of this he suffered agonies of mind and heart while the scores lay silent in his desk.

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- He cried out against the stinginess of a world which refused him a few luxuries when he was preparing joy for so many thousands. He felt that the time would come when the world would be ready to heap all kinds of honors on his head, but he feared that it would come too late.
- Yet in this state of mind he couldn't sleep. He worked unceasingly at the score of "Die Meistersinger," and, according to Mme. Wille's own account, "with a perfect satisfaction as to its greatness."
- One day, while at the Willes' home, Wagner received word that his Viennese creditors were on his track, and he resolved to go away. He was at his lowest ebb, for everywhere "Tristan" was pronounced impossible, and "Die Meistersinger" was refused before the score was seen.

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- He went to Stuttgart with the vain hope that he could arrange for the performance of some of his operas there and thus earn enough to stave off misfortune for a time.
- Then, at last, a miracle happened! Now, his scores would sound and the world would learn the true might of Richard Wagner.
- There was a young prince of Bavaria, who was captivated by Wagner's works and who worshipped the master in secret. At fifteen he had heard "Lohengrin," and, like all whose operatic experience began with Wagner, he had become an ardent Wagnerite.
- He had watched his idol's career of misfortune but was unable to help him until, quite suddenly, his father died and this young prince became King Ludwig II.

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- One of his first acts was to send a messenger to bid Wagner come to his capital and complete the majestic labors of his life in peace.
 - On May 4, 1864 Wagner wrote to Frau Wille, "He wants me to be with him always, to work, to rest, to produce my works; he will give me everything I need; I am to finish my Nibelungen and he will have them performed as I wish, have whatever I need, if only I stay with him.
 - I am to be my own unrestricted master; not Kapellmeister - nothing but myself and his friend. All troubles are to be taken from me; I shall have whatever I need, if only I stay with him."
- And the rest is history!

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- The full score of "Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg" was completed 24 October 1867 and the opera was first performed in Munich on 21 June 1868.
- The production was sponsored by King Ludwig II and the conductor was Hans von Bülow.
- Franz Strauss, the father of the composer Richard Strauss played the French horn at the premiere, despite his often-expressed dislike of Wagner, who was present at many of the

rehearsals. Wagner's frequent interruptions and digressions made rehearsals a very long-winded affair.

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- After one 5 hour rehearsal, Franz Strauss led a strike by the orchestra, saying that he could not play anymore. Despite these problems, the premiere was a triumph, and the opera was hailed as one of Wagner's most successful works.
- At the end of the first performance, the audience called for Wagner, who appeared at the front of the Royal box, which he had been sharing with King Ludwig. Wagner bowed to the crowd, breaking court protocol, which dictated that only the monarch could address an audience from the box.

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SYNOPSIS

- All video clips are taken from the 2011 Glyndebourne performance, directed by Sir David McVicar and conducted by Vladimir Jurowski
- Act 1
- Scene 1: Interior of St. Katherine's Church in Nuremberg
- After a magnificent orchestral prelude, Mass is just ending with Luther's hymn "Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam" as Walther von Stolzing, a young knight from Franconia addresses Eva Pogner, whom he had met earlier, and asks her if she is engaged to anyone. Eva has fallen in love with Walther at first sight, but she informs him that her father, the goldsmith and mastersinger Veit Pogner, has arranged to give her hand in marriage to the winner of the guild's song contest on St. John's Day (Midsummer's Day), tomorrow.

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- Eva's maid, Magdalena, induces David, Hans Sachs' apprentice, to tell Walther about the mastersingers' art.
 - The hope is for Walther to qualify as a mastersinger during their Guild meeting, traditionally held in the church after mass, and thus earn a place in the song contest despite his utter ignorance of the Guild's rules and conventions.
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- Scene 2
 - As the other apprentices set up the church for the meeting, David warns Walther, that it is not easy to become a mastersinger; it takes many years of learning and practice. David gives a confusing lecture on the mastersingers' rules for composing and singing. (Many of the tunes he describes were real master-tunes from the period.)

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- In the first video clip, starting at this point in the action, Walther is exasperated and says to David, "Heaven help us, how many more rules!" David, sung by Topi Lehtipuu, tries to explain to Walther, sung by Marco Jentsch, that there are many strict rules for composition and singing. Walther is confused, but is determined to try for a place in the Guild anyway.

• CLIP 1

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- Scene 3

- The first mastersingers file into the church, including Eva's wealthy father Veit Pogner and the town clerk Beckmesser, who is a clever technical singer and expects to win the contest without opposition.
- He is distressed to see that Walther is Pogner's guest and who also intends to enter the contest. In the following video clip, Beckmesser, sung by Johannes Martin Kranzle, the same person as in the recent MET production, is dressed in a black frock coat and Pogner, sung by Alastair Miles, is seen taking snuff.
- At the end of the clip you will see that the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs, the Guild's leader, joins the assembly. This character is based on an actual historical figure: Hans Sachs (1494–1576), the most famous of the historical mastersingers.
- CLIP 2

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- Meanwhile, Pogner introduces Walther to the other mastersingers as they arrive. Fritz Kothner the baker, sung by Henry Waddington, serving as chairman of this meeting, calls the roll. Pogner, addressing the assembly, announces his offer of his daughter's hand for the winner of the song contest.
- CLIP 3
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- When Hans Sachs argues that Eva ought to have a say in the matter, Pogner agrees that Eva may refuse the winner of the contest, but she must still marry a mastersinger.
- Another suggestion by Sachs, that the townspeople, rather than the masters, should be called upon to judge the winner of the contest, is squelched by the other masters.
- Pogner formally introduces Walther as a candidate for admission into the Guild of Mastersingers. The next video clip starts where Walther is questioned by Kothner about his background.
- Walther states that his teacher in poetry was Walther von der Vogelweide, whose works he studied in his own private library in Franconia and his teachers in music were the birds and nature itself.

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- Walther explains that he was self-taught.
- There is much opposition from the masters, even though Sachs tries to keep an open mind in support of Walther
- Kothner then asks Walther, "Are you ready to show us if you can create a 'mastersong' set to your own words and melody now at this very moment?"
- Walther makes a valiant attempt, but the masters show their disapproval by moving to the right hand side of the assembly, leaving only a few masters, including Sachs, on the left.
- Beckmesser is irritated and tries to lobby the guild against Walther but, reluctantly the masters agree to admit him, provided he can perform a mastersong of his own composition that is officially judged by the 'Marker' process.
- CLIP 4

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- For the formal singing application, Walther chooses "love" as the topic for his song and therefore is to be judged by Beckmesser alone, the "Marker" of the guild for worldly matters.
- Walther launches into a novel 'free-form' tune, breaking all the mastersingers' rules, and

his song is constantly interrupted by the scratch of Beckmesser's chalk on his chalkboard, maliciously noting one violation after another.

- When Beckmesser has completely covered the slate with symbols of Walther's errors, he interrupts the song and argues that there is no point in finishing it. Sachs tries to convince the masters to let Walther continue, but Beckmesser sarcastically tells Sachs to stop trying to set policy and instead, to finish making his (Beckmesser's) new shoes, which are overdue.

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- The rest of the masters reject the knight, bringing Act 1 to a spirited and noisy conclusion, that only Wagner could write and which I would enjoy bringing to you, but have not enough time.
- Act 2
- Scene 1
- Evening in a Nuremberg street, at the corner between Pogner's house and cobbler Hans Sachs' workshop
- David informs Magdalena of Walther's failure. In her disappointment, Magdalena leaves without giving David the food she had brought for him. This arouses the derision of the other apprentices, and David is about to turn on them when Sachs arrives and hustles his apprentice into the workshop.

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- Scene 2
- Pogner arrives with Eva, engaging in a roundabout conversation: Eva is hesitant to ask about the outcome of Walther's application, and Pogner has private doubts about whether it was wise to offer his daughter's hand in marriage for the song contest.
- As they enter their house, Magdalena appears and tells Eva about the rumors of Walther's failure. Eva decides to ask Sachs about the matter.
- Scene 3
- As twilight falls, Hans Sachs takes a seat in front of his house to work on a new pair of shoes for Beckmesser. He muses on Walther's song, which has made a deep impression on him.
- Scene 4
- Eva approaches Sachs, and they discuss tomorrow's song contest. Eva is not enthusiastic about Beckmesser, who appears to be the only eligible contestant.
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- The next video clip starts when Eva hints that she would not mind if Sachs, a widower, were to win the contest.
- Though touched, Sachs protests that he would be too old a husband for her. Upon further prompting, Sachs relates Walther's failure at the guild meeting.
- This causes Eva to storm off angrily, confirming Sachs' suspicion that she has fallen in love with Walther.
- CLIP 5
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- Eva is intercepted by Magdalena, who informs her that Beckmesser is coming to serenade

her. Eva, determined to search for Walther, tells Magdalena to pose as Eva at the bedroom window for the unwelcome serenade.

- Scene 5
- Just as Eva is about to leave, Walther appears. He tells her that he has been rejected by the mastersingers, and the two prepare to elope. However, Sachs has overheard their plans. As they are passing by, he illuminates the street with his lantern, forcing them to hide in the shadow of Pogner's house. Walther makes up his mind to confront Sachs, but is interrupted by the arrival of Beckmesser.
- Scene 6
- As Eva and Walther retreat further into the shadows, Beckmesser begins his serenade.

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- Sachs interrupts him by launching into a full-bellied cobbling song, and hammering the soles of the half-made shoes. Annoyed, Beckmesser tells Sachs to stop, but the cobbler replies that he has to finish the shoes, whose lateness Beckmesser had publicly complained about in act 1. Sachs offers a compromise: he will be quiet and let Beckmesser sing, but he (Sachs) will be Beckmesser's "Marker", and mark each of Beckmesser's musical/poetical errors by striking one of the soles with his hammer.
- Unfortunately, this very comical scene, mentioned in Wagner's letter at the beginning of this lecture, cannot be shown here today.
- Beckmesser, who has spotted someone at Eva's window (Magdalena in disguise), has no time to argue.

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- He tries to sing his serenade, but he makes so many mistakes (his tune repeatedly places accents on the wrong syllables of the words) that from the repeated knocks Sachs finishes the shoes.
- David wakes up and sees Beckmesser apparently serenading Magdalena. He attacks Beckmesser in a fit of jealous rage.
- The entire neighborhood is awakened by the noise. The other apprentices rush into the fray, and the situation degenerates into a full-blown riot. In the confusion, Walther tries to escape with Eva, but Sachs pushes Eva into her home and drags Walther into his own workshop. Quiet is restored as abruptly as it was broken. A lone figure walks through the street – the night watchman, calling out the hour.
- This lengthy boisterous melee is a spectacle not to be missed but you will have to forgive me that it is not part of my video clips, due to time constraints.
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- Act 3
- Scene 1: Sachs' workshop
- As morning dawns, Sachs is reading a large book. Lost in thought, he does not respond as David returns from delivering Beckmesser's shoes. David finally manages to attract his master's attention, and they discuss the upcoming festivities – it is St. John's day, Hans Sachs' name day! David recites his verses for Sachs, and leaves to prepare for the festival.
- The next video clip is the first monologue sung by, in my opinion, the most believable Sachs I've heard and seen on DVD, played by Gerald Finley.
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- Alone, Sachs ponders last night's riot. "Madness! Madness! Everywhere madness!" His attempt to prevent an elopement had ended in shocking violence. Nevertheless, he is resolved to make madness work for him today. He will do all he can to help Eva and Walther.

- CLIP 5A

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- Scene 2

- Sachs gives Walther an interactive lesson on the history and philosophy of music and mastersinging, and teaches him to moderate his singing according to the spirit, if not the strict letter of the masters' rules. Walther demonstrates his understanding by composing two sections of a new Prize Song in a more acceptable style than his previous effort from Act 1. Sachs writes down the new verses as Walther sings them. A final section remains to be composed, but Walther is tired of words. The two men leave the room to dress for the festival. CLIP 6

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- Scene 3
- Beckmesser, sung by Johannes Martin Kranzle, still sore from his drubbing the night before, enters the workshop. He spots the verses of the Prize Song, written in Sachs' handwriting, and infers that Sachs is secretly planning to enter the contest for Eva's hand.
- The cobbler re-enters the room and Beckmesser confronts him with the verses.
- The next video clip starts when Sachs declares that he has no intention of wooing Eva, and denies having written the song (although he admits that the handwriting is his, because Beckmesser asks in general terms if the lyrics are his but he uses the word 'hand', which, in German, stands both for handwriting and for work). He gives the manuscript to Beckmesser as a gift.

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- He promises never to claim the song for his own, and warns Beckmesser that it is a very difficult song to interpret and sing. Beckmesser, his confidence restored by the prospect of using verses written by the famous Hans Sachs, ignores the warning and rushes off to prepare for the song contest. Sachs smiles at Beckmesser's foolishness but expresses hope that Beckmesser will learn to be better in the future.
- CLIP 7

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- Scene 4
- Eva arrives at the workshop. She is looking for Walther, but pretends to have complaints about a shoe that Sachs made for her. Sachs realizes that the shoe is a perfect fit, but pretends to set about altering the stitching.
- As he works, he tells Eva that he has just heard a beautiful song, lacking only an ending. Eva cries out as Walther enters the room, splendidly attired for the festival, and sings the third and final section of the Prize Song.
- The couple are overwhelmed with gratitude for Sachs, and Eva asks Sachs to forgive her

for having manipulated his feelings.

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- The next video clip starts where the cobbler brushes them off with bantering complaints about his lot as a shoemaker, poet, and widower.
- At last, however, he admits to Eva that, despite his feelings for her, he is resolved to avoid the fate of King Marke, a reference to the subject of another Wagner opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, in which an old man tries to marry a much-younger woman, thus conferring his blessing upon the lovers.
- CLIP 8

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- David and Magdalena appear. Sachs announces to the group that a new mastersong has been born, which, following the rules of the mastersingers, is to be baptized. As an apprentice cannot serve as a witness for the baptism, he promotes David to the rank of journeyman with the traditional cuff on the ear.
- He then christens the Prize Song the "Morning Dream Song". After celebrating their good fortune with an extended quintet, the group departs for the festival.
- It is interesting to note the Wagner interjects part of Brunnhilde's love theme, from Act 3 of his "*Siegfried*", just before Eva starts singing in the beautiful quintet. Wagner had just returned to composing *Siegfried* at the same time as composing *Meistersinger*.
- CLIP 9
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- Scene 5: The meadow near the Pegnitz River
- The feast of St. John is taking place. The various guilds hold their processions, culminating in the arrival of the mastersingers. The crowd sings the praises of Hans Sachs, the most beloved and famous of the mastersingers.
- The prize contest begins. Beckmesser attempts to sing the verses that he had obtained from Sachs. However, he garbles the words and fails to fit them to an appropriate melody, and ends up singing so clumsily that the crowd laughs him off.
- Before storming off in anger, he yells that the song was not even his; Hans Sachs tricked him into singing it. The crowd is confused—how could the great Hans Sachs have written such a bad song?
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- Sachs explains that the song is not his own, and also that it is in fact a beautiful song which the masters will love, when they hear it sung correctly. To prove this, he calls a witness: Walther. The people are so curious about the song that they allow Walther to sing it.
- The next video clip starts where Walther sings the conclusion of his prize song. Everyone is won over in spite of the song's novelty. They declare Walther the winner, and the mastersingers want to make him a member of their guild on the spot.
- CLIP 10
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