

UDK 782.01

DOI: 10.4312/mz.50.2.231-237

Sanna Iitti

Samostojna raziskovalka, Helsinki
Independent Research Professor, Helsinki

The Dionysian signs in Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*

Dionizična znamenja v operi *Tannhäuser* Richarda Wagnerja

Prejeto: 31. december 2012
Sprejeto: 27. marca 2013

Received: 31st December 2012
Accepted: 27th March 2013

Ključne besede: Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, dionizična znamenja, glasbena semiotika, libido

Keywords: Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, Dionysian signs, musical semiotics, libido

IZVLEČEK

ABSTRACT

Prispevek obravnava dionizične znake v operi *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* Richarda Wagnerja, pri čemer se osredotoča na Venerino arietto "Geliebter! Komm". Metodološko želi predstaviti semiotško analizo glasbenih toposov. Njegova teza je, da pastoralni slog ariette vzpostavlja lirično dionizično znamenje.

The article discusses Dionysian signs in Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, focusing on Venus's arietta "Geliebter! Komm". The method exemplifies musical topics' semiotic analysis. It is proposed that the arietta's pastoral style constitutes a lyric Dionysian sign.

1. Introduction

Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*¹ reveals one aspect of the composer's romantic fantasy about the Dionysus cult. Bacchus's worship fuses with that of Venus in the opera. I shall examine signs therein that one can deem as Dionysian, focusing on lyrical points. The sign conception that I involve could be characterized as an outgrowth of that which Leonard G. Ratner developed and the analysis of musical topics (topoi) is central to it.²

Wagner's autobiography reveals that antique art and religion had inspired him already in his youth. Accordingly, it is perhaps not surprising that *Tannhäuser* puts forth

1 *Tannhäuser*'s first version was premiered in Dresden on October 19, 1845. The focus of this article is the opera's Paris version, however, that received its premiere on March 13, 1861.

2 Ratner's notion of musical signs comprises a distinction between musical types and styles (see Ratner 1985, pp. 9–30).

ideas about old Roman religion. These have not been thoroughly explained, however. Ernest Newman discusses the techniques, by which Wagner created a Bacchanal for *Tannhäuser's* first Act, and his analysis provides the outset of my scrutiny of the Dionysian signs. In his account of this scene, Newman distinguishes altogether seven motives that first occur in the Overture and then outline the Venus Mountain's seductions and the Dionysian dancing there (Newman 1991 [1949], 68-69).

The Bacchanal is a pantomime scene that was choreographed by Marius Petipa, as *Tannhäuser* was first performed in Paris. Despite the wishes of the Paris Opera, this scene was never developed into a proper ballet. Wagner expanded Venus's part, however, that is more fully developed in the opera's Paris version than in the earlier one.

Classical literature influenced Wagner a great deal and the poetry of authors such as Ovid and Theocritus had fascinated him since his student days. His fantasies about pagan religion in *Tannhäuser* arose from his relentless study of the Classical Times. Besides, topics related to antiquity had often been explored in French-styled operas that had inspired him. Wagner's intimate knowledge of Gasparo Spontini's *La Vestale* that he had directed at the Dresden Court Opera, as he was completing *Tannhäuser's* first version, seems in particular to have encouraged his imaginings for the stage.³

The motives that one may entitle as the "Venus Mountain" or the Bacchic motives are characteristically short and apposite.⁴ The Bacchanal scene revolves around the dynamic development of these motives and this section presents brisk characters. Wagner outlined the motion involved in the parentheses, calling forth satyrs', fauns' as well as bacchant's wild, ecstatic revealing. But some of the Dionysian signs in *Tannhäuser* are more lyrical by nature and encode aspects about the pastorelle tradition. I shall shed light on such signs besides their relation to musical gestures.

I regard musical gestures as a means for creating referential meanings in music, song and opera in particular. Vocal music represents gender, sex and also different aspects of sexuality thereby. In analysing those gestures, my stance is based on style analysis. I propose two categories for musical gestures by distinguishing socially performative and libidinal gestures.⁵

In operatic works, gestures related to the libido - that is, libidinal gestures - often suggest its positive manifestations but quite as often convey something about desire's suppression. In *Tannhäuser*, the libido's denial is very much at stake. Accordingly, I shall present examples of vocal gestures that express desire's rejection aside with discussing the Dionysian signs of lyrical kind.

3 I have proposed elsewhere that Spontini's choices for the props of Venus's temple in Dresden had encouraged the conception of the Venus Mountain's subterranean grotto that Wagner had developed. See my abstract submitted to the congress "The Staging of Verdi & Wagner Operas" (Pistoia, Italy, September 13-15, 2013), organized by Roberto Illiano, Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini, Lucca.

4 According to Newman, seven motives altogether outline the Venus Mountain (see Newman 1991 [1949], pp. 68-69). Yet due to its straightforward and victorious character, the sixth one - motive No. 8 in Newman's presentation - ought to be associated with the opera's hero, Tannhäuser, only. Unlike the other Venus Mountain motives, the sixth one develops into a lengthy and broadly arching melody. It is appealing with a triumphant character. Tannhäuser's song "Dir töne Lob!" in Act I, Scene 2 in praise of Venus opens by this motive.

5 See Iitti, 2006.

2. The Exotic Venus

Wagner imagined the Venus Mountain as an idyllic rural landscape, which he described in the score in detail for instance by mentioning particular colours. Conventional pastorale topics - styles and figuration - lie behind the treatment in the arietta “Geliebter! Komm”, which Venus presents in the first Act (Act I, Scene 2, *Andante*) following Tannhäuser’s claim of freedom from her service. This arietta is based on the seventh of the Venus Mountain motives that Newman distinguishes (see Example 1).



Example 1: Leitmotif “Geliebter! Komm”

Cited in Richard Wagner, Tannhäuser, edited by Felix Mottl, Edition Peters Nr. 8217 (Frankfurt, London, New York: C. F Peters, 1974), p. 48.

The key is F major, the traditional key of pastorale compositions, and “Geliebter! Komm” also puts forth traits common in 17th- and 18th-century pastorale scenes, such as an opening by the tonic chord’s prolongation as well as a translucent and ornamental accompaniment texture based on broken chords. These progress slowly as performed by the strings and the high woodwinds besides the horn.

Venus does her best in trying to seduce Tannhäuser. She describes the grotto’s idyllic surroundings that invite one to love and erotic enjoyment. As she refers to the Venus Mountain’s gods and their residence, the grotto, by the lines “Komm, sieh’ dort die Grotte” and “[Entzücken] bö’t selbst einem Gotte...” her broadly-arching phrases are coloured by an exotic flavour induced by the passing use of the whole-and-half-tone scale: with the exception of c, the dominant of F major, the melody moves along an octatonic scale at these two points (see Wagner 1961, pp. 860-863).

This provides a tense timbre for the filling of the third a-flat - c-flat by a quick step-wise progression. Besides, the melody is full of tension right at the arietta’s opening, something due to the use of a diminished fifth as the descending leap that completes the initial leap c - f upwards. Venus is portrayed as a deviant being by these details that also suggest her increasing anxiety or even hidden anger.

The fact that her existence is based on the libido - on love and erotic yearning - is generally paralleled by melodic writing that is rich with chromatically descending motives plus unstable, quickly shifting tonal relations. This becomes apparent following Tannhäuser's bid "Göttin, laß mich zieh'n" - Goddess, set me free - in the *Sehr bewegt* section in Act I, Scene 2 and thereafter.

Tannhäuser's parts are throughout the opera characterized by bright, diatonic melodies and simple harmonic structures. But the harmonic and melodic progressions that Wagner composed for Venus render her as a being genuinely different from Tannhäuser and the other characters, who are all rooted to the Christian community.

To summarize: the pastorale style that this arietta presents constitutes one Dionysian sign, which is lyric. The basing of the melody's core on the unusual octatonic scale, often associated with Oriental issues in 19th-century music, bestows the subtle pastorale character an exotic timbre. This choice aptly stresses Venus's strangeness for the Christians.

3. The Revengeful Goddess

Venus aspires to keep Tannhäuser as her worshipper by every possible mean. Her subtle persuasions are paralleled by her caressing gestures. She grants him the freedom to leave, but as it becomes clear that their disagreement cannot be settled, her anger bursts out in a demonic manner.

Venus thus intimidates Tannhäuser upon his departure from the Venus Mountain by claiming that he will only encounter coldness, as he returns to the world of human beings. She believes that he will come back to the Venus Mountain, longing for his past bliss and begging for a reentry to her realm. Her lines, which start by the words "Oh! Could you but find her who once smiled to you!" ("O! fändest du sie wieder, die einst dir gelächelt!") in Act I, Scene 2, build on vocal gestures (see Example 2).

The progression, which starts at this point, is characterized by the subtle fluctuation of tempi. The two phrases that Example 2 presents stand out as vocal gestures. The melodic leap from *f* downwards onto the *a*-flat at the outset of the second phrase, which is a restatement of the first one, together with the *piano pianissimo* by which the phrase opens create a capricious and sudden accent. This is due to the fact that both the leap downwards and the quick switch to the soft tone volume follow a *crescendo* that ends the first phrase.

A similarly capricious effect occurs at the end of the second phrase as the violins switch from *pp* to *ff* upon starting the thirty-two-note quintuplet that finishes the phrase. The style germinating in this passage points to the later Schönbergian speech song (*Sprechgesang*), putting forth traits akin to those that prevail in many expressionistic vocal compositions that were created at the outset of the 20th century.

The first Venus on the stage, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, apparently inspired much of *Tannhäuser* at its earliest stages, as Laurence Dreyfus has suggested (Dreyfus 2010, 77). One indeed senses repercussions of her melodramatic vocal performance style in *Tannhäuser*, something that Wagner also described in his autobiography.⁶

6 See Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben. Erste authentische Veröffentlichung* (München: Paul List Verlag, 1963), p. 46 and *Mein Leben. Vollständige Ausgabe*, ed. Eike Middell, vol. I, Sammlung Dieterich Bands 119 (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1986), pp. 328–329.

un poco ritenuto
plus lent

Haupt zur Er - de:
Haut la té - re:

„O! fan - dest du sie wie - Ge, die einst dir ge - li - chalt! ach!
„Ah! si je re - frou - ois - so hoch - fe, sou - ven - ir - re, Ad -

pp sehr matt

E. K. 4850

913

off - ne - te sie dir wie - der die Tu - ge ih - rer Wun - nen!
Inst! si je pou - vois - ren - der die Ter - res d'asson em - pi - ve!”

Example 2: The “demonic” Venus: Act I, Scene 2 (un poco ritenuto)

Cited in Richard Wagner, Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg, ed. Max Hochkofler (Switzerland: Edition Eulenburg, 1961), pp. 912–913.

Venus’s increasing anxiety motivates those particularly expressive phrases. These vocal gestures are in much based on the composer’s working on descending motives, which are permeated by dense chromaticism. Tannhäuser rejects her love that no longer has a meaning for him. This means that the libido will be denied. As the libido is the ground of Venus’s existence, she is enraged.

But Venus’s pride overcomes her possessive affection: she will not deprive Tannhäuser of his freedom, although his desire to leave invokes a truly revengeful mood in her. She thus curses the whole mankind in a raging manner, retorting her offence. Her part at that point is characterized by plain melodic figuration. The forceful restatement of particular pitches, such as d-flat and e, is central to it. Although there is no direct quotation, her fierce manner owes much to that of Queen of the Night in W. A. Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. Both the cursing Venus and the dagger-bearing Queen are featured so as to resemble the bacchantes-turned-into-furies of antique tragedies.

The curse is slightly more concise in the Paris version as compared with the Dresden one. It addresses the curse to the humankind (“Menschengeschlecht”), whereas the Paris version to the entire world. As Venus declares, “...If you do not return to me, / then let the whole world lie under a curse / and for ever be a desert / from which the

goddess fled!"⁷ But the curse is essentially the same in the opera's both versions: Venus suggests in each that if Tannhäuser will not return to her, she will leave the world and turn it void.

Venus reveals her ability to destruct by this turn. The rejection of her love triggers negative emotions in her, revealing something about the dark side of her libido. The curse that she presents stands out as a forceful Dionysian sign. It could be understood as an allusion to the voices of Classical tragedies' heroines.

4. On the Vocalizing of the Libido's Rejection

Next to nuanced tones of voice achieved by a careful, detailed notation, libidinal gestures in *Tannhäuser* present major dynamic shifts that take place rapidly. Those proceedings reveal that Wagner composed an intensive emotional loading into these moments.

Libidinal gestures in vocal music are averagely exposed by the textual content besides the performance practice indications. Generally, musical gestures stand out as emphasized or particularly expressive points. Certain gestures in *Tannhäuser* tell about libidinal issues only, whereas some like Venus's curse allude to these and also the Dionysian heritage at the same time, comprising complex signs.

Bibliography

- Cervone, Roswita. Ed.. Booklet. *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*. Translated by Lionel Salter. Philharmonia Orchestra, Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Dir. Giuseppe Sinopoli. Hamburg: Deutsche Gramophon, 1989. CD 427 625-2 GH3.
- Dreyfus, Laurence. *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Iitti, Sanna. *The Feminine in German Song*. Germany: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006.
- Newman, Ernest. *The Wagner Operas*. USA: Princeton University Press, 1991 [1949].
- Ratner, Leonard G.. *Classic Music. Expression, Form, and Style*. USA: Schirmer Books, 1985.
- Wagner, Richard. *Mein Leben. Erste authentische Veröffentlichung*. München: Paul List Verlag, 1963.
- , *Mein Leben. Vollständige Ausgabe*, ed. Eike Middell, Vols. I, II. Sammlung Dieterich Bands 119-120. Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1986.
- , *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, ed. with a foreword by Max Hochkofler. French translation by Charles Nuittier, Edition Eulenburg, No. 903, Eulenburg Miniature Scores. Switzerland: Ernst Eulenburg Ltd., 1961.
- , *Tannhäuser. Oper in drei Aufzügen. Dresdener und Pariser Fassung in Szenenfolge*. Klavierauszug von Felix Mottl, Edition Peters, Nr. 8217. Frankfurt, London, New York: C. F. Peters, 1974.

7 In German: "Kehrst du mir nicht zurück, / so treffe Fluch die ganze Welt! / und für ewig sei öde sie, / aus der die Göttin wich!" English translation by Lionel Salter cited in Cervone, ed., 1989, pp. 86–87.

POVZETEK

Prispevek opazuje vpliv klasične umetnosti in religije na značilnosti opere *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* Richarda Wagnerja, pri čemer se osredotoča na pariško verzijo (1861). Avtorica opazuje predvsem prizor z bakanalom v prvem dejanju in analizira dionizična znamenja, zlasti v Venerini arietti "Geliebter! Komm". Analize se loteva z metodami, ki spominjajo na semiotično analizo glasbe. Z njimi odkriva predvsem glasbene topose in sloge. Ob tem ugotavlja, da je na podrobnosti zasnove Venerine votline, kakor je predstavljena v partituri opere *Tannhäuser*, vplivalo Wagnerjevo sodelovanje s starejšim kolegom Gasparom Spontinijem pri izvedbi njegove opere *La Vestale* leta 1845 v Dresdnu. Venerina arietta "Geliebter! Komm" je navdihnena s tradicionalnimi opernimi prizori. Venerino eksotičnost slika z uporabo oktatonске lestvice, ki je bistveno drugačna od glasbe krščanskih

Minnesängerjev. Avtorica zastopa mnenje, da pastoralni slog ariette predstavlja v operi dionizični znak lirične vrste. Ob tem so za nastope Venere – ob padajočih kromatičnih postopih – značilne tudi nestabilne, hitro spreminjajoče se harmonske zveze. Na nekaterih mestih se razvijajo celo v melodram. Zdi se, da ta sredstva razkrivajo pravo naravo njenega bistva, ki je prežeto z erotičnim koprnenjem in libidom.

Še več, avtorica ugotavlja, da je trenutek, ko Venera pred njegovim odhodom izreče kletev nad *Tannhäuserjem*, drugo dionizično znamenje. Spominja na ženske like v antičnih tragedijah, ki se iz bakhantinj prelevijo v furije. Avtorica se posveča tudi nekaterim drugim odlomkom, v katerih se Venera poskuša soočiti s *Tannhäuserjevo* zavrnitvijo. Večinoma izstopajo kot vokalne geste. Avtorica predstavlja svojo metodo dela na vzorčnih analizah teh odlomkov.

Prevod naslova, izvlečka in povzetka Aleš Nagode