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# OPERA NIGHTS

Wagner & Strauss

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RICHARD STOREY WALKER



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For Maria, Emily and Caroline



# *Contents*

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| INTRODUCTION                               | 9   |
| 1. DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER                 | 13  |
| 2. TANNHAÜSER                              | 23  |
| 3. LOHENGRIN                               | 33  |
| 4. DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN                 | 41  |
| 5. TRISTAN UND ISOLDE                      | 75  |
| 6. DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG          | 93  |
| 7. PARSIFAL                                | 103 |
| 8. SALOME                                  | 115 |
| 9. ELEKTRA                                 | 123 |
| 10. DER ROSENKAVALIER                      | 129 |
| 11. ARIADNE AUF NAXOS                      | 139 |
| 12. DIE FRAU OHNE SCHATTEN                 | 143 |
| 13. ARABELLA                               | 149 |
| 14. DIE SWEIGSAME FRAU                     | 153 |
| 15. CAPRICCIO                              | 157 |
| APPENDIX 1 WAGNER'S THREE VISITS TO LONDON | 159 |
| APPENDIX 2 WAGNER ATTENDANCE RECORD        | 165 |
| APPENDIX 3 STRAUSS ATTENDANCE RECORD       | 167 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                               | 169 |
| INDEX                                      | 173 |



## *Introduction*

**OPERA NIGHTS** is a personal reflection on the profound impact of almost half a century of listening to and seeing the operas of Wagner and Strauss. My journey began in February 1982 with a performance of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* and, later the same year in December, Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* - both at the London Coliseum. Since then, over nearly fifty years, have attended close to one hundred live performances of Wagner's operas and around fifty of Strauss's.

Such was the effect on me of these opera nights, that I can recall each one and, with the aid of online archives, have been able to verify the details of conductors, singers and directors. I've also included excerpts from critical reviews in *Opera* magazine, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *The Wagner Journal*, and others. Most of my Wagner experiences have been in UK venues - the Royal Opera House, the Coliseum, Glyndebourne, Garsington and Grange Park. But I have also had the privilege of attending performances in renowned international opera houses, including the Berlin Staatsoper, Opéra Bastille in Paris, Teatr Wielki in Warsaw, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Vienna State Opera and the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth.

My invaluable guide to Wagner's operas has been Ernest Newman with his four volume biography of Wagner (*The Life of Wagner*) and his guide to the operas called *Wagner Nights*. I have borrowed the title from this invaluable text, not only because it perfectly describes what this book is about, but also as a gesture of gratitude to Mr Newman. For Strauss, I always first turn to Charles Osborne's *Complete Operas of Richard Strauss*.

Music has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Growing up, we all played instruments. My mother was a fine pianist and regularly played both piano and organ at church. My father, an amateur violinist, used to joke that his real instrument was the gramophone. My older brother, Robert, played the bassoon and was

principal contra bassoon with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra for thirty years. My twin brother, Martin, was an accomplished amateur cellist and led both the Bristol Concert Orchestra and the Bath Symphony Orchestra. I played percussion, though never very seriously. My greatest passion was always for listening. I still remember my first record: Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* with the Soviet State Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Nathan Rakhlin and the excitement it brought. Although my father had a vast record collection, it included little opera and no Strauss or Wagner. They came later.

As a child, my exposure to Wagner was limited to the familiar strains of the *Bridal Chorus* from *Lohengrin* and the *Ride of the Valkyries* from *Die Walküre*. But a vivid early memory is of my father purchasing a record of highlights from *Götterdämmerung*, conducted by Charles Mackerras. That record opened up a new world and was my first immersive experience of Wagner's sound world. My discovery of Strauss began with his orchestral work, particularly *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and a love of his operas was ignited by seeing *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Coliseum in 1982.

Only in the last decade have I been able to engage more deeply with Wagner's writings (autobiography, criticism, prose, philosophy and politics) aided by the biographies and commentaries I have referenced in this book's bibliography. I have always struggled with philosophy, but have found the effort to be worthwhile, especially discovering Schopenhauer, whose ideas have been a revelation. I came to him through Hume, Hegel, and Žižek and when I finally read him directly, much that had eluded me began to fall into place.

I still cannot quite explain what it is about listening to *Parsifal*, *Tristan* or the *Ring* that moves me so deeply or gives me such lasting pleasure. But Schopenhauer opened a window onto the nature of that experience. Through him, I have found a new language for understanding how Wagner's music affects me and why it matters so much. As a result, the pleasure I take in hearing and seeing these works

only continues to grow. This book explores each of Wagner's ten mature operas (*Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and *Parsifal*). I examine the themes, ideas, historical and contemporary contexts, and personal impressions that have shaped my experience of them. In discussing *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, I follow Wagner's vision and treat it as a unified 15-hour epic, rather than four separate operas. In my experience, *The Ring* should be encountered over the course of a single week in the same theatre, with a consistent cast, orchestra, conductor, and audience.

Though I am not a trained musician and offer no formal musical analysis, I believe I was born with a deep love of music and both Strauss and Wagner reach me ways no other composers do. Through his operas, Wagner communicates narrative, emotion, and psychological depth with astonishing power. Works like *Der Ring*, *Tristan*, and *Parsifal* seem to access something deeply subconscious within me. I suspect that for some religion plays this role, but for me, it is Wagner's music. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in *The World as Will and Representation* that music 'gives the most profound, ultimate, and secret information on the feeling expressed in the words, or the action presented in the opera. It expresses their real and true nature, and makes us acquainted with the innermost soul of the events and occurrences, the mere cloak and body of which we are presented on the stage.' This sentiment resonates deeply with my experience.

I can recall each opera I have seen over the last forty years and, with the aid of online archives, have been able to verify the details of conductors, singers and directors. I've also included excerpts from critical reviews in *Opera* magazine, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *The Wagner Journal*, and others. Most of my Strauss and Wagner experiences have been in UK venues: the Royal Opera House, the Coliseum, Glyndebourne and Grange Park. But I have also had the privilege of attending performances in renowned

international opera houses, including the Berlin Staatsoper, Opéra Bastille in Paris, Teatr Wielki in Warsaw, Metropolitan Opera in New York and the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth.

I have concluded this book with a brief account of Wagner's three visits to London in the second half of the nineteenth century (Appendix One). That Wagner stayed in places close to where I lived and worked brings a connection, for me, to this genius of words and music.

An editorial note: In the text that follows, each live performance is introduced with a heading indicating the opera company, director, conductor, and year of production, for example:

**English National Opera • Pountney • Elder • 1982**

Where I have seen a production more than once, all dates and (where applicable) different conductors are noted. Specific performance dates (day/month) are listed in the Appendices.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Der fliegende Holländer*

*I am doomed to the most hideous of lots:  
Rather would I welcome death ten times over!  
From the curse a woman alone can free me,  
A woman who would be true to me till death...*

By the early 19th century, the legend of *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman) was well known, but Wagner's 1840 adaptation introduced a striking innovation. Redemption was a familiar theme in Romantic opera, typically framed as the salvation of a woman through the noble actions of a man. Wagner inverted this in *Holländer*, it is the man who is redeemed by the love and self-sacrifice of a woman.

The opera is framed through the perspective of Senta, the daughter of a Norwegian sea captain. Senta is an ordinary young woman caught in extraordinary circumstances. Suffocated by her impending marriage to the respectable but uninspiring local village boy Erik, she becomes captivated by the enigmatic Dutchman, a cursed wanderer of the seas brought home by her father. Significantly, Wagner never gives the Dutchman a name, rendering him a mythic, symbolic figure. Senta's pivotal ballad near the beginning encapsulates the opera's structure, recounting the Dutchman's past (his curse), present (his arrival), and future (his hoped-for redemption through her). While Wagner had already explored supernatural themes in his earlier works, he was writing within a tradition made popular by composers like Meyerbeer (*Robert le Diable*), Weber (*Der Freischütz*), and Marschner (*Der Vampyr*).

Michael Tanner (2010) suggests Wagner may also have been influenced by Beethoven's *Fidelio*. He draws comparisons between Senta's father and Rocco the jailer, between Erik and Jaquino, Rocco's assistant. Wagner sees Senta as a variant of Leonora, consumed by a sacrificial love for a tormented man. Tanner remarks dryly that Wagner was no feminist, noting that Wagnerian women often find meaning through self-sacrifice, 'whilst the men fulfil themselves without regard to the happiness of other people.' Some commentators argue that the Dutchman character prefigures the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, even though Wagner would not read Schopenhauer until 1854. The Dutchman's weariness, alienation, and desire for annihilation align closely with Schopenhauer's ideas of renunciation and the futility of striving. Robert Gutman (1969) wittily observed that Wagner's characters were disciples of Schopenhauer before their creator grasped the doctrine guiding their steps. This philosophical undercurrent would become more explicit in later operas like *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *The Ring* cycle (especially in the character of Wotan). In *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*, written after Wagner had fully absorbed Schopenhauer's worldview, the philosophical framework is unmistakable.

Yet *Holländer* ends with a vision Schopenhauer would surely have rejected. Rather than oblivion, the Dutchman and Senta are transfigured together, rising above the waves. Wagner's stage directions read, 'In the far distance the Dutchman and Senta, he embracing her, rise from the water, both transfigured.' His earlier, more naïvely romantic imagination still held sway.

By 1843, Wagner and Minna were living in Dresden, where *Holländer* premiered on 2 January. After the London visit, they had travelled to Boulogne (where Wagner met Meyerbeer), then on to Paris for two fruitless years. Only with the acceptance of *Rienzi* by the Dresden Opera did things begin to change and the Wagners moved

### *Der fliegende Holländer*

from Paris for the new production. After a series of delays, it was finally premiered on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1842.

Wagner composed *Holländer* alongside *Rienzi*, and its close scheduling, just two months apart, attests to Dresden's growing confidence in him. Dresden, though the capital of Saxony, was often considered culturally second-tier to Leipzig. A contemporary wit called Leipzig a 'big, small town' and Dresden a 'small, big town'. Following the popular success of *Rienzi*, audiences found *Holländer* bleak and somber. It was withdrawn by the theatre after only four performances and replaced with *Rienzi*. After the second performance, Wagner went to a dismal wine bar (Newman 1933) with his friend Heine and consumed far too much wine while reading the reviews of the first performance, some of which were brutal. On his return to his hotel, he found a stranger, Prof Werder, keen to meet him and to express his deep gratitude for the profound emotions that the opera had aroused in him. Wagner, afraid that he would not remember the man's name because of his inebriated state, asked him to write it down. Six years later, a fugitive at Weimar, he used the name on forged documents to escape from Weimar to Zurich.

As Ernest Newman in his biography (1931) observed, 'Wagner became painfully conscious that his daemon was to drive him along a road on which the general public would have some difficulty in following him at first.' I recall my own early struggles with Wagner's work. In my twenties, I found him challenging until my father wisely advised: 'You have to work at Wagner, you know.' He was right.

Despite its lukewarm debut, *Holländer* gained traction. It was performed in Riga and Kassel in 1843, Berlin in 1844, Zurich in 1852, and Weimar in 1853. Its first London performance was in 1870, sung in Italian as *L'Olandese Dannato* (*The Damned Dutchman*) to conform with the peculiar rule that all operas at the Royal Italian Opera be performed in Italian. The opera was not performed at Bayreuth until 1901, long after Wagner's death. In his 1851 essay *A Communication to*

*My Friends*, Wagner identified *Holländer* as a turning point: ‘From here begins my career as poet, and my farewell to the mere concoctor of opera-texts.’ He saw the Dutchman as ‘a mythical creation of the Folk: a primal trait of human nature speaks out from it with heart-enthralling force... the longing after rest from amid the storms of life.’ Ironically, its gloomy Romanticism may have made *Holländer* seem old-fashioned to contemporary audiences. The public mood was shifting toward historical spectacles like Meyerbeer’s *Le Prophète* and *L’Africaine*.

Though Wagner wrote *Holländer* as a single act, early performances in Dresden, Berlin, and Riga presented it in three acts, a version Wagner himself conducted in Munich in 1864. Cosima Wagner reinstated the one-act version for the 1901 Bayreuth Festival, a format generally followed today.

## Live Performances of *Der fliegende Holländer*

### **English National Opera • Pountney • Elder • 1982**

*Der fliegende Holländer* was the first Wagner opera I experienced live, and I have now seen six different stagings of it. In 1982, I purchased a ticket to see it performed in English at the London Coliseum. This production marked David Pountney’s debut as Director of Productions and initiated his collaboration with conductor Mark Elder. Along with company manager Peter Jonas, they formed a team later known as the Powerhouse, whose work I would follow throughout the next fifteen years.

Reflecting the Bayreuth tradition, the performance unfolded in a single, uninterrupted act lasting two and a quarter hours. Pountney’s approach was largely conventional, adhering closely to Wagner’s original storyline. Norman Bailey took on the role of the Dutchman, and Josephine Barstow sang Senta. A particularly vivid memory from this staging is the appearance of the phantom ship, its red sails cast in

### *Der fliegende Holländer*

an ominous light. The production featured Pountney's own English translation.

In *Opera* magazine, Harold Rosenthal praised Pountney's clever touch in referencing *The Ring's* dragon Fafner within the sailors' mocking song. This was a playful nod, since Wagner had not yet written *Siegfried*, where Fafner emerges as the dragon guarding the Nibelung treasure. Rosenthal also singled out Bailey and Barstow for commendation and spoke with evident relief at the production's adherence to tradition, having been wary that Pountney might present another modern, politically themed Wagner staging. His only substantial criticism was directed at Elder, whose conducting, Rosenthal felt, occasionally allowed the orchestra to overpower the singers, a view I did not share.

### **The Royal Opera • Ashman • Albrecht • 1986**

I attended Mike Ashman's Covent Garden production in March 1986, with Simon Estes as the Dutchman, Siegfried Jerusalem as Erik, and Rosalind Plowright as Senta. Gerd Albrecht conducted. The Dutchman's ship was reimagined as a rusting tugboat that arrived spectacularly from nowhere. The spinning scene was relocated to a Soviet-style factory, with the female chorus mechanically weaving electrical cables, rather than spinning cloth. Rosalind Plowright, singing Senta for the first time, clutched a portrait of the Dutchman throughout. In a 1992 interview for *Opera* she said that she regretted taking on the part (she was singing *Trovatore* at the same time) and felt bullied in to doing it.

At the opening night, *Opera's* William Mann reported that the audience responded with boos and shouts directed at Ashman at Ashman, in a manner reminiscent of the resistance shown by the ... as if they were the old Bayreuth guard when confronted with the radical productions of Götz Friedrich or Harry Kupfer. Mann felt that while Ashman's reinterpretation of the story was imaginative, it suffered from

an excess of pretentious symbolism and lacked coherence, with too many awkward or ill-defined moments.

Despite this criticism, I found the production stimulating and provocative, as Wagner productions often are. Oddly, current Royal Opera programmes omit this staging entirely, jumping from Clifford Williams's 1966 version to Ian Judge's in 1992. In a 1988 interview with baritone James Morris, critic Hugh Canning described the Ashman production as potentially interesting, though its scheduled 1988 revival with James Morris as the Dutchman was abandoned in favour of production of *La Boheme* with Domingo.

Reflecting on this period in a 1997 *Opera* interview, General Director Jeremy Isaacs, remarked that Ashman's *Dutchman* unsettled some senior figures at the Royal Opera House. He explained that they neither understood nor liked the production and resolved never again to take responsibility for such a work. Isaacs himself, however, believed it represented exactly the sort of bold artistic statement the company should have been pursuing.

### **The Royal Opera • Judge • von Dohnányi • 1992**

The 1992 Royal Opera production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, under the direction of Ian Judge and conducted by Christoph von Dohnányi, featured James Morris as the Dutchman and Julia Varady in the role of Senta. The stage design was particularly memorable with a vast platform was suspended over the stage, constantly shifting, tilting, spinning, and rotating to create a striking visual effect. David Murray, writing for *Opera*, observed that this dynamic platform was essential to binding the drama together, lending the performance a sense of continuous, unified action. There were moments of real tension as chorus members clung to the moving structure, and at least once, an individual appeared to lose his grip mid-performance. The Dutchman's crew emerged ominously from below the stage, while his ship itself was never depicted.

## *Der fliegende Holländer*

James Morris's portrayal received criticism from Murray and other observers, who felt his performance relied too much on stock gestures and poses, lacking the emotional resonance that could truly bring the character to life. By contrast, Julia Varady's Senta was widely praised. Murray described her performance as robust and captivating, noting that her vocal timbre was more Italianate than Teutonic and that she delivered a genuinely compelling rendition of the role.

Looking to the future, Murray expressed confidence that, as the production settled, its visual and dramatic elements would come together successfully. However, when Tim Ashley reviewed the revival in 2000, he remarked that the psychology of the opera was overshadowed by spectacle. Ashley observed a persistent tilt towards symbolism, which he felt ultimately muddied the opera's portrayal of how supernatural forces impact a bourgeois society.

### **The Royal Opera • Albery • Albrecht (2009) • Nánási (2024)**

In 2009, Tim Albery brought a new Royal Opera production of *Der fliegende Holländer* to the stage, conducted by Marc Albrecht. Bryn Terfel took on the role of the Dutchman, with Anja Kampe as Senta. The setting was the contemporary Baltic, and the action unfolded on the deck of a massive steel ship, marked by a single mooring rope stretched diagonally across the stage. The ghost ship's presence was suggested only by its shadow gliding across the sleeping steersman, while Terfel made his entrance dragging the thick rope behind him. Instead of a full-scale vessel, a small model schooner floating in a pool was used to represent the Dutchman's ship. For the spinning scene, the set descended from above, illuminated by harsh strip lights—mercifully dimmed during Senta's ballad. The spectral crew made a chilling, sudden entrance from offstage.

*Opera's* Erica Jeal was less than impressed by the final scene, describing it as a colossal anti-climax. Rather than a spectacular leap to her death, Senta simply embraced the model ship—a choice I found to

be in keeping with the production's overall simplicity, though I am always skeptical of miniature props such as boats or cars.

I attended the revival in 2024, which happened to fall on my birthday. Bryn Terfel returned as the Dutchman, joined by Elisabet Strid, who delivered a remarkable performance as Senta, while Henrik Nánási conducted. On that occasion, I felt that Terfel and Stephen Milling (Daland) were somewhat underwhelming, but Strid was truly outstanding. The Dutchman's return to his ship was staged via a massive gangplank; as it ascended, Senta clung to it in a haunting scene. Yet, as before, her death was understated. Senta embraced the model schooner rather than dramatically leaping into the abyss.

Reviewing this revival for *The Guardian*, Erica Jeal again found Senta's demise anticlimactic, but singled out Strid as the highlight of the evening, noting her character's tragic longing to achieve her dream, fulfilled only in an understated death.

### **Dorset Opera • Carr • Carnall • 2013**

Dorset Opera has been performing since 1974, and I have been a regular attendee for more than twenty years. Despite its branding as country-house opera, the performances actually take place in the theatre at Bryanston School rather than in a traditional country house setting. Over the years, both the amateur chorus (trained in a summer school) and the orchestra have shown notable improvement.

In July 2013, I attended their *Der fliegende Holländer* production featuring Mark Doss as the Dutchman, Lee Bisset as Senta, and Paul Carr conducting. The staging was minimalist yet executed with competence. Roger Jones, reviewing for *Seen and Heard*, observed that the company benefitted from highly committed musicians and a conductor adept at maintaining excitement and tension to the very end. For my part, though, I found the performance lacked the inspiration to truly move me.

**Bayreuth • Tcherniakov • Lyniv • 2022**

In 2022, I travelled to Bayreuth Festival to see *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*. Director Dmitri Tcherniakov radically reimagined Holländer, offering a new origin story: the Dutchman's mother, abandoned by Daland after an affair, takes her own life—an event witnessed by her young son. Shunned by the townspeople, he grows up to become the Dutchman, driven not by a quest for redemption but by a thirst for revenge. Tcherniakov opens his production with this backstory, silently enacted during the overture. As an adult, the Dutchman, portrayed by Thomas Mayer, returns to the village, buys drinks at a shabby local bar, and soon wins over Senta, played by Elisabeth Teige. The familiar spinning scene is dispensed with, replaced by a choir rehearsal during which Senta is lost in reverie. The Dutchman's crew, depicted as fascist enforcers, threaten the townspeople, some are shot by the Dutchman, and buildings are set ablaze. In the climactic final scene, the Dutchman is shot by Mary, Daland's partner, rather than being condemned to eternal wandering. Senta comforted Mary as the Dutchman dies.

Hugo Shirley, writing in *Opera*, observed that Tcherniakov's concept is a far cry from Wagner's original scenario, but nonetheless found the director's work striking and effective in its own right, a view I shared. Shirley Apthorp, in the *Financial Times*, described the narrative as meticulously constructed and deeply absorbing, noting its psychological insight and the deliberate stripping away of familiar nautical imagery. The *New York Times* highlighted Tcherniakov's focus on the Dutchman's angry, vengeful psyche, with far less emphasis on female-led redemption. A dissenting voice came from BR-Klassik, which dismissed the production as little more than an aimless thriller overlaid on Wagner's ideas, though entertaining, it was ultimately irrelevant. I disagreed, feeling this approach provided a revelatory and enriching take on the work, reminiscent of Jonathan Miller's mafia-themed *Rigoletto* at ENO in 1982. Musically, the performance was

*Opera Nights: Wagner & Strauss*

superb: Thomas Mayer, Georg Zeppenfeld as Daland, and Elisabeth Teige all delivered powerful performances. But the most lasting impression was left by Oksana Lyniv, who made history as Bayreuth's first female conductor, 156 years after the festival's founding.

*Der fliegende Holländer*