Honour Thy German Masters: Wagner's Depiction of "Meistergesang" in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

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The operas of Richard Wagner (1813-1883) exist in a world of fantasy, populated by mythic knights, gods and goddesses, and depictions of heaven and hell. The exception is *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867). Foregoing the world of myth, Wagner transports the audience back to sixteenth-century Nürnberg, where the city is led by the *Meistersingers* and, in particular, Hans Sachs. Though still writing in a nineteenth-century style, Wagner went to great lengths to integrate the actual practices and compositional rules of the *Meistersingers* into his opera. This attempt at historical accuracy allows for an exploration of the musical correspondences between historical *Meistergesang* and Wagner's own depiction of the genre. By comparing *Silberweise* and *Morgenweise*, two pieces written by the historical Hans Sachs, to the *Meistergesang* within Wagner's opera, it becomes clear that Wagner's most accurate representations of *Meistergesang* are sung by Beckmesser, the antagonistic marker. Why then, if the opera purportedly promotes rules and the maintenance of tradition, are Sachs and Walther the heroes? Though this contradiction may seem a hypocrisy, this essay will show that the depiction of *Meistergesang* in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, while incorporating nineteenth-century compositional methods, expresses Wagner's belief that musical innovation must be based on tradition.

As charming and believable as *Die Meistersinger* may be, it too, in its own way, is a fantasy. Wagner's Nürnberg is not a historically accurate depiction of the town and its populace, but an "idealized monument to a peculiarly German kind of city at the very moment of its historical disappearance."[1] This idealization was part of nineteenth-century German Romanticism, which longed for a strong, unified Germany. This longing was "inevitably projected to a vaguely medieval past when Germany had seemed powerful and united."[2] The glorification of medieval Nürnberg inevitably led to a misrepresentation of the *Meistersingers*. In his opera, Wagner portrays the *Meistersingers* as both cultural and civic leaders. They are the burghers who run the city, and their festivals are shared by all the people. However, as Peter Hohendahl points out

> [Nuremberg] was anything but a harmonious community in which its citizens enjoyed work and art.…The Meistersingers clearly did not play the significant role that Wagner assigns them. Their poetic practices were much more confined to their own social group.[3]

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[1] Timothy McFarland, "Wagner's Nuremberg," *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg: ENO/ROH Opera Guide19*, ed. Nicholas John (London, 1983): 33, quoted in Stewart Spencer, "Wagner's Nuremberg," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 1 (1992): 32.

[2] Stewart Spencer, "Wagner's Nuremberg," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no.1 (1992): 24.

[3] Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Reworking History: Wagner's German Myth of Nuremberg," in *Re-Reading Wagner*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 49.

Wagner was not the first to take creative liberties with the cultural and political role of the *Meistersingers*. The study of *Meistersingers* was popular at the beginning of the century, resulting in several studies and narratives through which Wagner became acquainted with the medieval tradition.[4] Wagner's first introduction to Hans Sachs and the *Meistersingers* came from Georgg Gottfried Gervinus' *History of German Literature* (1835), a reading that sparked the idea for *Die Meistersinger*.[5] Wagner was also familiar with Jakob Grimm's essay *Über den Altdeutschen Meistergesang* (1811) and the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, particularly his story *Meister Martin der Küfner und seine Gesellen* (1819). Both of these authors contributed to an idealized picture of the *Meistersingers*, in which "artists and artisans, hand in hand, march happily together towards a common goal."[6] The *Meistersingers* were even the inspiration for an opera before Wagner, Albert Lortzing's *Hans Sachs*, which premiered in 1840. The plot similarities between the two operas indicate the Wagner was surely aware of Lortzing's opera when writing the libretto for *Die Meistersinger*.[7]

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[4] Archer Taylor, *The Literary History of Meistergesang* (New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1937), 3.

[5] John Warrack, "The sources and genesis of the text," in *Richard Wagner, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, ed. John Warrack (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 1-2.

[6] Ibid., 19.

[7] Peter Bassett, "Albert Lortzing's Hans Sachs: An Inspiration for Wagner's Die Meistersinger," *Leitmotive: The Journal of the Wagner Society of Northern California* 23, no. 1 (2008): 20.

Though inspired by romanticized tales of the *Meistersingers*, Wagner strove to lend his opera a sense of realism that went beyond mere allusion to historical characters. To achieve this, Wagner turned to Johann Christoph Wagenseil's Nuremberg Chronicle. Compiled in 1697 from a variety of different sources, Wagenseil's text included the compositional rules of the *Meistersingers*, the customs and history of the guild, and several examples of *Meistergesang*.[8] This material provided Wagner with concrete information on the guild's culture, much of which was incorporated directly into the opera. For example, the singing school in the first act is based directly on Wagenseil's treatise. As recorded in the treatise, singing schools were held in the church either on Sundays or holidays. The singing candidate was required to sit in a chair while they were presenting their song. If the marker, hidden in a curtained box, counted more than seven errors, the candidate failed the test. The list of *Meistertöne* David sings to Walther comes from Wagenseil, as does the idea that a new song had to be baptized.[9] Though Wagner made some changes to the historical practices, such as reducing the number of markers down from four to only one or changing the location of the church, the factual details he did maintain give *Die Meistersinger* a distinct air of authenticity. As John Warrack states:

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[8] Taylor, *The Literary History of Meistergesang*, 2.

[9] Anna Maude Bowen, "The Sources and Text of Richard Wagner's Opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*," (Ph.D diss., Cornell University, 1987): 21-26.

> [Wagenseil's treatise] provides factual circumstance, with an intricacy of reference in a setting that rings vividly true even for audiences with no knowledge of the Meistersinger's authentic practices. There is an atmosphere of sustaining tradition that is at the same time humorously restrictive…It is by these means that Wagner ensures that it has taken sufficiently deep root in our minds for Sachs' final defense of Mastersong to have authority over Walther's rejection.[10]

In order to depict the music of the *Meistersingers* within his opera, Wagner turned to the many compositional rules listed in Wagenseil's text.[11] Like the singing school, the rules have a prominent role in the first act. Walther is taught the rules by both David and Kothner before his song trial. While detailing issues such as word placement and meaning, the most important rules for Wagner were those that detailed the bar form of the piece, the rhyme scheme, and the musical content of the *Stollen* and *Abgesang*.[12] These rules served as a compositional guide for Wagner and directly connected the pieces in *Die Meistersinger* with their historical precedents. Historical *Meistergesang* employed bar form, represented as AAB, in which two identical *Stollen* were followed by a related yet

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[10] Warrack, "Sachs, Beckmesser, and Mastersong," 65.

[11] Ibid., 63. Wagner did incorporate one real Meistergesang in his opera*, which can be found in the opening motive of the overture in measure 41.

[12] What Wagner defines as bar form is actually incorrect. While Sachs refers to a single stanza of Walther's song as a bar, the historical use of this term referred to the entire composition.

musically different *Abgesang*. For the *Meistersingers*, melody and poetry were two distinct entities. The melody, or *Ton*, of a *Meistergesang* was written without specific words or rhythm. A separate text would then be applied to the melody, dictating its rhythm.[13] While new *Töne* were written, there was a greater focus on the composition of new poems. Sachs, for example, wrote approximately 2575 poems during his lifetime, but only thirteen different *Töne*.[14] *Meistergesang* were additionally sung without instrumental accompaniment.[15] Given these characteristics, the analysis of *Morgenweise* and *Silberweise* presented here will focus only on those characteristics of *Meistergesang* inherent in the melody. These melodic traits are not discussed by Wagenseil, and thus offer a new vein for exploring Wagner's depiction of *Meistergesang*.

It is readily apparent that both *Morgenweise* (Figure 1) and *Silberweise* (Figure 2) follow the bar form set down by Wagenseil's treatise. The second *Stollen* is not even written out, but indicated by a repeat sign. Overall, both *Silberweise* and *Morgenweise* are characterized by simple, somewhat declamatory melodic lines. Melodic

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[13] Horst Brunner, "Meistergesang," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*,
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/18291> (accessed 25 October 2008).

[14] Mary Beare, ed., *Hans Sachs Selections* (Kendal: Titus Wilson and Son, 1983), xiv. In addition to *Meistergesang* texts, Sachs also wrote another eighteen volumes of *Sprüche*, which included tragedies, fables, and Carnival plays, among others.

[15] Taylor, *The Literary History of Meistergesang*, 75.

motion is primarily by step without frequent changes in direction, and repeated notes occur frequently. Leaps do occur, but they are never larger than a fifth and the range of the piece stays within the octave. Chromatically altered notes are nearly non-existent— the only example is the A# in line 18 of *Morgenweise*. These two pieces are not necessarily tonal— *Morgenweise* strongly hints at G Mixolydian—but they do have a sense of tonal stability.

Two characteristics regarding phrase structure can be gleaned from these pieces. Both *Meistergesang* include short passages of melisma, most often decorating the end of the melodic line (indicated with slurs on the score). This is far more prominent in *Morgenweise* than in *Silberweise*, but the use of melisma observed in *Morgenweise* was the norm for sixteenth-century *Meistergesang*.[16] Concurrent pieces, in fact, indicate that these melismas could be much more extensive, as demonstrated by Example 1.
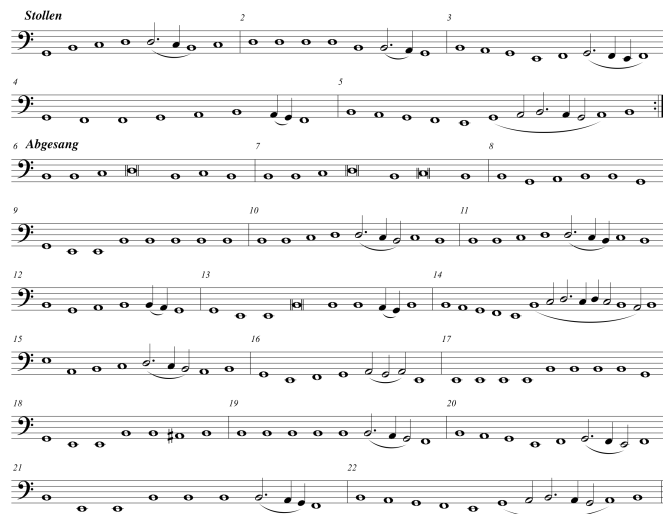
Example 1: *Abgesang* **of** *Spruch weis*, **by Hans Sachs**[17]

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[16] Brunner, "Meistergesang."

[17] Münzer, *Das Singebuche*, 81.

Figure 1: *Morgenweise*[18]

Both of these *Meistergesang* also exhibit a clear articulation of phrase endings, aiding a clear declamation of the text. While made apparent through the fermatas found at the end of each phrase, this is also inherent in the shape of the melodic line.

One prominent feature of *Meistergesang* not mentioned by Wagenseil is the use of repetition as a unifying device. In both pieces, the most notable example of this is the repetition of the end of the *Stollen* at the end of the *Abgesang.* This repetition effectively creates a sense of structural unity between the two halves of the piece. Repetition also creates unity within the *Abgesang,* which is substantially longer than the *Stollen* in both pieces. For example, lines 9, 13, 18, and 21 in

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[18] Ibid., 75. Transcription by author.

Morgenweise all open with the same melodic figure.
Repetition of phrases also generates melodic content.
In *Silberweise* this can be seen in the immediate
repetition of lines 5 and 6 in lines 7 and 8. Similarly in
Morgenweise, line 7 is a repetition of line 6, with both
phrases further repeated in lines 10 and 11. The
extent of the repetition in these pieces clearly
indicates that it was both an organizational and
compositional tool in the *Meistergesang* of Hans Sachs.
While serving as a unifying device, and undoubtedly
an aid to memorization, it seems likely that the high
degree of repetition also reflects the improvisatory
nature of *Töne* composition.[19]

Figure 2: *Silberweise*[20]

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[19] Taylor, *The Literary History of Meistergesang*, 73.

[20] Münzer, 81. Transcription by author.

Based on these observations, we can identify four characteristics of *Meistergesang* style on which the comparison with Wagner's drama will be based.

> 1) *Meistergesang* employs bar form, with identical *Stollen* and a stable tonal centre.
>
> 2) The melody is simple, dominated by stepwise motion, repeated notes, and a small range. Chromatic notes occur infrequently.
>
> 3) The ends of phrases are clearly articulated and ornamented with melisma.
>
> 4) Repetition occurs throughout the piece, unifying the *Stollen* and *Abgesang*.

Four characters are directly associated with *Meistergesang* throughout Wagner's opera: Hans Sachs, Walther von Stolzing, Sixtus Beckmesser, and David. While it would be most logical to begin with Wagner's depiction of Sachs, this character sings no *Meistergesang* throughout the opera. We will thus begin with Walther. Not yet a member of the guild, Walther sings four different *Meistergesang* over the course of the opera, more than any other character. These include "Am stillen Herd," "Fanget An!," "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise," and Walther's Prize Song (the transformation of "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise"). It is Walther's pieces that are presented by Wagner as the ideal *Meistergesang* throughout the course of the opera, Walther winning the song contest, Eva, and the respect of Sachs.

Even without discussing melodic characteristics, Walther's pieces clearly deviate from the expected norms of *Meistergesang*. All of Walther's songs except "Am stillen Herd" show significant alterations to the

second *Stollen* of the bar form, not only altering the melodic line but also modulating into a different key. While one could reconcile the two small changes in "Am stillen Herd" to historical bar form the alterations made in Walther's other three pieces directly contradict both Wagenseil's treatise and the historical examples of Sachs. Nevertheless, Walther's *Meistergesang* remain close enough to bar form to be recognizable to the audience. Where Walther's pieces truly differ from historical precedents is in their treatment of melody, phrasing, and the repetition of musical phrases.

Walther's pieces, while beautiful, do not observe the simple melodic style of historical *Meistergesang*. The melodies of his pieces are very active, full of leaps that frequently change melodic direction. In particular, the leaps in "Fanget An!" give the melody a frenzied quality. The wide range of the piece, often highlighting the top of the range, emphasizes this quality. Stepwise motion and repeated notes are both relatively rare (though it is interesting to note that of all Walther's songs, these features are most common in "Fanget An!"). The melodic leaps employed in Walther's songs generally stay inside the confines of a fifth with several notable exceptions, including both a minor and major seventh and the unprecedented augmented fourth. Consecutive leaps can also

Example 2: Use of major seventh, minor seventh, and augmented fourth in "Fanget An!" [21]

2a: measures 58 to 60

So fief es mir __ in der Brust, __

2b: measures 17 to 18

von weit- her naht ein Schwel - len, das mäch - tig nä - her zieht.

2c: measures 115 to 177

licht in den Lüft - en blinkt;

be found in each of Walther's *Meistergesang*. It is not the size of the leaps that divorces Walther's music from *Meisterlied,* however, but their frequency, which contrasts the simpler, almost static nature of historical *Meistergesang.* The extensive use of chromatically altered notes within Walther's pieces also sets them apart from their historical models. This can be an indication of key change, as seen in the Prize Song (Figure 4, measures 32 to 38). However, all of Walther's pieces employ chromatic non-chord tones as ornaments, a feature not seen in traditional *Meistergesang.* On the other hand, melisma, an ornament found in historical *Meisterlied*, is absent from Walther's songs.

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[21] All measure numbers in "Fanget An!" and "Am stillen Herd" are based on a transcription of the song that disregards interjections from other characters.

Example 3: Ornamental use of non chord tones in "Am Stillen Herd," measures 5 to 7

wie einst der Lenz so lieb - lich lacht;

Example 4: Ornamental use of non-chord tones in "Fanget An!" measures 18 to 21

Es schwillt und schallt, es - tönt der Wald von - hol - der Stimm...

The general ambiguity of phrase structure in Walther's pieces again demonstrates their divergence from historical *Meistergesang*. Looking at the melodies of Walther's songs, it is often difficult to tell where the ends of phrases should fall, an impression enhanced by the infrequency of rests within the melodic lines. In "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise," for example, there are no rests within the melodic line until measure 30. Walther's melodies generally give the impression of continuous motion. This ambiguity is not resolved if one turns to the text, again exemplified by "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise." While it is already difficult to determine where the ends of musical phrases are, Wagner causes further confusion by not consistently correlating the end of a musical phrase with the end of the textual phrase in each of the three verses. For example, while the first and third verses end their first textual phrase on the dotted

Figure   3:   "Die   Selige   Morgentraum   Deutweise"

quarter note in measure 4, the second verse continues the phrase into measure 5. As indicated on the score, there are only four moments in the entire piece where Wagner ends the textual phrase at the same moment in each of the three verses. This directly contrasts the norms of sixteenth-century *Meistergesang*, in which the text was written specifically to fit the established musical phrase.

It is clear that Walther's *Meistergesang* are quite different from their historical precedents. This divergence, however, must be understood in the context of Wagner's compositional practices. For composers of the nineteenth-century, the prevailing aesthetic concern was the originality of the musical idea. The challenge for composers was to create a unified piece based on a relatively short thematic idea without resorting to repetitions of previous melodic material or "musical padding." Whereas musical form in the Classical era had been characterized by the idea of balanced musical sections, the importance placed on originality in the nineteenth-century led to the conception of form as "a discourse in sound in which motives develop out of earlier motives like ideas, each of which is a consequence of its predecessors."[22] Wagner's compositional technique of *endliche Melodie* is clearly a derivative of this conception, especially when one considers its true definition, which "is not that the parts of a work flow into each other without caesuras but that every note has meaning, that the melody is language and not empty sound."[23] While *unendliche Melodie* is not as prominent within *Die Meistersinger* due to the prevalence of individual musical numbers, Wagner's concept of music as a meaningful language plays a prominent role within this opera.

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[22] Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), 50.

[23] Ibid., 56.

Keeping this in mind, it is understandable that Walther's pieces, while maintaining bar form, do not employ the direct melodic repetitions that characterize historical *Meistergesang*. Instead, Wagner's *unendliche Melodie* manifests as a constant

Figure 4: Prize Song

❀ Indicates the point at which the section departs from *Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise*

development of the thematic idea within a single piece. Present to some extent in all of Walther's songs, this is best exemplified by "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise" and the Prize Song. Consider the first *Stollen* of "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise." Already characterized by a long, unbroken, and somewhat ambiguous phrase, the treatment of thematic material in measures 4 to 6 and 7 to 10 clearly demonstrates how Wagner used sequential variation to construct his melody. The theme is further developed in the second *Stollen* when Walther (and Wagner) breaks with tradition by changing the melody and ending in a different key. Similar thematic development is seen in the *Abgesang*. For example, the opening gesture is an expansion of the *Stollen*, and the sequential pattern from measures 7 to 10 is again found in measures 26 to 28. Even the most characteristic gesture in the *Abgesang*, the descending chromatic passage seen for the first time in measures 36 and 37, is a development of the five-note descending pattern first seen in measure 2. Though the three repetitions of "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise," a concession to the dramatic scenario, do contradict the idea of thematic originality, Wagner's *unendliche Melodie* is undoubtedly present within this song.

As a further development of "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise," Walther's Prize Song stands as the epitome of Wagner's developmental techniques. Though the songs are linked, there are distinctions between the two. In both the *Stollen* and *Abgesang* of the Prize Song, Walther breaks off from

the pattern established in "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise" and further develops the melodic material. For example, the descending chromatic line that first appeared in the *Abgesang* of the *Deutweise* is incorporated into the Prize Song's *Stollen* (Figure 4, measure 16). Wagner also expands the harmonic language in the Prize Song, most notably through the modulation to B major in measure 33. However, the relationship between the two pieces is maintained, as the various sections of the Prize Song both begin and end in the same tonal area as its model. While the Prize Song deviates from both "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise" and the expectations of *Meistergesang*, these changes are the product of Wagner's compositional methods and the nineteenth-century aesthetic of originality. One can hardly imagine Wagner letting such an important song within the opera be a mere repetition of earlier melodic material.

In contrast to Walther's pieces, influenced by Wagner's compositional technique and only loosely invoking the traditions of sixteenth-century *Meitergesang*, Beckmesser's songs reveal many similarities with their historical models. Connected to *Meistergesang* through his membership in the guild and his role as marker, Beckmesser sings two *Meisterlied* throughout the opera: "Den Tag," his serenade to Eva in Act two, and "Morgen Ich Leuchte" his act three competition song. On a superficial level, a connection between Beckmesser and traditional *Meistergesang* is implied by the fermatas that mark the ends of Beckmesser's phrases. The lute accompaniment used in his songs, while still not conforming to the historical practice of a cappella

singing, is also much more evocative of the historical practice than the full orchestral accompaniment of Walther's pieces. However, Beckmesser's songs more consistently conform to the structural and melodic characteristics of historical *Meistergesang*. For starters, both of Beckmesser's *Meistergesang* exhibit proper bar form with two identical *Stollen*. "Den Tag" (Figure 5), like its historical prototypes, has a small vocal range. In addition, it is tonally stable, with only one chromatically altered note. Though "Morgen Ich Leuchte" (Figure 7) does modulate to another key, it is a modal modulation to the relative major rather than a tonal one as seen in Walther's songs. This again serves to emphasize the historical quality of Beckmesser's compositions.

Figure 5: "Den Tag"

There are some divergences from traditional *Meisterlied* in Beckmesser's two songs. Both feature an

active melody characterized by a large amount of coloratura, a feature that, while having historical precedents, does not seem appropriate to these songs. There have been several explanations offered for Beckmesser's excessive ornamentation, including the idea that Wagner was imitating Italian opera.[24] It is also possible, however, to see Beckmesser's excessive coloratura as an expression of his anxiety over courting a young girl who clearly prefers another. Perhaps the florid ornamentation was a misguided attempt to impress Eva–recall that in the first act, Beckmesser expressed his concerns to Pogner that Eva would not appreciate his skills as a Master and thought it unwise to give her the deciding vote. Love is also an unfamiliar subject for Beckmesser, being a topic forbidden in *Meistergesang*: perhaps he thought such floridity was appropriate for such a frivolous theme. The motivation is somewhat beside the point, for underneath Beckmesser's ornamentation, the basic melodic shapes of his two songs are quite simple and reminiscent of the style seen in *Meistergesang* (See Figure 6). Leaps that occur are most

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[24] Thomas S. Grey, "Masters and their Critics: Wagner, Hanslick, Beckmesser, and *Die Meistersinger*," in *Wagner's* Meistersinger: *Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2002), 185. In an anti-semitic reading of Beckmesser, this ornamentation is seen to be representative of the "cantorial singing" of the Jewish faith. Grey lists several other characteristics of Beckmesser that point to his Jewish identity. For further a more complete discussion of the topic, see Has Rudolf Vaget, " 'Du warst mein Feind von je': The Beckmesser Controversy Revisited," in *Wagner's* Meistersinger: *Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002): 191-208.

often part of the coloratura phrases. There are only
two intervals greater than a fifth in "Den Tag," both
of which are diatonic and given the same treatment in
each of their repetitions (Figure 5, measures 5 and
23). Beckmesser's songs also hearken back to
traditional *Meisterlied* through the presence of clearly
defined phrases, created both by the use of rests and
melodic contour.

Figure 6: Stollen 1 of "Den Tag" reduction

Repetition also forms an important component of
Beckmesser's songs, if not to the same density of
Sachs' *Meistergesang*. Repetition found in "Den Tag" is
reminiscent of that found in the *Stollen* and *Abgesang*
of *Silberweise*. Unlike traditional *Meistergesang*, there is
no direct repetition between the *Stollen* and *Abgesang*
that serves a unifying function in Beckmesser's songs.
However, the repetitive nature of the coloratura,
which is always based on the descending fourth,
connects the two halves of the piece into a unified
whole.

Figure 7: "Morgen Ich Leuchte"

Beckmesser's *Meistergesang* are quite similar in style and form to sixteenth-century traditions. However, the parody made of his songs minimizes the effect of his historical accuracy. This parody is achieved mostly through Beckmesser's text, which is notoriously bad. William Marvin comments that "Beckmesser violates every rule of word/music relationship while observing all of the rules of form; his song is a perfect example of form without content."[25] Taking the poor word choices seen in "Den Tag" to the extreme, "Morgen Ich Leuchte" combines the relatively lucid melody with a completely nonsensical text, though one that still employs the required end rhyme.

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[25] William Marvin, "The Function of 'Rules' in 'Die Meister-singer von Nurnberg'," *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 3 (2003): 46.

Wagner also parodies the compositional practices of *Meistergesang*. Beckmesser seems to compose by rearranging a small repertoire of stock musical figures, the complete opposite of Walther's developmental style. Beckmesser's two songs are so similar that the pieces are almost variations of one another, though they are built on different texts. "Morgen Ich Leuchte" uses the melodic patterns, rhythms, and coloratura passages of "Den Tag," and even copies the *Abgesang* note for note. The near farcical treatment of Beckmesser's music undermines the historical validity of his *Meistergesang*, allowing Walther's pieces to be seen as more accurate and authentic in comparison.

David, playing a relatively small role within the opera, cannot be ignored as a representative of *Meistergesang*. David first tries to teach Walther the rules of the guild, and while he does not become a *Meistersinger* like Walther, he is made a journeyman after singing his "Johannessprüchlein." This indicates that David has gained at least a basic mastery of the *Meistersinger* rules. David is situated between Walther and Beckmesser in his relation to traditional *Meistergesang*. Like Walther, his second *Stollen* is not identical to the first, but suggests a move to the dominant. However, his short *Meistergesang* also has clearly defined phrases, a relatively singable melodic line, and repetition that unites the *Stollen* and the *Abgesang,* all features more prominent in the music of Beckmesser.

Figure 8: "Johannessprüchlein"

It is clear from this analysis that Beckmesser is closer to the traditions of historical *Meistergesang* than Walther. His music eschews the chromatic, developmental nature of Walther's pieces and mimics the clear phrases, melodic simplicity, and repetitive nature of *Morgenweise* and *Silberweise.* This is not to say that Beckmesser's songs are more artistically valid than Walther's. *Meistergesang*, though glorified by Wagner and other artists of the nineteenth-century, was recognized as a tradition in which "obedience to the rules" led to a "paucity of good Meisterlieder."[26] Wagner seems to support this negative view of *Meistergesang.* After all, Sachs and Walther are presented as the heroes of the opera, not Beckmesser and his more historically accurate songs. Combined with Beckmesser's satiric presentation, Wagner appears to deride *Meistergesang* throughout the opera by making it the symbol of a pedantic antagonist.

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[26] Susan Gattuso, "16th Century Nuremberg," in *The Renaissance: From the 1470s to the end of the 16th Century*, ed. Iain Fenlon (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1989), 299.

Such an interpretation is contradicted, however, by the emphasis the opera places on rules and traditions. The drama of *Die Meistersinger* centers on Walther's ability to satisfy the rules of the *Meistersingers*. Though presented as a freethinker, Sachs also emphasizes the need for rules in the creative process. Defending the *Meistersingers* as men of honour, Sachs explains to Walther that it is necessary to have rules so that inspiration may be preserved later in life. He is far more forceful when Walther rejects the *Meistersingers* at the end of the opera, saying to the young knight:

> Scorn not the Masters, I bid you, and honour their art! What speaks high in their praise speaks richly to your favour… So think back to this with gratitude: How can the art be unworthy which embraces such prizes that our Masters have cared it rightly in their own way, cherished it truly as they thought best, that has kept it genuine.[27]

We are presented here with a paradox, for as we know, Beckmesser is, at least in a historic sense, the best representative of the *Meistersinger's* rules. Wagner appears to be simultaneously criticizing and praising the traditional art of the *Meistersingers*. In order to reconcile these two contradictory interpretations of *Die Meistersinger*, we must turn to Wagner's depiction of Sachs.

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[27] Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, translated by Peter Branscombe, Choir and Orchestra of the German Opera, Berlin, Eugen Jochum, with Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau, Roland Hermann, Placido Domingo, and Catarina Ligenzda, Deutsche Grammophone 415 278-2, 1976, 4 compact discs.

There is never any doubt, though he gives no evidence during the opera, that Sachs is capable of singing *Meistergesang*. Most obviously, Sach's historical reality as a *Meistersinger* lends his operatic persona an immediate sense of authority. This is mirrored on stage by his membership in the *Meistersingers* guild. Sachs is also able to teach the rules of *Meistergesang* to others, not only a musical genius like Walther, but also a more average musician such as David. Eva and Beckmesser each recognize Sachs' superiority as a *Meistersinger*, both implying that he could win the song competition if he wanted to: Eva by counting on Sachs to triumph over Beckmesser if she cannot marry Walther, and Beckmesser by accusing Sachs of writing "Die Selige Morgentraum Deutweise" for his own use in the competition. The spontaneous acclamation of the people at the end of the opera only serves to reinforce the portrait of Sachs as a highly skilled and respected *Meistersinger*, even though Sachs never produces *Meistergesang* in the course of the opera.

Sachs, however, is not silent. The character has two monologues, his final address to Walther, his vocal contribution to the Act three quintet, and his Cobbling Song.[28] The hymn "Wach Auf!" that the chorus sings in act three can also be attributed to Sachs. The text of "Wach Auf!" is based on the poem *Die Wittemburgisch Nachtigall*, written by the historical Hans Sachs—a version of which was set to

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[28] While recognizing *Jerum* as part of Sachs output, it has not been a significant element in this analysis.

Morgenweise.[29] Though presented here as a chorus and not as a *Meistergesang*, the implication in the opera is that this chorus is by Sachs. Like the chorale, Sachs' two monologues are not in bar form, yet all three pieces are logical and well ordered. The fact that Sachs writes music other than traditional *Meistergesang* indicates that that his music "is more modern than that of the other *Meistersingers*."[30]

The audience cannot help but notice that Sachs stands slightly apart from his fellow guild members, being less dogmatic and set in his ways than the other *Meisters*. Sachs "appreciates, cherishes, and shares [the *Meistersingers*'] values, [but] recognizes there may be times when too great a permanence may stifle creativity."[31] Consider how he challenges the *Meistersingers* to forget their own rules and seek out new rules to fit the music when they cannot understand Walther's Trial Song. It is this progressive attitude, not only the absence of proper *Meistergesang*, that sets Sachs apart from the other *Meisters*. Taking into account the musical beliefs Sachs proffers on stage and the circumstantial evidence for his proficiency in *Meistergesang,* we must reach the following conclusion: having mastered the rules and traditions of *Meistergesang*, Sachs developed his own

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[29] Arthur Groos, "Constructing Nuremberg: Typological and Proleptic Communities in "Die Meistersinger"," *19th Century Music* 16, no. 1 (1992): 31.

[30] Ibid., 32.

[31] Alan Alberbach, "Hans Sachs: Wagner's Thinking Man and the Embodiment of the German Spirit," *Leitmotive: The Journal of the Wagner Society of Northern California* 16, no. 4 (2002-03): 2.

musical style and language (a language which is also
based on Wagner's technique of thematic
development). However, his new music is firmly
based on the rules and traditions of the *Meistersingers*.

Comparing Sachs with Walther and Beckmesser
confirms this interpretation, and exemplifies the need
for both tradition and innovation in an artistic
creation. Walther is clearly a genius in his own right.
When answering the questions of the *Meistersingers* in
"Am stillen Herd," he is able to produce a perfectly
acceptable *Meistergesang*, one which likely would have
gained him entry into the guild. However, when
Walther tries to follow the rules in "Fanget An!"
having just learned them from David, the musical
form breaks down, resulting in "a string of gorgeous
lyric outbursts that relate imperfectly to one
another."[32] Walther's unfamiliarity with the rules leads
to confusion within the form and topic of his song.
The far-reaching harmonies, a "mild, affectionate
parody of the advanced Wagnerian language in *Tristan
und Isolde*," and the bi-partite construction of the
Stollen–motivated by anger towards Beckmesser than
any real artistic innovation–confuse the Masters,
causing them to reject Walther as a candidate for the
guild.[33] There is, as Sachs notes, a great deal of
musical worth within Walther's music. However,
Walther has gone too far outside the rules to be
understood by the *Meisters*.

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[32] William E. McDonald, "Words, Music, and Dramatic Devel-
opment in "Die Meistersinger"," *19th-Century Music* 1, no.3
(1978): 6.

[33] Grey, "Master's and their Critics," 174.

It is up to Sachs to teach Walther that "there are rules in art, rules that the artists must learn to master and that can be gleaned only from the great masters of the past, but without getting stuck in one's ways."[34] Walther must learn to compromise. In his ignorance, Walther obscures the form of "Fanget An!" to the point that it is unrecognizable as a *Meistergesang* to the guild. It was thus inevitable that the *Meisters* would reject Walther, genius though he is. This is the crux of Walther's need for tradition: innovation can only be understood if it can be put in relation to what is known, i.e. tradition. As Nietzsche states:

> The progress from one level to the next must be so slow that not only the artists, but also the listeners and spectators participate in it and know exactly what is taking place. Otherwise, a great gap suddenly appears between the artist…and the public.[35]

Once he learns the rules from Sachs, Walther is able to reconcile his own musical ingenuity with the traditions of *Meistergesang*. Wagner does not make a strong musical concession on this point, as Walther's

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[34] Harry Kupfer, " 'We Must Finally Stop Apologizing for *Die Meistersinger*!': A Conversation with Harry Kupfer," in *Wagner's* Meistersinger*: Performance, History, Representation* , ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 40.

[35] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits,* trans. M. Faber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 168, quoted in Lydia Goehr, "The Dangers of Satisfaction: On Songs, Rehearsals, and Repetition in *Die Meistersinger*" in *Wagner's* Meistersinger: *Performance, History, Representation,* ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 66.

Prize Song is extremely experimental, displaying many
of the harmonic explorations that earned the *Meister's*
disdain in "Fanget An!" Nevertheless, the Prize Song
is recognizable to the *Meistersingers.* The guild can thus
accept Walther and his music, for while the "rules are
altered to fit the new material, …the notion of rules is
preserved. Evolution has replaced revolution."[36]
Given that Walther's songs are built on Wagner's
compositional style, it is clear that Wagner is
presenting himself as the next step in the evolution of
operatic music.

Beckmesser, on the other hand, demonstrates the
dangers of blindly following tradition, of getting
'stuck in one's ways', of lacking originality. It is
tempting to view Beckmesser only as an outcast and
antagonist within the opera, but that is an over-
simplification of his character. Like Sachs,
Beckmesser is both a *Meistersinger* and a member of
the business community. As Harry Kupfer describes
him:

> [Beckmesser] is an intellectual, and is certainly a
> genuine authority when it   comes   to   the
> rules of the Mastersinger-Tabulatur. But he is not
> creative and has no imagination.…He is petit
> bourgeois intellectual, pedantic, narrow-minded,
> precise, but not stupid.[37]

Not unlearned, Beckmesser is certainly uninspired
and conservative, either unwilling, unable, or afraid to

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[36] McDonald, "Words, music, and dramatic development," 14.

[37] Kupfer, "We Must Finally Stop Apologizing for *Die Meister-
singer!*," 42.

add new elements into his music. He believes that a strict adherence to the rules is the only requirement, and perhaps the only characteristic, of good *Meistergesang.* Yet Beckmesser's failure to win either Eva's affection or the acclaim of the people with his traditional songs strongly indicates that the rules of *Meistergesang* and a repertoire of stock musical figures are not enough. Walther, through his studies with Sachs, has been able to reconcile his genius to the traditions of *Meistergesang.* Beckmesser, on the other hand, will not allow innovation to alter the rules of his art. Thus, "Walther comes off better than Beckmesser not simply because he has a richer imagination, but because he can learn where the merker cannot."[38] It is this dogmatic insistence on tradition and rules that Wagner criticizes in this opera, rather than *Meistergesang* itself.

Given Wagner's revolutionary status within operatic history, it may seem unusual to consider this opera an argument for the importance of rules and tradition within art. The necessity of building from the past, however, can be seen in Wagner's own work. *Tristan und Isolde* may have broken new ground in opera, but Wagner's early works, such as *Rienzi* and *Die Feen,* were clearly based on traditions such as *grand opera* and *opera comique.*[39] Wagner also emphasized the importance of musical traditions in his writings. In *Oper und Drama*, Wagner sketched a direct connection

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[38] McDonald, "Words, music, and Dramatic Development," 248.

[39] Carl Dahlhaus, "Wagner's Place in the History of Music," in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Elrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 103.

between his own operatic works and the symphonic style of Beethoven, commenting that "the characteristic, decisive course of [my] whole art-evolution shows out with Beethoven by far more genuinely that with our Opera-composers."[40] It was, in fact, in the music of Beethoven that Wagner saw the origins of his technique of thematic development.[41] Wagner later stated that he viewed Bach as "the wondrous individuality, [and] strength and meaning of the German spirit in one incomparably speaking image."[42] Just as he demonstrated in Sachs and Walther, Wagner's knowledge of the rules and regulations of his own musical culture was necessary for his development as a composer, not because they provided a set of strict guidelines, but because they allowed him to organize and present his ideas in a manner understandable to the public.

Though in many ways a product of Wagner's own imagination, it may be, as Peter Hyönig suggests, that had Wagner not written *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, "this wonderful tradition of truly popular…art from and for the people would still be forgotten or

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[40] Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 2, trans. William Ashton Ellis, (The Wagner Library), http://users.skynet.be/johndeere/wlpdf/wlpr0063.pdf, 66.

[41] Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 41.

[42] Richard Wagner, "What is German?" in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 4, trans. William Ashton Ellis, (The Wagner Library), 10, http://users.skynet.be/johndeere/wlpdf/wlpr0122.pdf.

unknown."[43] The most historical of his operas, Wagner depended directly on the traditions of *Meistergesang* to communicate his ideas about innovation and tradition. As embodied in the character of Sachs, and emerging in Walther, great art requires a delicate balance between maintaining the established traditions in music while still incorporating new musical ideas. How appropriate that Wagner should combine the traditions of the *Meistersingers* with his own new music to communicate this idea to the audience.

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[43] Peter Höyng, "http://worldwidewagner.richard.de: An Interview with the Composer Concerning History, Nation, and Die Meistersinger," in *Wagner's* Meistersinger: *Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2002), 129.

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Abstract

The music and culture of the sixteenth century *Meistersinger* is the central topic of Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, his only operatic comedy. Wagner turned to Johann Christoph Wagenseil's *Von der Meister-Singer Holdseligen Kunst* for information on the customs of the *Meistersinger*, and many scenarios within the opera are based on information from this treatise. The inclusion of the famous historical *Meistersinger* Hans Sachs as a central character further strengthened the drama's connection with the historical guild. The use of distinct set pieces, a seeming departure from the *endliche Melodie* of earlier operas, also helped Wagner create an air of authenticity within the music of *Die Meistersinger*.

As much as *Die Meistersinger* invokes the sixteenth century, Wagner does not present an accurate musical depiction of *Meistergesang* in this work. Though Hans Sachs and his role as a *Meistersinger* is an important element in his drama, Wagner only superficially observed the form and style of historical *Meistergesang*. None of Walther's songs, including *Fanget an!, Am stillen Herd*, or his Prize song, which wins him the admiration of both the masters and the people, completely satisfies the rules set down by Wagenseil. The character of Sachs, in fact, sings no *Meisterlied* at all. A comparison of Sachs' *Morgenweise* and *Silberweise* with Wagner's drama reveals that it is actually in the music of Beckmesser, the pedantic, rule-bound antagonist, that Wagner comes closest to the musical traditions of the sixteenth century. Given the historical setting of the opera and the emphasis the libretto places on rules and traditions, this paper sets out to examine how

these three characters are musically portrayed, the degree to which they deviate from traditional *Meistergesang*, and what this reveals about Wagner's ideas on artistic genius and musical composition.