

The Flying Dutchman

Der Fliegende Holländer

Music and Libretto by Richard Wagner

Study Guide to the Opera

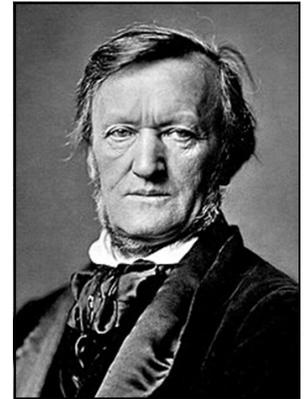
Opera San José 2018, *The Flying Dutchman*, Steven C. Kemp Design (stevenckemp.com)



Inspiration for *The Flying Dutchman*

Richard Wagner was a choirmaster and conductor in Riga (now Latvia) before an extravagant lifestyle and minimal income forced him to flee with his wife, Minna, to avoid his creditors in 1839. Had he not left for Paris when he did, today we may not have his third opera—*The Flying Dutchman*—one that broke away from grand Italian and French operatic styles.

Wagner first planned to sail to London and then take a train to Paris. While at sea, the ship ran into an intense storm, one that forced the travelers to take refuge in two different Norwegian ports. Wagner found calmness and inspiration for the theme of the seamen's song at these ports; he also heard from the sailors the tale of *The Flying Dutchman*.



Wilhelm Richard Wagner
(1813–1883)

Wagner, now 28 years old, sold his libretto (based on Heine's *Aus den Memoiren des Herrn von Schnabelewopski*) to l'Opéra de Paris, which turned it over to a house composer. Wagner then used the 500 francs to rent a piano and composed his own score for *Der Fliegende Holländer* in seven weeks. *The Flying Dutchman* premiered on January 2, 1843; Dresden audience members expected a work in the French-Italian tradition, similar to his earlier *Rienzi* (1840), so they were puzzled by the innovative way the new opera integrated the music with the dramatic content. The composer became even more adventurous with *Tannhäuser* in 1845.

Caught up in the political turmoil of 1848, Wagner fled to Zürich. During this enforced exile he wrote influential essays, asserting (following G.W.F. Hegel) that music had reached a limit after Ludwig van Beethoven and that the "artwork of the future" would unite poetry, music, acting, scenery, and drama to create the opera, an instrument for great philosophical ideas. Wagner's concept for the "total artwork" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) and inspiration from the folktale are evident in *The Flying Dutchman* score, where he included detailed stage directions and suggestions for set and costume design.

The Flying Dutchman Synopsis

A Norwegian fishing village, 18th century

ACT I. An icy storm has driven Captain Daland's ship several miles from his home. Sending his crew off to rest, he leaves the watch in charge of a young steersman, who falls asleep as he sings about his girl ("Mit Gewitter und Sturm aus fernem Meer"). A ghostly schooner drops anchor next to Daland's ship. Its captain steps ashore and, with increasing despair, reflects on his fate: once every seven years he may leave his ship to find a wife ("Die Frist ist um, und abermals verstrichen sind sieben Jahr"). If she is faithful, she will redeem him from his deathless wandering. If not, he is condemned to sail the ocean until Judgment Day. Daland discovers the phantom ship, and the stranger, who introduces himself as "a Dutchman," tells the captain of his plight. The Dutchman offers gold and jewels for a night's lodging, and when he learns that Daland has a daughter, asks for her hand in marriage. Happy to have found a rich son-in-law, Daland agrees and sets sail for home.

Intermission

ACT II. A group of local girls are singing and spinning in Daland's house ("Summ und brumm, du gutes Rädchen"). Daland's daughter, Senta, is captivated by the portrait of a pale man in black—the Flying Dutchman. Her friends, working under the watchful eye of Mary, Senta's nurse, tease Senta about her suitor, Erik, who is a hunter, not a sailor. When the superstitious Mary refuses to sing a ballad about the Dutchman, Senta sings it herself. The song reveals that the Dutchman's curse was put on him for a blasphemous oath. To everyone's horror, Senta prays with burning intensity that she will be the woman to save him. Erik enters with news of the sailors' return. Alone with Senta, he reminds her of her father's wish to find her a husband and asks her to plead his cause, but she remains distant. Realizing how much the Dutchman's picture means to her, he tells her of a frightening dream in which he saw her embrace the Dutchman and sail away on his ship. Senta declares that this is what she must do, and Erik rushes off in despair. A moment later, the Dutchman enters. Senta stands transfixed. Daland follows and asks his daughter to welcome the stranger, whom he has brought to be her husband. Daland leaves, and the Dutchman, who is equally moved by the meeting, asks Senta if she will accept him. Unaware that she realizes who he is, he warns her of making a rash decision, but she vows to be faithful to him unto death. Daland is overjoyed to learn that his daughter has accepted the suitor.

ACT III. At the harbor, the villagers celebrate the sailors' return. Baffled by the strange silence aboard the Dutchman's ship, they call out to the crew, inviting them to join the festivities. Suddenly the ghostly sailors appear, mocking their captain's quest in hollow chanting. The villagers flee in terror. Quiet returns and Senta appears, followed by the distressed Erik. He pleads with her not to marry the Dutchman since she has already pledged her love to him. The Dutchman, who has overheard them, lets go of all hope and boards his ship. When Senta tries to stop him, he explains she will escape damnation—the fate of those who betray him—only because she has not yet proclaimed her vows before God. He reveals his identity and Senta ecstatically replies that she knows who he is. As the Dutchman sets sail, Senta throws herself into the sea, claiming that she will be faithful to him unto death. This is his salvation. The spectral ship disappears, and Senta and the Dutchman are seen ascending to heaven.

Characters

Senta *soprano*
Daland's daughter, who is deeply impressed with the tale and the painting of The Flying Dutchman. Upon meeting the cursed sailor, Senta deems it her mission to save him from his curse.

The Dutchman *bass-baritone*
Condemned by the devil to sail the seas until Judgment Day, unless he finds a woman who would love him faithfully until death.

Erik *tenor*
A huntsman in love with Senta.

Daland *bass*
A Norwegian sea captain and Senta's father.

Steuermann *tenor*
Daland's steersman.

Mary *mezzo-soprano*
Senta's nurse.

Norwegian sailors
Dutchman's ghost crew
Villagers



Richard Wagner Festspielhaus am Grünen Hügel in Bayreuth

Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Poetry, music, acting, stage scenery, and drama merge to create the opera—this concept was Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The following are typical Wagner instructions. "The ship and the ocean must be given scrupulous attention by the stage director: he will find all necessary indications in corresponding passages of the orchestral score. The opening scene of the opera should evoke the proper mood in which the audience will be able to appreciate the marvelous apparition of the 'Flying Dutchman' himself. . . The sea, in between the rocky promontories, must be shown in as wild a state as possible; the handling of the ship cannot be too realistic, and such details as the shaking of the vessel when struck by a violent wave should be realized in a very drastic manner. Particular attention must also be paid to the lighting. . . in order to make effective the meteorological shifts across the first act the skillful implementation of painted scrim is imperative, reaching as far as the middle of the stage."

In 1876, Wagner designed and created his own opera house at Bayreuth with financial support from Bavarian King Ludwig II. The orchestra faced the stage, and audience members were not allowed their usual meanderings to the bar during the performance. To balance the instrumental music and the singing, Wagner placed the orchestra in a covered pit partly beneath the stage. The Festival Theater at Bayreuth is still controlled by Wagner's direct descendants.

Leitmotifs and Wagner's Operatic Influence

Wagner embraced the use of leitmotifs, musical phrases from the orchestra assigned to specific characters, situations, objects, or emotions. Though leitmotifs (or leitmotives), had been used in Italian operas, Wagner used the device on a grander scale; he presented or contrasted themes, contracted or expanded leitmotifs, and used the device to suit his own needs. *The Flying Dutchman* was the first of his operas to employ leitmotifs, which became a staple of Wagner's future operatic scores. Listen for **leitmotifs** in music for:

The Flying Dutchman and his ship
The Sailor's Chorus reveling on land
Senta and the salvation she promises

Wagner's score for *The Flying Dutchman* required expanded wind, brass, and percussion sections—a much larger orchestra than traditional French and Italian opera orchestras. With more instruments, he was able to create the sounds of nature and especially that of the storming sea. Wagner's expanded instrumentation demanded a new style of German operatic singing, one that needed voices with greater intensity and depth. However, Wagner did not completely abandon the influence of French and Italian styles. The commoners' songs were in the traditional, well-known styles, while the leitmotifs for Dutchman and Senta stood out. Wagner's compositional choices and use of leitmotifs were to become his signature style.

Listening to his music, one does not forgive him for what he may or may not have been. It is not a matter of forgiveness. It is a matter of being dumb with wonder that his poor brain and body didn't burst under the torment of the demon of creative energy that lived inside him, struggling, crawling, scratching to be released; tearing, shrieking at him to write the music that was in him. The miracle is that what he did in the little space of seventy years could have been done at all, even by a great genius.

Deems Taylor, *Of Men and Music*,
Simon and Schuster, 1937

Wagner's Notable Written Works:

- "A Communication to My Friends"
- "Art and Revolution"
- "My Life"
- "Opera and Drama"
- "The Art Work of the Future"

The Flying Dutchman: **Historic Folktale with Widespread Adaptations**

A phantom or spectral ship, which supposedly is seen in bad weather trying to round the Cape of Good Hope.

Portends bad luck. From a legend of a Dutch sea captain, Captain Vanderdecken who, encountering head winds while trying to round the Cape, blasphemously swore that he would succeed if it took till Judgment Day. The Devil heard the man's promise and took the sailor at his word, forcing the man to sail for eternity. The sailor's only possible redemption was through love, so the Devil allowed the Dutchman to return to land once every seven years to search for a bride. His crew is composed of dead men who stand to their tasks but will not answer questions.



The Flying Dutchman by Louis M. Elshemius
Oil painting on composition board, 1908
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

The theme of the Flying Dutchman has been used widely in a number of genres, including literature, music, art and design, film, television, comics, radio dramas, leisure, aviation, sailing, nicknames, and horse racing. Some of the best-known works, in addition to Wagner's opera, are:

Literature

English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge based his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" on the legend.

Music

English dramatist Edward Fitzball and composer George Rodwell created a melodrama titled *The Flying Dutchman; or the Phantom Ship: a Nautical Drama, in three acts.*

Art

In addition to Elshemius, the *Flying Dutchman* has been painted by Albert Ryder (Smithsonian American Art Museum) and by Howard Pyle (Delaware Art Museum).

Film

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales (2017)
The Flying Dutchman (2001 TV Movie)
What's Opera, Doc? (1957)

German poet Heinrich Heine published a set of fictional memoirs that reference the folk tale. Should we consider his thought that "The moral of the piece is, for women, to be careful not to marry Flying Dutchmen, while we men may learn from it how even at best we flounder with women."

Pittsburgh Opera Education thanks our generous supporters:

Allegheny Regional Asset District
Michele and Patrick Atkins Baird
The Olga Barry Fund
Robert and Jillian Boldin
Howard and Marilyn Bruschi
The Buhl Foundation
The Jack Buncher Foundation
Verna Corey
DT Midstream
Eat'n Park Hospitality Group
EQT Foundation
Michele Fabrizi
Federated Hermes
The Grable Foundation
Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council
Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield
The Huntington National Bank
Intermediate Unit #1, Pennsylvania Department of Education
Levin Furniture
Michalka Family Charitable Fund
Howard and Nell E. Miller Foundation
Nancy N. and Maurice A. Nernberg
NexTier Bank
The PNC Advisors Charitable Trust Committee
PPG Foundation
UPMC Health Plan

Memorable Dutchman Music

The massive orchestra includes extra winds, brass, strings, percussion, and a wind machine. And it's an opera that lets the chorus shine while singing a thrilling ghost story in German.

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
412-281-0912
www.pittsburghopera.org