

Richard Wagner, Destiny and Fulfilment Tannhäuser or the Capitalisation on Medieval Legends

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Abstract: *To speak nowadays of Wagner's egotism, after time has "classified" his incontestable œuvre in the highest areas of international dramaturgy, is not in the least surprising. To notice, however, his sparks of genius and the radical anticipations announced as early as his first operas, this is truly impressive with a musician who had discovered the art of handling sounds so late. The key to solving this phenomenon is called simply – BEETHOVEN. The same colossal musician who would influence the destinies of music and of all musicians from the first half of the 19th century and not only. How could we praise more appropriately the genius of the musician from Bonn, now when we celebrate 250 years from his birth, than through R. Wagner's œuvre, who would identify himself with and consider himself a successor of Beethoven's aesthetic and human ideals! I do not believe that the history of music can offer us a more eloquent example of artistic completion, all the more so since, paradoxically, the two great musicians never met.*

Keywords: *destiny, ascent, contradictions, mythology, success, Tannhäuser*

Beethoven and Wagner

If Beethoven was considered the last great Classical composer and the one who would dominate the music from the first half of the 19th century, Wagner was the last and maybe the greatest of the Romantics, the one who would master the music from the second half of the same century.

Until the age of fifteen, when he decided to become a composer, Wagner had not studied any instrument and had no musical training. Listening to Beethoven works like *Egmont*, *Fidelio*, but especially *Symphony No. 9* had an immense impact on him, leaving such an impression on him that they transformed his entire existence.

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Wagner's own words are the most evocative regarding this revelation:

I do not really know what was destined for me! – I only remember that one evening I listened to a symphony by Beethoven for the first time, that I became feverish and fell ill. When I came to, I had become a musician... The fact that later, having become familiarised with various sorts of distinguished music, I still loved above all and I honoured and adored Beethoven, originates, without a doubt, in this circumstance. I did not know any other joy, apart from this: to plunge wholly into the mysteries of this genius until I thought that I had finally become a speck of him.¹

In his first years of composition, Wagner evolved more as an autodidact. The few harmony lessons taken from a musician from Leipzig during his teenage years certainly meant less than the study of Beethoven's symphonies. These were maybe the best "teacher" regarding his musical training.

Wagner was endowed with an immense gift of poetry and drama. His artistic and creative mastery found full expression in the area of musical theatre, as he authored thirteen monumental operas.

After Beethoven, no other composer managed to approach such a wide sphere of contemporary problematics like Wagner. He was, just like Beethoven, against any form of oppression. Besides, he unmasked the spiritual poverty of the bourgeois world, the lies and falsehood. He also evoked the contradictions of life, unfulfilled hopes, etc. Expressions such as *lustred lies* or *trifles set in gold* were formulas through which he showed his aversion towards the hypocrisy of a dominant class.

The life of man depicted by Beethoven, so comprehensive in feelings, appears to Wagner as a fight in the grandest meaning of the word, of the soul aspiring towards joy, happiness and freedom. His artistic achievements, ideological conceptions, his objection to formalism and compromise in art prove Wagner's unflinching wish to promote his own artistic principles, which, most of the times, as in Beethoven's case, attracted the toughest of reactions.

The press of the time wrote about the works Beethoven composed before his first symphony: "[...] unintelligible, bizarre, obscure works or average, poor, colourless, sometimes hilarious works not to be presented before an audience"². We must notice that this criticism also continued with the same obstinacy after the wonderful symphonies which would follow, culminating in a certain A. Garthy's references from *Musikaliche Conversation-Lexikon* from 1835:

¹ Richard Wagner, *Pelerinaj la Beethoven*, Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1977, p. 12.

² *Allgemeine musicalische Zeitung*, 1799 – 1899; acc. to. Aurel Ion Brumaru, *Prefață*, in Richard Wagner, *Pelerinaj*..., p. 9.

*This work – Symphony No. 9, with Schiller's "Ode to Joy" – is the most strident and the spikiest satire on Schiller's sublime ode, overflowing with boredom and misanthropy from beginning to end*³.

Of course, such obscure criticism is not worth the slightest comment. It is rather worth taking into consideration how important that music was for a visionary like Wagner, who not only had the openness and the receptiveness of an advanced spirit, but, moreover, found Beethoven's music corresponding to his own philosophy.

Wagner was especially fond of *Symphony No. 9*, which he considered as being the supreme achievement of the world culture. Needless to say, the influences of this symphony are often felt in his music.

As for Wagner's conducting activity, there are fewer references. At 30 years of age, when he occupied the position of musical conductor of the Semperoper in Dresden, Wagner was already a knowledgeable and experienced musician, which allowed him to put his reforming ideas into practice. His coordinating work came to remarkable results, raising the level of the ensemble at the highest rank among the German theatrical collectives.

Beside opera music, he conducted numerous symphonic concerts, in which Beethoven's works featured prominently. In 1843 Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* was still unknown in Dresden. Wagner presenting it was a veritable triumph. Interesting and edifying regarding the choice of this work is the fact that Wagner begins his conducting career with this very masterpiece, while the last work presented in his last concert in which he appears as a conductor was also *Symphony No. 9*. This happened in 1872, on the occasion of a ceremony of starting construction work on the Festival Hall in Bayreuth. He saw in the work of his predecessor the fruit of radical renewals, but also a support of the revolution that he himself would fulfil in music. It was the ideal mode of expression which would clear the way for his music drama. It is here that the aspiration towards the glorified, spiritualised ideal in *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* comes from, which was carried out fully in his last opera *Parsifal*: "[...] his last symphony (referring to Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*) appeared to me as the keystone of a great artistic era, that no one was capable of surpassing..."⁴. Expressions like *the human gospel of the art of the future...*, *the most accomplished work of art...*, *the universal drama* can be met in most of Wagner's writings. We shall thus ascertain that this work would become for Wagner the central axis around which he built his idea of music drama and his whole conception of art.

The importance that Wagner gave to this masterpiece, as well as to other works of the titan from Bonn was materialised in numerous writings,

³ *Musikalische Conversation-Lexikon* from 1835. Acc. to Aurel Brumaru, *Prefață*, in Richard Wagner, *Pelerinaj...*, p. 10.

⁴ Richard Wagner, *Un muzicant german la Paris*, Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1981, p. 21.

articles, studies, literary comments and books. They were meant to create for the public an adequate state of mind concerning the understanding of the real message. Besides, they also proved to be necessary for an informed audition of Beethoven's music. Thus, he wrote *Regarding the presentation of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9* (1873), *Pilgrimage at Beethoven* (1840), *Beethoven* (1870), *Symphony "Eroica"*, *The Coriolan Overture*, *On Conducting* (1869) – an ample monograph devoted to Beethoven, but also a vast autobiographical work.

Wagner – signs of originality

Wagner built his entire œuvre – his music drama – departing from Beethoven's last symphony, out of which he extracts the sap of his entire conception of musical art. Beethoven's symphonic pragmatism thus offered him the spirit of this new drama, while the traditional myths and legends constituted the thematic basis for its elaboration. For Wagner, music would signify first of all the intimate fusion of poetic art with the art of sound, as it is certain that only a synthesis of the arts would be able to ensure a fulfilment of the drama of the future.

In the 8th decade of the 19th century, Wagner knows full acknowledgement by completing the opera that crowns his whole creation – the gigantic Tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

In the *Tetralogy*, Wagner concentrated all his principles of musical theatre regarding themes, action and the music *per se*. The great opera of Wagner's maturity begun in the autumn of 1848 and which would be finalised more than 26 years later, reconstitutes in a unitary, original main idea topics and characters of the German traditional myths and legends about the Nibelung around an equally legendary character – Siegfried, the nucleus of the entire dramaturgy. The myths that Wagner looked for in the most distant past of Germanic peoples symbolized the essence of the most authentic and undying human features.

*The hero of myths – Wagner was saying – is a man of action: the purest essence of the aspirations towards freedom and heroic deeds of humanity, expressed in a generalised form, have been concentrated in his person. Every era, every generation finds their own theme in ancient legends, because myth does not suffer from the influence of time, it is universal, and a great artist will know how to discover and to emphasise in it what corresponds to the needs of the contemporary period.*⁵

⁵ Acc. to M.S. Druskin, *Richard Wagner*, Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1961, p. 69.

Wagner's great masterpiece includes: the fairy tale opera *The Rheingold*, the psychological drama *The Valkyrie*, the heroic epic *Siegfried* and the tragedy *Twilight of the Gods*. The genre differences of its component parts do not harm the overall unity, but, on the contrary, contribute as completely as possible to a capitalisation on the means of expression.

The melody – a basic element of Wagner's music – is born out of speech, and musical speech involves renouncing the patterns of the melodic opera. The melodic form, according to him, is capable of a much richer development than there had seemed to him possible until then, and creates, at the same time, a greater freedom of harmonic display. He thus establishes new principles of building form, which do not include conventional structures anymore. The dialogues and the monologues follow constructions based on free principles of development. Wagner fundamentals the importance of declamation in the vocal part, conceived in the form of an uninterrupted sonic flow. This is the "*infinite melody*".

A basic principle of construction in his music dramas is the *leitmotif*. The term, associated by most commentators with Wagner's work, was in fact invented by his friend Hans von Wolzogen⁶ and was used by many of his forerunners. The Romantics often utilize leading motifs with a symbolic meaning (Weber, Berlioz, Schumann, etc.). Wagner increases the importance of *leitmotifs*, granting them the role of bond and leader of musical developments, impressing the action with a more unitary progress. His operas represent a huge web of *leitmotifs*, which evolve together with the characters and the situations of the drama, many times suffering important changes without, however, losing their recognisability.

Wagner's personality was often marked by deep contradictions, both regarding his conception of the world and his artistic work. His ideas, the topics and images appearing in his work, differ from one stage to another, at times emphasising the features of Realism, at other times those of reactionary Romanticism. At first, he adhered enthusiastically to the bold slogans of "Young Germany", only later to fall under the powerful influence of Feuerbach's materialistic philosophy, which led him towards utopian socialism. He was also influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's writings, which made him adhere to the Pan-German nationalist ideas; and the list of his ideological contradictions may continue.

On the musical level, also, Wagner passes from one extreme to another. Denying at first the successes of German opera, he falls under the influence of Italian and French music, only to later return to nationalist ideals. Even when he supported with much conviction the necessity of creating a national music drama, the deviations from these ideals did not cease to appear. A good example is the opera *Rienzi*, which, although being

⁶ Hans von Wolzogen (1848 – 1938), a German writer, publicist and editor, also known because of his ties to Wagner.

seen by some as the most accomplished genre work in this first creative period, shows, however, powerful influences from Italian or French composers. He condemned everyone who accepted compromise, declaring passionately that his reason for existence was not earning money, but creating. But he himself, oftentimes determined by his precariousness, would make compromises. Here is how the one who looked to inspire German art with major ideas and noble, uplifting aspirations would sometimes write music to the taste of bourgeois fashion out of the wish to earn money. It is the case of the opera *Rienzi* or of those arrangements for piano composed after fashionable operas, that he himself criticised.

Another contradiction in Wagner's music is related to the use of choirs. If in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* we come across grand choral scenes, as their role and place in the progress of stage action is very pervasive, this fact becomes altogether unusual in his later work. From the grand choral apotheosis in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, the importance of the choir diminishes, as the composer sometimes completely renounces its contribution. Nevertheless, the contribution of the orchestra is capitalised on intensely. Departing from the principles of programmatic music, which he consistently promotes, the overtures, orchestral prologues, symphonic interludes and the numerous tableaux in his works prove an immense richness of orchestration, with sonorities ranging from the most gentle and subtle nuances to the grandest ones. Wagner's extended orchestra becomes an equal-rights participant in the progress of the drama. The role of the orchestra in his conception is to express what words are incapable of doing: the profoundness of human thoughts and feelings, complex psychological states, etc.

Beyond all the contradictions and the criticism of the time, Wagner's work remains uncontestably one of the most important in the whole history of music. Animated by the wish to imagine heroic ideas and images, a national heroic ideal inspired from ancient legends and myths, Wagner populated his operas with fantastic characters, subordinating everything to the main objective: emphasising the human character and the most complex states of mind. The verisimilar, convincing expression of profoundly human ideas and feelings, as well as the totality of the innovative language elements, which situate him among the most progressive representatives of German culture, exercised strong influence upon all composers active in the late 19th century, but also upon future generations.

The *Tannhäuser* Overture

Finished in 1845, the opera *Tannhäuser* is his fifth dramatic work, after *The Fairies* (1834), *The Ban on Love* (1836), *Rienzi* (1840) and *The Flying Dutchman* (1841). Wagner was already in Dresden as musical

conductor of the Semperoper and was working on the direction of *The Flying Dutchman*, when he finalised the score of *Tannhäuser*. The subject, which had been sketched out as early as 1842, is inspired from the legends of the German people and treats the theme of expiation and human sacrifice in the name of overcoming egoism and self-love.

Tannhuser (from old German) was a character in a medieval legend from the middle of the 13th century, who tried to obtain from the Pope divine forgiveness for his sins. This legend, brought to life in a short story written by Ludwig Tieck, as well as an old traditional song about Tannhäuser, impressed Wagner as early as his teenage years.

Another legend, which inspired many German writers (such as G. Ph. Novalis, E. Th. A. Hoffmann), had as a subject the singers' contest from Wartburg, and the hero was a troubadour knight, Heinrich von Ofterdingen. Wagner keeps Ofterdingen's character traits, but attributes them to Tannhäuser, whom he transforms into the hero of the singers' contest in Wartburg. This is how the libretto of the opera *Tannhäuser* is born: from blending two different legends into a dramatic narrative processed by Wagner.

The action of the opera progresses around Tannhäuser. The hero reinvented by Wagner can find fulfilment neither in the vicious world of delighting the senses – in Venus's grotto full of sins, nor in the world of moral duty and high aspirations – in the pilgrims' world. This duality of completely opposite worlds can already be found in previous works, but especially in his *Tetralogy*.

Venus, the goddess of beauty and love, in whose empire he arrives during his wanderings, wishes to retain Tannhäuser in her world, but in Wartburg he is expected by Elisabeth, the embodiment of moral and spiritual purity, the one who loves him truly. The central tableaux and climax of the opera are represented by the scene of the singers' (the Minnesänger's) contest, where Tannhäuser praises the earthly pleasures, which attracts contempt from his close ones. Only Elisabeth stays close to him, faithfully imploring him to start on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he would obtain atonement for his sins. Refused and scolded by the Pope, Tannhäuser loses all trust in the moral dogma of the church and, rejected by everyone, feels attracted to Venus again. Vanquished by grief and sorrow, Elisabeth dies. Elisabeth's love up to sacrifice is the key to the expiation of Tannhäuser's sinful life, who, shaken by the girl's death, also finds his eternal peace.

Many of these events, characters and situations are well illustrated in the overture of the opera, a veritable masterpiece of world symphonic music. The idea content of the overture is supported in an inspired manner by the very original structure of the work, composed in the *form of a Frame*, with a long middle part in the *form of a Sonata*, having clearly delineated sections.

The music shows a pronounced dramatic instinct, including numerous contrasts theatrical in effect.

Frame A is surprising through the square structure and the symmetry of the periods which it is composed of: every stanza from the two of every period is sixteen bars long and can be subdivided in its turn in eight-bar phrases, alternating according to the previous model – consistently. The phrases can also be divided in four-bar motifs, alternating according to the same principle of dialogue.

The entire thematic material of this section is made up of two themes that follow each other continuously, gradually involving ever larger groups of instruments in a *crescendo* intensifying the musical discourse up to powerful overflowing. Little by little, the tumult loses intensity, reaching the beginning atmosphere of the first theme in the conclusion of this section.

The first theme, displayed at first at clarinet, horn and bassoon, is the pilgrims' chorale, representing the world of the righteous and of the most noble human aspirations.



Fig. 1 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 1-11

This theme can pose important problems regarding the homogeneity of the voices. Even if all the three instrument families have related timbres, there are major differences regarding the dynamic possibilities and especially the mode of sonic emission. Moreover, the way the voices are led, the support and the melodic of the phrasing must observe a natural manner subject to the same rules of singing.

The second theme, displayed by the cello and continued by the violins, is based on the plaintive motive of repentance and amplifies the sonic space by much.



Fig. 2 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 12-23

After a four-bar bridge in the same dynamic development, the whole stanza is resumed (bar 38) in an *ff* nuance, having the trombones in the foreground, supported by the ternary rhythm of the entire orchestra and the melodic figuration of the violins. Slowly, as the two themes are displayed, the intensity of the orchestra falls down to the beginning nuance, fetching the calm atmosphere of the first theme, emitted by the same instruments (clarinet, horn and bassoon) in the conclusion of this section (bars 70 – 80).

In the middle part of the overture, written in the *Sonata form*, there resounds the music from Venus's grotto, music of temptations and bodily pleasures. It is here that we also come across the melody of the hymn dedicated by *Tannhäuser* to the goddess of love. All of these happen after dusk. For the Romantics, night is the symbol of feelings unchained from reason. At night, chaotic, instinctive forces and mystery awaken; the hours of the night are full of the fantastic, of the poetic charm of mysterious, troubling movements in nature and man's senses. Among the composers of the 19th century, none expressed with so much feeling as Wagner the romanticism of the night, as he did in *Tannhäuser* or *Tristan and Isolde*.

The first theme of the *sonata form*, which comes immediately after the last chords of the pilgrims' chorale die out (bar 81), is made up of three sections (*aba – arch form*), in which the third is a reprise of the first in a treated manner. The first section (stanza) of fifteen bars is divided into two phrases of seven and eight bars, respectively, and presents a series of motives sometimes displayed alternatively, sometimes simultaneously, which are transformed into alluring songs of cheerfulness.

*When dusk falls magical phenomena happen: a powder pierced by rosy light swells up, voluptuous songs of joy reach our ear.*⁷

⁷ Richard Wagner, *Un muzicant...*, pp. 163-164.

Fig. 3 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 81-86

We observe a first motive (bar 81) played by the violin, over which another motive emitted by the flute is superimposed in the next bar and together with all the others that follow (bars 84, 88, 92 and 94) they make up the thematic material of the first theme. All these present Venus's seductive charms in a fragmented form, in movements with a dancy, sensuous tendency.

The second section of the first theme (the 2nd stanza) of 16 bars, also divided in two phrases of nine and seven bars each, begins at bar 96 and depicts Tannhäuser. Attracted by Venus's luring charm, Tannhäuser approaches and joins the tempting game.

Fig. 4 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 93-98

The last section of the first theme (bar 112) brings back motives of the first theme, which it develops over the course of twelve bars.

A bridge of eighteen bars leads us towards the second theme of the exposition, composed of two stanzas of sixteen and fourteen bars each. It is the hymn dedicated by Tannhäuser to the goddess of love.

*Through his song dedicated to love, which rejoices proudly, cheerfully and defiantly, he brings the dizzying charm nearer to himself. He is being answered to with unrestrained yells: around him, ever nearer, turn the rosy clouds, tempting fragrances encircle him themselves, intoxicating his senses.*⁸

Fig. 5 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 142-148

The second stanza (bar 158) is played by the woodwinds together with the violin in the same tonality of the second theme – *B major*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

Fig. 6 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 158-162

After a shorter, eight-bar bridge, we enter the development. This section of 66 bars can be structured in two subsections. The first one, from bar 180 to 195, resumes thematic elements of the first theme, which it treats succinctly through overlapping and sequencing.

Fig. 7 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 176-183

The second one, which is preceded by a change in tempo – *Un poco ritenuto* – is a tripartite thematic episode, thanks to some new themes it brings. It is the moment when Venus, the goddess of beauty, appears.

In seductive twilight, his unnaturally clear regard catches sight, as if cast before him, of a feminine figure of distinguished charm; he hears the voice that, in sweet tremor, seems the echo of mermaids' calling. The voice promises to him – the bold – the fulfilment of his most fiery wishes. Before him stands Venus herself.⁹

This new theme, entirely different from the whole thematic material used up to now, is emitted by the clarinet at bar 196 on the discreet and delicate accompaniment in *tremolo* of the string orchestra.

Fig. 8 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 192-202

The middle part of this thematic episode is a dialogue of the first two soloist violins in the same warm, inviting atmosphere, over which another new theme, also displayed at the clarinet, will be superimposed at the end.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

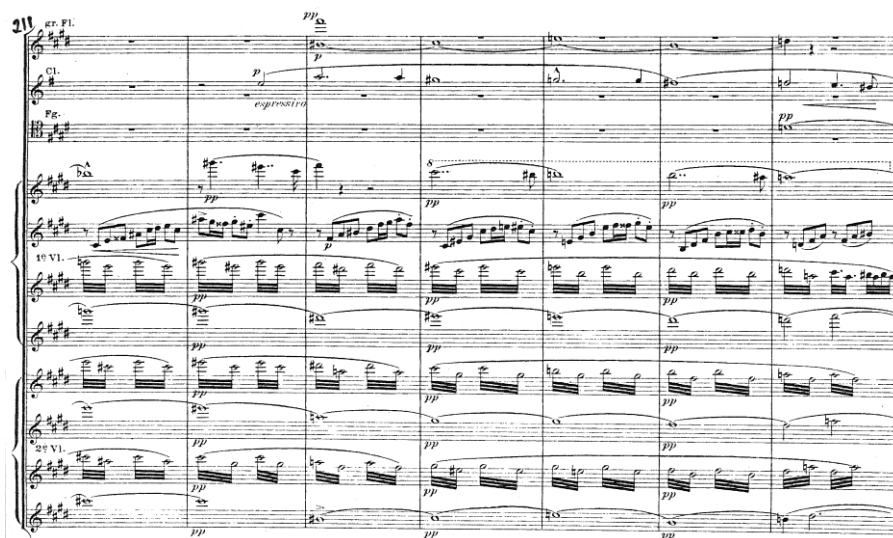


Fig. 9 Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, bars 211-217

The same bridge, that we heard between the two themes of the exposition, comes back now (extended by four bars) in the basic tonality – *E major* (bars 228 – 241).

The re-exposition brings again the two initial themes, but in reverse order. Thus, the second theme appears first in the same structure at bar 242 with added enthusiasm and joy, which overcomes the entire orchestra.

*His (Tannhäuser's) heart and senses fire up, burning longing heats up the blood in his veins. She pulls him towards her with irresistible force and Tannhäuser approaches even more the goddess with the triumphant love song, which he now, floating in the deepest ecstasy, sings to her glorification.*¹⁰

The first theme is brought again (bar 273), without being preceded by the bridge, in the same tumultuous atmosphere, with yells of joy and wild outbursts of pleasure in a frenetic dance, which carries Tannhäuser through the hottest and most dizzying moments of relish. It is interesting that Wagner inverts the two thematic expositions here, as well. The second stanza is brought first, with the same structure as in the exposition, while the first stanza appears in a restricted (seven-bar) form.

The same bridge between the first and second themes of the exposition or between development and re-exposition prepares the return of the pilgrims' choir (from bar 296 to 320).

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

*The song approaches ever more, and the day stealthily banishes the night and the whispered fretting of pleasures...; finally, as the sun raises its splendour, the pilgrims' song itself – in the animation of the world, of everything that lives and exists - announces the obtained deliverance.*¹¹

This last section – frame **Z** – returns at bar 321, being emitted by the same instruments from the beginning of the work, accompanied by the entire orchestra, presenting the following differences: although the thematic material is identical, both from the point of view of content and of structure, to that from frame **A**, with the exception of the second stanza (from which the second phrase is missing), the main difference can be found in the meter. The initial time signature of $\frac{3}{4}$ is replaced here with the time signature of $\frac{4}{4}$, the same as in the entire sonata form, with the difference that the pulsation is made every two beats – in *alla breve*. This augmentation is amplified together with the musical discourse, as the conclusive stanza (bar 379) – *assai stretto* - sees a one-beat pulsation on three-bar phrasing. Thus, a $\frac{3}{4}$ bar from frame **A** equals three bars from frame **Z**.

The overture closes with a ten-bar *Coda* in *piu stretto* in a dynamic culmination, which can reach the highest nuances and the most uplifting sonorities.

In conclusion, the opera *Tannhäuser* fully reflects a diverse, complex and contradictory world of human feelings, ranging from mysticism to rationalism, Apollonian – Dionysiac, moral – immoral, etc., contradictions which largely characterise the composer's anxious life. Although the way towards the assertion of the defining features of the Wagnerian style had begun with the *Flying Dutchman*, which is considered by the specialists as being his first mature creation, *Tannhäuser* definitely represents a new, distinct stage, which will be marked by the most important aesthetic ideals. He had barely passed 30 years of age, but the experience accumulated in his frequent travels contributed a lot to his artistic knowledgeability. With immense creative energy characteristic of youth, Wagner manages to put into practice a good number of his reforming ideas, gathered in a supreme desideratum, that of achieving a German national opera, free of the influences of the Italian or French music in the same genre. *Tannhäuser*, as reinvented by Wagner, is a representative character of the German romantic world by excellence, the hero-antihero who makes you despise or become fond of Wagner... or as Nietzsche said: *I hate Wagner but I cannot stand any other music.*¹²

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Cazul Wagner*, Humanitas publishing house, Bucharest, 2004, p. 9.

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