

Repertoire & Standards

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Male Choirs



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Richard Wagner's Choruses for Men's Voices

by
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Festgesang zur Enthüllung des Friedrich-August-Monuments in Dresden am 7.6.1843
Das Liebesmahl der Apostel
Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August
An Weber's Grabe

On April 7, 1842, Richard Wagner and his wife Minna said goodbye to Paris and began the five-day, four hundred mile trip to Dresden, Germany. He recalls, "As I saw the river for the first time, tears came to my eyes and I made a vow, poor artist that I was, to be eternally faithful to my native German land."¹ Although he had no professional position and no regular income to speak of, Wagner's preoccupation with his operas, *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer*, were enough to keep him excited. The October premiere of *Rienzi* was greeted with much acclaim, yet

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Der fliegende Holländer, which debuted only three weeks later, saw just four performances.

That next year, the Dresden Court Theater experienced only lackluster productions, and embarrassing turmoil within its artistic leadership. In an attempt to resolve these issues, the King of Saxony appointed Wagner Kapellmeister, where he would earn a salary of £225.² During his tenure in Dresden, Wagner composed grand masterpieces that included the operas *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, but also four lesser-known works for male chorus: *Festgesang zur Enthüllung des Friedrich-August-Monuments in Dresden am 7.6.1843*, *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel*, *Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August den Geliebten* and *An Weber's Grabe*.

Festgesang zur Enthüllung des Friedrich-August-Monuments in Dresden am 7.6.1843

Festgesang, also referred to as *Der Tag erscheint* or [The Day Appears], received its first performance in Dresden, July 7, 1843. Wagner composed this unaccompanied TTBB work for a ceremony honoring King Friedrich August I. Reinhard Kapp writes,

Wagner's Dresden *Festgesang* recalls the captivity of the first king of Saxony and the happier times that subsequently followed, contrasting 'oblivion' with the refreshment of memory brought about by the unveiling of the statue.³

Unlike much of his output in which Wagner wrote the text, Christoph Christian Hohlfeld, a well-known translator and contributor to various almanacs and collections, penned the words for this particular assignment. The

piece was first performed without accompaniment, however, Wagner did compose, most likely around the same time period, a version for male chorus and a brass ensemble consisting of 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, and tuba.⁴

Der Tag erscheint is a mere ninety-seven measures, yet performance of this work requires skilled singers. Long, lyrical phrases require great breath in all voice parts. The first tenor line sits quite high in the *tessitura*. Very much in the notational style of Mahler, Wagner is explicit as to how each line should be sung. Diacritical markings are specific and abundant and leave the performer with a clear understanding of how the piece should be performed.

This work is considered more Baroque in style; Wagner employs the vocal turn—marked by a squiggle between two notes. Upon further investigation of the score and with great supposition, this author believes this mark is judiciously saved for those moments representing goodness for the people of Saxony. For example, in measure 21 the text is, "He was so sorely missed, for at his side good fortune and peace made Saxony their home." The turn is in the first tenor line on the word, *Glück*—good fortune. The turn also appears in measure 46—"Whose brows are garlanded by arts and learning." In

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measure 53, the turn happens at the beginning of the phrase—“Such is the image in his people’s eyes.” In this instance, the image is that of His Royal Highness King Friedrich August of Saxony. The last two turns occur in measures 79 and 86 respectively—“While pious songs of gratitude soar up to thee (God); more firmly as in Ore and Marble does your memory impress the heart” (Figure 1).

Upon examining the instrumental parts, there is no doubt in this writer’s mind that Wagner did not originally plan to write for voices and instruments. When not totally *colla voce*, the brass provides simple harmonic and rhythmic support and offers no new melodic or thematic ideas. The instru-

mentation adds an element of pomp to the composition with its rhythmic motives, cascading quarter notes and accents on strong beats. Also effective are those moments where the brass is tacet, as they are in measure 17—“He was so sorely missed...” The omission of the brass creates bareness in the overall sound that has not been heard until this point. He again omits the brass in bar 49 as the choir sings, “A faithful Christian, a grave and gentle father...” Arguably, this was Wagner’s way of referencing the German Protestant Reformation and his desire to bring this important text to the foreground. If this was in fact the case, then this writer believes, Wagner was grinning wide when he conceived the idea.

Das Liebesmahl der Apostel

Appointed Kapellmeister in 1842, Wagner would remain in this position for the next seven years. His duties were to conduct the Opera Theatre, prepare music at the Hofkirche on Sundays, and direct the Court orchestral concerts. He also assumed leadership of an amateur male choral society, the Dresden Liedertafel, a group he complained was more interested in socializing than in music-making. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner writes, “This club [Dresden Liedertafel] consisted of a moderate number of young merchants and officials intrinsically more interested in social intercourse than in music.”⁵ Although somewhat disgusted with the organization, Wagner’s success

78
T1 tö - nen Dir des Dan - kes from - me Lie - der; und fe - ster als in
T2 tö - nen Dir des Dan - kes from - me Lie - der; und fe - ster als in
B1 tö - nen Dir des Dan - kes from - me Lie - der; und fe - ster als in
B2 tö - nen Dir des Dan - kes Lie - - der; und fe - ster als in

84
T1 Erz und Mar - mor - stein prägt Dein Ge - dächt - nis sich den Her - zen ein, prägt
T2 Erz und Mar - mor - stein prägt Dein Ge - dächt - nis sich den Her - zen ein, prägt
B1 Erz und Mar - mor - stein prägt Dein Ge - dächt - nis sich den Her - zen ein, prägt
B2 Erz und Mar - mor - stein prägt Dein Ge - dächt - nis sich den Her - zen ein, prägt

Figure 1. Richard Wagner, *Festgesang zur Enthüllung des Friedrich-August-Monuments in Dresden am 7.6.1843*, mm. 78 – 89.

with the Liedertafel is most likely responsible for his being appointed conductor of a great Männersängerfest held in Dresden in July 1843. Professor Leopold Maximilian Löwe, the guiding spirit behind the Dresden Liedertafel, organized a gala performance in which all the male choral societies in Saxony would participate. It was for this gathering of men's voices that Wagner was asked to write a large choral work.

Having recently completed the libretto of his next opera, *Venusberg* (later titled, *Tannhäuser*), Wagner sketched the words for *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* [The Love Feast of the Apostles] on April 21, 1843. In *Mein Leben* he writes, "I decided that the monotony of such choral singing, which the orchestra would only enliven to a slight extent, could be made bearable solely through the introduction of some dramatic elements." He developed a Biblical scene in which the first feast of the Pentecost was represented—when the Holy Ghost appeared to the Apostles.

Wagner conducted the premiere of *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* WWV69 in Dresden's *Frauenkirche* on July 6, 1843 at the opening of the two-day festival that brought together male singing societies from all over Saxony. The local orchestra and chorus numbered 1,300 performers! Years later, Wagner described his disappointment with the "comparatively feeble effect" produced by the large orchestra and chorus of "so-called singers." In a more enthusiastic letter written just after the music festival, Wagner writes,

Picture to yourself a choir of 1,200 men's voices, all perfectly rehearsed, on a platform occupying almost the entire nave of the church and behind them an orchestra of 100 musicians, and you can imagine the impression it had! There has never been anything like it in any other church.

The subject is derived from the fourth chapter of Acts of the Apostles and ends with the thirty-first verse. The text details the events of the first Pentecost when the Holy Ghost descends upon the Apostles. For the premiere of this work, the orchestra

was placed behind (!) the massed chorus. Three groups of tenors and basses were divided into two parts depicting the Disciples.

Twelve basses represented the Apostles. Forty men were placed high above in the turret of the church for additional sound.



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When the Disciples and Apostles meet, it takes Wagner only twenty-five measures of sublime choral writing and some very specific musical instruction to set the text. Wagner wrote to his half-sister that, “[T]his passage depicting the descent of the Holy Ghost held everyone spellbound”⁶ (Figure 2).

Twenty minutes into the work, as the chorus proclaims from above, “Be not afraid,”

the orchestra makes its first entrance. The effect, lasting thirty measures and beginning with a unison C *tremolo* by the strings and *timpani*, starts *pianissimo* and gradually increases to *fortissimo*. Three of the four drums are tuned to C as well. The Disciples cry out, “What roaring fills the air! What sounds! What ringing!” Christopher Gibbs writes, “The initial effect is of a giant *cre-scendo* that leads to moments reminiscent

of Berlioz (whose music Wagner much admired) and anticipatory of his own impending *Tannhäuser*.”⁷ Incidentally, some 35 years later in his last opera, *Parsifal*, Wagner employed not only voices from above, but also reused some of the melodic passages from this earlier composition.

The orchestral score of *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* consists of piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, serpent,

Mäßig langsam

293 *f* Seid ge-trost! Ich bin euch nah, und mein Geist ist mit euch. Ma-chet euch auf! *ff* *f*

302 *f* Re-det freu-dig das Wort, das nie in E-wig-keit ver-geht! *p* Re-det freu-dig das Wort, *p*
f Re-det freu-dig das Wort, das nim-mer ver-geht! *p* Re-det freu-dig das Wort, *p*
f Re-det freu-dig das Wort, das nim-mer ver-geht! *p* Re-det freu-dig das Wort, *p*

311 *mf* *f* *ff*
 das nie in E-wig-keit ver-geht! Ma-chet euch auf! Ma-chet euch auf! Ma-chet euch auf!
 das e-wig nicht ver-geht! Ma-chet euch auf! Ma-chet euch auf! Ma-chet euch auf!
 das e-wig nicht ver-geht! Ma-chet euch auf! Ma-chet euch auf! Ma-chet euch auf!

Figure 2. Richard Wagner, *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel*, mm. 293–317.

four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, four timpani (three of which are tuned to C), and a full compliment of strings.

Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August den Geliebten

Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August den Geliebten [Greetings to the Beloved Friedrich August from his Loyal Subjects] WWV 71 is written for TTBB choir, piccolo, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 8 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 6 trombones, and two tubas. In addition to this wind-band setting, Wagner himself voiced this work for unaccompanied, four-part men's choir.

The first performance of this work took place in early August 1844. It was composed to celebrate the return of King Friedrich August II of Saxony from England. Unusual, the composition of this work was not formally requested of Wagner. It is also interesting to note that Wagner's superiors, Kapellmeister Lüttichau and Kapellmeister Reissiger, were displeased with Wagner's spontaneity and presumptiveness. To make amends, Wagner invited Reissiger to conduct the premiere. Ultimately, and to the surprise all three, the King was forced to leave the performance early due to a toothache. He did, however, request a repeat performance in its entirety.

Although this piece was not specifically written for the Dresden Liedertafel, Wag-

ner's compositional knowledge for this genre is clearly evident in this work. To give a better understanding of the Liedertafel movement in the early nineteenth century, one must recognize certain characteristics inherent in Liedertafel music. Such ensembles typically consisted of amateur singers, and as such, music composed for them reflected their musical potential. First, most music in this genre consists of four independent melodic vocal parts. These four parts remain active, i.e., extended measures of rest are rare. Melodically, lines are kept simple. Complicated rhythms and awkward leaps are typically avoided. The diatonic scale with minimal use of chromaticism is most frequently used. As for overall compositional structure, most employ the strophic form of verse-chorus, verse-chorus. This style allows the singer to become acquainted with their part and then gives ample opportunity to repeat it.

With knowledge of these compositional traits and the ability to recognize them in Wagner's music, it is clear Wagner understood the Liedertafel movement and what was required of him as a composer writing for this genre. *Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August den Geliebten* demonstrates well Wagner's ability to appropriately write for such forces. While there is a fair amount of chromaticism in this particular work, it is most frequently by step and usually serves only as passing tones. The four-part choral

writing is totally homorhythmic. Like *Der Tag erscheint*, the first tenor *tessitura* is extreme with several high B-flats.

In studying Wagner's music, one notices certain amusing ironies. The text, Wagner's own, refers to horn calls and proud Saxonites, yet the style indication marked is *In ruhiger Bewegung* (in quiet movement). Not until the middle of the refrain does Wagner's music climax. One could surmise that Wagner's intention was to keep the listener's ears entrapped in the text through the use of soft calm music. The *fortissimo* upper-*tessitura* explosion in the middle of the refrain then awakens the listener for the text, "Your peoples' desires have been met with love." While it would be inappropriate to make a generalization from a single example, compositional irony certainly is present on more than one occasion in Wagner's choral writing (Figure 3).

An Weber's Grave

Carl Maria von Weber died June 5th, 1826. Although German-born, his vestiges were placed in St. Mary's Chapel, Moorfield, London. According to Barry Millington, "Wagner had been instrumental in having the remains of his idol, Carl Maria von Weber transferred from London to his home town of Dresden."⁸ Millington continues, "[B]y the grave-

Figure 3. Richard Wagner, *Gruss seiner Treuen an Friedrich August*, mm. 35–end.



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T1 *f p* Nicht trau-ert mehr die deut-sche Mut-ter Er - de um den ge-lieb - ten, weit ent - rück - ten Sohn: nicht blickt sie mehr mit
 T2 *f p* Nicht trau-ert mehr die deut-sche Mut-ter Er - de um den ge-lieb - ten, weit ent - rück - ten Sohn: nicht blickt sie mehr mit
 B1 *f p* Nicht trau-ert mehr die deut-sche Mut-ter Er - de um den ge-lieb - ten, weit ent - rück - ten Sohn: nicht blickt sie mehr mit
 B2 *f p* Nicht trau-ert mehr die deut-sche Mut-ter Er - de um den ge-lieb - ten, weit ent - rück - ten Sohn: nicht blickt sie mehr mit

Figure 4. Richard Wagner, *An Weber's Grabe*, mm. 9–13.

side, in the Catholic Friedrichstadt cemetery, Wagner gave an oration and conducted his chorus, set to his own words." *An Weber's Grabe* WWV 72 was composed in early November 1844 and received its premiere, likely by the Riga Liedertafel, on December 15th of that same year. It is unclear whether this work was debuted accompanied or unaccompanied, and by choir or by soloist.⁹

Wagner composed this text in honor of his dear friend, Weber. He writes, "No longer does his mother, German Earth, lament the distant exile of her well-loved son; no longer must she turn her longing eyes across the sea to distant Albion." Three specific musical instructions are composed. The first is a forte mark on the word "Nicht" in measure 9. It is immediately followed by a piano mark

on the next word, "trauert". As such, the line communicates Wagner's message—"NO longer" will German Mother Earth mourn Weber's death. Also worth observing is the accent Wagner attaches to the word "deutsche." With this accent, it is not just any Mother Earth—it is German Mother Earth (Figure 4).

An Weber's Grabe is written for four-part male chorus. The vocal ranges are typical for Wagner; as is the use of primarily homorhythmic texture. What differs is the abundant use of chromaticism. Although not the first non-diatonic chord present in the work, an attention-grabbing chord worth discussing is the one found on the last syllable of the word "Albion" in measure sixteen. The entire line of text reads, "No longer must she turn her longing eyes across the sea to distant Albion." Albion, in this context, an most ancient name for Great Britain, and as Great Britain is a great distance from Germany, it makes sense for Wagner to include a chord musically far away from the home key of D minor. He does this and writes a fully diminished D chord (not D flat) on the final syllable of the word.

Returning to a thought previously mentioned, this work is unaccompanied. One can only hypothesize as to why this is, so one can



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conclude that remnants of Wagner's conventional Protestant upbringing are displayed in this burial work. Would an instrumental accompaniment have seemed appropriate for a Protestant composer? For Weber's Catholic funeral service? Would it be considered irreverent, or perhaps disrespectful to Weber? Would the addition of strings or brass muddle the text as Wagner would have wanted it to be heard?

While questions arise about Wagner's compositional approach, but there is no doubt he came to embrace and appreciate Männerchor, the male chorus phenomenon of the nineteenth century. Wagner composed not merely to add to the repertoire, but always for a purpose, albeit not always for personal gain or at his own discretion. These choral works for men's voices, especially those composed in honor of Friedrich

August and Carl Maria von Weber, serve a community greater than Wagner's alone, and reflect Wagner's commitment to the greater German culture in a widely accessible form. Although he is remembered primarily for his operatic output, Richard Wagner's significant contribution to the Liedertafel repertoire is worthy of our attention.

NOTES

- ¹ Ronald Taylor, *Richard Wagner: His Life, Art and Thought*. New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1979.
- ² Barry Millington, *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*. 1st American ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Wagner, Richard, and Reinhard Kapp. *Chorwerke*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1993.
- ⁵ Richard Wagner, A. Gray and M. Whittall, My

life. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Christopher Gibbs, 'Das Liebesmahl der Apostel', in *American Symphony Orchestra Dialogues and Extensions 2003–04*. 2004.

⁸ Barry Millington, *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*. 1st American ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992.

⁹ Wagner, Richard, and Reinhard Kapp. *Chorwerke*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1993.

* All musical examples from Wagner, Richard, and Reinhard Kapp. *Chorwerke*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1993.



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