



MUSIC

# A Wagnerian Treat for Children: 'Tannhäuser'



Jorg Schulze/Bayreuth Festival

The mezzo-soprano Alexandra Petersamer, standing at right, as Venus in a version of the opera "Tannhäuser" for children.

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

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BAYREUTH, Germany — There is a general and well-founded perception of the [Bayreuth Festival](#) as an elitist stronghold for [opera](#), as much a shrine to Wagner as a festival of his works. And there is no ticket harder to come by. Wagner lovers wait an average of 10 years to get a coveted ticket to the Festspielhaus, which seats only about 2,000.

The new co-directors of the festival,

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Jorg Schulze/Bayreuth Festival

Jeffrey Dowd portrays the title character in the Wagner for Children's offering of "Tannhäuser."

### [Eva Wagner-Pasquier and Katharina](#)

[Wagner](#), who are half-sisters (and

[Richard Wagner's](#) great-

granddaughters), are determined to

make it more people-friendly and

open. Last summer, in a new venture,

the festival presented the first offering of Wagner for

Children: a playful mini-production of "Der Fliegende

Holländer" ("The Flying Dutchman"), trimmed to 60

minutes.

On Tuesday afternoon, a couple of hours before

["Lohengrin"](#) began at the main house, the festival presented

the last of 10 performances of this summer's Wagner for

Children offering: a 70-minute, irreverent and charming

production of "Tannhäuser," directed by Reyna Bruns. It

took place in one of the rehearsal halls for an audience of

roughly 200 people, mostly children, including many very

young ones. I have seldom been among such delighted

operagoers.

This was no run-through with singers and a piano, but a proper performance of excerpts from the opera, played by 29 members of the Brandenburgisches Staatsorchester Frankfurt, led by a dynamic young conductor, Hartmut Keil, and featuring a large cast of gifted younger singers and a chorus. The tenor Jeffrey Dowd brought a robust voice to the title role and looked endearing in his ragtag shirt and dingy jeans. Some of the cast members are also in the main festival productions. (The singers who performed Elisabeth and Venus are also appearing as Valkyries in "Die Walküre.")

The story of "Tannhäuser" was adapted to make it more age-appropriate. As written, when Wagner's opera opens, we see the minnesinger Tannhäuser enjoying round-the-clock Bacchanalian orgies in Venus's enchanted realm. Part of him knows he should get out of there, but he cannot help himself.

In this production for children, however, the opera began with a made-up spoken scene. We see young Tannhäuser and fellow minnesingers in what looks like a barracks, getting ready for bed. Tannhäuser is strumming his ukulele, making up a melody that will later become his impassioned love song to Venus. An officer then pops into the barracks and tells everyone to pipe down. "Lights out!"

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Then, in a short transitional scene, we see the Young Shepherd in the opera pass by: the soprano Christiane Kohl, dressed as a newspaper delivery boy on a bike. Finally Tannhäuser encounters Venus. She is not a sexpot but an urban party girl, played by the mezzo-soprano Alexandra Petersamer. Her hair is a riot of colored braids, and she gets around on a skateboard. She starts calling Tannhäuser “Tanny,” and he cannot resist her sassy vitality. Her gal pals play with what looks like the tails of exotic serpents and keep huge spiders as pets. I was not exactly sure what this all meant. Still, the kids squealed with delight.

The virtuous Elisabeth, the soprano Sonja Mühleck, is portrayed as a sensible young woman who works in a computer lab, represented by black walls dotted with 1’s and 0’s, which Elisabeth nimbly moves around. Children in the audience were frequently invited to take part, helping to move sets or holding props during the song contest.

Once, when Tannhäuser asked himself out loud (in German, of course), “Where did I put my crayon?,” a little girl in the audience volunteered, “It’s in your hand!” Which it was.

This was not just fun and games with “Tannhäuser,” but also a real mini-musical performance. The big arias and choruses were heard, including the “Song to the Evening Star,” beautifully sung by the baritone Marek Reichert as Wolfram. At the end, when Tannhäuser, having completed his pilgrimage to Rome to atone for his sins and win Elisabeth’s blessing, joined in the angelic final chorus, the doors behind the stage were thrown open, revealing afternoon sun, leafy trees and some confused-looking passers-by on the grounds of the opera house.

The festival plans to keep this new popular venture going. The performances are free for children and also for a parent bringing them. If two parents come, then one pays 20 euros (about \$26). This is to foster audiences that are mostly kids. The tickets can be secured in advance, and they disappear, Katharina Wagner said in an interview, as soon as they go online.

After this “Tannhäuser,” the cheering ovation went on for 10 minutes. Venus was the favorite, which is not exactly the message, many would say, that we are supposed to take from the opera. But who cared?

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