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Walpurgisnacht/Striving toward the Light
Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

By Kitty Hughes, BCCO Soprano

When we sing we have to focus so much on getting the music right, that it is easy to overlook the words or texts. In some cases, as in the case of Walpurgisnacht, it is worth having some conversation about exactly what we are singing. For one reason, the text itself is a powerful poem, written by one of Europe's eminent writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who lived in the last half of the eighteenth century into the first third of the nineteenth century. Second, Mendelssohn obviously loved the poem, he used all of the text, and he spent years reworking the music that would enhance it to his satisfaction.

Several singers have mentioned to me that they don't have a clue as to what is going on in this piece. It lands us in an antique time and place, with its talk of devils and murder, its pagan fire rites on the mountain, and rowdy druids bearing cudgels. It bounces around from one point of view to another, without any preparation. The compressed poetic text, with a few archaic terms thrown in, is at times hard to follow, and not well translated in places. The heart of the piece is a raucus masquerade, full communal passion and energy, that seems to burst out of bounds, consuming more than a quarter of the entire piece. It may come as a surprise to learn that Goethe's poem, which constitutes the text, was intended to convey a rational plea for religious tolerance.

The poem is best understood against its historic background. Its subject is the persecution of the Saxons, an ancient Germanic people, who had settled large parts of Germany following

the decline of the Roman Empire. The Saxons worshipped their god Wodin and often conducted their religious rites on mountaintops.

In the year 772 the Frankish ruler Charlemagne took it upon himself to conquer the Saxons and convert them to Christianity. For thirty years, he conducted a savage campaign, killing masses of people, pillaging, taking hostages, breaking truces, and deporting recalcitrant Saxons, with the aim of compelling them to accept Christianity.

“Walpurgisnacht” derives from St. Walpurgis, a missionary to Saxony who was known for her kindness and mercy during Charlemagne’s bloody campaigns. The church most likely chose to honor her on the day of the pagan holiday that occurred on April 30, celebrating the coming of spring.

Charlemagne (presumably with help from St. Walpurgis) successfully subdued the Saxons and their allies, took their land and incorporated them into the Frankish empire. But he was not entirely successful in wiping out their culture and religion. Although the Saxons renounced their religion when they took their baptismal vows, vestiges of earlier practices and beliefs hung on, practiced by a subdued and humiliated population.

Traces of the Saxon practices on a mountain called “Brocken” in the Hartz Mountains fascinated Goethe. (The Saxons were said to have placed a portrait of Wodin there and made sacrifices to him on its rocky summit.) In 1771, Goethe hiked a trail that leads to the mountain summit where the ancient rites were said to have been held. The Goethe Way is a trail that commemorates his climb, popular with hikers to this day. Goethe described the Brocken in his *Faust*, published in 1808, revisiting it again as a Walpurgisnacht, a poem set on the mountaintop where ancient fire rituals took place on the eve of April 30.

Goethe chooses to call his Saxons “Druids,” a more collective term conveying pagan power, hearkening back to Caesar’s Gallic Wars against the Celts, who occupied a large area of Western Europe. The Druids were their religious leaders, and various conflicting accounts of their activities were written during the Roman invasions. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a revival of interest in the Celts, particularly among writers. Poets of the time idealized the Druids as bards or mystics or shamans, associations that appealed to Goethe, when he wrote *Walpurgisnacht*.

Goethe’s poetry, however, was rooted mainly in the ideals of the German Enlightenment, although he showed some tendencies toward Romanticism. For Goethe, the need for emotional balance was a key precept; he saw the emerging Romantic movement as self-involved and self-indulgent. Goethe also felt that no one has a full purchase on the truth, or can ever completely grasp the thoughts of another. His poem captures his insistence on balance and tolerance, encompassing both Dionysian revelry and Apollonian calm, without privileging one over the other.

Goethe’s poem

It is clear that Goethe imagined his scene of pagan revelry, as the historic record is rather scant. In his hands, a plot emerges, with characters and dramatic tension. Mendelssohn follows the order of Goethe’s text but transforms it into a multidimensional experience (like going from 2-D to 3-D). He compresses Goethe’s twelve-part poem into nine parts. He frames it with a lengthy overture, with other orchestral insertions in the body of the work, to guide the listener through changing moods and events. When he wants to emphasize psychological impact and dramatic

tension, he has the soloists and chorus repeat key words, virtually dissecting Goethe's poem in key places, interrupting the forward motion to draw out the emotion. For example, the repeated action words, "Hinauf," Kommt," and "Lasst Uns Fliehn" help us imagine the dramatic scene unfolding before us. Firmly rooted in the Romantic tradition, Mendelssohn shapes Goethe's poem into a more complex experience, adding local color, musical drama, and heightened emotion. Aural effects conjure up vivid visual images and underscore the action throughout.

In Mendelssohn's overture, you can almost feel the raging storm, with swirling snow and raging wind, that builds in intensity. The music also conveys the warfare against the Saxons and their "the cultural winter," with its ragged notes and tragic mood in a minor key. A slow thaw and reawakening are suggested by the horns that intrude toward the end of this section. The horns also announce the theme of spring breaking out, picking up speed and energy before the people emerge. The overture has two parts. The second section develops the transition to spring with luscious tones that convey warming and renewed activity.

No. 1) The poem opens with the Saxons (the Volkes, or folk, in our scores) emerging into a glorious spring after the bitter winter. It is worth noting that Goethe considered himself a Panthiest, so he is drawn to the Pagan's sense of integration with the natural world. A Druid urges the people up to the top of the mountain to practice their ancient, holy rites and give praise to their high god (referred to as Allvater and Unser Vater). "Hinauf," translated as "Away," in our text, actually means "Upwards." The mountain is not named, but it is presumably the Broke Mountain and 'father' refers to the Saxon's god Wodin.

2) An old woman she argues against proceeding, fearing the slaughter of their menfolk and children from the occupiers' ramparts ("Walle," or walls). Our translation says the soldiers "will slaughter," but the German gives the present tense, "they slaughter," conveying that the slaughter is occurring already and is ongoing.

3) The Druid priest counters that those who fear taking part in the ritual deserve their chains. He instructs the Folk to gather wood for the fire and pile the stems together, adding that, although, they must hide in the forest by day, they will perform the rites at night, under the protection of the guards. He urges the Folk to banish fear and fulfill their duty (Plicht), then orders the guards to disperse.

4) The Druid Guards go on high alert, preparing to guard the passes to protect their people. They emphasize the need to move silently (im Stillen). The passage suggests that watchfulness and secrecy are the lot of those who have been denied open access to their religious practices. This was a key idea inherited from the Enlightenment; suppression doesn't work; it only drives the denied practices underground. The rational, enlightened person accepts religious differences.

5) One of the Druid guards suggests that they perform a masquerade to frighten away the occupying "dumpfen Pfaffenchristen," the dumb Christians. (My language translator gives me "Popish" for "Pfaffen.") The guard argues for exploiting the Christians fear of the devil (Teufel), whom they fear and tell their own fables about ("fabeln"). He urges the Druids forward "Mit Glut und Klapperstocken (fire and clapping sticks), "Zachen," which suggests the Devil's pitchfork, and "Gabeln" (stakes).

6) This masquerade has been called a “prank,” which belittles its significance. Number 6 is full of vitality and passion, a Pagan religious orgy. It is the longest section of the piece; Mendelssohn dwells on it, celebrating with Goethe the ecstatic extreme of religious experience (reflection and meditation occupying the other pole). The masquerade allows the Druids and their followers to reenact deep rituals that tie them to nature, calling upon the owls and ravens to howl with them “in unser Rundgeheule” (our howling circle). Circles are often associated with Pagan religion, and are a symbol of the unity of nature, so the choice of words is pointed. (Again, the score’s translation doesn’t hit the mark, translating the line as “join with us to scare the cravens.”) This passage underscores the Enlightenment belief that oppressed people often resort to deep subterfuge to successfully practice their own religion, when it has been suppressed.

7) The priest bemoans that the religious rites must be performed at night. The Druids and Folk join in. In unison they sing, “When it is day, cleansed by the night ritual, each can bring a “reines Herz” (pure heart) to the Alfater,” the four-part tune suggesting a Bach chorale. The tonal shift away from rowdy No. 6 serves to remind us that serious conviction and spiritual longing motivate their practices. “They ask for All Father’s (“Allvater’s”) protection against the persecuting enemy (“Dem Feinde,”) a reminder of religious persecution throughout history.

No. 7 (Page 76) conveys the moment of the Walpurgisnacht, the ancient custom of offering a fire on the mountain. “Die flame reinigt sich from Rauch,” the flame rises from the smoke. The folk joyfully celebrate “Den alten Brauch,” the ancient rite (mistranslated in our scores as Our Rites withheld). Then all break out in “Dein Licht, wer can es rauben” the light, who can take that from us; Goethe here reminding us again that striving for light (clarity,

understanding and uplifting thoughts) is at the heart of religious experience. This line occurs at the end of No 7 and is repeated at the end of the entire piece, making a kind of envelope around the hyperactive No. 8.

8) Here is a surprising turn of events, a bit jarring. We are suddenly thrown into the point of view of an occupying Christian guard, who is then joined by other guards. At the sight of the approaching procession, the Christians panic, fearing that hell itself is about to engulf them, their hyperactive imaginations envisioning “Menchenwolf” (wolf men) and “Drachenweiben” (dragon women) rushing forward to snag them. The revelers are, in fact, only masked and equipped with lights and sticks. *Walpurgisnacht* suggests that primal forebodings lurk in all of us that cannot be erased and can surface unexpectedly. No. 8 is wedged between two sections that convey the spiritual longings of the Saxons, thus balancing the differing points of view, a kind of equalizing counterpoint.

9) Conversely, the Saxon “heathens” are much like the Christians and believers of all religions when it comes to their essential spiritual longings. In the last section, the Druid’s “alten Brauch,” (the traditional earth-bound rituals), are subsumed into a larger awareness of “Dein Licht,” an abstract divinity. This light represents a longing for a true understanding, basic to all human experience. The last lines, *Dein Licht, wer kann es rauben*, (Your light, who can rob it from us) – not only calls up the ubiquity of spiritual conviction, it also reminds us that our internal worlds are our own, even when we may be forced to bow to external authorities.

A Few Notes on Mendelssohn’s Collaboration with Goethe

When an old woman objects to the plan in No. 2, Goethe gives her a scolding tone, a character trait befitting a crone. Mendelssohn overlays a sad and edgy mood (conveyed in a

minor key) that recalls the dark mood embedded in the overture. Mendelssohn makes her voice increasingly strident as she warns that the victors (Überwinder) will slaughter them for reviving any open celebration of their rites. She is joined by other women, expressing maternal fears for their loved ones, the tempo here fast and skittery.

Mendelssohn makes the Druid Priest who responds a Baritone, (No. 3), reflecting his authoritative role in the community. (He makes several appearances at crucial points demanding leadership throughout the cantata.) When he counters that those who fear taking part in the ritual deserve their chains, the tempo is “Andate maestoso,” (slow with majesty), conveying gravitas (in contrast to the zippier sections that precede it). He is joined by the male chorus, who follow his lead.

Goethe’s line about “deserving their chains” resonated with several of Mendelssohn’s preoccupations, which is perhaps why Mendelssohn worked so hard on this piece. Religious conviction and persecution lie at the heart of his other two choral works, *Elijah* and *St. Paul*, both of which this chorus has sung. Elijah features on Old Testament prophet from Israel, who is persecuted by the worshippers of Baal; St Paul, a New Testament apostle who was born a Jew and faces persecution after his conversion. Like these biblical figures, our Druid priest is an admirable model but one whom most of us do not have the strength to emulate. (It’s worth noting that Romantic writers and composers were attracted to larger-than-life leaders with power to transcend ordinary reality.)

In No. 4, when the Druid guards rouse themselves to action to ensure that the Christians don’t intrude in their ceremony, they proceed in silence (im Stillen,) which Mendelssohn repeats, emphasizing the guards’ fear of the enemy and necessity for covert action. Light

staccato orchestra notes and muted choral voices, marked “pianissimo,” create an aural ‘picture’ of creeping quietly through the forest.

In No. 5, one of the guards suddenly has a bright idea. Goethe makes him a rather brash fellow, putting down the dumb Christians, the “dumpfen Pfaffenchristen,” whom he says with assurance that they can easily fool with their masquerade. Mendelssohn makes his music staccato, suggesting stealthy movement. growing in speed and intensity, as his call to action “Kommt! Kommt! Kommt!” is picked up by the Druid guards. Triumphant orchestral notes cap the end of this section.

Although reared as a Protestant, Mendelssohn was always mindful of his Jewish heritage. Goethe’s poem depicts the triumph by guile of an oppressed group in an occupied land. Mendelssohn, aware that historically his and other Jewish families had been forced practice their religion in secret, found in Goethe’s poem an opening for exploring this theme in his music. Some have thought that, for Mendelssohn, the situation of the persecuted pagans specifically reflected the increasing anti-Semitism throughout Europe in the 19th century. This may be true, but Mendelssohn never expressed this view openly. We can, however, safely say that he grappled with the impacts of religious suppression on both the perpetrators and their victims, while he also venerated the persons of conviction like Elijah, Paul and the Druid priest who stood up for the right to worship freely.

No. 6 opens with stately processional music setting the stage for the revelry to come. The Druid Guards respond to their fellow’s call to action, their voices stern and emphatic as they pick up on the call to action; they in turn are joined by the people, as the entire community goes forward to enact the masquerade. This section is the most musically energized in the entire piece, with a propulsive rhythm reflecting the group’s mobilization. A lively folk motif, when

the women voices join in, suggests cultural cohesion and something akin to religious ecstasy, as they call on the owls and ravens to howl with them. Mendelssohn takes a short passage from Goethe and makes it the longest section of the piece, tipping it in the direction of Romanticism, by celebrating joyous revelry and a spontaneous overflow of emotion.

Rather than directly encountering the Christians, which event is delayed to No. 8, No. 7 reintroduces the Druid priest (the baritone) The tempo is *Andante maestoso*, as when he first appears (No. 3), again invoking a sense of authority. The priest says that they may take away our customs or rites (“*Brauch*”), but they can’t take away the yearnings toward divine light (“*Dein Licht*”). Mendelssohn puts musical emphasis on both these words whenever they appear, “*Brauch*” encompassing traditional earthbound customs and rites) and “*Licht*,” the striving toward an enlightened abstract divinity.

No. 7 brings the central issue of enlightened tolerance and freedom to worship into focus. The priest laments the necessity of practicing the ancient rites by night and wishes for the right to worship by day, “night” metaphorically representing the suppression that forces worship to go underground and “day” standing not only for uncensored worship but also for the Enlightenment’s tolerance of all religious practices. The tone is wistful and hopeful at the same time, looking backward and forward in history.

When the chorus of Druids and the people join in, you can hear resonances with Bach and Lutheran hymns, and the whole period of the Reformation (“*Doch ist es Tag, so bald man mag...*”) No. 7 concludes with the yearning toward a higher spiritual value “*Dein Licht*,” that reoccurs in No. 9, thereby sandwiching in between the two No. 8’s raucous masquerade (a symbolic counterattack), when the Christian guards flee, convinced that the legions of hell are upon them.

With its unexpected shift of point of view, No. 8 can be confusing to a first-time listener. With no preparation, we are suddenly witnessing the Christians fleeing in terror before the oncoming masked and armed folk. The Christian guard's voice is hurried and strained, fading away as he and his fellows run off. This episode demonstrates the immediate efficacy of the Saxon's masquerade. The Christian's desperate cries of "Lasst uns fliehn," let us flee," provide a dramatic counterpart to the Druid's repeated cries of "Kommt" in No. 6.

The juxtaposition and framing of the primal emotions (both the Saxon's exuberant rituals and the fears of the fleeing Christians) with the reflective yearning toward an abstract spiritual essence reflect Goethe's insistence on balance. He can encompass both the Enlightenment's focus on higher thinking and Romanticism's tendency toward unbridled emotion, while not giving over to one or the other. Mendelssohn loads the music with vibrant color, to contrast the spontaneous energy of the revels with the calm voice that pulls back from action and reflects on the meaning of it all. (As noted above, he draws out the scene of revelry, most likely indicating his own Romantic preference for the wild over the tamed. His Hebrides Overture, or Fingal's Cave, comes to mind).

No. 9 breaks out with no orchestral fanfare, the chorus exhilarated by the freedom to worship freely and openly. The voice of the Baritone priest is woven with the voices of the people. No 9 features two hymnlike sections that could have been borrowed a Lutheran church service. "Wer kann es rauben," (who can steal it away from us?) underscores the realization that suppression never works. Mendelssohn manages to instill a sense of poignancy as well as joy into the exalted tone of our concluding notes, reminding us of a bloody history that cannot be erased—and moments of exultation that carry us above it. The repeated "Dein Licht" is

expressed in an upward-leaping vocal interval, reflecting the universal striving toward something that exceeds our human condition.

Walpurgisnacht celebrates the variety of religious experience, from ecstatic ritual to internal yearning. At heart, both Goethe and Mendelssohn seem to agree, we all seek an ennobling idea, no matter our circumstance of history.

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