

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

WAGNER

The Flying Dutchman

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson

The NAXOS logo features the word "NAXOS" in a bold, serif font, centered within a stylized architectural frame that resembles a classical building facade with columns and a pediment.

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Other works in the Naxos ‘Opera Explained’ series

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A complete recording of Wagner’s *The Flying Dutchman* is available as a 2-CD set from Naxos:

Alfred Muff / Ingrid Haubold / Peter Seiffert / Erich Knodt / Jörg Hering / Marga Schiml / ORF Symphony Orchestra / Pinchas Steinberg (Naxos 8.660025–26)

Richard Wagner (1813–1883): The Flying Dutchman

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel canto*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in

history; and, for many, Puccini represents in every sense the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

The Flying Dutchman

Wagner is the Everest of opera. Viewed from the foothills, his towering masterpieces, with their lofty themes and sometimes extraordinary length, can seem to test the endurance of all but the fanatic. But this image is only apt in part. His melodic gifts, the power and majesty of his orchestral writing, and his ability to relate excellent narratives, make him almost a figure of popular culture. The thrilling opening to the film *Apocalypse Now* would be nothing without its accompanying ‘Ride of the Valkyries’; Bugs Bunny reached apotheosis through *Tannhäuser*; and at one time no bride could be trusted to walk down the aisle unless accompanied by the ‘Wedding March’ from *Lohengrin*. Fortunately, there is one thoroughly approachable and fascinating way to explore the work of the greatest Romantic of them all, and that is through *The Flying Dutchman*.

Wagner’s first three operas were not particularly successful, but with *The Flying Dutchman* his career took off. Like many other great artists, he wasted none of life’s experiences suitable for integration into his work. Fleeing from creditors and the law, he crossed the North Sea from Germany towards England and was blown off course by a furious gale, ending up, temporarily, in a Norwegian fjord. The fury of the gale was recreated in the dramatic opening to *The Flying Dutchman*’s Overture, and the sailors’ cries he had heard resounding off the walls of the fjords were re-echoed in the opera’s opening scene.

Of course, it helps to have a strikingly good story. The legend of the Dutch captain who, frustrated by his numerous attempts to round Cape Horn, makes a pact with the Devil and is condemned to sail the Seven Seas forever, is such a story. The ‘gimmick’, if you like, is that every seven years he is allowed to come ashore and try to find a woman who will be faithful to him – even unto death. If successful, he will find eternal peace.

The musical score contains many pre-echoes of Wagner’s later style, most especially in the use of leitmotifs – leading themes, or signature tunes which identify people, events, or emotions, and which recur throughout the opera in different guises. So in the first seconds of the Overture we hear different themes associated with the raging sea, the Dutchman, and Senta – the woman whose redeeming love will bring salvation.

If *The Flying Dutchman* looks back stylistically and relies to some extent on the mannerisms of German Romanticism, it is no bad thing. The period of Lortzing, Schubert, and Weber was one of superb melodic invention, and Wagner is their equal. But this eminent work also looks forward to the deeper, more profound operas of Wagner’s mature years: *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, and, above all, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. By introducing us to the master’s style, some of his techniques (the famous leitmotifs among them), and some of the recurring themes of his dramaturgy – the lonely idealist against society, the redeeming power of a woman’s love, the peace that only death can bring – he prepares us for the ascent in his remarkable career, which is one of the most satisfying journeys in all music.

Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos 'Opera Explained' series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays throughout the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, three volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.



OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

An Introduction to... WAGNER

The Flying Dutchman

written by **Thomson Smillie**
narrated by **David Timson**

The Flying Dutchman is the perfect opera with which to approach the operatic mountain that is Richard Wagner. It is short, has a great story – the legend of the Dutch captain doomed to sail forever unless redeemed through love – and the striking score has many pre-echoes of Wagner's later music dramas. It contains wonderful tunes in its arias, ensembles, and big choruses, and the orchestral writing – from the gale that blows out of the Overture to the final theme of 'Redemption through Love' – will... well... 'blow you away'.

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