

**Un-edited version
as supplied by Jessica Duchen**

Tannhauser, Opéra Bastille, Paris

Reviewed by Jessica Duchen

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It's Christmas in Paris, and Venus saunters onto the Bastille stage in the first bars of Wagner's overture, stark naked. While British audiences were shoehorned into endless Nutcrackers, the French capital hotly anticipated a season highlight in Robert Carsen's new production of Tannhäuser, the Paris Opera's first since 1984, which opened on 6 December – but the first performances were semi-staged due to a strike by stagehands. It wasn't until later that the full monty was unfurled. And it was worth waiting for.

Re-settings of operas that actually work are rare, but the transformation of Tannhäuser into a radical artist creating a scandal succeeds because it enhances the work's core issues: sex versus spirituality (or prudishness), progressive art versus the establishment. How appropriate, too, for Paris, the city of Manet – whose 'Dejeuner sur l'herbe' adorns the programme – and the territory where Tannhäuser caused a comparable scandal in 1861, albeit because the Jockey Club objected to the lack of a ballet in the second act.

The ballet appears, instead, right after the overture, in the Venusberg – the realm of the senses inhabited by the goddess of love – and this time the Jockey Club members wouldn't have known what had hit them. The nude Venus, Tannhäuser's model, drapes herself across a mattress while he paints her in a frenzy, aided and abetted by a crowd of male dancers who portray the wild, messy confluence of creativity and sex in an orgy of scarlet paint.

Act II's song contest is transformed with great aplomb into a painting competition in a posh gallery; the artists' songs introduce the unveiling of their paintings (which the audience never sees). Symbolism returns for Act III, when the conventional, uptight Elisabeth – who alone understands Tannhäuser's art but is fatally wounded by his sexual betrayal – takes off her dress, lets down her hair and begins to merge with the image of Venus. Tannhäuser, refused absolution by the Pope, returns from his pilgrimage seeking the Venusberg instead, but now Elisabeth and Venus mingle as he learns to integrate their opposing qualities in his work. And with the final chorus comes Tannhäuser's salvation: his canvas is hung among the most famous and scandalous nudes in the history of art.

The American heldentenor Stephen Gould is a towering hunk as Tannhäuser, his voice as powerful as his presence. His Elisabeth is Eva-Marie Westbroek,

her 'Dich, teure Halle' delivered from the front of the stalls with a heart-lifting combination of natural radiance and vocal ease. Exquisite richness of tone from the mezzo-soprano Béatrice Uria-Monzon as Venus and superb performances from Franz-Josef Selig as Hermann and the substantial chorus.

Most unforgettable, though, is Matthias Goerne as Tannhäuser's friend Wolfram, portraying a generous yet introverted soul tortured by unrequited love for Elisabeth. Goerne's magical phrasing, charcoal-soft baritone and gut-wrenching inwardness make him unique at the best of times, but it would have been worth the journey to Paris just to hear him sing Wolfram's Song to the Evening Star. Meanwhile under Seiji Ozawa's mercurial baton, the orchestral playing was full of élan, and proved unfailingly sensitive to the singers. Christmas crackers for grown-ups don't come much better than this.