

THE MASTER SINGERS OF NURNBERG
Act I, Scene 3 Excerpt

Kothner:
If we're to welcome the nobleman,
Then first he must sing an audition.

Pogner:
I'd like to see his wish fulfilled
But I abide by all the rules of our Guild.
So question him, Masters.

Kothner:
Would the knight kindly answer:
Was he born in wedlock and born free?

Pogner:
To ask him that, there's no need.
Since I myself substantiate
He's free born and legitimate:
Sir Walther Proudly, Franconian.
I certify that I know the man.
The last one of his noble line,
He left his land and home behind
And moved to Nurnberg where
He'll be a townsman here.

Beckmesser:
That noble flower is a weed!

Nightingale:
Friend Pogner's word's enough for me.

Sachs:
The long-standing Master Guild rule is clear:
Both lord and farmer are welcome here.
We judge all comers by their art alone
When they take part in Master Song.

Kothner:
Instead, then, I shall ask,
Which Master taught you your craft?

Walther:
There at the hearth in Winter white,

The land snowed in on every side,
I read how Spring so lovely laughed
And how she would awake at last,
In the ancestral book I grasped.
How often I did read that!
Sir Walter von der Vogelweid--
He was my Master of song-craft.

Sachs:
The best of Masters!

Beckmesser:
Long dead and gone!
How could he teach him all the rules of song?

Kothner:
But your vocal preparation
Was with which academician?

Walther:
When all the fields from frost were freed
And once again blew Summer's breeze
That which I'd studied Winter-long
From my ancestral book of song,
I heard aloud on emerald lawns
In woods around me ringing.
From forest birds in meadows green
I learned the art of singing.

Beckmesser:
O-ho! From titmice a-winging
He learned his master singing?
Who'd listen to this blithering bird?

Twitteringbird:
Two brilliant stanzas from him we've heard.

Faultfinder:
You praise him, Master Twitteringbird,
Because he learned to twitter from birds?

Kothner:
I ask you, Masters, should I go on?
Or can this candidate be withdrawn?

Sachs:

In course we'll find out duly.
If he's an artist truly
Who treasures craft and art,
Who cares where he got his start?

Kothner: *(to Walther)*

If you're prepared now to perform
A brand new work of Master Song
All of your own invention,
We'll give you our attention.

Walther:

What Winter nights,
What woodland sprites,
What book and meadow taught me,
What poets in their fancies' flights
With secret wisdom brought me,
When horses' hooves
To trumpets moved,
When folks danced rings
At gatherings,
I listened meditative
And thought that life's most worthy prize
Was in song to translate them
To my own words and music mine
Which to me flow together.
A Master Song, if such you find,
Ye Masters I present you.

Beckmesser:

In all that blather, what'd he say?

Twitteringbird:

Oh well --he tries!

Nightingale:

A curious case.

Kothner:

If, Masters, you'll allow,
We'll bring the score booth out.

(to Walther)

Would you, Herr, choose a sacred trope?

Walther:

My sacred choice is "What is Love's Voice?"
I'll sing and bring myself good hope!

Kothner:

That trope is worldly. Even so,
Master Faultfinder, in you go.

(Beckmesser rises and walks as if reluctantly to the Scorer's Box)

Beckmesser:

A bitter task - more so today.
My scoring might chalk up woe and pain.

(bows to Walther)

Learn, good Sir, how
Sixtus Beckmesser scores you now.

Here in the box

He quietly carries out his job!
Seven errors you may commit.
He marks them with chalk over here.
More than seven errors he won't permit.
Then you're out on your noble ear.

(he sits in the scorer's box)

If you could see
Him you might well disheartened be.
So he must hide
For your peace of mind,
And shut himself away.

(Beckmesser sticks his head out with haughty, friendly nod and disappears behind the curtains that completely enclose the box.)

May God be with you today.

Kothner: *(signals the Apprentices, then, to Walther)*

To make your song correct, be schooled
And guided by the codex of rules.

(the Apprentices have taken down from the wall the "Leges Tabulaturae" which they had hung up earlier, and give it to Kothner, who reads from it.)

"Each single bar of a Master Song
Is mandated as two stanzas long
With two clear musical sections.

This rule has no exceptions.

In each bar both stanzas must be always
Set to exactly the same melody.
A stanza's made of a group of lines
Whose verses at their ends must rhyme.

After these comes the After-song,
Also x-many verses long,
That has its particular melody
Which like the stanzas' tune must not be."

A composition made just like so,
Each section in the Master ratio
And with the composition built
So no more than four syllables
With another song coincide,
That song would win the Master Prize!
(gives the "Leges Tabulaturae" back to the Apprentices, who hang it back up on the wall)

Now sit down on the singer stool!

Walther: *(with a shiver)*
Here, on the stool?

Kothner:
Yes, that's our rule!

Walther: *(mounts the stool reluctantly, then, aside)*
For you, Beloved, I shall win!

Kothner: *(very loudly)*
The singer sits.

Beckmesser: *(invisible in his box, very harshly)*
Let's begin.

Walther:
"Let's begin,"
Said Springtime to the woodland,
Who echoed her command,
And as the sound receded
As with an ocean wave,
From far off was repeated
A sound that closer came.

It echoed loud
The woods around
In lovely choruses' voicing
Now loud and clear
And drawing near,
The voices swelled
Like happy bells
That ring to signal rejoicing.

The wood
Soon could
Give answer to the cry
That brought him back to life.
So he burst
Into a song of Spring.

(From the Scorer's box discouraging groans are heard, along with loud marks from chalk striking the chalkboard. Walther has heard it, too. It interrupts him briefly but he carries on.)

But in a thorn bush prickly,
Consumed with jealous hate,
Hid Winter himself quickly.
Well-armed, he lay in wait
And there among the plants
A wicked ambush planned,
Where he the singing joyful
Would ruin and would foil.

(he rises from the stool)

Still: Let's begin.
I heard the call in my breast
When I knew of love nothing yet.
I felt it and I shuddered.
It woke me out of my dream.
My heart quaked as it fluttered
And burst from my breast, it seemed.
My blood, it coursed
With mighty force
And swelled with new emotion.
In that warm night
With fearsome might
Swirled all around
A sighing sound
In wild, wondrous commotion.
My breast

Soon could
Give answer to the cry
That brought it back to life.
Let us sing
The noble song of love.

Beckmesser: *(tearing open the curtains)*
Have you quite finished?

Walther:
Say, what's afoot?

Beckmesser: *(harshly)*
It's the chalkboard.
Look, it's all kaput.
(He holds the out chalkboard, full of strike marks. The Masters burst out laughing.)

Walther:
Not yet. I've still my Lady's praise
To sing with new melodic phrase.

Beckmesser: *(leaving the Scorer's box)*
Sing where you like! But you struck out here!
Look, Masters, at the chalkboard. It's clear.
In all my life I've heard no song
So flagrantly, so very wrong!

Walther:
But may he, Masters, show me the door?
Will I be silenced or sing more?

Pogner:
A word, Herr Scorer, you seem perturbed!

Beckmesser:
That's natural after what we heard!
But that the noble knight has failed out
I'll demonstrate to the Masters now,
Thought that's no easy task of mine--
How to start, when he had no opening line?

Of rhymes wrong and groupings misplaced
I shall utter no word.
Too short, too long, and with no line breaks!
Who one proper line from him heard?
Just "unclear meaning" I shall address.

Could what he meant
Be more meaningless?

Masters:
One had no clue.
I must agree.
A line break was nowhere to be seen.
Who knows what he means!

Beckmesser:
And then the tune--
A jumbled lampoon!
"Adventure" themes mixed with "larkspur" tunes!
And "high fir tree" with "proud young man" tones!

Kothner:
I understood not one of those.

Beckmesser:
No fermatas, no coloratur',
No melody --then what's singing for?!

Masters: (*in a growing state of commotion*)
That's singing, you say?
No, it's a disgrace!

Twitteringbird:
An ear-splitting ruckus!

Zorn:
No artistry! Bupkis!

Kothner:
He left the sing-chair! Left his position!

Beckmesser:
What proof do you require in addition?
Or's it clear he failed his audition?

-End Excerpt-