
Freischütz, Der ('The Freeshooter')

Clive Brown

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O007222>

Published in print: 01 December 1992

Published online: 2002

Romantische Oper in three acts, j277, by Carl Maria von Weber to a libretto by Johann Friedrich Kind after Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun's *Gespensterbuch*; Berlin, Schauspielhaus, 18 June 1821.

| | |
|---|---------------|
| Max <i>an assistant forester</i> | tenor |
| Kilian <i>a wealthy peasant</i> | baritone |
| Cuno <i>a hereditary forester</i> | bass |
| Caspar <i>an assistant forester</i> | bass |
| Aennchen <i>Agathe's relative</i> | mezzo-soprano |
| Agathe <i>Cuno's daughter</i> | soprano |
| Samiel <i>the 'Black Huntsman'</i> | speaking role |
| Four bridesmaids | sopranos |
| Ottokar <i>a sovereign prince</i> | baritone |
| Hermit | bass |
| Hunters, peasants, spirits, bridesmaids, attendants | |
| <i>Setting</i> Bohemia at the end of the Thirty Years War | |

Shortly after taking up the post of Kapellmeister of the German opera in Dresden in 1817, Weber revived the idea of writing an opera on the Freischütz story, which he had first considered seven years earlier after reading the tale in Apel and Laun's newly published *Gespensterbuch*. He discussed the project with Kind, a fellow member of the Dresden literary 'Liederkreis', who rapidly produced the draft of a libretto provisionally entitled *Der Probeschuss* ('The Test Shot'). Between the publication of the *Gespensterbuch* and Kind's libretto, the story had been used as the basis of a number of other theatrical pieces. The first treatment of it, by Franz Xaver von Caspar with music by Carl Neuner (1812, Munich) may have provided certain elements for Kind's libretto. Two versions were also produced in Vienna in 1816, and one of them, *Die Schreckensnacht am Kreuzwege*, by J. A. Gleich with music by Franz de Paul Roser, held the stage until 1828. In 1818 Spohr, with the collaboration of Georg Döring, also began to compose an opera on Apel's tale, but hearing that Weber was working on the same subject he abandoned it in favour of *Zemire und Azor*.

During the composition of *Der Freischütz* Weber made a number of changes to the libretto, the most important of which was the deletion, against Kind's wishes, of the scenes between the Hermit and Agathe which were to have opened the first act. In these the Hermit sees a horrifying vision which he interprets as a warning of danger to Agathe. When Agathe brings him food and tells him of Max's nervousness over the *Probeschuss*, he gives her, for her protection, roses from a tree brought from Palestine.

Weber's work on *Der Freischütz* progressed slowly. His duties in Dresden and his efforts to promote German opera there were burdensome and often frustrating. He was also distracted by other commissions, and his health was increasingly weakened by the progress of tuberculosis. During 1819, however, after he had arranged with the Intendant of the Berlin opera, Count Brühl, that the opera (at that stage known as *Die Jägersbraut*, 'The Hunter's Bride') should have its première in the newly rebuilt Schauspielhaus, he worked more intensively. By 30 November he had completed the first act and was able to promise Brühl that he would finish the opera by March 1820. On 18 June the following year *Der Freischütz* became the first musical piece to be staged in the Schauspielhaus. Its success was immediate and long-lasting. Within a few years it conquered all the major stages of Europe. By 1830 it had been produced in Danish, Swedish, Czech, Russian, English, French, Hungarian, Polish and Dutch, and before 1850 it was staged as far afield as Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro and Sydney. It has long been regarded as one of the seminal works of German Romantic opera.

Synopsis

The C major/minor overture sets the scene for the opera, its two principal tonalities representing the healthy aspects of life as opposed to evil and the dark powers. Horns conjure up a vision of forests and hunting, low clarinets, timpani and especially the sound of the diminished 7th chord, associated with Samiel, presage the dark side of the drama. The *Molto vivace* is based on Max's 'Doch mich umgarnen finstre Mächte' in Act 1, full of foreboding, and Agathe's exultant 'Süss entzückt entgegen ihm' in Act 2.

ACT 1 *In front of an inn in the Bohemian forest*

In a bright, rustic D major chorus (no.1) the peasants congratulate one of their fellows, Kilian, for his victory in a shooting competition. They make fun of the forester Max's failure and accompany Kilian's mocking solo ('Schau der Herr') with laughter in repeated major 2nds. A fight between Max and Kilian is prevented only by the arrival of Cuno and some of his foresters, among whom is Caspar. Kilian explains that they were teasing Max because he had missed all his shots. Caspar (who has made a compact with the Black Huntsman), after giving thanks in an aside to Samiel for his own accuracy, suggests that Max's gun must be bewitched; he mockingly proposes to call on the dark powers for assistance. Cuno intervenes, rebuking Caspar, but warns Max that if he fails in the shooting trial the next day he will not be allowed to marry Agathe. Cuno explains the origins of the shooting trial for whoever is to inherit the chief forester's position. In the trio with chorus 'O! diese Sonne' (no.2) Max remains despondent, while Cuno admonishes him and Caspar tempts him to rash measures. The trio opens in A minor, and its use of a diminished 7th chord in the third bar hints at the imminence of the dark powers. The ensuing hunting chorus ('Lasst lustig die Hörner erschallen!') turns to a healthy F major. In the dialogue Kilian wishes Max luck and invites him to join the dance. The peasants exit, dancing to a waltz (no.3) which gradually fades and disintegrates, giving way in a highly effective

manner to a dramatic scena ('Nein! länger trag' ich nicht die Qualen') as Max is left alone, pondering the abrupt alteration in his success. At one point, as he wonders if Heaven has forsaken him, the diminished 7th is heard and Samiel is seen in the distance. As the music finishes in C minor, Caspar comes out of the inn. He orders wine and insists on Max's drinking several toasts with him; he then sings a coarse drinking song which enrages Max (no.4, 'Hier im ird'schen Jammerthal'); from its initial B minor tonality it modulates to D major, a key which Weber associates with the rustic life, but is wrenched back to B minor to the accompaniment of a shrill piccolo. When Max is about to leave Caspar tells him that he can help him succeed in the trial, and proves the point by giving him his gun to shoot at a distant bird. Max shoots and brings down a massive eagle. Caspar explains that the gun was loaded with a *Freikugel*, a magic bullet that always hits its mark; but it was his last. However, seven more can be cast if Max will meet him in the Wolf's Glen at midnight. After Max has departed, Caspar, who plans to offer him as a victim to Samiel in place of himself, exults in Max's impending damnation and his own triumph in the aria 'Schweig, schweig' (no.5).

ACT 2 A room in Cuno's house

Aennchen is fixing a portrait of Cuno's ancestor, which had fallen down and slightly injured Agathe. In the A major duet 'Schelm, halt' fest!' (no.6) the characters of the two young women are nicely established; Aennchen's sprightly phrases show her carefree disposition, while Agathe's slower-moving ones indicate her more serious nature and her concern for Max. Aennchen cheers Agathe in a lively C major arietta in polonaise rhythm, 'Kommt ein schlanker Bursch gegangen' (no.7), and Agathe explains that her brooding was caused by the outcome of her morning visit to the Hermit. Left alone, Agathe sings a recitative and aria in E major, 'Wie nahte mir der Schlummer ... Leise, leise' (no.8), not altogether free from the Italian influence about which Weber was so frequently critical but highly effective in painting her character. During this number her uneasiness gives way to joy at the thought of her coming wedding day, when she hears Max's footsteps approaching. Max enters and explains that he must hurry away again to collect a stag which he has shot in the forest near the Wolf's Glen. At the mention of this dreadful place Agathe, in a C minor beginning to the E \flat trio 'Wie? was? Entsetzen!' (no. 9), and Aennchen express their horror, while Max exclaims that a hunter cannot be afraid of the forest at night when he has his duty to perform. Samiel's diminished 7th chord is heard as Max exclaims that the bright moonlight will soon be gone. By the end of the trio Aennchen has recovered her usual lightheartedness, oblivious to the concern of the others.

The Wolf's Glen

The music of the finale (no.10) begins in F \sharp minor with pianissimo string tremolandos and low sustained clarinets and trombones. The subsequent tonalities of the scene are those of the individual notes of the diminished 7th chord which accompanies each of Samiel's appearances. Caspar intones a spell and a chorus of invisible spirits, accompanied by shrieks on the woodwind, answers him with owl-like calls. As a distant clock strikes twelve, Caspar, in a short section of melodrama, calls up Samiel. As the music moves to C minor, Samiel appears and agrees to allow him three more years of life in return for another victim; Caspar suggests that Samiel direct the seventh bullet at Agathe. The music modulates to E \flat and Max arrives; he is horrified by visions of his dead mother and Agathe, but nevertheless descends. The music returns to C minor and they begin casting the bullets. As they are cast, the music alternates between C minor and A minor with copious use of diminished 7ths. Between each of the seven castings there are supernatural manifestations of mounting horror: flapping

nightbirds; a black boar; a hurricane; cracking whips, trampling horses and wheels of fire; a wild hunt; thunder, lightning, hail, meteors and fire; and finally Samiel himself. Caspar and Max fall unconscious and the tonality returns to F# minor. As the clock strikes one, calm returns.

ACT 3 A forest

After an entr'acte with horn-calls (no.11), the curtain rises on a hunting party in the forest. Max has made three magnificent shots and has only one magic bullet left; he asks Caspar for more, but is refused. Caspar uses up his last magic bullet so that Max has the only one remaining, the one that belongs to Samiel.

Agathe's room

Wearing her wedding dress, Agathe affirms her trust in God in the cavatina 'Und ob die Wolke' (no.12). She has had a bad dream in which she saw herself as a white dove: when Max fired his gun she fell; the dove vanished and she was Agathe again, but a bleeding black bird lay at her feet. Aennchen enters and tries to dispel Agathe's anxiety. In a *romanza* and aria, 'Einst träumte' (no.13), which Weber added to the opera for his first Aennchen, she tells a tale of a cousin who had fearful nightmares which resulted from the sound of the dog rattling its chain (no.13). The bridesmaids arrive and sing a folksong, 'Wir winden dir den Jungfernkranz' (no.14). Aennchen returns; the picture of Cuno's ancestor has again fallen, and the box that Aennchen has brought is found to contain a funeral wreath. Both women are thoroughly shaken, but decide to make a new wreath from roses which the Hermit had given Agathe. To the final chorus of the bridesmaids' song they depart, but the music modulates disturbingly through D minor to A minor, ending with sinister tremolos in the bass. These are answered by a sudden explosion of D major as the orchestral introduction to the rousing Huntsmen's Chorus, 'Was gleicht wohl auf Erden' (no.15), begins.

A 'romantic landscape'

Prince Ottokar and his retainers wait for the shooting contest to begin. Cuno requests that it take place before Agathe arrives. The Prince chooses a white dove on a branch as target. As Max takes aim Agathe enters and cries to him to hold fire, since she is the dove. The Hermit touches the bough and the dove flies off to another tree behind which Caspar is hiding. Max shoots; both Agathe and Caspar fall to the ground and the finale (no.16) begins, in C minor, the key of the dark powers. The people think Max has shot Agathe, but she is unhurt. Caspar has been fatally wounded and as Samiel, accompanied by his diminished 7th, appears to him he dies, cursing Heaven and Hell. At this point C major begins to reassert itself. Max makes a full confession, after which, despite the pleas of Cuno, Agathe and the people, the Prince banishes him. However, on the intervention of the Hermit, the Prince agrees that Max be given a year to prove himself, at the end of which the Prince will himself officiate at Max's wedding to Agathe. The opera ends with a hymn of praise for God's mercy in which the triumphant theme from Agathe's aria (no.8), which had also crowned the overture, plays a prominent part.

Der Freischütz was the culmination of an important phase in Weber's struggle to realize his conception of German opera. His idea of combining the resources of drama, music and the visual aspect of theatre in a unified art work was only partly realized in *Der Freischütz*; but, owing much to the example of

French opera, he moved far beyond the limitations of Singspiel as it was practised by the majority of his German contemporaries. Along with Spohr (*Faust*, 1813) and Hoffmann (*Undine*, 1816), who had similar aims, he attempted, with considerable success, to express the essential elements of the drama in his music. Like them, Weber used tonality, musical motif, orchestral colour and various formal and structural devices. Spohr's *Faust* in particular, which Weber had introduced in Prague in 1816, may have exerted a considerable influence on his use of motif. Weber himself had recognized the effectiveness of Spohr's employment of 'a few melodies, felicitously and aptly devised, [which] weave like delicate threads through the whole, and hold it together artistically' (*Prager Zeitung*, 1 September 1816). His use of motif in *Der Freischütz* is less subtle and pervasive than Spohr's, but for precisely that reason, perhaps, it is more effective; while even the alert listener may fail to observe the transformations of Spohr's Hell motif, Samiel's diminished 7th, with its sinister orchestration, is unmistakable. (Spohr, in fact, had used a diminished 7th, strikingly orchestrated, as a motif for supernatural intervention in *Zemire und Azor* in 1818–19.) Another point of similarity between all three composers was the use of librettos that explored the relationship of the natural and supernatural worlds, a theme which continued to find favour with German Romantic composers. However, while Hoffmann's *Undine* failed to enter the repertory, and the operas of Spohr (and later those of Marschner) enjoyed only limited success in the long term, *Der Freischütz*, despite the limitations of its libretto, has held the stage uninterruptedly. This may be attributed largely to Weber's extraordinary ability to judge the effectiveness of his music in the theatre and to his gift for combining musical substance with accessibility. Almost every number of the opera still speaks to its audiences with refreshing vigour and directness.