

RICHARD WAGNER

Born May 22, 1813 in Leipzig; died February 13, 1883 in Venice.

Selections from *Lohengrin* (1845-1848)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Weimar, August 28, 1850

Court Theater

Franz Liszt, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 18 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Wagner based his libretto for *Lohengrin* on two 13th-century German sources — a poem by the knight Wolfram von Eschenbach (who appears as a character in *Tannhäuser*) and *The Knight of the Swan* by the *Minnesinger* (the German counterparts of the French troubadours) Conrad von Würzburg. In the opera, Lohengrin, son of Parsifal and a Knight of the Holy Grail, appears in 10th-century Antwerp to defend Elsa against a false accusation of murder. She is absolved of the charge, and Lohengrin consents to wed her on the condition that she does not inquire about his name or his past. After a magnificent marriage ceremony (the source of the familiar *Wedding March* — “Here Comes the Bride”), she asks the forbidden questions. Lohengrin reveals his name and his sacred mission to find the sacred chalice lost after it was used at the Last Supper, but leaves Elsa, who expires of her grief.

The Prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin* is a brief burst of sunlight that serves as a foil to the pervasive seriousness of the work. It portrays the joy and expectation of Elsa and Lohengrin on the eve of their wedding. The Prelude is in a compact three-part form, beginning and ending with a jubilant, leaping theme in the low instruments that is heard nowhere else in the opera. The solo oboe begins the more lyrical and subdued center section, which is loosely based on phrases of Elsa's music from Act II.

Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral is the beautiful and solemn music that accompanies the couple's approach to Antwerp Cathedral.

After Elsa has been wrongfully accused of murdering her younger brother in a bid for the throne of Brabant, she sings the aria *Einsam in trüben Tagen* (“*Alone in Troubled Days*”), in which she says that she has seen a knight in her dreams who has pledged to be her protector.

“Siegfried's Funeral Music” from *Götterdämmerung* (1869-1876)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Bayreuth, August 17, 1876

Festspielhaus

Hans Richter, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 8 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and harp.

In the story of *Götterdämmerung*, Hagen, who lusts after the power of the Ring, has given Siegfried a magic potion that makes him forget his love for Brünnhilde. Siegfried journeys back to their cave, and takes the accursed Ring from the stricken Valkyrie as Hagen savors the plot he has set in motion. Brünnhilde follows Siegfried back to the Rhine with Gunther, Hagen's half-brother, who has been duped into believing that the warrior-maiden will be his bride. When all return, Hagen arranges a hunting expedition during which he slays Siegfried from behind with his spear, and commands his vassals to bear the body back to his hall of the banks of the Rhine. The solemn *Funeral Music* accompanies the sad procession.

The excerpt begins just as Siegfried expires. A soft, muffled drum beats a cadence. An ominous tremble arises from the depths of the orchestra, and the brasses play a stark melody in empty octaves. The full horror of the deed comes like a tidal wave as an enormous shudder overtakes the orchestra. Various themes associated with Siegfried and his heroism are heard throughout, articulated in some of the most grandiloquent measures in the entire *Ring* cycle. The intensity subsides, overwhelmed by grief, and the muffled drum cadence ends the concert version of the *Funeral Music*.

“Chorus of the Norwegian Sailors” from *Der fliegende Holländer* (“*The Flying Dutchman*”) (1840-1841)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Dresden, January 2, 1843

Richard Wagner, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 4 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Wagner gave this brief précis of *The Flying Dutchman*: “[Act 1] As the opera opens two ships take refuge in a cove on the coast of Norway, one commanded by Daland, the other by the Dutchman. Impressed by the Dutchman’s wealth, Daland offers hospitality and promises the hand of his daughter Senta to the Dutchman. [Act II] Senta is waiting with the other maidens for the return of her father’s ship. She reveals that she is strangely moved by the story of the Flying Dutchman’s suffering and has a strong desire to save him. Erik, her lover, tries to persuade her to abandon her wild dreams. Daland and the Dutchman arrive together, and Senta agrees to marry the Dutchman. [Act III] Outside Daland’s house, the ships lie at anchor. The Dutchman hears Erik accusing Senta of breaking a past promise to him. Assuming her incapable of fidelity, the Dutchman puts out to sea. Senta calls that she is faithful to death and throws herself from the rocky cliff into the sea. At once the Dutchman’s ship sinks beneath the waves, and Senta and the Dutchman are seen rising toward heaven.”

In the opening scene of the opera’s third act, village maidens offer food and drink to the Norwegian sailors, who respond with a boisterous chorus and dance cut from the musical cloth of Weber’s *Der Freischütz*.

Selections from *Tannhäuser* (1843-1845)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Dresden, October 19, 1845

Richard Wagner, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 12 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Though Richard Wagner is universally known as a composer, he also considered himself — as the author of the librettos for all of his operas, a huge autobiography and an avalanche of theoretical and philosophical tracts voluminous enough to literally fill a shelf — a poet and a man of letters. The sources of inspiration for his librettos were invariably the history and myths of Germany, and during a vacation in the early summer of 1842 at the northern Bohemian town of Teplitz, he devoured a wide variety of 19th-century retellings of the ancient tales of the legendary medieval singing contests in search of an operatic subject. The accounts, by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the Brothers Grimm, Heine, Ludwig Tieck and others, concerned a historical 13th-century Minnesinger (i.e., a German poet-musician of noble birth) named Heinrich von Ofterdingen, a contest of song held in 1208 at the Wartburg Castle, near Eisenach (today remembered as Bach’s birthplace), and a (perhaps) mythical character called Tannhäuser who succumbed to the seductions of Venus in her mountain enclave and sought forgiveness through a pilgrimage to Rome and the love of a pure woman. Before he left Teplitz, Wagner had sketched an operatic scenario from these sources, and the following spring worked it into a full libretto originally titled “The Mount of Venus” but later renamed *Tannhäuser* to thwart lascivious comment. The three acts of the opera were composed in 1844, while he was conductor of the Royal Opera House in Dresden; the orchestration was completed on April 15, 1845. Wagner directed the work’s premiere in Dresden on October 19, 1845 to an audience initially bemused by his attempts to weld together the individual numbers of the opera through accompanied narratives and instrumental transitions. By the third performance, however, Tannhäuser proved to be a success. It was repeated in Dresden, with some revisions to clarify its dramatic structure, in 1846 and 1847, and was introduced into the repertoires of the major European opera houses over the next decade. *Tannhäuser* was the first of Wagner’s operas to be staged in America (Stadt Theatre, New York, April 4, 1859; the Overture was played here as early as 1853, in Boston).

Tannhäuser has journeyed to Rome to seek forgiveness for the sins of living for one year in the Venusberg, the mountain where German legend says that Venus, the goddess of love, took refuge after the fall of ancient civilization. His friend Wolfram awaits his return, hoping that his reappearance will end the grief that Tannhäuser's faithful lover, Elisabeth, has endured because of his absence. A band of pilgrims marches past, but Tannhäuser is not among them, and the distraught Elisabeth prays that the Virgin may claim her life and end her suffering. She leaves, and Wolfram takes up his lyre and sings of Elisabeth's longing for death, asking the friendly evening star to accept her soul.

After escaping from the Venusberg, Tannhäuser finds himself in a valley below Wartburg Castle. His friend Wolfram recognizes him and invites him to the Wartburg to take part in a singing contest. The *Entry of the Guests* accompanies the procession of the nobles into the great hall of the Wartburg, the scene of Tannhäuser's earlier triumphs in song.

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Born October 10, 1813 in Le Roncole, Italy; died January 27, 1901 in Milan.

Selections from *La Traviata* (1852-1853)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Venice, March 6, 1853

Teatro La Fenice

Gaetano Mares, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 25 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Verdi was visiting Paris on February 2, 1852 when the premiere of the drama *La Dame aux camélias* by Alexander Dumas *fils* took place. Dumas' play had sprung from his brief affair eight years before with Marie Duplessis, a woman of rare beauty and charming wit who was dedicated to a life of excitement and sensuous pleasure. (One of the most delicious Parisian rumors of the day had it that the playwright's illustrious father, Alexander Dumas *père*, author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, had also received Marie's favors.) Verdi recognized in Dumas' poignant tragedy the stuff of opera, and within a year he had completed his musical transformation of the story as *La Traviata* (in which Marie became Violetta Valery), the third of his series of middle-period masterpieces that began in 1851 with *Rigoletto* and continued two years later with *Il Trovatore*. Since *La Traviata* is today often played as an Empire-period piece, it is difficult to realize that the work contained revolutionary theatrical elements that took considerable courage on Verdi's part to broach. Here was an opera that was to be played not in the costumes of a by-gone or mythical era, but in contemporary dress; a piece about a courtesan whose life style destroyed both her situation and her health; a musical drama that depended for its emotional impact not upon music of sweeping gestures but rather of subtle intimacy. Reports on the opening-night reception (March 6, 1853) of *La Traviata* at La Fenice in Venice differ, though it is now clear that the first performance was not the complete fiasco that it was once thought to have been. Though there were public misgivings about *La Traviata's* perceived moral turpitude from church and government authorities, the work soon became a staple of the repertory, and it has remained one of the most popular of all operas.

The poignant Prelude to Act I sets the tone of melancholy that pervades the later actions of the opera. As the curtain rises on a party in the courtesan Violetta's house in Paris, she finds herself drawn to a young man, Alfredo Germont, who, a friend tells her, has admired her from afar for some time. Alfredo warns the consumptive Violetta that she will kill herself if she persists with her present mode of living, and then confesses that he has loved her since the day he first saw her a year before. He departs. Violetta, alone, muses on the night's happenings, and is surprised at how strangely Alfredo's words have affected her. She reveals her longing "to love and be loved" in the expressive aria *Ah, fors'è lui*, but soon dismisses these thoughts as hopeless folly for a woman of her sort. She says she will give up on love and renew her pursuit of pleasure (*Sempre libera degg'io*), but Alfredo's voice floating in through the window gives her pause. Act I ends with Violetta's brilliant commendation of the sensuous life.

In Act II, Scene 1, Alfredo is living with Violetta in a country house near Paris. Germont, Alfredo's father, arrives to tell Violetta that she must leave his son to prevent embarrassment to his family. She is torn between her sincere love of Alfredo and Germont's pleas, but decides to break off the relationship.

Alfredo is distraught to learn that he has lost Violetta, so Germont tries to comfort him with memories of their home in Provence in the aria *Di Provenza il mar*.

Act II, Scene 2 of *La Traviata* is set at a festive party in a richly decorated Parisian townhouse. Some of the guests are disguised as Gypsy fortune-tellers and others as Spanish matadors; each group entertains with a song and dance.

“Va, pensiero” (Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves) from *Nabucco* (1841)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Milan, March 9, 1842

Teatro alla Scala

Eugenio Cavallini, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 5 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings

Nabucco concerns the faithfulness of the Hebrews to God during their Babylonian Captivity. The great chorus of the Hebrews on the banks of the Euphrates, *Va, Pensiero* (“Fly, Thoughts”), in which they express longing for their lost freedom and their distant homeland, struck a sympathetic chord in its Italian listeners, and became the opera’s instant hit and one of Verdi’s most enduring contributions to his country’s culture. At the time of the premiere (March 9, 1842 at La Scala) much of northern Italy was still ruled by the Austrian Habsburgs under terms decided by the Congress of Vienna more than 25 years before. Most Italians desperately wanted to be free of Austrian domination, and supported the revolutionary movement known as the *Risorgimento* (the “resurgence” of national pride that the descendents of ancient Rome regarded as their long-denied birthright). *Va, Pensiero*, the passionate hymn of freedom, became the movement’s anthem and Verdi its hero. During the insurrections of 1848, the name VERDI, scrawled across walls and carried on signs, was used as a rallying cry by the nationalists. In addition to being a tribute to their beloved composer, the letters of his name were also an acrostic for “Vittorio Emanuele, Re d’Italia,” the Duke of Savoy whom the patriots were fighting to bring to power as “King of Italy.” When Cavour called the first parliamentary session of the newly united Italy in 1859, Verdi was elected as the representative from Busseto. Though reluctant to enter the political arena, he was sufficiently patriotic and cognizant of his standing with his countrymen to accept the mandate. So great and enduring was the fame of *Va, Pensiero* that it was sung by the crowds lining the streets of Verdi’s funeral procession almost six decades after it was composed.

“Caro nome” from *Rigoletto* (1850-1851)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Venice, March 11, 1851

Teatro La Fenice

Gaetano Mares, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 7 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, timpani and strings.

Rigoletto opens at a party in the palace of the libertine Duke of Mantua, who declares that he takes his pleasure where he finds it. The Duke’s latest quarry is Gilda, the daughter of Rigoletto, his court jester. After an assignation with the Duke, Gilda sings of her infatuation in the spectacular aria *Caro nome*.

“Io morirò, ma lieto in core” from *Don Carlo* (1866-1867)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, March 11, 1867

Paris Opéra

François George-Hainl, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 4 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Don Carlo, Infante of Spain, and his sworn friend Rodrigo have fomented a revolt in subjugated Flanders against the rule of King Philip, Carlo's father. Carlo has been imprisoned, but Rodrigo has contrived to have all the guilt fall upon him to save his friend and rescue their cause. During their meeting, an assassin steals into the cell and fatally wounds Rodrigo. With his dying words, Rodrigo bids Carlo farewell, and begs him to protect Flanders.

"Gloria all'Egitto" (Triumphal March and Chorus) from *Aida* (1870)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Cairo, Egypt, December 24, 1871

Khedivial Opera House

Giovanni Bottesini, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 8 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

The grand chorus *Gloria all'Egitto* ("*Glory to Egypt*") occupies much of the spectacular Triumphal Scene (Act II, Scene 2) of *Aida*, in which the victorious Egyptian army parades its Ethiopian captives and booty before King and people.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda