

GIOACHINO ROSSINI

Born February 29, 1792 in Pesaro; died November 13, 1868 in Paris.

Overture to *William Tell* (1828-1829)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, August 3, 1829

Paris Opéra

François Habeneck, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 12 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, flute, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings

In 1824, Rossini moved to Paris to direct the Théâtre Italien and there became fully aware of the revolutionary artistic and political trends that were then gaining popularity. He was too closely attuned to public fashion to ignore the changing audience tastes, so he began to cast about for a libretto that would keep him abreast of the latest developments in the musical theater while solidifying his new position in Paris. Schiller's play *William Tell*, based on the heroic Swiss struggle against tyranny in the 14th century, had recently created much interest when it was introduced to Paris in a French translation. Rossini decided that the drama would make a fine opera (or, at least, a saleable one), and seems to have taken special care to incorporate the emerging Romantic style into this epic work, as evidenced by its subject matter, symphonic scope and attention to dramatic and poetic content. From the summer of 1828, when word of the project first surfaced, through the following spring, when several delays were reportedly caused by prima donna incapacity (actually, Rossini was withholding the work's premiere to press negotiations with the government over a lucrative contract for future — never realized — operas) until the premiere in August 1829, *William Tell* kept Parisian society abuzz. Once the opera finally reached the stage, it was hailed by critics and musicians but disappointed the public, who felt that its six-hour length was more entertainment than a single evening should decently hold. (The score was greatly truncated when it was staged in later years.) Whether the new style of the opera was one Rossini did not wish to pursue, or whether he was drained by two decades of constant work, or whether he just wanted to enjoy in leisure the fortune he had amassed, *William Tell* was his last opera. During the remaining 39 years of his life, he did not compose another note for the stage. The four sections of the Overture, virtually a miniature tone poem, represent dawn in the mountains, a thunderstorm, the pastoral countryside and the triumphant return of the Swiss troops.