

sometimes heard in an arrangement for full orchestra, Wagner originally wrote it for an ensemble of 15 players. Having prepared and rehearsed the work in secret, Wagner gathered his small orchestra on the stairway on Christmas morning, 1870, and awakened Cosima with its first performance (Cosima's birthday was December 24; the Wagner family celebrated that day and the Christmas holiday together). Afterward, Wagner and Cosima's five children presented her with the score.

As is reflected in the uncharacteristically (for Wagner) modest scoring, the Siegfried Idyll is a particularly intimate work, meant to acknowledge and celebrate the year that Wagner and Cosima could finally legitimize their union. Several stressful years had passed since Cosima had left her first husband, the conductor Hans von Bülow, in 1866. The divorce was finalized at last in 1870, and in August of that year Cosima and Wagner wed.

Wagner wrote Siegfried Idyll while he was occupied with the completing and initial staging of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The music for Siegfried (1856-71), the third part of the cycle, had caused the composer great difficulty; he had set it aside in frustration in 1857, returning to it only in 1869. Wagner borrowed Siegfried Idyll's principal themes from Siegfried and *Die Walküre* (1854-56), where they have specific meanings within the cycle's system of leitmotives. Within the context in Siegfried Idyll, however, these themes are taken on a more general nature as expressions of triumphant love and affection. Wagner had never intended to publish the work, but financial problems forced him to make it public in 1877.

# WAGNER

## The Flying Dutchman Overture Venusberg Music From "Tannhauser" Siegfried Idyll

Jascha Horenstein conducting the  
The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



The overture that opens this fiery opera is a popular orchestral work that gives the listener insight into some of the characters and their themes within the opera. Opening with a statement horn theme, the music is rocked by the sound of aggressive waves of the ocean. Wagner uses the brass and percussion to create huge swells of sound as the music is pulled from pillar to post. High in intensity and drama, this opening is signature Wagner.

Wagner uses a number of leitmotifs to represent different characters, and some of these are heard in fragmented form during the overture. In the slower more lyrical sections we hear the leitmotif of the woman, which is first presented by the cor anglais. Wagner pushes the classical boundaries with his rich orchestral writing, and this in turn supports this dramatic story. As the tempo builds again, so do the dynamics of the music, as the strings layer in and become louder, the opening brass theme returns, signalling to us that the Flying Dutchman is coming.

The Flying Dutchman presents themes of sacrifice, love, loss and turmoil, which is certainly represented in the constantly changing character of the overture. The rousing central section reaches the first big climax and sees Wagner's chromatic harmony come into play. Throughout the overture the textures are grounded and rich, with even the sparser sections adhering to this style. High in intensity until the very end, the last minute of the overture sees the return of the opening brass theme, this time at half speed to build tension. A small woodwind interlude breaks the brass theme and this leads into a suspended string motif that concludes the overture with a rousing tutti chord.

Unlike most composers, Wagner wrote both the words and the music of his operas, and the plot of Tannhäuser is a unique creation that combines

elements of two medieval legends. It centers on the eponymous hero Tannhäuser, a singer torn between sacred and profane love. The overture juxtaposes these conflicting forces: it begins with a slow, solemn introduction that uses the melody of the "Pilgrim's Chorus" that recurs throughout the opera, a prayer for salvation through repentance:

The flickering, faster music that ensues is associated with the mythical realm of the Venusberg, a mountain beneath which the goddess Venus has hidden since the advent of Christianity. The fragmentary ideas of the Venusberg soon coalesce in a forceful tune for the violins. This melody is used throughout the opera as Tannhäuser's "Hymn to Venus," in which he sings, "My heart yearned, oh my senses thirsted after pleasure, after delicious gratification. Forever envied is he who, with ardent passion, has shared the godlike glow in your embrace!"

The music then slows, and a solo clarinet plays the music of "Venus's Call," her seductive entreaty: "Come, beloved, see yonder grotto, filled with rosy fragrance gently wafting! That abode of sweetest delight would offer enchantment even to a god." This tranquil interlude gradually builds to a reprise of Tannhäuser's hymn, and the ensuing Venusberg music leads directly into the ballet that begins the opera.

The full title on the original manuscript of Wagner's Siegfried Idyll reads, "Tribschen-Idyll, with Fidi-Birdsong and Orange Sunrise, presented as a symphonic birthday greeting to his Cosima by her Richard, 1870." The "Siegfried" in the title does not refer to the composer's opera of the same name, as is often supposed, but to his infant son, whose pet name was "Fidi." The "orange sunrise" refers to the color of Cosima's bedroom wallpaper, which brightly reflected the morning light. Though the work is

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- 1 The Flying Dutchman Overture 10:10**
- 2 Venusberg Music From "Tannhauser" 13:13**
- 3 Siegfried Idyll 16:00**

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