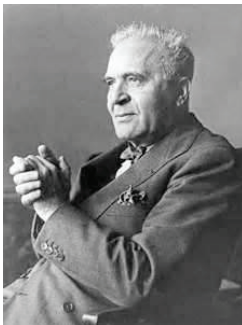


Bruno Walter (born Bruno Schlesinger, September 15, 1876 – February 17, 1962) was a German-born conductor, pianist, and composer. Born in Berlin, he left Germany in 1933 to escape the Third Reich, settling finally in the United States in 1939. He worked closely with Gustav Mahler, whose music he helped establish in the repertory, held major positions with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Salzburg Festival, Vienna State Opera, Bavarian State Opera, Staatsoper Unter den Linden and Deutsche Oper Berlin, among others, made recordings of historical and artistic significance, and is widely considered one of the great conductors of the 20th century.

Born near Alexanderplatz in Berlin to a middle-class Jewish family, he began his musical education at the Stern Conservatory at the age of eight, making his first public appearance as a pianist when he was nine; he performed a concerto movement with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1889 and a full concerto with them in February, 1890. He studied composition at Stern with Robert Radeke de:Robert Radecke, and remained active as a composer until about 1910 (see list of compositions below). But it was seeing an 1889 concert by the Berlin Philharmonic led by Hans von Bülow, he wrote, that "decided my future. Now I knew what I was meant for. No musical activity but that of an orchestral conductor could any longer be considered by me. He made his conducting début at the Cologne Opera with Albert Lortzing's *Der Waffenschmied* in 1894. Later that year he left for the Hamburg Opera to work as a chorus director. There he first met and worked with Gustav Mahler, whom he revered and with whose music he later became strongly identified



Conducting In 1896, he was appointed Kapellmeister of the Stadttheater (municipal opera) in Breslau, on the strength of a recommendation from Mahler to the theater's director, Theodor Löwe. However, Löwe required that before taking up this position the young conductor change his last name from Schlesinger, which literally means Silesian, "because of its frequent occurrence in the capital of Silesia", In a letter to his brother paraphrased by Erik Ryding and Rebecca Pechefsky, Walter said he had "suggested several names, which Mahler wrote down and gave to Löwe, who returned the contract with the name Bruno Walter. These biographers add that Walter wrote to his parents that he found that "having to change his name was 'terrible"; they report that Mahler and his sisters "pressed" Walter to make the change of name, and add that, contrary to occasional unsubstantiated reports, it "is unknown" whether Löwe's stipulation had anything to do with a desire to conceal Walter's Jewish origins.

In 1897, Walter became Chief Conductor at the municipal opera in Pressburg. He found the town provincial and depressing, and in 1898 took the position of Chief Conductor of the Riga Opera, Latvia. While there, he converted to Christianity, probably Roman Catholicism. In 1899 Walter was appointed music director of the Temeswar, Austria-Hungary (now Timisoara, Romania) Opera. Walter then returned in 1900 to Berlin, where he assumed the post of Royal Prussian Conductor at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, succeeding Franz Schalk; his colleagues there included Richard Strauss and Karl Muck. While in Berlin he also conducted the premiere of *Der arme Heinrich* by Hans Pfitzner, who became a lifelong friend.

In 1901, Walter accepted Mahler's invitation to be his assistant at the Court Opera in Vienna. Walter led Verdi's *Aida* at his debut. In 1907 he was elected by the Vienna Philharmonic to conduct its Nicolai Concert. In 1910, he helped Mahler select and coach solo singers for the premiere of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*. In the following years Walter's conducting reputation soared as he was invited to conduct across Europe – in Prague, in London where in 1910 he conducted *Tristan und Isolde* and *Ethel Smyth's The Wreckers* at Covent Garden, and in Rome. When Mahler died on May 18, 1911, Walter was at his deathbed. On June 6, he wrote to his sister that he was to conduct the premiere of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, he did so in Munich on November 20, 1911, in the first half of an all-Mahler concert (the second half contained Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* (Mahler) On June 26, 1912 he led the Vienna Philharmonic in the world premiere of Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*.

Bruno Walter

## WAGNER

“DIE MEISTERSINGER” OVERTURE

“THE FLYING DUTCHMAN” OVERTURE

PRELUDE AND GOOD FRIDAY SPELL FROM “PARSIFAL”

THE COLUMBIA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Though Wagner had created a prose version of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as far back as 1845, he didn't begin composition of the opera in earnest until the spring of 1862. Earlier that same year he wrote two new prose treatments of the libretto and also conceived the opera's orchestral prelude during a train voyage from Venice. He conducted the Prelude as a concert work in the fall.

The full production of *Meistersinger* would not occur until 1868 but the ten-minute Prelude Wagner unveiled six years before hinted at something that would become rather unique in his catalogue – pure, uncomplicated optimism. The story details a 16th century singing contest put on by the Guild of Mastersingers in the town of Nuremberg. It speaks essentially to the eternal struggle between old and new, between the conservative musical traditionalists and the unbound forward-thinkers. Many of the characters in the opera were based on actual historical figures from the time and the Guild itself did in fact exist. The Mastersingers were skilled German folk vocalists, active from the very end of the mediaeval period to the 19th century and made up of common tradespeople with an intense devotion to music. Wagner's life as a musician was also marked by a dissonance similar to the one he addressed, albeit quite lightly, in *Meistersinger*. His version centered on the battle between his own progressive compositional ideas and the rigidly anachronistic mindset of some of his critics. One of the most ardent was a man named Eduard Hanslick and some have posited that the dour character of Beckmesser was created as his unflattering caricature. The bright and agreeable Prelude to *Die Meistersinger* includes none of this presumed baggage however. It merely introduces the opera's most important themes in the same beautifully self-contained fashion that makes every Wagner opera overture such a magnificent concert piece.

Richard Wagner's Overture to *The Flying Dutchman* is a surpassing achievement on two counts: it wonderfully synthesizes the opera's dramatic content by utilizing themes associated with characters and ideas; and it is, as an independent piece of music, a striking tone poem conjuring vividly the turbulent atmosphere of the sea. In a sense, the sea is the opera's chief protagonist, the human characters being at the mercy of its impenetrable mysteries and caprices. The Dutchman, in vowing to sail the Cape in the face of all climatic odds, has invoked the devil, and in so doing, has provoked

him. Cursed by the evil one to sail the seas through eternity, he can be saved from his fate only by the fidelity of a woman's love. Senta offers her love, but the Dutchman doubts its strength. Senta's proof is first tragic, then redemptive: She flings herself to a watery grave, but the power of her love breaks the curse. The Dutchman's ship sinks in a whirlpool, and he and Senta, transfigured, are united in death.

From the very opening of the Prelude to Act 1 of *Parsifal*, Wagner's last opera, the listener is transported into a world out of time. A long, unaccented and unaccompanied theme rises slowly from the lower string to the shimmering resolution which fills the whole orchestra, and from which the same theme re-emerges. Wagner is in no hurry to leave this gently wistful motif and extracts a good deal of mystic power from it before moving on to the next section. This is introduced by a very simple statement of the Dresden Amen, representing the Holy Grail, leading a sonorous, forthright brass theme, the Faith motif. Only one other motif is clearly heard in the Prelude, Amfortas's Agony, whose tortured harmonies cast a shadow over the calm of the other three. The overall impression is a curious, unearthly blend of immobility and of a reaching upwards towards the light. Having attained it, the music hovers there, drifting into silence without any descent from that enchanted summit. In Act 3, *Parsifal*, now in possession of the once-lost Holy spear and made wise through his years of painful travel, finds his way back to the Castle of the Grail, arriving on a Good Friday. His return means the fulfilment of the prophecy, Amfortas's salvation and the renewal of the Brotherhood of the Grail. He is greeted by the hermit Gurnemanz as their saviour, and is anointed King, to the triumphant fanfare that begins the passage known as the Good Friday Music.

Before leaving the spring by which Gurnemanz lives, the weary Parsifal rests and observes with wonder the beauty of the sunlit, flower-filled meadow around him. 'This is Good Friday's magic spell,' explains Gurnemanz. Nature and all Creation rejoice on this day because with the Redeemer's sacrifice the earth has been cleansed of sin. Quiet triplets in the strings create a translucent wash of sound from which a beautiful oboe melody rises tranquilly, evoking the warmth of sunlight and the lightest of flower-scented breezes. As in the Prelude, the picture is one of tranquility, peaceful ecstasy and profound compassion.

# Wagner Preludes and Overtures

## Bruno Walter - Columbia Symphony Orchestra

1. Die Meistersinger Overture
2. The Flying Dutchman Overture
3. Prelude From Parsifal
4. Good Friday Spell From Parsifal

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Wagner Preludes and Overtures - Bruno Walter

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