

DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG

RICHARD WAGNER

Born May 22, 1813, in Leipzig, Germany

Died February 13, 1883, in Venice, Italy

This album includes both a suite of excerpts from *Meistersinger*, including the Prelude to Act 3, the "Dance of the Apprentices," the "Procession of the Mastersingers," and the Prelude to Act 1, arranged and conducted by Mark Wigglesworth, and a separate performance of the oft-performed Prelude to Act 1, led by former ISO Music Director Mario Venzago.

In October 1861, Richard Wagner went to Venice for a vacation with some friends. He indeed needed a diversion. He was in a financial crisis, and his professional life was in trouble. In 1859, he had finished *Tristan und Isolde*, and there was no hope of performance. A performance of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opera in 1861 had been hissed and booed. "My earlier operas are all over the place; my new works are presenting me with insuperable difficulties. I have pressed on far, far ahead of my time and that which our theaters are capable of. I must begin all over again," he wrote to his publisher. Added to all this was a complex love life featuring an estranged wife, two quarreling mistresses, and Cosima von Bülow on his mind as another romantic quest.

While in Venice, he viewed *The Assumption* by Titian and wrote in *My Life*, "The *Assumption* made a most exalted impression upon me so that by this inspiration, I found my old creative powers awakening within me in their original primordial power. I decided to write *Die Meistersinger*." Well, almost. The idea did not really begin at that point. In 1845, he had written a prose sketch of a story based on the tales of the German meistersinger while in Marienbad. Meistersingers were members of a musical guild of poets and musicians in the 16th century. They produced many works that were subject to extensive rules and regulation.

The Overture or Prelude was attributed to this Marienbad visit as well. Concerning that, Wagner reported, "During a beautiful sunset which transfigured the lights as from the balcony of my apartment, I contemplated a splendid view of Mainz and the golden and majestic Rhine streaming past it. The Prelude to my *Meistersinger*, just as I had once seen it as a distant apparition rising from a mood of despair, now returned suddenly clear and distinct to my soul. I set about putting the Prelude on paper and wrote it down precisely as it is in the score today with all the main themes of the whole drama already definitively formed."

The Prelude is rather traditional, built largely around three themes heard in the music drama, leading directly into the action. If the work is played independently in concert, the music concludes with several chords. It opens with the Meistersinger march, and a lyric episode follows from the winds, marking the advent of Walther's theme (the young hero) who challenges the old styles and rules of the Meistersinger. This is followed by a second march, the "Banner of the Meistersinger," which is subject to extensive elaboration. Violins emerge singing the hero/love theme, and then the turbulence resumes with main themes and subsidiary ideas woven into a stunning polyphonic structure. The Prelude closes with a recall of the opening theme.

Wagner conducted the first public performance of the Prelude in September 1862 and completed the opera (musik-drama) in 1867. In its final form, the opera evolved into the longest opera to date in the German repertoire, lasting some five hours. Alfred Loewenberg observed, "Of all the Wagner

operas, *Die Meistersinger* was the one which made its way most quietly and steadily and without that note of sensation and hostility so characteristic of the earlier and later operas.”

“THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES” FROM *DIE WALKÜRE* RICHARD WAGNER

Almost everything about Richard Wagner is enormous: his orchestra and orchestration, the scale of his lifestyle (“The artist should live in a grand manner,” he insisted), his music dramas, his writing and criticism published over four decades, his revolutionary musical aesthetic (defined in *Oper und Drama*, 1850), and his profound influence on contemporaries and future composers. In his quest for a synthesis of the arts in one gigantic presentation, a *gesamtkunstwerk*, he created a tidal wave of proponents and adversaries. W.H. Hadow summarized, “For vastness of artistic concept, for newness of musical language, for independence of musical thought, Wagner dominated the closing of the 19th century like a Colossus. He might be hated or worshipped—but to ignore him was impossible. The spell of Wagner was inescapable.” For Wagner, the “music of the future” would be in this gigantic synthesis, a process of musical evolution in a Darwinian sense.

Music, in his thinking, was the best vehicle of emotion (rather than words), and the inner action of a drama played itself out frequently in the music. Thus, the music of his operas played a significant part in the development of the story. “Words float like a ship on the sea of orchestral harmony,” he stated. He continued in *Music of the Future*, “If differences of language prevent literature from attaining universality, music—that great language all men understand—should have the power by dissolving verbal concept into feeling, to communicate the innermost secrets of the artist’s vision—especially when it is raised through the medium of a dramatic performance to that clarity of expression hitherto reserved to painting alone.”

His views—and their realization in the complex music dramas—were controversial. To many, his ideas placed him as a man very much ahead of his time. The publisher G. Schirmer published a cartoon in 1869 displaying an orchestra of crazed animals led by a conductor at whose feet lies a paper saying, “Wagner—not to be played much until 1995.”

Understanding the *Leitmotif* is essential for gaining access to Wagner’s musical logic. Simply put, a *Leitmotif* is a musical idea (a small melody or group of notes or a particular harmony) that depicts or symbolizes a person, object, or idea that is part of the story. This “idea” or motif reappears in the music, subject to all kinds of transformations and combinations as the story unfolds. The elaboration of this concept was a significant feature of Wagner’s music, and he developed the use of the *Leitmotif* concept to incredible complexity.

The *Ring* cycle embodies the *Leitmotif* procedure extensively. In 1871, with the publishing of “The Destiny of Opera,” Wagner had decided that music was a full, not subservient, partner to the story, inextricably bound to the words. In Wagner’s words, “My dramas are acts of music become visible.” The entire cycle, probably the largest work in the history of Western music, includes *Das Rheingold* (1853), *Die Walküre* (The Valkyries) (1856), *Siegfried* (1869), and *Götterdämmerung* (1872).

The exciting “Ride of the Valkyries” opens the third act of *Die Walküre*. The nine valkyries gather fallen warriors and take them to Valhalla, home of the gods. This ride describes their flight through

the heavens as they go from battle to battle on their flying horses. Wagner's musical painting is unmistakable. The music opens with swirling air-like motion which becomes studded with the rhythmic horses' hooves. "It is one of the most dramatic and realistic pieces of music ever written about locomotion." (Ewen) After the rushing atmosphere is created brasses enter with quotes of Brünnhilde and her battle cry, and assorted Valkyrie motifs. After the wild ride, the music ends with a small coda representing their disappearance.

A special addendum for movie-goers: you might recognize this music as background to a helicopter battle in the film *Apocalypse Now*.