



SAN FRANCISCO  
OPERA

## *Hansel and Gretel*

### **Composer: Engelbert Humperdinck**



Though Engelbert Humperdinck wrote a great deal of music in a variety of genres, he is best remembered for a single opera, *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893), based on the familiar fairy tale. Humperdinck's musical style is infused with elements of the German folk tradition, but the composer's primary influence was clearly the music of Wagner;

indeed, Humperdinck worked as an assistant to the older master for a time, even providing extra music for a scene change in the premiere staging of Wagner's *Parsifal* in 1882. It is possible that Humperdinck's music remains, uncredited, as part of the score that has come down to posterity.

Following a conventional education at Paderborn, Humperdinck entered the Cologne Conservatory at the age of 18 and began studies in voice and composition. While a student there, he was the winner of the Mozart Stipend of Frankfurt in 1876; with the aid of its financial award, he went to Munich to study first with Franz Lachner and then with Rheinberger at the Royal Music School. While enrolled there (1877-1879), he won an award from the Mendelssohn Foundation of Berlin, following which he traveled to Italy and had the fortune to meet up with Wagner in Naples.

Written to a libretto by Humperdinck's sister Adelheid Wette (who added characters and scenes to expand the little story to operatic dimensions), *Hänsel und Gretel* was first presented in Weimar in December of 1893; it was quickly taken up in opera houses all over Europe, representing the perfect antidote to the chill, veristic winds blowing out of Italy at the time. Ostensibly a work for children, the opera has always found favor with audiences of all ages thanks to its odd blend of fable-like innocence and Wagnerian weight. Humperdinck's successful blending of a children's story with his own, rather monumental, orchestral world has made *Hänsel und Gretel* the only post-Wagnerian work to be considered a successful synthesis of the German master's style.

During the course of his musical career, Humperdinck supplemented his compositional activities with turns as a music editor, critic, and, at various times, a music teacher; Wagner's

son Siegfried was one of his pupils. His other works, particularly the pleasant 1880 Humoreske for orchestra in E major, find occasional performances today. In the 1960s and 1970s, Humperdinck's name was again on the lips of the public; in this case, however, "Engelbert Humperdinck" was the new persona (chosen from a music dictionary) of a pop balladeer formerly known as Arnold Dorsey, fondly or not-so-fondly remembered for his stagey rendition of "Release Me." The two, needless to say, are not related.

Source: Allmusic.com