

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

Composer Biography: Richard Wagner



Richard Wagner (May 22, 1813 – February 13, 1883), German composer, conductor, theatre director of operas, is considered one of the most important figures of nineteenth-century music. Wagner's music is still widely recognized today, accompanying celebrations with the ever-present Wedding March (Bridal Chorus) from the opera *Lohengrin* and the Ride of the Valkyries from the opera *Die Walküre*, which has been used in movie soundtracks to great effect.

Richard Wagner was born at No. 3 (The House of the Red and White Lions), the Brühl, in the Jewish quarter of Leipzig, the ninth child of Carl Friedrich Wagner, who was a clerk in the Leipzig police service, and his wife Johanna Rosine, the daughter of a baker. He enrolled at the University of

Leipzig in 1831, taking composition lessons with the cantor of Saint Thomas Church, Christian Theodor Weinlig, who arranged for the composer's first work, his Piano Sonata in B-flat to be published. In 1833, Wagner's older brother Karl Albert managed to obtain for Richard a position as choir master in Würzburg. At the age of 20, Wagner composed his first complete opera *Die Feen*, which was not performed until after the composer's death.

His reputation grew as the composer of works such as *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843), *Tannhäuser* (1845), and *Lohengrin* (1850), which were broadly in the romantic vein of Weber and Meyerbeer. Wagner's compositions are notable for their complex texture, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of leitmotifs: musical themes associated with individual characters, places, ideas or plot elements. Unlike most other opera composers, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for every one of his stage works.

Wagner's *Lohengrin* was rejected by Dresden opera and the composer was infuriated. Anger fueled his support of the socialist party, and Wagner took a role in the May Uprising, which led to a government call for the arrest of the revolutionaries. Wagner was forced to flee Dresden for Paris, eventually settling in Zurich for a thirteen-year exile. *Lohengrin* was presented in Weimar in Wagner's absence, conducted by his friend, the composer Franz Liszt.

Wagner was used to a high standard living, and was plagued by problems with money and women all of his life. Fortunately for the composer, a young King Ludwig II of Bavaria decided to become Wagner's benefactor in 1864. Wagner was in dire straits when the 18-year old Ludwig settled Wagner's considerable debts, and

proposed to stage *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, the Ring, and the other operas Wagner planned. The drawing room of "Mad" King Ludwig's Neuschwanstein Castle in southwest Bavaria is graced with a mural of the *Lohengrin* story. Incidentally, the palace, built in homage to Wagner, is also the inspiration for Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle. Eventually, a scandalous affair forced Ludwig to move the composer to Switzerland.

Eventually, in 1871, Wagner settled in the small town of Bayreuth, a place chosen as the location of his new opera house, Bayreuth Festspielhaus, which contained many novel design features. It was here that the Ring and Parsifal received their premieres and where his most important stage works continue to be performed today in an annual festival run by his descendants. Wagner's views on conducting were also highly influential. His extensive writings on music, drama and politics have all attracted extensive comment in recent decades, especially where they have anti-Semitic content. Wagner died of a heart attack at the age of 69 on February, 13 1883 at Ca' Vendramin Calergi, a 16th century palazzo on the Grand Canal and is buried in the garden of the Villa Wahnfried in Bayreuth.

Wagner transformed operatic thought with his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art"), a synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts. Wagner realized this concept most fully in the first half of the monumental four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner's Ring —comprised of *Das Rheingold* (1869), *Die Walküre* (1870), *Siegfried* (1876), *Götterdämmerung* (1876)— is considered one of the great artistic achievements in opera. However, his thoughts on the relative importance of music and drama were to change again.

Wagner pioneered advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, which greatly influenced the development of European classical music. Wagner's influence continued to spread beyond music into philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre with his last few stage works, including *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) and *Parsifal* (1882). His *Tristan und Isolde* is sometimes described as marking the start of modern music.

Wagner achieved all of this despite a life characterized, until his last decades, by political exile, turbulent love affairs, poverty and repeated flight from his creditors. His pugnacious personality and often outspoken views on music, politics and society made him a controversial figure during his life, which he remains to this day. The effect of his ideas can be traced in many of the arts throughout the twentieth century.

Sources: www.classicsforkids, wikipedia.org, www.wagner.net