

103. Theme in A flat Major

('Porazzi'-Thema; WWV 93, 1858/1881)

Richard Wagner

(1813-1883)

arr. William Melton

Wagner, (Wilhelm) Richard

(born 22 May 1813 in Leipzig; died 13 February 1883 in Venice)

A century ago, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* acclaimed Wagner to be 'the grandest and most original dramatic composer of all times'. Such hero-worship has since diminished, but he is still regarded as perhaps the most influential, and the most controversial, composer of the 19th Century.

Wagner's infancy was marked by the death of his father, and he lost his step-father, the actor Ludwig Geyer, at the age of eight. As a youth he took music lessons with the church musicians Gottlieb Müller and Theodor Weinlig (the latter also taught Clara Schumann). These studies were augmented by philology at university and an intensive immersion in Beethoven's symphonies. At age twenty Wagner became chorus master at the theatre in Würzburg, and his early attempts at composing operas produced *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot*. Both went unperformed, and Wagner became a conducting nomad, taking a succession of positions in Magdeburg, Königsberg, and Riga, along the way marrying the actress Wilhelmina Planer. He spent 1839-1842 in Paris, lobbying fruitlessly for performance of his new grand opera *Rienzi*, composing the more original *Der fliegende Holländer*, and growing resentful of a musical world that could ignore his obvious genius. The two operas were eventually produced in Dresden, and Wagner was engaged there as conductor in 1843. His next opera, *Tannhäuser*, received a cold reception in Dresden in 1845, and *Lohengrin* (1848) was not taken up by the theatre management. Wagner's involvement with the Dresden revolutionaries of May 1849 resulted in his fleeing the city to avoid arrest. He went first to his loyal friend Franz Liszt in Weimar, who helped him escape Germany altogether, first to Paris and then to Zurich. There Wagner wrote the text for his next projects: the monumental cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Die Meistersinger*.

In 1864 King Ludwig of Bavaria lured Wagner from his Swiss exile, inviting him to Munich and funding his projects. But Wagner proved unpopular in Munich and left the next year, having installed his protégé Hans von Bülow as chief conductor. Hans Richter was engaged to help Wagner produce his orchestral scores at the Swiss villa Tribschen, and Bülow directed the premieres of *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* in Munich. Complicating matters, Wagner began a relationship with Bülow's wife (and Liszt's daughter) Cosima. He had earlier separated from Minna Planer, who had died in 1866, and after Cosima's divorce from Hans von Bülow she and Wagner were married in 1870. A special theatre built to the composer's specifications was erected in Bayreuth, in the north of Ludwig's kingdom. After years of postponement, the four *Ring* operas (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*) were produced there in the summer of 1876. Despite failing health, Wagner produced one more major work with the assistance of his newest copyist-apprentice Engelbert Humperdinck: the Bühnenweihfestspiel *Parsifal*, which saw performance in Bayreuth in 1882. He spent the following winter in Venice, and died there on 13 February 1883. With the sometimes brilliant and often poisonous essays he wrote on subjects from art to politics, religion to race, Wagner did much to sully his own name. Still, the stage works he left remain incomparable.

Wagner's orchestral mastery gave a generation of instrumentalists parts both challenging and idiomatic, but horn was an undeniable favourite. He composed many unique moments for the instrument, from the primordial 'Siegfried's Forest Call' (*Siegfried*), to the bumptious shrieking of the Act 2 Finale of *Die Meistersinger*, to the noble waves of cresting sound in the 'Sonnenaufgang' (*Götterdämmerung*). In 1853 Wagner had envisioned a darker, huskier cousin of horn tone, and a generation later former hornist Hans Richter and brass craftsman Georg Ottensteiner made that timbre a reality with the production of the first Wagner tubas. Wagner's animosity with first hornists Joseph Rodolphe Lewy in Dresden and Franz Joseph Strauss in Munich is well documented. Less known is his friendly relationship with what he called his 'superb hornists' in Riga (for whom he arranged the Hunting Chorus from Weber's *Euryanthe* for twelve horns). He also gave his personal seal of approval to horn quartet arrangements after being serenaded by the hornists of the Mannheim theatre on the morning of 16 November 1872, when Cosima Wagner wrote of the 'wonderful impression' left by their renditions of the 'Wach' auf' chorale and Prize Song from *Die Meistersinger*.

The 'Theme in A flat Major', WWV 93, was once given the revered status of being Wagner's last completed musical thought. In March 1882 the composer stayed at the Piazza die Porazzi in Palermo, and the brief piece was thought to date from that time (hence the title 'Porazzi-Theme'). Newer research suggests an earlier date of composition. The reverse side of a page of Act II, Scene 2 of *Tristan und Isolde* contains notation that is very similar to the so-called Porazzi music, which would put its date of composition at about December 1858. The short sketch is notated in lilac ink, a colour that Wagner did not widely use until his last music drama, but the idea of Wagner packing a pile of *Tristan* sketches to take on a Sicilian vacation dedicated to finishing *Parsifal* is not a logical one. Instead, the composer may well have come across the the sketch during a fair copy of the *Tristan* score undertaken in 1881 in Bayreuth, and finished the composition then. In any case, the 'last musical thought of the Master' legend was purveyed in the *Bayreuth Festival Guide* of 1934, together with the first published facsimile of the 'Theme in A flat Major'.

Text by William Melton