

08. Herz und Wald (EHVV 35)

Engelbert Humperdinck
(1854-1921)
arr. William Melton

Humperdinck, Engelbert

(born 1 September 1854 in Siegburg; died 27 September 1921 in Neustrelitz)

Humperdinck was born in a small town in the Rhineland, his mother a gifted amateur soprano and his father a schoolmaster. The boy was no Wunderkind, and in his late teens seemed destined to have a modest career in an architect's office. Then he took his first compositions to 'the Musical Pope of the Rhineland', Ferdinand Hiller, who immediately accepted the young man into the Cologne Conservatory of Music. This training would later be augmented with private lessons from Franz Lachner, and Humperdinck's studies were completed at the Munich Conservatory with counterpoint and orchestration under Joseph Rheinberger. In quick succession, the young man won three prestigious awards for composition, the first of which paid his way to a sojourn in southern Italy. There he took his fate in his hands and called upon Richard Wagner, who was in residence near Naples, trying to recoup his health and finish the instrumentation of *Parsifal*. Humperdinck would serve as Wagner's apprentice, moving to Bayreuth where he helped Wagner transform his short score of the work into the full orchestral score. Humperdinck was intimately involved with the first performances of *Parsifal*, but had moved on to Paris when he heard the momentous news of Wagner's death on 17 March 1883. The news shattered the young man, and his next ten years would be a nomadic procession: teaching in Cologne, Barcelona and Frankfurt, conducting, editing for publisher Schott of Mainz, and writing opera critiques. Then a request from his sister Adelheid resulted in four songs for a family pageant. He developed these into a Singspiel, and finally a full-fledged opera. The result, *Hänsel und Gretel*, would be the greatest German operatic success of its time.

Fame brought changes, and after a more relaxed interlude in a villa on the Rhine at Boppard, in 1900 Humperdinck was offered a professorship

in composition in Berlin. There his reputation reached its zenith, and hundreds of pupils attended his composition lessons (including Siegfried Wagner, Leo Blech, Kurt Weill, Oskar Fried, Wallingford Riegger and Charles Tomlinson Griffes). Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss were close friends, and Mahler and Puccini respectful correspondents. Humperdinck was awarded membership in the arts academies of Berlin, Paris and Rome, was received by the likes of the Kaiser and Pope Pius X, and dined with Theodore Roosevelt at the White House. His own production went on to include six operas, ten other stage works, works for orchestra, choruses, chamber ensembles, piano pieces, and over a hundred Lieder. His opera *Königskinder* enjoyed a triumphal world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1910. Then, after the huge popular success of *The Miracle* in London, Humperdinck suffered a stroke that would impair his last decade. The First World War saw his son and most of his students taken by the military, and severe rationing and privation, political upheaval, and financial ruin blighted his final years. At his death a memorial performance was given at the Berlin State Opera, and Victor Lehmann wrote, 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. He was pure in heart. He was a Mensch'. The honours bestowed by his contemporaries have long since faded, and today Humperdinck is remembered almost exclusively as the composer of *Hänsel und Gretel*, one of the most performed operas in history.

'Herz und Wald' ('Heart and Forest') for voice and piano dates from 1875/76, and was written when Humperdinck was a student at the Cologne Conservatory. Though short, its import is great: it is Humperdinck's first surviving collaboration with his sister Adelheid, who would later furnish the libretto for *Hänsel und Gretel*. In the text, the pain of spurned love is soothed by the healing powers of the forest: 'From the heights a Waldhorn sounds, and to the depths its echo resounds'. A copy of the MS of the score is held by the city archive of Siegburg, the composer's birthplace.

Text by William Melton