

15. Jagdfanfare (Das Mirakel, EHWV 151)

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.

The Miracle (Das Wunder), a 'Grand Pantomime in Two Acts and One Entr'acte', was playwright Karl Vollmoeller's reworking of a fable by thirteenth century Caesarius von Heisterbach. The plot follows the journey of a young nun who leaves her order in shame after the Christ Child from the Madonna and Child statue in the cathedral mysteriously disappears on her watch. She then wanders the profane world for seven years. A succession of her would-be lovers includes a knight, a robber baron, a prince, and a king – all of whom come to bad ends. Shunned as a witch, the nun is next seen travelling with a group of war refugees, carrying her own infant child. On Christmas Eve they pass her old cathedral and she is drawn by the carols being sung inside. She lays her baby at the feet of the Madonna, who comes to life to pick up the child before they both turn back into stone. When the nuns enter they are overjoyed at the miracle, and the nun is accepted back into the fold.

The epic aspects of the modern-day reuniting of drama and ritual appealed to the Austrian stage director Max Reinhardt, and he turned to his trusted colleague Humperdinck to provide the music. On 15 December 1911 Humperdinck journeyed to England, where rehearsals were being held in the cavernous Olympia Theatre in Kensington (an automobile exhibition had been displaced for the gargantuan production). Two thousand actors, dancers, musicians and technical personnel filled the building. The set included a huge Gothic cathedral whose doors alone were forty-five feet high by sixty-five feet wide. The premiere on 23 December was a major success (with nineteen curtain calls) and much of the jubilation was for Humperdinck: 'The singers carried him through the huge Olympia hall in triumph', wrote Victor Lehmann. 'His dreamy gaze looked shy and lost at the masses that were honouring him'. Despite the religious tone of the piece, by popular demand Boosey & Hawkes published a *Miracle* suite for military band and Bote & Bock a potpourri and fantasy for salon orchestra. Those who carped at the drama's lapses in taste took solace in the music. 'The best of this titanic mechanised pantomime', recorded a subsequent reviewer in *Die Zeit*, 'is the music which Humperdinck created for it. Powerful four-part choruses, fugal organ pieces, integration of pre-existing songs and effective phrasing display the sure touch of a master of harmony and melody'. One such 'set piece' was the fanfare of the hunters in the Entr'acte in Act I, evoking the forest background of the nun's first encounter with the outside world.

Text by William Melton