

13. Weihnachten

(1898)

Engelbert Humperdinck

(1854-1921)

arr. William Melton

Humperdinck, Engelbert

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

Humperdinck was born in a small town in the Rhineland, where his mother was a gifted amateur soprano and his father a schoolmaster. The boy was no Wunderkind, and in his late teens seemed destined for a modest career in an architect's office. Then he took his first compositions to "the Musical Pope of the Rhineland," Ferdinand Hiller, who happily 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 March 17, 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. Its composition was juggled along with the duties of conservatory teaching and private lessons, nights at the opera house and producing critiques in the late hours afterwards. With encouragement from his family and his new bride Hedwig née Taxer, he managed to complete the opera, and *Hänsel und Gretel* would be the greatest German operatic success of its time.

Though Hermann Levi in Munich had hoped to premiere the work, that honor fell to Richard Strauss and his Weimar forces on December 23, 1893. The opera swept across Germany, quickly becoming part of the national consciousness. Arthur Seidl wrote:

The entire German populace, as if freed from an evil spell, danced the joyful rounds of the Gingerbread Children [...] from all points of the political spectrum there was agreement on one issue, and from one end of Germany to the other, 'Hänsel und Gretel' was heard, sung and danced.

The phenomenal success of the opera was not lost on foreign observers. Before the year 1894 concluded, the first British performance, in English, was staged at Daly's Theatre in London and Covent Garden followed in 1896. Anton Seidl conducted the work at Daly's in New York on October 8, 1895. The Metropolitan did not stage it until a decade later, when *Hänsel und Gretel* set a record for the number of performances in one season. The advent of radio would also bring a landmark: *Hänsel und Gretel* was the first complete opera broadcast in Europe, and on Christmas Day 1931 the work would be the first opera to be broadcast from the stage of the Metropolitan. To meet public demand publisher Schott issued paraphrases, fantasies, marches, quadrilles and potpourris for piano (up to eight hands), organ, harmonium, flute solo and duet, violin solo and duet, cello, cornet (by the virtuoso Herbert Clarke), harp, piano quintet, salon orchestra and military band. The text was translated into sixteen languages (including Latvian, Catalan, and Croatian) and audiences in Cairo, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Shanghai and Tokyo granted the humble middle-European fable a durable place on the operatic stage.

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 honors 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.

Humperdinck's relationship to the horn had deep roots. His teachers Hiller, Lachner and Rheinberger had all composed idiomatically for the horn (indeed, for a time Franz Lachner had earned his keep playing the instrument). Humperdinck frequently heard fine hornists in performances in Cologne, Munich (where he heard Franz Strauss play the entire *Ring*), and later Frankfurt. The months of exposure to Wagner and the

Parsifal score certainly deepened his understanding of the instrument. In 1892, while working on *Hänsel und Gretel*, Humperdinck was also preparing an orchestration manual for his own class. The horn's flexibility guaranteed it a special place in his instrumental palette:

The horn is the natural bridge between the opposite tone colors of woodwinds and brass. At heart a poetic instrument like the flute or harp, when used melodically it fires the imagination of the listener and imbues the simplest melody with its sensitive timbre. If forced, however, the sound takes on a wild rawness and reverts to its hunting origins.

The 'wild rawness' of the horns is heard in *Hänsel und Gretel* in the triumphant fortissimo broom motif in the last scene of the opera. And it is not by happenstance that the 'poetic', 'sensitive' *Abendsegen* motif that begins the overture of the work was entrusted to horn quartet.

Poetic and sensitive are apt adjectives to describe Humperdinck's song "Weihnachten" ("Christmas"). His sister Adelheid had sent this plaintive, rhyming appeal for a setting of her newest song in 1898:

Now I do ask:
oh, just compose the thing!
Otherwise, I fear,
our Christmas looks dire,
I can give the children nothing,
the cash box and purse are empty,
and empty will be the hands of the children,
as they sadly watch the joy of others,
if you do not help me earn the fee,
therefore for all charity come to my aid!

Humperdinck, then living in the quiet wine village Boppard on the Rhine, composed the strophic "Weihnachten" and sent it to his sister straight away. It was the first and far the most popular of a series of Christmas songs that the composer would produce over the next decade. A fragment of "O Sanctissima," which he employed in the early cantata *Die Wallfahrt nach Kevelaar* and would use again, is incorporated in the melody from the outset. A middle section in minor sets up a return of the opening major mode that ends with optional choral reinforcement on the "O Sanctissima" motif. The song was first published with the collection *Weihnachtslieder des Berliner Lokalanzeigers* by Scherl of Berlin in 1898 (which also included "Weihnachtslied" by his friend Richard Strauss).

Leise weht's durch alle Lande
wie ein Gruss vom Sternzeit,
schlinget neue Liebesbande
um die ganze weite Welt.

Jedes Herz mit starkem Triebe
ist zu Opfern froh bereit,
denn es naht das Fest der Liebe,
denn es naht die Weihnachtszeit.

*Quietly it wafts across all lands
Like a greeting from the stars,
New bands of love entwining
And embracing the whole wide world.*

*Every sympathetic heart
Is open and glad to sacrifice,
Since the feast of love approaches,
Now that Christmastide is near.*

Text by William Melton