PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Richard Wagner
Born May 22, 1813, Leipzig, Germany.
Died February 13, 1883, Venice, Italy.

Overture to The Flying Dutchman

Wagner began composing his opera *The Flying Dutchman* in 1840, completed the score the following year, and led the premiere in Dresden on January 2, 1843. He continued to revise the work over the years, making his final changes to the overture in 1860. The overture is scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately eleven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of the overture to Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* were given at the Auditorium Theatre on February 26 and 27, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on November 25 and 26, 1983, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting. The Orchestra first performed this overture at the Ravinia Festival on June 29, 1939, with Sir Adrian Boult conducting, and most recently on July 19, 2002, with James Conlon conducting.

For the record
The Chicago Symphony recorded the complete *The Flying Dutchman* in 1976 under Sir Georg Solti for London. The Orchestra recorded the overture in 1994 under Daniel Barenboim for Teldec.

Although the United States of Richard Wagner's time was a heyday for home-grown talent and innovation—led by figures such as Lincoln, Edison, Twain, and Longfellow—Americans were obsessed with the music of a fiercely Germanic composer and his mythical tales of old-world heroes. Wagner himself wasn't surprised that a country "with no history behind it" would be receptive to his brash new ideas and pioneering music, and he often talked about visiting or even trying to work in the States—"the ground there is easier to plant" is how he put it.

Among the earliest of his champions in this country was Theodore Thomas, who started conducting Wagner's music when it was brand new—some three decades before he founded the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In fact, Thomas's debut concert as a symphonic conductor, in New York City in 1862, opened with the American premiere of *The Flying Dutchman* overture that is performed at this week's concerts. Over the next few years, he introduced some of Wagner's most important works to this country—the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* in 1866, less than a year after the world premiere of the opera in Munich, and the *Meistersinger* overture seven months later.

When Thomas moved to Chicago in 1891 to establish the Chicago Symphony, he saw to it that the very first music the orchestra ever played was by Wagner: the little-performed *A Faust Overture* opened the inaugural concert on October 16, 1891, just eight years after Wagner's death. Thomas introduced Chicago to *The Flying Dutchman* overture that February. During Thomas's tenure in Chicago, Wagner's music appeared on more than half of the orchestra's subscription programs. Louis Sullivan, whose Auditorium Theatre was the first home of the Chicago Symphony, recalled being overwhelmed by concerts of Wagner's music in Chicago—"revealing anew, refreshing as dawn, the enormous power of man to build, as a mirage, the fabric of his dreams." When Thomas died in 1905, only weeks after the opening of Orchestra Hall, which featured Wagner's name prominently on the façade, the tradition of
playing Wagner's music was well established in Chicago.

When Thomas introduced Chicago Symphony audiences to the overture to *The Flying Dutchman*, here is how the 1892 program book summarized the opera's genesis and storyline:

. . . Wagner read Heine's legend of “The Flying Dutchman,” the unhappy mariner, who after trying long in vain to pass the Cape of Good Hope, had sworn not to desist if he had to sail on the ocean to eternity. For his blasphemy he was condemned to the fate of the Wandering Jew, his only hope of salvation lying in his release through the devotion unto death of a woman, and to find such he is allowed, every seven years, to go on shore. Senta finally proves his saving angel, although at the cost of her life.

In his essay “On the Overture” that was published in January 1841, while he was in the middle of work on *The Flying Dutchman*, Wagner criticized the common potpourri overture for its crass showmanship rooted purely in “a theatrical desire to please.” Instead, he claimed an overture should lead “the central idea at the heart of the drama to a conclusion which would correspond, with a sense of presentiment, to the resolution of the action on stage.” The overture to *The Flying Dutchman* is based on two themes—the Dutchman and his redemption—interwoven with musical mottoes associated with the sailors and their lovers’ spinning wheels, and highlighted by a hair-raising forecast of one of music's fiercest storms.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*