

PROGRAM NOTES

Richard Wagner - *Siegfried Idyll*

Richard Wagner

Born May 22, 1813, Leipzig, Germany.

Died February 13, 1883, Venice, Italy.

Siegfried Idyll

Although Cosima Wagner was born on December 24, she chose to celebrate her birthday on the twenty-fifth. Her diary entry for Sunday, December 25, 1870, reads:

When I woke up I heard a sound, it grew ever louder, I could no longer imagine myself in a dream, music was sounding, and what music! After it had died away, R. came in to me with the five children and put into my hands the score of his "symphonic birthday greeting." I was in tears, but so, too, was the whole household; R. had set up his orchestra on the stairs and thus consecrated our Tribschen forever! The *Tribschen Idyll*—so the work is called . . .

R. is her beloved Richard, and two of the five children are Cosima's from her previous marriage to Hans von Bülow, whom she abruptly left for the man that even Hans, a talented pianist and conductor, admitted to be his superior in the world of music. The other three are five-year-old Isolde; Eva, three; and Siegfried, eighteen months—Cosima and Richard Wagner's children, all born before their marriage on August 25, 1870. Tribschen is the name of the house on a promontory overlooking Lake Lucerne, where Cosima and Richard made their home. *Tribschen Idyll* is, of course, the *Siegfried Idyll*—though it wasn't given that name for many years, after the Wagners elected to publish their private musical communication in exchange for a nice sum of money. ("The secret treasure is to become public property," Cosima wrote in her diary.)

Richard and Cosima first declared their love for each other on November 28, 1863 (like all the important events in their life together—and many of much lesser significance—it is well documented); at the time both were married to others—she to Bülow, who was a student of her father, Franz Liszt; he to Minna Planer, an actress four years his senior, from whom he was estranged. The union between Richard and Cosima was consummated in June 1864. The following years brought artistic triumphs and personal scandals as well as an astonishing mixture of private and professional events, including the

birth of Isolde, Richard and Cosima's first child, on the very day that Bülow, still Cosima's husband, began orchestral rehearsals for Wagner's newest work, *Tristan and Isolde*.

In 1869, after the triumphant premieres of *Tristan and Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner resumed work on the *Ring* (which he had abandoned twelve years earlier), beginning with act 3 of *Siegfried*. In June his only son, inevitably named Siegfried, was born. The following year the Bülows' marriage was legally dissolved (Wagner's wife Minna had died in 1866), and on August 25 Richard and Cosima were married in the Protestant church in Lucerne. Wagner once called 1870 the happiest year of his life.

Wagner composed the *Tribschen Idyll* later that year to celebrate his private joys: the domestic bliss of married life after years of secretiveness and scandal, the long-hoped-for birth of a son, his undying love for Cosima, and the composition of *Siegfried* (which in turn promised the completion of the *Ring*, the single greatest artistic achievement of his life). It was designed to be performed on the steps leading up to Cosima's bedroom at Tribschen, and its instrumentation was dictated by the size of the staircase. (The first performance was given by thirteen or fifteen players—regarding this detail, oddly, there is conflicting evidence.) The piece was secretly rehearsed by the conductor Hans Richter, who learned to play the trumpet especially for the occasion (the part is just twelve measures long).

The *Idyll*, an astonishingly beautiful and extravagant birthday gift from a man not always known for his generosity, was performed three times on Christmas Day in 1870. After the early morning, wake-up-call premiere, the household stopped for breakfast. The players then reassembled and the piece was repeated, followed by the wedding march from *Lohengrin*, Beethoven's Septet, and yet another performance of the *Idyll*.

Cosima was used to hearing snatches of extraordinary music around the house, but she immediately recognized that the *Idyll* was unique in her husband's output. Wagner called the *Idyll* a symphony in the autograph score, and, when it was published in 1877, he described it as a "symphonic birthday greeting." He had struggled with symphonic form as a young composer—he remained fond of a very Beethovenian symphony in C major that he had composed when he was twenty-nine—and continued to sketch ideas for other symphonies into his last years. The month before his death, he spoke to Cosima about a single-movement symphonic work in which the melodies would flow one into another.

The *Siegfried Idyll*—this title apparently dates from a performance in Meiningen in 1877—remains Wagner's only instrumental work that is regularly played. The main theme is a generous and lilting melody sung by Brünnhilde in act 3 of *Siegfried* to the words beginning "Ewig war ich" (I always was, I always am, always in sweet yearning bliss). Wagner claimed that this music came to him during the summer of 1864 at the Villa Pellet, overlooking Lake Starnberg, where he and Cosima consummated their union. (He is contradicted, however, by his own obsessive record keeping: the melody was composed that November 14, when he was alone in Munich.) A second theme, introduced by the oboe, is a lullaby Wagner jotted down on New Year's Eve 1868. The music is unusually intimate and restrained for a composer who lived a life of excess. It's the most personal of all his works: the title page of the published score refers to "Fidi-Birdsong and Orange Sunrise"; Fidi was a favorite nickname for little Siegfried, and the sunrise was the "incredibly beautiful, fiery glow,"

in Cosima's words, of the wallpaper in his room when it was struck by the morning sun. More than any other of Wagner's scores, the *Siegfried Idyll* marries the private and public sides of the most famous composer of the nineteenth century. The Siegfried of the title is both the third music drama of the *Ring* cycle and Wagner's son—who was destined to carry his father's name and beaked silhouette into the next century.

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

© by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may not be reproduced; brief excerpts may be quoted if due acknowledgment is given to the author and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs and artists subject to change without notice.