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WAGNER

SIEGFRIED-IDYLL

for small Orchestra
WWV 103



Eulenburg

RICHARD WAGNER

SIEGFRIED-IDYLL

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WWV 103

Edited by/Herausgegeben von
Peter Jost



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PREFACE

Orchestral music for Richard Wagner receded into the background for a longer period after the overtures and symphonies of his youth – once the *Faust* overture (1839/40, re-worked in 1855) is disregarded. He did not, however, abandon the ambition to produce path-breaking works within this genre. Time and again in the 1860s and 1870s, planned orchestral projects are mentioned in the extant documents; but only four compositions were carried out, of which three are written in march form and unmistakably intended to have an effect on the public: *Huldigungsmarsch* (WWV 97, 1864) for the Bavarian king, Ludwig II, in grateful acknowledgement of his support, *Kaisermarsch* (WWV 104, 1871) for the imperial coronation of the Prussian king, Wilhelm, as well as *Großer Festmarsch* (WWV 110, 1876) for the centenary celebration of the American Declaration of Independence. By far the most ambitious of these works, the *Siegfried Idyll* (WWV 103, 1870), clearly stands out because of its small setting and chamber-music structure, together also with the private circumstances that led to its genesis.

In the year of his marriage to Cosima, daughter of his friend Franz Liszt, Wagner planned a special present for her birthday on 25 December 1870. For her on Christmas morning, he performed with musicians from Zurich on the stairway of his then residence in Tribtschen near Lucerne, a secretly composed orchestral work, the name of which at first alternated amongst various titles and ultimately ended up as *Siegfried Idyll* in 1877. The full score was completed, according to an autograph dating, on 4 December 1870. Exactly when it was started is not known, but considering its limited scale it may well have been only a few weeks before. Reporting later on preparations for the performance and the premiere itself was Hans Richter who was then working as secretary for Wagner:

On the 4th of December 1870 the Master handed me the original score of the just completed Siegfried Idyll; he himself saw to a splendidly beautiful fair copy for Frau Wagner, but he sent me the original score. I immediately copied the orchestral parts and travelled to Zurich where I engaged musicians with the aid of my friend Oskar Kahl, then concertmaster of the city orchestra. Wednesday, the 21st of December, the first rehearsal took place in the foyer of the old theatre. [...] The musicians were splendid and the work sounded magnificent. Saturday, the 24th of December, the musicians came to Lucerne; in the hall of the Hôtel du Lac the Master held the dress rehearsal from 3 to 5 [o'clock] in the afternoon. Everything went to his satisfaction. Sunday, on the 25th of December 1870, [...] the musicians came early in morning; noiselessly and with great care the podium was set up and the parts of the instruments were seen to in the kitchen, which was very spacious. The small orchestra took its position on the stairway, the Master at the very top, then the violins, violas, woodwinds, horns, and at the very bottom cellos and bass. The latter could actually no longer be seen by the conductor, but still the performance came off smoothly; in the difficult passages I mediated an undisturbed correlation.¹

How very successful the surprise was, Cosima Wagner's diary entry attests:

As I awakened, my ear heard sound, ever richer it swelled, I could no longer imagine that I was dreaming, music rang out, and what music! As it faded away, R[ichard] came to me with the five children and presented me with the score of the 'Symphonic Birthday Greeting' –, I was in tears, but the whole house also; R[ichard] had placed his orchestra on the stairway and so consecrated our Tribtschen for eternity! The 'Tribtschen Idyll' is what the work is called.²

¹ Hans Richter's letter to Theodor Müller-Reuter from 18 September 1909, quoted here from: *Richard Wagner. Sämtliche Werke* (= RWSW), Vol. 18, III: *Orchesterwerke*, Vol. III, ed. Peter Jost (Mainz, 1995), XXXIV

² *Cosima Wagner, Die Tagebücher* (= CT), eds., with commentary, Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, 2 vols. (Munich and Zurich, 1976/77), Vol. I, 329 (entry from 25 December 1870)