

KISHWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
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PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

Prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*
by Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

While taking the baths in Marienbad in Bohemia with his wife in July 1845, German composer Richard Wagner did his best to follow doctor's orders and avoid stress. In his autobiography, *Mein Leben* (My Life), the always fantastical composer describes a morning walk into the woods where he eventually sat by a brook reading Eschenbach's poems *Titurel* and *Parzival* and the anonymous *Lohengrin* epic. In his own inimitable fashion, Wagner describes how a new drama based on *Lohengrin* suddenly appeared before him, complete in detail. Later, while sitting in his scheduled bath, he couldn't resist the temptation, jumped out of his bath and, barely dressed, ran to the villa where he wrote out the prose.

After soon completing his own libretto for a three-act opera, probably in 1846, Wagner spent the next three years composing the music. The composer was unable to participate in the work's première in Weimar, Germany, on August 28, 1850, though, because of his participation in the failed May 1849 revolution in Dresden and subsequent banishment from the kingdom. He is supposed to not have heard the entire opera until May 1861 in Vienna.

The opera tells the story of a young woman, Elsa, who, wrongly accused of murdering her brother, Friedrich, is championed by a knight, clad in silver armor, who suddenly appears in a boat drawn by a beautiful white swan. Before he battles for her honor, he tells her she must never ask his name. They eventually marry, and she asks his name. Calling together the people of Brabant, whose leadership he assumed after saving Elsa, he tells them he is Lohengrin, one of the knights who guard the Holy Grail and that he is the son of their late king, Parsifal (the subject and name of Wagner's last opera). The swan and boat return to take Lohengrin away when suddenly one of the evil-doers, Ortrud, tells everyone that the swan is Elsa's brother and that, because Elsa broke her promise to never ask Lohengrin's name, Friedrich will remain a swan. Lohengrin kneels in prayer and a dove, representing the Divine presence, appears. As the swan disappears, Friedrich is

restored to his human form, the evil Ortrud falls dead, and, as Lohengrin vanishes, Elsa falls into her brother's arms and dies.

Lohengrin remained the most lyrical of all Wagner's operas until his last, *Parsifal*. The Prelude to Act One is a prime example of that lyricism. After the storm-tossed key of D minor of his Overture to *Der fliegende Holländer* ("The Flying Dutchman"), we enter an entirely new world, that of the Grail's domain in a radiantly transfigured A major. A new Wagner appears on the scene with this Prelude. He is now the magician conjuring in tonal colors, a master of fluid transitions from one level of drama to another. As annotator Werner Burkhardt writes, "These sounds come from a far-away land; indeed, for the composer's contemporaries they probably seemed to come from a different, hitherto unexplored world. A glow emerges from the orchestra, becomes brighter, and then dies away again, similarly to the Grail in the drama."

By the way, *Lohengrin* has inspired other works of art. So beloved was the opera by King Ludwig II of Bavaria that he named his fairy-tale castle Neuschwanstein, or "New Swan Castle," after the Swan Knight. Ludwig was inspired to provide Wagner funds to devote himself to composing. He eventually built a theatre in Bayreuth designed specifically for staging his opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Ring of the Nibelungs").

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 3 in B minor, Op. 61 by Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

It's easy to forget that Camille Saint-Saëns' life spanned eight and a half decades during which French music made huge strides across a wide spectrum of musical styles and eras. Born less than eight years after Beethoven's death and a short five years after the première of Berlioz's *Fantastic Symphony*, Op. 14, Saint-Saëns lived through Claude Debussy's entire life and career and through a large part of Maurice Ravel's life and career. But, like Richard Strauss in Germany, Saint-Saëns was and still is, criticized because he continued to the end representing the old and traditional romanticism of the 19th Century. We must remember, though, that his neo-classicism foreshadows works by Igor Stravinsky and other composers working in France during the first few decades of the 20th Century.

Written for the Spanish composer-violinist Pablo de Sarasate, Saint-Saëns completed his Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 3 in B minor, Op. 61, in March 1880. The concerto's popularity among his works for violin and orchestra is

only superseded by his *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* in A minor, Op. 28. Audiences love the Third Violin Concerto because of its poetic atmosphere and compelling melodiousness. On the other hand, violinists favor it for its strong element of pyrotechnical display and the work's significant interpretive challenges. One of the concerto's most vocal critics was George Bernard Shaw, who sneered and described it as "trivially pretty scraps of serenade music sandwiched between pages from the great masters." Sarasate premièred the work in Paris on January 2, 1881. An immediate success, it was published the following year with a dedication to Sarasate.

Symphony No 6 in D Major, Op. 60 **by Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904)**

Czech composer Antonín Dvořák composed his Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60, in only seven weeks' time beginning the late summer of 1880. His excitement over his newest composition carried him to Vienna where he played the work on the piano to a delighted Hans Richter, the venerated conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic, who gave Dvořák a kiss after each movement and quickly promised him a première of the work in Vienna on December 26, 1880, to be followed with a performance with Richter in London. The Vienna performance didn't happen, though, as the Philharmonic – which was also the Court Opera's orchestra – was too busy, overbooked, and overworked. And being a self-governed organization, the Philharmonic musicians were also not too keen on the idea of performing a new Czech composer's music. (In fact, the Vienna Philharmonic did not perform the work until 1942!)

Dvořák's Symphony No. 6 – published as Symphony No. 1 by the Berlin-based publisher, Simrock, and dedicated to Richter – had its première in Prague on March 25, 1881, under conductor Adolf Cech. Richter led the promised performance during the following season at one of the Philharmonic Society of London concerts. In a letter to the composer, written while still rehearsing the work, Richter wrote, "This morning we had our first rehearsal for your wonderful work. I am proud to have received this dedication. The orchestra is truly delighted. The performance is on Monday 15th at eight in the evening. I am certain it will be a great success. But it has also been rehearsed with love nonetheless ..."

Lasting about 40 minutes, Symphony No. 6 brought international attention to Dvořák as a composer of large symphonic works. In its four movements, he manages to capture some of the Czech national style while maintaining a

traditional German classical-romantic form. From the work's first notes, there is a strong sense of warmth, peace, and tranquility. It continues throughout the work even though some may argue that the third movement, one that is based on a Czech folk dance known as a "Furiant," isn't so tranquil. Yes, it is fiery but it's all in good fun. By the way, the first American performance of the symphony, in New York City in 1883, is accredited to Theodore Thomas, the founder of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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