

Richard Wagner (1813-83)
Favourite Overtures and Preludes

The Philharmonia Orchestra
conductor Yuri Simonov

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|---|-------|
| 1. "Rienzi" Overture | 13:16 |
| 2. "Der fliegende Holländer" Overture | 10:43 |
| 3. "Tannhäuser" Overture | 15:22 |
| 4. "Lohengrin" Prelude to Act 1 | 10:42 |
| 5. "Lohengrin" Prelude to Act 3 | 3:09 |
| 6. "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg"
Overture | 10:04 |
| 7. "Ride of the Valkyries" | 4:55 |

Total Time 68:14

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Wagner

Overtures & Preludes

Rienzi • Der Meistersinger
Der Fliegende Holländer
Lohengrin • Tannhäuser
bonus track
Ride of the Valkyries

Philharmonia Orchestra
Yuri Simonov

alto

Of all musicians perhaps **Richard Wagner** (1813–83) arouses the most heated debate: many find his operas long-winded and obnoxious, seeing his writings as the ramblings of an outspoken bigot, whilst others approach these same works in a state of ecstasy, extract from his diaries only those passages which illustrate his intentions to revolutionise staging, ignoring the more contentious episodes. Whatever one's feelings about the man, the power and intensity of his musical vision have left an indelible mark upon subsequent composition and staging.

Wagner's early operas *Die Feen* (1835) and *Das Liebesverbot* (also premiered 1835, based upon *Measure for Measure*) are heavily influenced not only by Weber, Spohr and Marschner but also by French and Italian opera of the day. The first success was *Rienzi* (composed 1838–40, a time when Wagner and his wife fled to France via Norway and England to escape their creditors). Its hero is the first of a long line of lonely idealists and in its scale it points towards the great music dramas of the future. The noble central theme of the overture is a setting of the tenor aria "Allmächt'ger Vater". Wagner had to thank Meyerbeer (1791–1864) for the work's success in Dresden but he later resented the power wielded by this composer (*Rienzi* has been variously described as Meyerbeer's both best and worst opera!)

Meyerbeer once again aided Wagner in having his next opera *Der fliegende Holländer* produced in 1842. Stranded and penniless in Paris during its composition Wagner must have felt much affinity with Heine's 'Wandering Jew of the Ocean' who in Wagner's tale hopes for unlikely redemption from a selfless woman. From its opening bars we immediately picture a storm-tossed vessel, but the music eventually dies down to reveal the pure-hearted Senta who has seen the anguished Dutchman in her dreams and longs to save him. Both themes are intertwined until the final bars of the Overture when the Dutchman's ghostly crew is overcome by the Redemption theme.

Tannhäuser (two versions Dresden 1845; Paris 1861) can be seen as a loner's struggle between the commonplace real world and his more exciting imagination. For his purposes Wagner drew upon real-life characters from the thirteenth century court of Thuringia and the Overture, as in *Dutchman*, makes much of the juxtaposing themes of the Wartburg castle's pure-minded inhabitants and the sirens from the Venusberg. Wagner's last overtly Romantic opera *Lohengrin* (premiere conducted by Liszt in 1850) was written without set pieces in mind although much to the composer's disgust certain highlights emerged out of context, most notably the so-called Bridal March. The first act Prelude (composed last) sums up the purity of the falsely-accused Elsa and her

'rescuer' Lohengrin. The Prelude which introduces the final act is in contrast exuberant as befits the coming public spectacle of the wedding.

Der Ring des Nibelungen was conceived as early as 1848 when Wagner first sketched his poem *Siegfrieds Tod* (later to become *Götterdämmerung*) and then three years later he expanded the idea to take in the beginning of the Nibelung myth (the theft of the ring from the Rhinemaidens by the dwarf Alberich and the effects of Alberich's curse when it is taken from him in turn). This massive work necessitated four evenings in the theatre and coincided with Wagner's first plans for a custom-built opera house, with a sunken orchestra pit. *The Ride of the Valkyries* opens the last act of the second opera *Die Walküre* and depicts the passage of the warrior-maidens as they collect the fallen heroes from the battlefield.

Whilst at work on *Siegfried*, Wagner composed *Tristan und Isolde* and began *Meistersinger*, three works quite dissimilar in style. *Meistersinger*, although extremely long (you could fit the whole of *Bohème* into its third act) has long been regarded as one of Wagner's most accessible operas. The overture uses themes from the opera – the pompous march of the Mastersingers, Walter's Prize song and Hans Sachs's appeal to the crowd to preserve German culture (a sentiment unfortunately misappropriated by Hitler) amongst others.

The conductor of these recordings **Yuri Simonov** comes from a family of opera singers and studied in St Petersburg, later assisting Yevgeny Mravinsky. He is especially renowned for Russian music recordings (Khachaturian ballets ALC 1080) and also recorded the previous superb Wagner disc (ALC 1065). Having won the Santa Cecilia competition in Rome (1968) he became the youngest ever Chief Conductor of the Bolshoi Opera. In 1985 he founded the Maly Symphony Orchestra. At present he is Music Director of both the Moscow Philharmonic and the Belgian National Orchestras and is in constant demand. © **James Murray 2010**

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