



WAGNER

Overture to Rienzi

Richard Wagner (22 May 1813 – 13 February 1883) was a German composer, conductor, theatre director and polemicist primarily known for his operas (or "music dramas", as they were later called). Wagner's compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for their complex texture, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of leitmotifs: musical themes associated with individual characters, places, ideas or plot elements. Unlike most other opera composers, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for every one of his stage works. Perhaps the two best-known extracts from his works are the Ride of the Valkyries from the opera *Die Walküre*, and the Bridal Chorus from the opera *Lohengrin*. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer in the romantic traditions of Weber and Meyerbeer, Wagner transformed opera through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). This synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts was announced in a series of essays between 1849 and 1852, and realized most fully in the first half of the monumental four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner pioneered advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, which greatly influenced the development of European classical music. Wagner's influence spread beyond music into philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre. His extensive writings on music, drama and politics have all attracted extensive comment in recent decades, especially where they have anti-Semitic content. His pugnacious personality and often outspoken views on music, politics and society made him a controversial figure, but Wagner's impact can undoubtedly be traced throughout the twentieth century.

Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen (Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes; WWV 49) was written between July 1838 and November 1840, it was first performed at the Hofoper, Dresden, on 20 October 1842, and was the composer's first success. The opera is set in Rome and is based on the life of Cola di Rienzi (1313–1354), a late medieval Italian populist figure who succeeds in outwitting and then defeating the nobles and their followers and in raising the power of the people. Magnanimous at first, he is forced by events to crush the nobles' rebellion against the people's power, but popular opinion changes and even the Church, which had urged him to assert himself, turns against him. In the end the populace burns the Capitol, in which Rienzi and a few adherents have made a last stand. The opera opens with a substantial overture which begins with a trumpet call (which in Act 3 we learn is the war call of the Colonna family) and features the melody of Rienzi's prayer at the start of Act 5, which became the opera's best-known aria. The overture ends with a military march. Wagner himself later perceived Rienzi as an embarrassment, and thus the work has never been performed at the Bayreuth Festival. Although the composer disclaimed it, it can be noted that Rienzi prefigures themes (brother/sister relationships, social order and revolution) to which Wagner was often to return in his later works.