

Overture to *Fidelio*, op. 72c  
by Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

*Duration: Approximately 6 minutes*

*First Performance: November 20, 1805 in Vienna*

*These are the first ESO performances of the work*

For all his magisterial command of his musical materials, not even Beethoven was equally comfortable in all areas of his art. Unlike Mozart, for example, he was not by temperament a man of the theater and, although he would produce one noble and enduring operatic masterpiece, it would cost him more time and trouble than virtually anything else in his career.

The opera now known as *Fidelio* was first produced under the title *Leonore* in 1805 and then in a revised version in 1806. Not to put too fine a point on it, both productions were resounding flops. It would not be until November of 1814 that the final version, now called *Fidelio*, would be produced in Vienna to great public acclaim. Incidentally, timing of the latter production could hardly have been better, because the political implications of the opera perfectly coincided with the mood of the city, overrun as it was by royalty and statesmen from all over Europe attending the Congress of Vienna, celebrating the defeat of Napoleon and busy building a new post-Napoleonic order.

Along the way through all those operatic travails which, as Beethoven put it in a letter to a friend, would “win me a martyr’s crown”, he would write no fewer than four separate overtures. The first three, known as *Leonore* Overtures 1, 2, and 3, respectively, are highly dramatic and powerful works which stand well on their own and are very much a part of the standard orchestral repertoire. In the opera house, however, they proved to be too much of a good thing, overwhelming the relatively light opening scenes of the opera. The final solution would be the overture heard today and the one now customarily used to open the opera. It is a compact work and, without using much material from the opera itself, deftly manages to set the appropriate tone for the action to come.

As a so-called “rescue opera,” a swashbuckling genre popular after the French Revolution featuring dramatic rescues of heroic figures and depicting the triumph of good over evil, *Fidelio* has plenty of drama. The noble moral tone of the work is exemplified by the heroine Leonore, who, disguised as a man named Fidelio, rescues her husband Florestan from the evil governor Don Pizarro. The overture suggests both of these elements, the drama by frequent fanfare figures (including the horn call that forms the main theme), and the high moral tone through nobly lyrical melodic writing. The plot, incidentally, mirrored Beethoven’s own strongly held anti-authoritarian political views. Finally, the deliriously exciting coda is simply good stagecraft, leading to the rising of the curtain or, as in the case today, serving as an invigorating opener for a symphony concert.

*Vier letzte Lieder (Four Last Songs)*, TrV 296  
by Richard Strauss (1864 -1949)

*Duration: Approximately 24 minutes*

*First Performance: May 22, 1950 in London*

*Last ESO Performance: April, 2002; Ollie Watts Davis, soprano; Robert Hanson, conductor*

As great as Richard Strauss's achievements were in instrumental music, every bit as important was his contribution to the literature of the human voice, and, it might be said, especially the female voice. In addition to his many unforgettable female opera roles such as the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* or the title roles in *Elektra* or *Salome*, to mention just a few, he also wrote nearly 200 songs, making him the last major contributor to the great German Romantic tradition of *Lieder*.

For better or for worse, Strauss married a soprano. Pauline de Ahna Strauss was born into a military family and seems herself to have inherited the personality of a drill sergeant. The stolid and easy-going composer learned to deal with his fiery and impetuous wife, and somehow the odd couple managed to remain devoted to each other to the very end of an occasionally stormy but essentially successful marriage of 54 years. Richard died first (in self-defense?) but always maintained that no one could sing his songs as well as Pauline. Having toured as a pianist for her for many years, there is no doubt that Strauss learned much about writing for voice from her and was strongly influenced as a composer by the image of her voice.

With all these connections, it was certainly fitting that Strauss's own swan song, composed in 1948 at the age of 84 but not published until after his death, should have been some of his most beautiful writing for soprano voice. As biographer Michael Kennedy has put it, Strauss ended his career "with all the flair for bringing down the curtain at the right moment which distinguished his sense of theatre."

The *Four Last Songs* must now be numbered among Strauss's most beloved works and have served as vehicles for some of our greatest divas, ranging from such fabled names as Kirsten Flagstad and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf to singers of our own day, such as Jessye Norman, Kiri te Kanawa, and Renee Fleming.

The subject at hand is the progression from the vitality of youth as expressed in the opening poem *Frühling (Spring)*, moving toward the end of life. The first three poems are by Strauss's contemporary Hermann Hesse (1877 – 1962), the final song, *Im Abendrot (At Sunset)*, by the Romantic poet Joseph Eichendorff (1788 -1867). Death is viewed not in despair, however, but with mellow reflectiveness. Autumnal and valedictory though the tone may be, one senses that it is a look backward at life richly lived, with a sense of ripeness and fulfillment. Pauline's presence is deeply felt, as for example, in *Im Abendrot*, which, though now forming the end of the set, was actually the first of the set to be written. Strauss had been deeply moved by the poem and was struck by the way the description of an aging couple seemed to fit the composer and his wife perfectly.

Musically, Strauss uses the language of post-Romanticism in a way that seems to suspend time. Although the rhythm of the music seems to move slowly, Strauss uses constantly shifting harmonies and keys with enormous inventiveness while the voice soars over the orchestra. In addition to the marvelously skillful vocal writing may be mentioned

the beautiful violin solo in *Beim Schlafengehen*, illustrating the “unfettered soul floating freely“, and the horn solo at the end of *September*, which reminds us again, as in so many passages of Strauss, that his father had been one of the great horn players of his time. Finally, at the end of *Im Abendrot*, after we have heard the trilling of larks, we hear the question, “Is this death?” At this point Strauss quotes a theme from his early tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*, in which nearly 60 years earlier he had described the death of an idealistic artist. The artist had come full circle.

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*Zueignung (Devotion)*, TrV 141 , op. 10 , no. 1  
by Richard Strauss

*Duration: Approximately 2 minutes*  
*First Performance: March 5, 1886 in Meiningen*  
*These are the first ESO performances of the work*

If the *Four Last Songs* show Strauss at the height of his powers as a mature artist, *Zueignung* demonstrates that he had an exquisitely lyrical gift already as a young man. This famous song about the power of love was one of a set written in his late teens and published in 1885 as his first published songs when he was just 21.

Among the many riches provided by the intensely musical atmosphere in which Strauss grew up was the great Romantic tradition of German *Lieder* (art songs). This combination of poetry and music engaged composers from Beethoven and Schubert through Schumann, Brahms, and Hugo Wolf, forming one of the great glories of German culture. Strauss would bring this rich tradition into the twentieth century.

The opus 10 songs are set to poems by the Austrian poet Herrmann von Gilm. According to a well-known story, the composer caused some family discord by writing for a tenor voice and dedicating the set to a famous tenor rather than writing it for his aunt Johanna, as his father had wished. Apparently young Richard resolved to make amends with later songs. The song is now sung by women as well as men.

*Zueignung* is essentially what is known as a strophic song, i.e., one in which the same music is used for each verse of text. Here, however, the composer makes very slight yet highly effective changes for each of the three verses to avoid monotony and give a sense of dramatic movement from verse to verse. As with the majority of *Lieder* repertoire, *Zueignung* was originally written as an intimate work performed only with piano accompaniment, and the composer himself recorded it as pianist with several different singers. The version heard today was orchestrated by the German conductor Robert Heger. Strauss made his own orchestration some years later.

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*Ride of the Valkyries* from *Die Walküre*  
by Richard Wagner (1813 -1883)  
Arranged by Wouter Hutschenruyter

*Duration: Approximately 5 minutes*

*First Performance: June 26, 1870 in Munich*

*Last ESO Performance: November, 2015; Andrew Grams, conductor*

Excerpts from the operas of Richard Wagner have long been part of the standard orchestral repertoire. Although purists such as the great English musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey might object to the excision of these “bleeding chunks,” as he called them, from the living body of a complete opera, the practice has enabled many a listener who has never entered an opera house to become acquainted with the magical power of Wagner’s orchestral writing. Many of these excerpts have been taken from Wagner’s monumental collection of four operas known as *The Ring of the Nibelung*, that amazingly rich saga filled with gods, goddesses, heroes, and villains, all drawn from Norse and German mythology and meant to be seen and heard on four successive days. Today’s program presents five of the most familiar excerpts from *The Ring*.

While all five of these excerpts fall neatly into the category of symphonic “warhorses”, surely none has been ridden more than *Ride of the Valkyries*. (Pun very much intended.) Over -familiar though it may be, to those listeners who can banish the thought of Elmer Fudd or the many other parodies and abuses to which it has been subjected, it can still produce a thrill. As the opening of Act III of *Die Walküre*, the second of the four operas of the *Ring* cycle, it creates one of those scenes beloved of Romantic artists, a dark and stormy night on the summit of a craggy mountain top. The nine Valkyries, daughters of Wotan, King of the gods, perform their appointed duties by riding through the sky and swooping down to pick up the corpses of the bravest soldiers slain in battle in order to bring them back to papa Wotan to protect his home of Valhalla. Adding to the drama at this point is the fact that Brünnhilde, Wotan’s favorite daughter, has disobeyed her father and is fleeing from him to find some security with her sisters in their mountain retreat. Even without the famous *Hojotoho* and *Heiaha* battle cries sung by the ladies in the opera house, the galloping rhythms and simulated lightning flashes provide all the necessary drama.

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*Forest Murmurs from Siegfried*  
by Richard Wagner  
Arranged by Herman Zumpe

*Duration: Approximately 9 minutes*  
*First Performance: August 16, 1876 in Bayreuth*  
*These are the first ESO performances of the work*

The familiar *Forest Murmurs* is taken from *Siegfried*, the third opera of the *Ring* cycle. The eponymous Siegfried can actually be called the central figure in the entire *Ring* saga, being the hero designated by his grandfather Wotan to win back the magic golden ring which would insure the gods control of the universe. In the opera which bears his name, Siegfried performs various acts of derring-do, including such things as forging a magic sword, killing a dragon, and then claiming the Valkyrie Brünnhilde as his true love. (Technically, Brünnhilde was his aunt, but then Siegfried was himself the offspring of the incestuous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde who were brother and sister. This is not exactly *Ozzie and Harriet*.) The *Forest Murmurs* excerpt, which has actually been pieced together from various parts of the opera to make a self-contained orchestral piece, offers our hero a bit of respite as he sits under a linden tree in an enchanted forest basking in the sounds of nature, most especially birdcalls. The music offers a refreshing contrast to Wagner's customary heroic style and shows his skill at orchestrating a kind of impressionistic mood piece. Finally, the music turns more heroic as Siegfried ventures forth for more adventure.

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*Siegfried's Rhine Journey from Götterdämmerung*  
by Richard Wagner  
Arranged by Engelbert Humperdinck

*Duration: Approximately 10 minutes*  
*First Performance: August 17, 1876 in Bayreuth*  
*These are the first ESO performances of the work*

*Siegfried's Rhine Journey* is an orchestral interlude connecting the Prologue to Act I of *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), the fourth and final opera of the *Ring* cycle. As one of the most impressive pieces of orchestral writing that Wagner ever produced, the music is so vividly descriptive that the audience easily grasps its significance even though the curtain is down for most of the time.

The music begins quietly with a sunrise over the rock where, surrounded by fire, Brünnhilde had been imprisoned. Siegfried had fearlessly walked through the fire to claim his bride, and, having consummated their marriage, placed the magic ring on her finger as a sign of fidelity. He is not about to be domesticated, however, but takes off on

Brünnhilde's horse and carrying her shield in pursuit of more adventure up the Rhine river, where he will eventually meet his demise.

Much of the ingenious orchestral writing combines Siegfried's own *Leitmotiv*, which is a *macho* horn call first heard quietly in the horn section, with a sweepingly romantic theme representing Brünnhilde heard first in a solo clarinet and then moving to a lush string sound. The two themes weave in and out, with Siegfried's theme appearing sometimes in Wagner's famously large full brass section (heavy metal at its best), and even by itself played by a single unaccompanied horn. Along the way we hear occasional intricate counterpoint and several other *Leitmotifs*, including the theme representing the Magic Fire as well as the wave-like motion of the Rhine river theme. The richness of the writing and the brilliance of the orchestration clearly demonstrate why Wagner was the despair of so many composers of his time.

The arrangement heard today is by Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921), a fine composer in his own right and a close associate of Wagner.

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*Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music from Götterdämmerung*  
by Richard Wagner

*Duration: Approximately 12 minutes*

*First Performance: August 17, 1876 in Bayreuth*

*Last ESO Performance: April, 1970; Douglas Steensland, conductor*

On a hunting expedition along the banks of the Rhine River, Siegfried is murdered by the villain Hagen who stabs him in the back literally as well as figuratively by tricking Brünnhilde into abetting the murder. He dies whispering his wife's name and his body is carried on his shield in the most somber of funeral processions. Various themes associated with his past are heard, including the *Leitmotifs* of his family. Suddenly, cutting through the gloom, is the triumphant C major theme representing the magic sword *Nothung*, which once was to be his salvation. After another triumphant statement of Siegfried's famous horn call the death theme returns and the music trails off into darkness.

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*Entry of the Gods into Valhalla* from *Das Rheingold*  
by Richard Wagner  
Arranged by Herman Zumpe

*Duration: Approximately 9 minutes*

*First Performance: September 22, 1869 in Munich*

*Last ESO Performance: September, 2007; Robert Hanson, conductor*

The *Entry of the Gods into Valhalla* forms a spectacular visual as well as aural conclusion to *Das Rheingold*, which, as the first opera of the *Ring* tetralogy, serves as a prologue to the entire saga. In this final scene of the opera, the gods cross a majestic rainbow bridge over the Rhine River to enter their new home. Valhalla, of course, is not just any piece of real estate - not exactly your typical starter home. It is to be the ideal refuge and fortress for the gods and has been purchased at great price. The builders, that strange construction company of the giant brothers Fafner and Fasolt, had been promised nothing less than Freia, the goddess of beauty and everlasting youth, as payment for their labor. Wotan, King of the gods, reneges on his bargain, however, and buys off the giants with the magic golden ring which had been fashioned out of gold stolen from the Rhinemaidens by Alberich, a member of the dwarf tribe known as Nibelungs. Although the ring gives the power to rule the world, it also carries a curse, causing anguish to anyone who possesses it. Anguish comes soon enough as the giants fight over the ring and Fafner kills his brother.

By the end of the opera the gods are ready to escape all this turmoil and retreat to their new home. All in all, these gods are an unprepossessing lot, all too human in their greed, jealousy, and fear of the future. Loge, the wily god of fire, comments cynically on the complacency of the group, saying that they are entering a fools' paradise, and that they will ultimately be destroyed. That prophecy is exactly fulfilled in the Immolation scene at the end of the final opera *Götterdämmerung*, as Brünnhilde gives the ring back to the Rhinemaidens and offers herself as a sacrifice to be burned, setting off a conflagration that causes the Rhine River to overflow and Valhalla to be burned along with all its royal residents.

Ignoble though these gods may be, Wagner gives them majestic music, beginning with the *Leitmotif* of Thor, god of thunder. After that roll of thunder, we hear the rainbow motif, a broadly majestic arpeggio figure which soon melds into the noble Valhalla motif. The mood changes briefly as we hear the song of the Rhinemaidens, played by clarinets, who from the river below lament the loss of their magic gold. Finally, the rainbow and Valhalla motifs return as the curtain falls and the gods complete their majestic procession.

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