



PROGRAMME

Prelude to Act III (from *Lohengrin*)

Richard Wagner (1813 - 1883)

Born in Leipzig in 1813, Richard Wagner was the acknowledged son of a Government official, Carl Friedrich Wagner, and his wife Joanna, but possibly fathered by the actor Ludwig Geyer, who was to marry Joanna after Carl Friedrich's death. Wagner's education was an intermittent one, much of it in Dresden, where he fell under the spell of Weber and *Der Freischütz*, the first great German romantic opera. Returning to Leipzig he was to profit more from contact with his uncle Adolf, a widely read scholar, with a knowledge of Greek tragedy, as well as of the classics of Italy, the works of Shakespeare, and of course, of the literature of his own country. In Leipzig Wagner took the opportunity of furthering his own interests in music, stimulated by the performances of the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra and Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, which he heard in 1829. He borrowed books from the music lending library of Robert Schumann's future teacher and father-in-law, Friedrich Wieck, and took private music lessons at the *Thomasschule*, where J.S. Bach had been employed a century earlier.

The later career of Wagner was a turbulent one. His income never matched his ambitions, and he was driven on by an aggressive and ruthless urge to create a new form of music, the music of the future, particularly in the conjunction of all arts in a series of great music dramas. His first significant success was in Dresden, where his opera *Rienzi* was staged in 1842, followed by his appointment as conductor of the Court Opera. His own tactless espousal of revolutionary notions led to his flight from Dresden in 1849, at first to Franz Liszt in Weimar, and then to Switzerland. The protection later afforded by King Ludwig II of Bavaria allowed some respite from difficulties, but his liaison with Liszt's daughter Cosima, wife of the Bavarian court conductor Hans von Bülow, and his unpopularity in Munich led to a further period of exile in Switzerland. His final relative triumph in the establishment of a Festival devoted to his work in Bayreuth was accomplished again with the encouragement of King Ludwig. The first festival took place in 1876, but did nothing to reduce his increasing personal debts. Wagner died during the course of a visit to Venice in 1883.

The opera *Lohengrin* was first performed in Weimar in 1850 under the direction of Liszt, who had helped Wagner in his flight from Dresden. The work opens with King Henry the Fowler hearing the accusation of fratricide brought by Telramund against Elsa of Brabant to whom he had served as guardian after the death of her father, suggesting that she had killed her brother Gottfried in order to assume control over the land with a secret lover. The

King decrees mortal combat, to discover her guilt or innocence, and she declares that her champion will be a knight that she has seen in a dream. As heralds summon the combatants and Elsa prays for help, a swan is seen drawing a boat, from which steps an unknown knight. Telramund is defeated, but the knight spares his victim, while the heathen Ortrud, Telramund's wife and fellow conspirator, wonders if her powers are waning. Reproached by Telramund, now condemned to banishment, she tells him that the knight's power can only be broken if he is made to reveal his name. She arouses the pity of Elsa and at the same time casts doubt on the origin of the mysterious knight. A herald announces Telramund's banishment and the appointment of the knight to rule Brabant, as husband to Elsa. Telramund seeks to learn the knight's name and rank, but is denied an answer by the knight, who seeks Elsa's assurance of trust in him, as they proceed to their wedding.

The *Prelude* to the third act, perhaps the most familiar element in the whole opera, depicts the wedding celebration. Left together Elsa remains curious about the knight's name, in spite of her earlier promise not to question him on the subject, and eventually asks him to reveal his name. Telramund and four companions burst in, with drawn swords, but Lohengrin, with a sword that Elsa hands him, strikes Telramund dead, while the other knights yield. He calls to Elsa's maids to take her before the King, where he will answer her question about his identity. In the final scene Lohengrin, before the King, rejects the commission to lead the royal troops in war, and finds justification for his action. He accuses Elsa of breaking her word and explains his own origin, as a Knight of the Grail. As he takes his final leave, he tells Elsa that her brother Gottfried is alive, transformed by her magic, as Ortrud claims, into a swan. Gottfried re-appears, as Lohengrin sadly sails away, his boat now drawn by a dove, and Elsa sinks lifeless into her brother's arms.