



Hansel and Gretel

The tale of *Hansel and Gretel* dates from the Baltic region in the Middle Ages. The Brothers Grimm gave the story the form we know around 1800. Today, the version we perhaps know best is the operatic setting by Engelbert Humperdinck. The opera achieves the amazing effect of seeming a simple folk-talk, accessible even to children, while at the same time, its musical sophistication and craftsmanship thrills and moves the experienced, highly-knowledgeable opera lover. One never tires of the gorgeous wealth of melody and the brilliant orchestration.

The piece began life in a much simpler form. The composer's sister, Adelheid, wrote small plays for her children to perform. When she was writing one based on *Hansel and Gretel*, she asked her brother to compose a few simple songs that the children could sing. The results were so successful that she asked for more music. Humperdinck expanded it until he eventually had a full-length opera.

At this point, it's worth mentioning Humperdinck's position in relation to the two most important German composers of opera, Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. As a young man, Humperdinck was a protégé of Wagner, who invited him to come to the Bayreuth Festival, where Wagner's *Parsifal* was being prepared for its world premiere. The young Humperdinck copied the orchestral parts and late in rehearsals, when it was discovered that more time was needed for the scenery change in Act 1, he was assigned the task of composing the extra measures. So, a few moments of Humperdinck's music can be heard in the Act 1 transformation in *Parsifal*.

With loftier goals in mind, Humperdinck was not initially very excited about his "folk opera for children". However, he submitted the score to the opera house in Weimar, where the resident conductor was the young Richard Strauss, who immediately offered to give *Hansel* its first production. He conducted the work's world premiere on December 23, 1893. Actually, from the very beginning, *Hansel* had something of a tradition as a Christmas opera, although there is absolutely no reference to the holiday, other than children and candy! The opera's success was immediate. Gustav Mahler, who was director of the Hamburg Opera at the time, loved it. Hamburg was soon followed by productions in Berlin, London and Vienna. In its first three years, *Hansel* was translated into eleven languages!

Hansel reached the Metropolitan Opera in 1905. But its very special place in Met history comes later, when on Christmas Day 1931, it became the first complete opera to be

broadcast live from the Met stage, beginning the tradition which continues to this day. Humperdinck was granted the honor of a full-scale world premiere at the Met in 1910. That opera *Koenigs kinder* (The Royal Children) contains a great deal of lush, very beautiful music. But, it is a darker, rather symbolic story, and it never came close to achieving the great popularity of *Hansel*.

The original Grimm tale of *Hansel* was also very dark, with touches of real cruelty. But, Humperdinck's sister softened this in her adaptation, which very likely helped contribute of the opera's great popularity. But, the main reason that *Hansel* is so beloved is its unending stream of joyous, melodious music. The composer then wraps this music in some of the most brilliant orchestration heard in any opera-full of color, grace, counterpoint and brilliance. That is the true magic of *Hansel* and the score reveals new treasures and magic on every hearing.

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