

Hansel and Gretel,      Engelbert Humperdinck.

Hansel and Gretel in three tableaux, libretto by Adelheid Wette, first produced at the Weimer Opera on December 23rd 1893.

Originally, Humperdinck planned Hansel and Gretel for his nephews and nieces. While working on this project, it occurred to him that the subject might serve as the basis for a very appealing opera, and he expanded his original ideas. The first performances of his opera was phenomenally successful, so much so that a formerly obscure and unknown composer became famous throughout Germany. Nor was the success of Hansel and Gretel confined to Germany alone. It was performed in most of the leading opera houses in Europe to appreciative audiences.

Humperdinck's admiration of Wagner is evident in this score. As H.E. Krebbiel pointed out, Humperdinck built up his structure in the Wagnerian manner. But it is not an imitative work by any means, it has a charm and style of its own.

The little work is replete with melodies nearly all of which derive their physiognomy from two little songs which the children sing at the beginning of the first and second acts, and which are frankly borrowed from the folk song literature of Germany. These ditties however, contribute characteristic themes out of which the orchestral part is constructed. The opera is of course, based upon the famous fairy tale of Grimm. Hansel and Gretel, going to pick berries, lose their way, in a forest that is inhabited by a witch who eats children. At night, they say their prayers and go to sleep surrounded by guardian angels. The following morning they are caught by the witch, who proposes to roast them in her oven. They succeed, however, in forcing the witch herself into the oven, and her death releases all the other children she has captured.

When Hansel and Gretel was introduced at Weimar, the conductor was Richard Strauss, whose opinion was expressed in a letter to Humperdinck as follows, I want to tell you how enchanted I was by your opera. What refreshing humour, what preciously naive melodies, what art and subtlety in the orchestral treatment, what perfection in the shaping of the whole work, what flowering invention, what marvellous polyphony, all so original and new, and yet so genuinely German. Hansel and Gretel was the first opera to be produced in its entirety, over a nationwide network in the United States. This took place on December 25th 1931, from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House New York.