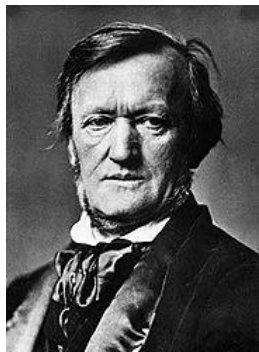


## Richard Wagner, *Siegfried Idyll*



The *Siegfried Idyll* is one of Wagner's few non-operatic works, a symphonic poem lasting approximately twenty minutes. Wagner composed it as a birthday present to his second wife, Cosima, after the birth of their son Siegfried in 1869. It was first performed on the morning of Christmas Eve (Cosima's birthday) in 1870 by a small ensemble on the stairs of their villa at Tribschen in the Canton of Lucerne, Switzerland; Cosima awoke to its opening melody. Today, it is most often performed in Wagner's full orchestral version.

**Wilhelm Richard Wagner** (22 May 1813, Leipzig, Germany – 13 February 1883, Venice, Italy) was a German composer, conductor, theatre director and essayist, primarily known for his operas (or "music dramas", as they were later called). Unlike most other opera composers, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for every one of his works.

Wagner's compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for contrapuntal texture, rich chromaticism, harmonies and orchestration, and elaborate use of leitmotifs: musical themes associated with particular characters, locales or plot elements. Wagner pioneered advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, which greatly influenced the development of European classical music. In his late opera *Tristan und Isolde*, he explored the limits of the traditional tonal system that gave keys and chords their identity, pointing the way to atonality in the 20th century. Some music historians date the beginning of modern classical music to the first notes of *Tristan*, the so-called Tristan chord.

He transformed musical thought through his idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total artwork"), the synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, epitomized by his monumental four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876). To stage these compositions as he imagined them, Wagner built his own opera house, the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus*.

In his lifetime, and for some years after, Wagner inspired fanatical devotion. His compositions, in particular *Tristan und Isolde*, broke important new musical ground. For years afterward, many composers were inclined to align themselves with or against Wagner's music. Anton Bruckner and Hugo Wolf were indebted to him especially, as were César Franck, Henri Duparc, Ernest Chausson, Jules Massenet, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Hans Pfitzner and dozens of others. Gustav

Mahler said, "There was only Beethoven and Wagner". The twentieth century harmonic revolutions of Claude Debussy and Arnold Schoenberg (tonal and atonal modernism, respectively) have often been traced back to *Tristan*. The Italian form of operatic realism known as *verismo* owed much to Wagnerian reconstruction of musical form.

In the twentieth century, W. H. Auden once called Wagner "perhaps the greatest genius that ever lived", while Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust were heavily influenced by him and discussed Wagner in their novels. He is discussed in some of the works of James Joyce. Wagner is one of the main subjects of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which contains lines from *Tristan und Isolde* and refers to *The Ring* and *Parsifal*. Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine worshipped Wagner. Many of the ideas his music brought up, such as the association between love and death (or Eros and Thanatos) in *Tristan*, predated their investigation by Sigmund Freud.

Apart from his operas, Wagner composed relatively few pieces of music. These include a single symphony (written at the age of 19), a Faust symphony (of which he only finished the first movement, which became the Faust Overture), and some overtures, choral and piano pieces, and a re-orchestration of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*. Of these, the most commonly performed work is the *Siegfried Idyll*.

The original title of the *Siegfried Idyll* was *Tribschen Idyll* with Fidi's birdsong and the orange sunrise. "Fidi" was the pet version of the name Siegfried. It is thought that the birdsong and the sunrise refer to incidents of personal significance to the Wagner and his wife.

The work begins with a motive known as "peace motive", and also uses a German lullaby "Sleep, Baby, sleep" as well as the "Siegfried's motive" in the solo trumpet part towards the end of the composition. Wagner published a detailed program for the work which describes his mother singing the boy asleep with a lullaby and then contemplating what he will be like as a young man.

*Siegfried Idyll* is often compared with a study of the events of the Wagner romance that inspired its writing. Its roots stretch from their earliest days and it would affect them to their last. As a consequence, much of the Wagner romance is covered here in a condensed form. Written as a private birthday gift, the piece was never intended for the public, but it was published when the Wagner's were pressed by debt. For its intimacy and emotion, the *Idyll* is regarded as one of Wagner's greatest works.