

# Synopsis

## Act I

In the broom-maker's house

## Act II

In the woods

*Intermission* (AT APPROXIMATELY 2:00 PM)

## Act III

The gingerbread house

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### Act I

Hansel complains he is hungry. Gretel shows him some milk that a neighbor has given for the family's supper. The children dance. Their mother returns and wants to know why they have got so little work done. She accidentally spills the milk and chases the children out into the woods to pick strawberries.

Their father, a broom-maker, returns home drunk. He brings out the food he has bought, then asks where the children have gone. The mother tells him that she has sent them into the woods. He tells her about the Witch who lives there, and that the children are in danger. They go out into the woods to look for them.

### Act II

Hansel picks strawberries. The children hear a cuckoo singing and eat the strawberries. Soon they have eaten every one. In the sudden silence of the wood, Hansel admits to Gretel that he has lost the way. The children grow frightened. The Sandman comes to bring them sleep, sprinkling sand over their eyes. The children say their evening prayer. In a dream, they see 14 angels.

### Act III

The Dew Fairy comes to waken the children. Gretel wakes Hansel, and they see the gingerbread house. They do not notice the Witch. The Witch decides to fatten Hansel up and puts a spell on him. The oven is hot. Gretel breaks the Witch's spell and sets Hansel free. When the Witch asks her to look in the oven, she pretends she doesn't know how to: the Witch must show her. When the Witch peers into the oven, the children shove her inside and shut the door. The oven explodes. The gingerbread children come back to life. The mother and father find the children, and all express gratitude for their salvation. —*Courtesy Welsh National Opera*

## In Focus

*Engelbert Humperdinck*

# Hansel and Gretel

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*Premiere: Weimar, Court Theater, 1893*

Originally conceived as a small-scale vocal entertainment for children, *Hansel and Gretel* resonates with both adults and kids and has become one of the most successful fairy-tale operas ever created. The composer, Engelbert Humperdinck, was a protégé of Richard Wagner, and the opera's score is flavored with the sophisticated musical lessons he learned from his idol while maintaining a charm and a light touch that were entirely Humperdinck's own. The folk tale of the siblings who get lost in a dark forest and become captives of an old witch is a classic of German literature, made famous in the collected stories of the Brothers Grimm. The opera acknowledges the darker features present in the Brothers Grimm version, yet presents them within a frame of grace and humor. Richard Strauss was delighted with Humperdinck's score and conducted the opera's world premiere. *Hansel and Gretel* has been internationally popular ever since and is one of the very few operas that can claim equal approval from such diverse and demanding critics as children and musicologists.

### *The Creators*

Engelbert Humperdinck (1854–1921) was a German composer who began his career as an assistant to Richard Wagner in Bayreuth in a variety of capacities, including tutoring Wagner's son Siegfried. Humperdinck even composed a few measures of orchestral music for the world premiere of Wagner's *Parsifal* when extra time was needed for a scene change. (This music is not included in the printed score and no longer performed.) *Hansel and Gretel* was Humperdinck's first complete opera and remains the foundation of his reputation. The world premiere of his opera *Königskinder* (also set in a fairy-tale world but featuring an original story) took place at the Met and was one of the sensations of the company's 1910–11 season. The libretto for *Hansel and Gretel* was written by his sister, Adelheid Wette (1858–1916), and is based on the version found in the Brothers Grimm collection of folk stories. Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm were German academics whose groundbreaking linguistic work revolutionized the understanding of language development. Today, they are best remembered for editing and publishing collections of folk tales.

### *The Setting*

The opera's three acts move from Hansel and Gretel's home to the dark forest to the Witch's gingerbread house deep in the forest. Put another way, the drama

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moves from the real, through the obscure, and into the unreal and fantastical. In this production, which takes the idea of food as its dramatic focus, each act is set in a different kind of kitchen, informed by a different theatrical style: a D.H. Lawrence-inspired setting in the first, a German Expressionist one in the second, and a Theater of the Absurd mood in the third.

### *The Music*

The score of *Hansel and Gretel* combines accessible charm with subtle sophistication. Like Wagner, Humperdinck assigns musical themes to certain ideas and then transforms the themes according to new developments in the drama. The chirpy cuckoo is depicted by wind instruments in Act II, which become increasingly frightening as night descends on the children, who are lost in the forest. The vocal parts also reflect this method. Unlike Wagner, however, Humperdinck uses separate songs (with real folk songs among them) within his scheme. In Act I, Gretel tells her brother that God will provide for them, using a bouncy and naïve tune that suggests a prayer a child might learn by heart but not fully understand. In Act II, this becomes the children's beautiful and heartfelt prayer, which then triggers the magical dream sequence of guardian angels that closes the act. Similarly, Gretel's dance tune in Act I morphs into the father's solemn prayer of thanksgiving for a happy ending at the opera's finale. The music, like the children, seems to grow up over the course of the evening. The role of the Witch, written for a mezzo-soprano, is sometimes (as in the present production) sung by a tenor.

### *Hansel and Gretel at the Met*

*Hansel and Gretel* had its Met premiere in 1905 with the composer present and was revived frequently during the holidays until 1916. A new production designed by Joseph Urban debuted in 1927. Perhaps the most memorable of these performances was on Christmas Day in 1931, when the opera was broadcast on the radio, inaugurating the Met's Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts, which continue to the present day. The Urban production was retired in 1948, and *Hansel* was not seen again until a new production was unveiled in 1967 featuring Rosalind Elias and Teresa Stratas in the title roles. Memorable singers to appear in this popular production over the years include sopranos Judith Blegen and Dawn Upshaw and mezzo-sopranos Tatiana Troyanos, Frederica von Stade, and Jennifer Larmore. The role of the Witch has been performed by an especially diverse array of talent, from Louise Homer in the opera's first decade at the Met to the tenors Paul Franke and Andrea Velis. The current production originated at Welsh National Opera and was subsequently seen in Chicago and San Francisco before being revised and reworked for the Met, where it was first performed in 2007.

## Program Note

In May of 1890, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* had its premiere in Rome. Two years later, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* followed in Milan. Separately, or in double harness—the Met first brought together *Cav* & *Pag* in 1893—these two pieces swept the opera houses of the world. Inflamed passions, violence, and verismo filled the lyric stage. And then, two days before Christmas 1893, there appeared an alternative: Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. As the influential music critic of the time, Eduard Hanslick, put it: "To the brutal miniatures, already becoming tiresome, the strongest possible contrast is—a children's fairy tale. On the one side we have criminals, suicides, betrayed lovers and couples; on the other, a little brother and sister whose only pain is hunger and whose greatest pleasure is a candy bar—no passion, no love story, no love intrigue. It is another world—and a better one." Ironically, as Hanslick realized, this innocent tale was composed by a musician under the spell of the arch-sorcerer Richard Wagner, who, Hanslick believed, had poisoned the pure founts of lyric art. A thorough command of Wagner's technical apparatus underlies *Hansel and Gretel*. "The restless modulation...the polyphonic texture of the accompaniment...the refined orchestral effects—this is Richard Wagner to the core," wrote Hanslick.

In 1879 Humperdinck, a brilliant, prizewinning young musician of 25, met Wagner in Naples. Wagner invited him to Bayreuth to help in the preparation of *Parsifal*, and a few measures of that score have been ascribed to Humperdinck. (The transformation scene took slightly longer to stage than there was music for; the assistant devised some extra measures, and Wagner approved of them.) In 1880 he wrote an orchestral piece, *Humoreske*, which had a certain success. But he was not a prolific composer. After Bayreuth, he held various teaching posts, including two years as a professor of theory at the Barcelona Conservatory, and in 1890 Cosima Wagner engaged him to complete the musical education of her son Siegfried. That same year, Humperdinck's sister, Adelheid Wette, asked him to compose some songs for a domestic entertainment she had written for her children to perform. With mock-Wagnerian pomposity this little drawing-room play was presented as "A Nursery Dedicatory Festival Drama." (*Parsifal* had been a "Bühnenweihfestspiel"; *Hansel* was a "Kinderstuben-Weihfestspiel.")

Now Humperdinck was looking for an opera libretto, and it occurred to him that his sister's play could be expanded to provide one. Thus *Hansel and Gretel* came into being.

Fairy tales, as everyone knows, can be allegories of real life. *The Magic Flute* is a fairy tale, and so is *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. (The *Ring*, for that matter, has episodes in common with *Puss-in-Boots* and *The Sleeping Beauty*.) The Grimm fairy tale on which *Hansel and Gretel* is based starts in a starkly realistic vein: "Times were hard. Work was scarce and food prices were high." So, in

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order to have two mouths less to feed, Hansel and Gretel are taken out into the woods and abandoned there. The gentle Adelheid Wette was shocked at such callous behavior and tried to soften it. In her version the mother comes home after a tiring and profitless day. The children have been larking, not working. When, in a scuffle, the milk jug is broken and the only nourishment in the house is spilt, she drives them out into the forest to gather strawberries in a sudden, understandable burst of temper and despair. In its own way, this first scene is also very realistic, and there is more than a hint that the father, even though (or because!) his day has been profitable, has been drinking on the way home. Poverty, hunger, cares that have turned a mother's love to harshness—all is set for a domestic tragedy.

But then *Hansel and Gretel* becomes an epic. Food may be a recurrent preoccupation—for the parents, for the children, for the greedy old child-eating Witch—but the theme is the outwitting of an ogress by two resourceful and spirited children. The Witch who has transformed her earlier little victims into gingerbread is a homely descendant of the enchantress Circe in *The Odyssey*, who turned Ulysses' companions into swine, and of the enchantress Alcina in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, who turned her admirers into savage beasts. Many morals can be drawn from *Hansel and Gretel*—but not, perhaps, the one that is sung out, maestoso, in its closing pages: "When in need or dark despair, God will surely hear our prayer."

The broad chorale makes a superb and moving musical close to the work—but heaven has played no part in the rescue of Hansel and Gretel or their awakening of the spellbound children. They are saved by their own wits. In fact, heaven's role is distinctly ambiguous. At the close of the forest scene, the pious tots sing their evening prayer before settling down to sleep. Fourteen angels appear to keep watch over them, and Humperdinck clothes the Dream Pantomime in music of shining, ethereal beauty. But when day dawns, the angel sentries are gone. They were as a dream. The children are left to face the menace of the Witch.

*Hansel and Gretel* is a Wagnerian music drama with nursery subject matter. When the milk jug is broken, the orchestral climax could accompany the shattering of Wotan's spear. The Witch's Ride is a Ride of the Valkyries, but with broomsticks for mounts, instead of magic horses. The shining Dream Pantomime owes something to *Lohengrin*, and perhaps more to *Parsifal*. The finale, the awakening of the children, is in effect an apotheosis and redemption. There have been people disturbed by, and critical of, the application of Wagner's elaborate methods to so slight a tale. But most people have loved *Hansel and Gretel*—loved it as children, and loved it perhaps even more as adults. And they do so for two reasons. First, because they can still share in the realities of its emotions. (The forest terrors that scare Gretel, in the second

scene, are kin to those that scare Mime in the *Ring*; anyone who has been alone in a forest at night must know them.) And second, because the music is so captivatingly beautiful. Humperdinck uses the same size orchestra as Wagner in *Die Meistersinger*, but there is no heaviness in his handling of it—only richness, warmth, delicacy, and (to quote the critic Robin Legge) “once or twice, as in the twilight woodland scene with the cuckoo, a poetry more enchanting than anything of the kind ever achieved by Wagner.” —*Andrew Porter*