

DES KNABEN WUNDERHORN

By GUSTAV MAHLER

Born July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, Bohemia; died May 18, 1911, in Vienna

In 1804, two young men from Heidelberg, Ludwig Achim von Arnim (1781-1831) and Clemens Maria Brentano (1778-1842) set off on an expedition throughout their country in search of German folk songs and poetry. The two scholars could hardly have been more dissimilar. Arnim, a proper Prussian *Junker*, was an aristocrat, conservative and correct. Conversely, Brentano, who was half Italian by birth, had led a nomadic existence, roaming about the country with his guitar, not unlike a wandering minstrel. A cohesive influence was perhaps contributed by Brentano's sister Bettina, who, earlier, had fallen in love with Beethoven and been a confidante of Goethe, and was now married to Arnim. Together, using old manuscripts and listening to the people themselves--shepherds, peasants, soldiers, and village musicians—they collected hundreds of examples of German folk texts, many of which had been handed down from generation to generation. They published the first volume of them in 1805 in an anthology which they entitled *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn). A second volume followed in 1807, and a third in 1808.

Although the literary quality of the poems of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* was looked upon as being decidedly uneven at best (a problem inherent in almost all folk material), the anthology itself was hailed as a major accomplishment in German literature. Heinrich Heine wrote of it, "In these songs we find the heartbeat of the German people; here are revealed all their pessimistic cheerfulness, all their unreasoning reason. Here German passion burns, here German jesting makes merry, here German love blooms. Here sparkle both truly German wine and truly German tears. This book contains some of the loveliest /flowerings of the German spirit, and

anyone who wishes to come to know the German people in its most loveable aspect should study these folk songs.” Goethe, to whom the first volume was dedicated, was no less enthusiastic. He recommended *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* to “all intelligent people” and particularly felt that the poems should inspire composers to set them to music. Despite Goethe's favorable endorsement of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the anthology was virtually ignored by most composers and songwriters. Indeed, it was not until nearly the final decade of the nineteenth century, when Gustav Mahler began drawing inspiration from it, that the work finally attained its musical majority. Although Mahler was probably familiar with some of the poems of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* from his own youth, he almost certainly encountered the actual book for the first time in 1887, while browsing through the library of the grandson of composer Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) in Leipzig. At that time, Mahler had been completing and preparing for production the elder Weber's unfinished comic opera *Die drei Pintos* (The Three Pintos)—and carrying on a clandestine affair with Marian Mathilda von Weber, the wife of his host.

Ultimately, Mahler would use *Wunderhorn* poems as texts for twenty-four of his forty-four songs, including the twelve collectively entitled *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Additionally, several other *Wunderhorn* poems either served as inspiration for or became actual movements in at least three of his nine symphonies. Mahler's fascination with *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* was an undeniably strong and long lasting one. Conductor Bruno Walter, who, as a young man, had been Mahler's disciple and had worked closely with him, suggested that, in the *Wunderhorn* poetry, Mahler found everything that agitated his soul, and found it in the same manner in which he felt it. Nature, piety, yearning, love, farewell, night, death, ghostly doings, soldiers' tales, youthful spirits, nursery jokes, crisp humor—they all lived in him as in the poems."

Rheinlegendchen (Rhine legend): A young lad philosophizes about his recently lost sweetheart.
His sorrows are slight, however, for soon he is fantasizing about the next "true love" he will find.