

Overture from *Rienzi*

By Richard Wagner

Born May 22, 1813, in Leipzig, Germany

Died February 13, 1883, in Venice, Italy

Based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel, *Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes*, Richard Wagner's eponymous opera tells the story of Cola di Rienzi (1313–1354), a late medieval citizen of Rome who rose to prominence by promising to crush the nobles and their followers and make Rome great again by returning power to the people.

Rienzi was Wagner's third completed opera, composed between 1838 and 1840, and first performed on October 20, 1842, in Dresden, to tumultuous popular acclaim. *Rienzi* was also the last of Wagner's operas wherein the influence of the Italian or French "grand opera" tradition is clearly evident. Even before its premiere, Wagner had finished his next opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, in 1841, signaling a major new direction in his work.

Still, much of the material in *Rienzi*, particularly in the overture, hints at what would be Wagner's greatness. In its spectacular orchestral vivacity and melodic brilliance, the overture became a favorite of orchestras long before and after the full opera, as originally written, practically disappeared from the stage. Though rarely performed in its entirety today, most performances of *Rienzi* have been based on a score, published in 1898-99, by Cosima Wagner (Richard's second wife) and conductor Julius Kniese. They made numerous unauthorized edits and stylistic changes in an effort to conform it more to Wagner's later music-drama aesthetic.

It is interesting if not savagely ironic to note that the original manuscript for *Rienzi* was for a while in the possession of Adolf Hitler, certainly a champion of Wagner's music, before it was either lost or destroyed in 1945. Hitler had attended a performance of the opera around 1906 or 1907. Who could have known then what transformative effect the opera's charismatic title character - in all his vigorous and provocative oratory, in his sense that only *he* could purify humanity - had on the young mind of Germany's future leader?

The overture begins with a slow movement - a call to arms from the trumpet. Then the strings play one of Wagner's most eloquent and majestic themes, "Rienzi's Prayer for the People," which became the opera's best-known aria. The melody is repeated by brass and woodwinds accompanied by violins and violas. After the repeat, the main section emerges, leading to

the battle hymn voiced by fortissimo brass and joined again with the melody of Rienzi's Prayer. Another passage based on the music of the slow movement gives way to a second subject which is then joined to a counter theme in the trombones. A splendorous, brassy military march, founded on the battle hymn, builds in intensity and brings the overture to a dazzling close.

Tom Wachunas