



Richard Wagner

Born May 22, 1813, Leipzig, Germany.
Died February 13, 1883, Venice, Italy.

Centennial March

In 1876—fifteen years before he moved here to found the Chicago Symphony—pioneering conductor Theodore Thomas served as music director of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. As Wagner’s leading advocate in the United States, Thomas got the idea of commissioning his favorite composer to write music honoring our country’s first one hundred years.

Thomas had introduced some of Wagner’s most important works to this country—the Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* in 1866, less than a year after the world premiere of the opera in Munich (the complete opera waited another twenty years for its first American staging) and the *Meistersinger* Overture seven months later. When the critics railed against the *Tristan* prelude—the *New York Times* dismissed it as “absolutely

without significance”—Thomas only strengthened his resolve to keep programming Wagner’s music. (“I will play it till they like it,” he is reputed to have said.) On the first of his celebrated all-Wagner programs in 1872, when he led the American premiere of “The Ride of the Valkyries,” audience members stood on their chairs and cheered, swept away by music they had never heard before. After the concert, he announced that he was establishing a New York Wagner society to raise funds for the first *Ring* at Bayreuth.

Although Thomas and Wagner never met—Thomas unsuccessfully tried to visit the composer while he was in Europe during the summer of 1867—they did exchange letters. In 1871, Thomas wrote to Wagner, asking for his permission to program orchestral excerpts from *The*

COMPOSED

February–March 1876

FIRST PERFORMANCE

May 10, 1876, Philadelphia, Theodore Thomas conducting

FIRST CSO

PERFORMANCE

April 6, 1900, Theodore Thomas conducting, Auditorium Theatre

INSTRUMENTATION

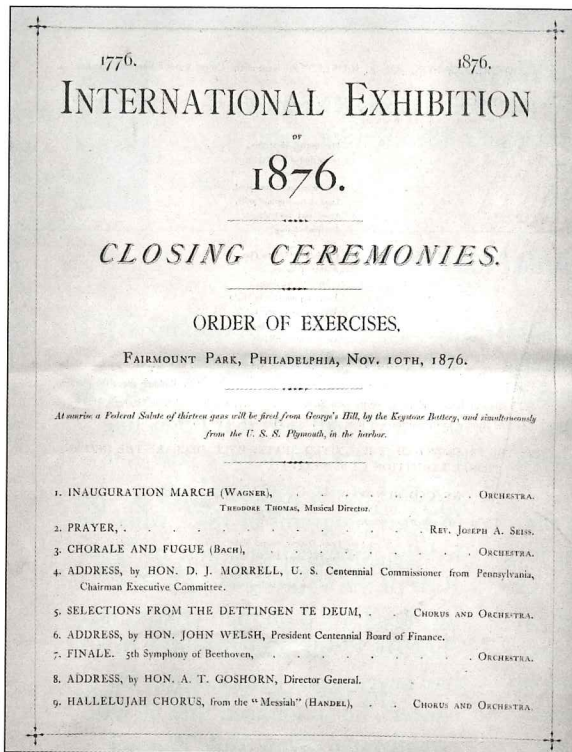
three flutes and piccolo, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons and

contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets and bass trumpet, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, tam-tam, strings

APPROXIMATE

PERFORMANCE TIME

12 minutes



Wagner's Centennial March also was the first work performed at the closing ceremonies of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition

Ring, which was not yet finished. Wagner turned him down. (He was probably nervous about American copyright laws, which didn't protect foreign composers.)

That same year, Thomas and Wagner corresponded frequently about the new march Wagner would write for a country he had never visited, but which had long intrigued him. In the early 1850s, just as he was beginning the *Ring* cycle, he said that it was his intention to "perform it only on the banks of the Mississippi." In 1859, he made plans to spend five or six months in the U.S. the following

winter, but gave up on the idea when he realized that he needed to finish writing *Tristan and Isolde* and didn't dare let anything stand in its way. After that, he mentioned coming to the U.S. less often, except as an occasional threat when he was fed up with the artistic climate in Germany, or when he suspected there was big money to be made in America. (Even as late as 1880, Wagner toyed with moving his entire family to "some climatically beneficial state of the Union," and launching an annual Wagner festival here to replace Bayreuth—in her diary, Cosima says he was thinking about Minnesota.)

Early in 1876, Thomas wrote to Wagner, asking him to agree to the American commission. Negotiations were cordial, although compromised from the start by Wagner's insistence that he be paid \$5,000, an astronomical sum at the time. Wagner based his fee—"I do not know whether it appears appropriate," he admitted—on what he had been offered for similar compositions, of which he had composed practically none, and the unrelated fact that "Mr. Verdi received circa one-half million francs from his publisher, Ricordi, for the . . . rights to his Requiem." Despite the promise of

a big paycheck, Wagner found it tough to muster much enthusiasm for the assignment; he was more into writing music to order than events with which he had a personal connection. On Feb. 18, Cosima wrote in her diary about working complaints of being unable to visualize anything to help him in this composition; it had been different with the *Kaisertochter*, she says, even with *Rule Britannia*, where he had thought of a ship, but here he can think of nothing but the 5,000 dollars he has demanded and perhaps will not get."

In March, Wagner finished his work "under great strain," he complained that Thomas had not contacted him much. "On pages 23 and 24 of the diary," he continued, "I have described the large pauses whose frequency at the first gala performance would be enhanced by the discharge of cannons . . . in the vicinity of some distance away." "The music immensely pleases my friend," he concluded. It did not thrill Thomas, who probably had even before he looked at the score when it arrived that April had seriously overpaid.

The premiere took place in Philadelphia as part of the exhibition opening ceremonies. President Grant, members of Congress, and justices of the Supreme Court. The *New York Tribune* called Wagner's March a masterpiece and the *Herald* critic found it not grand. But the *New York Herald* concluded that it was "al-

winter, but gave up on the idea when he realized that he needed to finish writing *Tristan and Isolde* and didn't dare let anything stand in its way. After that, he mentioned coming to the U.S. less often, except as an occasional threat when he was fed up with the artistic climate in Germany, or when he suspected there was big money to be made in America. (Even as late as 1880, Wagner toyed with moving his entire family to "some climatically beneficial state of the Union," and launching an annual Wagner festival here to replace Bayreuth—in her diary, Cosima says he was thinking about Minnesota.)

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a big paycheck, Wagner found it tough to muster much enthusiasm for the assignment; he was unused to writing music to order and for events with which he had no personal connection. On February 14, Cosima wrote in her diary: "R. still working complains of being unable to visualize anything to himself in this composition; it had been different with the *Kaisermarsch*, he says, even with *Rule Britannia*, where he had thought of a great ship, but here he can think of nothing but the 5,000 dollars he has demanded and perhaps will not get."

In March, Wagner finished the work "under great strain," as he put it, complaining that Thomas should have contacted him much earlier. "On pages 23 and 24 of the work," he continued, "I have designated the large pauses whose festiveness at the first gala performance can be enhanced by the discharge of cannons . . . in the vicinity—but some distance away." "The march immensely pleases my friends here," he concluded. It did not, however, thrill Thomas, who probably knew, even before he looked at the score when it arrived that April, that he had seriously overpaid.

The premiere took place in Philadelphia as part of the exposition opening ceremonies, before President Grant, members of Congress, and justices of the Supreme Court. The *New York Tribune* called Wagner's *Centennial March* a masterpiece and the *Herald* critic found it noble and grand. But the *New York Times* concluded that it was "altogether

devoid of pomp and circumstance," and that its impressive orchestral writing did not make up for its "lack of thought." Wagner later confided to his friends that the best thing about the piece was his fee.

The march is indeed a curiosity in Wagner's output—the rare occasional instrumental work, made to order, from a composer otherwise known for a string of immense music dramas written essentially to please no one but himself. With its powerful main theme and elaborate *Meistersinger*-like development, Wagner's March represents him, not surprisingly, at his most grandiose and ceremonial. It is all the more astonishing, then, to realize that Wagner was at work on the Flowermaidens' delicate, otherworldly music for act 2 of *Parsifal* at the time. (He even scribbled "Amerikanisch sein wollend!"—"Wanting to be an American"—in the margin of a sketch for this *Parsifal* scene.)

After the Philadelphia commission, Thomas and Wagner had no further contact. Thomas continued to champion Wagner's music—with his own orchestra, he gave the U.S. premiere of the *Siegfried Idyll* in 1878. In Chicago, he launched the Chicago Symphony's first concert with Wagner's *A Faust Overture*, led the Orchestra in the *Centennial March* several times at the World's Columbian Exposition—though just once, in 1900, on downtown concerts—and programmed Wagner's works on more than half the Orchestra's subscription programs during his fourteen seasons at the helm. ■