

Weber began his opera *Der Freischütz* in 1817 and completed the work in 1821. The first performance was given on June 18, 1821, in Berlin.

Related by marriage to Mozart—his cousin Constanze married Wolfgang after her sister Aloysia rejected him—Carl Maria von Weber was pushed from an early age to follow in Mozart's footsteps. (He was born the year of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and trained in Salzburg and Vienna not long after Mozart's death.) He immediately showed great promise—he studied composition with Michael Haydn (Joseph's brother) and wrote his first opera at the age of fourteen. Like Mozart, he excelled both as a composer and as a performer—he was one of the most brilliant pianists of his day and a fine conductor. But he earned his place in history as the composer of a single work, *Der Freischütz*, which was an overnight sensation, quickly became the best-loved opera in all Germany, and changed forever the course of the German art form. Shortly after its triumphant premiere in Berlin in 1821, *Der Freischütz* took the world by storm; by 1830 it had been presented in nine languages and before 1850 it had been staged in Cape Town, Sydney, and Rio de Janeiro.

*Der Freischütz* was the work that pointed German opera away from the values of Italian entertainment—Rossini, not Beethoven, was the most popular composer alive at the time—and led it toward loftier subjects. *Der Freischütz* is one of the cornerstones of romantic opera, and a precursor of German nationalism in music—hardly surprising since it was inspired by German folk song, based on a German legend, and set in a German forest. Weber's influence on later German composers, particularly Wagner, was incalculable (although Wagner inevitably downplayed the debt).

*Der Freischütz* (The free-shooter) is a convoluted tale of magic bullets, invisible spirits, and pacts with the devil. Its hair-raising Wolf Glen scene (the finale to act 2)—a landmark in orchestral tone painting—contains supernatural effects that are nearly impossible to realize. Today the opera is rarely staged except in Germany, but its overture remains one of Weber's most popular orchestral works. Although the overture quotes music from the opera itself, it is not simply a hit-tune potpourri, but a foreshadowing, in symphonic terms, of the drama to come. The main material is based on the tenor's act 1 aria, filled with foreboding, and the soprano's joyous music from act 2.

The overture calls for an orchestra consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

--Stephen Larmore