

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)

Overture to *William Tell*

Rossini was original and skillful in orchestration; graceful, elegant and bubbling with the spirit of fun. For the most part, his earlier operas were light, humorous works composed very quickly. *William Tell*, however, was written in a more serious vein, considered and executed conscientiously, and required six months of work. It was composed and produced in Paris in 1829, where it was immediately proclaimed an artistic triumph. It would prove to be his last. Following the Paris production of *William Tell*, at age 37, Rossini began settling into his long and comfortable retirement.

The opera is based on the 14th century legend of a Swiss patriot who refused to recognize Austrian authority and was made to shoot an apple off the head of his son with a bow and arrow.

In the Overture to *William Tell*, Rossini has met the dramatic requirements of the overture, linking the work to events in the story thus creating a miniature tone poem. The first movement is a tranquil introduction depicting profound solitude. It begins with a solo cello theme accompanied by the basses. The next movement, "The Storm," is not as great or overpowering as Beethoven's "Storm" from the Sixth Symphony, but is majestic and beautiful. There are staccato notes in the wind instruments which some think represents drops of rain. The bass drum re-echoes distant thunder in the mountains and then the decrescendo is skillfully handled.

Following "The Storm" is a refreshing pastoral scene featuring the English horn and flute. The triangle represents a little bell worn by the sheep, "while the shepherds call and answer in their joyful songs."

As the last note of the English horn is heard, the trumpets sound a fanfare beginning the final exciting *Allegro*. Although the theme and rhythm have become hackneyed over time, the piece has a genuine warmth and impetuosity which is irresistible. According to Berlioz, "The Overture to *William Tell* is the work of an enormous talent, so much like genius that it might easily be mistaken for it." (Margaret Bracken, ed. Stephen Larmore)