

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Hänsel und Gretel



**Music by Engelbert Humperdinck
Libretto by Adelheid Wette**

Based on a Grimm fairytale

**An Opera in Three Acts
Sung in German**

Setting: A forest in Germany

Characters

Gretel (soprano) Edita Gruberova
Hänsel (mezzo-soprano)Brigitte Fassbaender
Gertrude, their mother (mezzo-soprano)Helga Dernesch
Peter, their father (baritone)..... Hermann Prey
The Sandman (soprano)Norma Burrowes
The Dew Fairy (soprano)Elfriede Höbarth
The Witch (mezzo-soprano) Sena Jurinac
Fourteen Angels and gingerbread children (silent)

Conducted by Sir Georg Solti
Performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
and the Vienna Boys' Choir

Première performance at the Weimar Court Theatre, on December 23, 1893

Synopsis

Act I

Scene 1: A small cottage in the woods

Hänsel and Gretel are at home, working to earn some money for their poor family. Hänsel makes brooms and Gretel knits a stocking. Both children are hungry and bored, especially Hänsel. Gretel tries to get her brother's mind off of food by teaching him how to dance. She also shows him a hidden jug of milk that was given to them by a kind neighbor. Hänsel's delight at this news knows no bounds, and he gallops around joyously, sticking his fingers into the jug, and tasting the milk.

Suddenly the door to the cottage springs open. Their mother, Gertrude, is furious at how little work they've done while she was gone. She angrily chases Gretel around the room. The mother bumps against the table, and the jug crashes to the floor into pieces. Upset, she thrusts a basket into Gretel's hand, and orders the children not to return until they have filled it with strawberries. Then she sinks into a chair, sobbing in despair.

The cheerful voice of her husband, Peter, is heard in the distance. He has returned home from a successful day of peddling brooms, and enters the house carrying a sack full of food. He holds up a long link of sausages; then produces a ham, bread, potatoes, butter, eggs, flour and vegetables. He proudly tells Gertrude that he had sold all his brooms to a wedding party for the best price he has ever received. He then asks Gertrude where the children are. She tells him that she sent them into the woods to pick strawberries. Peter becomes alarmed. He tells Gertrude of a witch that lives in the woods who bakes children into gingerbread in her oven, and then eats them. With a shriek of terror, the mother rushes from the house to search for her children, Peter following close behind.

Scene 2: A Forest Glade

It is sunset. Gretel is making a garland of wild flowers and Hänsel is filling his basket with wild strawberries. Hänsel comes over, proudly displaying his basketful of berries. Gretel places her garland of flowers on her head, proclaiming that she is Queen of the Woods. Hänsel presents her with his basket of strawberries. Gretel pops a berry into Hänsel's mouth. Then he drops one into hers. She takes another and he takes a handful. They quarrel for the berries, and in a few seconds the basket is empty. The children begin frantically to search for more berries, but it has grown too dark.

A cuckoo calls. The children are afraid and start for home. Hänsel leads Gretel a few steps in one direction and then in another. At last he confesses that they are hopelessly lost! Gretel bursts into tears, and Hänsel consoles her, putting his arm about her protectively. Their fears multiply as they see wild animals behind every tree.



At this moment, the mists lift and, in the shadows there appears a tiny man, all in grey, and carrying a small sack. The children recognize him as the Sandman. Softly, he approaches the children and sprinkles sand over them. Then he disappears into the woods.

Getting sleepy, the children kneel together, fold their hands, and say their evening prayer. Sinking down onto the moss, with arms twined about each other, they fall fast asleep. A light breaks through the mists and fourteen angels group themselves protectively around the sleeping children, two at their heads, two at their feet, two upon the right hand, two upon the left hand. The others hover around. The curtain slowly falls.

Act II

The Witch's House



Morning is breaking. Hänsel und Gretel are still asleep under the tree. The angels have all vanished. Out from the forest steps a Dew Fairy, who sprinkles dewdrops over the children, and then disappears. The children awaken. Gretel springs to her feet and shakes Hänsel, who, after a little grumbling also wakes. They relate the wonderful dream they both had, of the angels who stood guard over them throughout the night.

The morning mists rapidly rise, revealing a tiny cottage made of delicious cakes and candies. On one side of the cottage is an outdoor oven, on the other a large cage. Both are connected to the house by a fence of gingerbread children.

Hänsel und Gretel approach the cottage cautiously, lured by the tempting aromas coming from the cottage. They break off a small piece from the cottage and begin to eat it. A voice from inside the house demands, “Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?” Taken aback, the children decide it must be the wind. When no further sound is heard, they continue eating. Stealthily, the door of the house opens, and an ugly old witch appears. The children are so engrossed that they do not notice the witch until she grabs Hänsel by the arm.

Hänsel succeeds in freeing himself and, seizing Gretel’s hand, the witch pulls her away. “Hold!” cries the witch, raising her magic wand. Waving it to and fro, she chants, “Hocus pocus, witch’s charm! Move not, as you fear my arm! Back or forward do not try, fixed you are by my evil eye!” Gretel stands frozen to the spot, transfixed by the witch’s spell. The witch leads Hänsel into the little cage, and locks the cage door after him.

The witch disappears into the house, returning a few minutes later with delicious sweets, which she feeds to Hänsel to fatten him up. The witch then orders Gretel to go into the house to set the table. Gretel hurries in. Hänsel curls up on the floor of his cage, pretending to be asleep.

The witch prepares the fire under her oven and, rubbing her hands with glee, thinks how she will roast Gretel into a gingerbread cake and then eat her. She grabs her broomstick and, shrieking madly, flies over the roof of the cottage (“The Witch’s Ride”).



The witch soon returns. While she is heaping wood on the fire, Gretel opens the door of the cage, and lets Hänsel out. The witch does not notice that Hänsel is now free. She attempts to lure Gretel into the oven by ordering her to peep into it to see if it is hot enough. Gretel pretends that she doesn’t understand what the witch wants her to do. She asked the witch to show her how. Impatiently, the witch opens the oven door. When she bends over to peer in, Hänsel und Gretel shove her in and slam the oven door shut behind her. They dance about together joyously.

Suddenly there is a terrific explosion. The oven has exploded into bits! The gingerbread boys and girls who formed the fence have turned into real children. They stand motionless, with their eyes closed. They sing softly, “O touch us, we pray, that we may awake.” Gretel goes from one child to the other, touching their cheeks. The children open their eyes and smile. Hänsel seizes the witch’s wand and says, “Hocus pocus, elderbush! Rigid body, loosen, hush!” The witch’s spell is finally broken. The children come to life and dance about Hänsel und Gretel, thankful to be free.

In the distance their father, Peter, is heard. He and Gertrude, their mother both appear. Hänsel flings himself into his mother's arms; Gretel rushes to her father. Meanwhile, two of the other children have pulled out the witch from the oven, who herself has been baked into a big gingerbread figure. Surrounding her, they all join together in a joyous song of thanks. The curtain slowly falls.

Engelbert Humperdinck

Born: Siegburg, Germany, September 1, 1854

Died: Neustrelitz, Germany, September 27, 1921



Engelbert Humperdinck began his musical education with piano lessons at the age of seven. His first experience of opera was in 1868, when he heard Lortzing's *Undine*, which, in later life, he continued to refer to Lortzing as one of his models. The consequences were immediate — in the same year he began working on two Singspiels, *Perla and Claudine von Villa Bella*, as well as the music drama, *Harziperes*.

His father was alarmed by these distractions from his serious study but, on the enthusiastic advice of the composer Ferdinand Hiller, he agreed to let his son enter the Cologne Conservatory in 1872. Humperdinck was very successful as a music student, winning the Mozart Prize of Frankfurt in 1876, the Mendelssohn Prize of Berlin in 1879 and the Meyerbeer Prize of Berlin in 1881. In 1877, with the aid of its financial award, he moved to the Munich Konigliche Musikschule, where he first studied with Franz Lachner and then with Rheinberger.

At that time, new influences began to disturb his adherence to the Schumannesque traditions of his teachers. He had heard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* in 1878 and joined the Munich Wagnerian society, "Orden vom Gral." While enrolled there he won an award from the Mendelssohn Foundation of Berlin.

In 1880 Humperdinck visited Wagner during his scholarship tour of Italy. It proved even more decisive. Wagner invited him to come to Bayreuth in 1881 to help with the first production of *Parsifal*. Later Humperdinck became the music tutor to Richard Wagner's son, Siegfried. Though friends feared such contact would inhibit Humperdinck's creativity, the composer said he would willingly give up originality if it meant that he could write choruses like those in *Parsifal*. He also pointed out that there were lighter sides to Wagner's writing which were not compatible with his own more Mendelssohnian inclinations.

It was ten years before Humperdinck was able to show the fruit of these new influences. Although he successfully pursued his career as a teacher and critic, becoming a lecturer at the Cologne Conservatory in 1887 and later at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, all his operatic plans came to naught.

Significantly, the inhibition caused by Wagner was overcome by a request from Humperdinck's sister, Adelheid Wette, to set some folksongs for the Grimm fairytale, *Hänsel und Gretel*. Adelheid wrote the libretto for the opera and added characters and scenes to expand the little story to operatic dimensions. *Hänsel und Gretel* premiered in Weimar in December of 1893, then quickly played in opera houses all over Europe, representing the perfect antidote to the chilly, controversial winds blowing out of Italy at the time.

Ostensibly, a work for children, the opera has always found favor with audiences of all ages, thanks to its odd blend of fable-like innocence and Wagnerian weight. Humperdinck's successful blending of a children's story with his own, rather monumental, orchestral world, has made *Hänsel und Gretel* the only post-Wagnerian work to consider a successful synthesis of the German master's style. The simplicity of the proposal suited the composer's unpretentious nature. As the opera, *Hänsel und Gretel* developed from folksongs to a Singspiel and finally to opera, the composer began to question the aesthetic wisdom of his

choice. The public's response to the work, however, confirmed that its spontaneity and naivety were among its greatest assets.

The immense success of *Hänsel und Gretel* proved difficult for Humperdinck to follow. At first, he continued to produce works in the fairy-tale genre, including *Die sieben Geislein*, *Königskinder*, and the *Sleeping Beauty* story, *Dornroschen*. However, he never matched the success of *Hänsel und Gretel*, which remains his musical legacy.

The operatic version of *Königskinder*, another characteristic piece in his naïve, folk-like style, premièred in New York in 1910; like *Hänsel und Gretel* it started from simple song settings and went through an intermediate stage to a full opera, showing Wagnerian harmonic and textural influences.

Although Humperdinck enjoyed a fruitful collaboration in the theatre with Max Reinhardt, providing incidental music for a number of Shakespearean productions in Berlin, he is mostly remembered for his first opera, the much loved *Hänsel und Gretel*. Humperdinck's other works, particularly the pleasant 1880 *Humoreske* for orchestra in E major, are occasionally performed today, his later, more ambitious operas never quite succeeded in gaining a firm place in repertory.

Hänsel und Gretel



In 1880 Humperdinck's sister, Adelheid Wette, asked him to compose some songs for a domestic entertainment she had written for her children to perform. With mock-Wagnerian pomposity, this little drawing-room play was presented as "A Nursery Dedicatory-Festival-Drama."

Humperdinck, looking for a libretto, realized that his sister's little drama could be expanded to provide one. Thus *Hänsel und Gretel* came into being. The original Grimm fairytale, on which *Hänsel und Gretel* is founded, starts in a starkly realistic vein. Times were hard, work was scarce and food prices were high. So, in order that there should be two less mouths to feed, Hänsel und Gretel were taken out into the woods and abandoned there. The gentle Adelheid Wette was shocked at such callous behavior, so she tried to soften it. In her version, Mother comes home after a tiring and profitless day. The children have been playing, not working. In a scuffle, the milk jug is broken — the only food in the house. The mother, in a sudden and understandable outburst of temper and despair, sends the children out into the forest to gather strawberries.

In its own way, this first scene is also very realistic, and there's more than a hint that Father (even though *his* day had been profitable) had been drinking on his way home. Poverty, hunger, financial worries that have turned a mother's tender love to harshness — all is set for a domestic tragedy. But then *Hänsel und Gretel* becomes an epic. Food may be a recurrent preoccupation — for the parents, for the children, for the greedy old child-eating witch — but the theme is the outwitting of an ogress by two resourceful and spirited children.

Many morals can be drawn from *Hänsel und Gretel*. The children are saved and safe by their own wits. At the close of the forest scene, the pious children sing their evening prayer before settling down to sleep. Fourteen angels descend to keep watch over them, and Humperdinck clothes the "Dream Pantomime" in music of shining, ethereal beauty. But, when day dawns, the angels are gone. They were as a dream — the reality that faces them is the menace of the witch's gingerbread house!

Hänsel und Gretel is a Wagnerian music-drama with nursery subject matter. When the milk jug is broken, the orchestral climax could accompany the shattering of Wotan's spear. The "Witch's Ride" is a "Ride of the Valkyries," but with broomsticks for mounts instead of magic horses. The shining "Dream Pantomime" owes something to *Lohengrin*, and perhaps more to *Parsifal*. The finale, the awakening of the gingerbread children, is in effect an apotheosis and redemption.

There have been people disturbed by, critical of, the application of Wagner's elaborate methods to so slight a tale. But most people have loved *Hänsel und Gretel* — loved it as children, and loved it perhaps even more as adults. And they do so for two reasons. First, because they can still share in the realities of its emotions. The forest terrors that scare Gretel, in the second scene, are kin to those that scare Mime, in *The Ring*. (Anyone who has been alone in a forest at night must know them.) And second, because the music is so captivatingly beautiful. Humperdinck uses the same size orchestra as Wagner in *Die Meistersinger*, but there is no heaviness in his handling of it — only richness, warmth, delicacy, and, to quote the critic, Robin Legge, "...once or twice, as in the twilight woodland scene with the cuckoo, a poetry more enchanting than anything of the kind ever achieved by Wagner."

Hänsel und Gretel was first performed at the Weimar Court Theatre on December 23, 1893, conducted by Richard Strauss. Within a few years it had been heard all over the world. Gustav Mahler conducted it in Hamburg; Felix Weingartner conducted it in Berlin; and Cosima Wagner staged it in Dessau.

Hänsel und Gretel reached New York in 1895, and from 1905 until 1917 the Metropolitan performed it every year thereafter as a favorite Christmas opera, missing only one season. *Hänsel und Gretel* returned to the Met in 1927, in a new production that lasted twelve consecutive seasons. It was coupled often with *Pagliacci*, and on occasion with *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In 1923, *Hänsel und Gretel* was the first opera to be broadcast in Europe (from Covent Garden). It was also the first complete Metropolitan Opera performance heard on radio, on Christmas Day in 1931. The work was revived in English in 1946, with Risë Stevens and Nadine Conner in the title roles. In June 1947, with this same cast, the first complete opera was recorded by the company. In 1967 it returned to the Met with a new production by Robert O'Hearn and Nathaniel Merrill. In 1982, again on Christmas Day, the opera was telecast live on the PBS *Live from the Met* series with Frederica von Stade and Judith Blegen in the title roles. This was the first, and so far the only *Live from the Met* telecast of an entire opera presented in the afternoon, rather than in prime time.

Hänsel und Gretel: The Video (1981)

Starring Brigitte Fassbaender, Edita Gruberova and Sena Jurinac; conducted by Sir Georg Solti



The production is filmed, not staged in Vienna under the direction of August Everding in January and February 1981 using special effects such as stop motion photography and animation for the more imaginative scenes. Although limited compared to today's computer graphics, it is quite a magical performance. The audio is top-drawer and the acting is compelling and believable. This is an all-star cast, conductor and orchestra that will not disappoint.

Brigitte Fassbaender sings Hänsel and she is wonderful in the part. Her light mezzo makes her a perfect Hänsel. Edita Gruberova sings Gretel and she too is marvelous. The pair in tandem carry the weight of this lyrical opera without difficulty — perfect casting. The late Hermann Prey as the Father was a comedic singer/actor of the first magnitude, but he tones his comic gifts down for this role. He looks suitably haggard in the film, but his singing is as lively as ever. Well-known Helga Dernesch as the mother, is also excellent. Most interesting is the much-loved soprano Sena Jurinac in the role of the witch, two years before her retirement.

This is a beautifully acted production with credible characters. The dream pantomime is one of the most breathtaking things in cinema.