

## MUSIC

# A Children's *Wilhelm Tell* Chorus

To celebrate the bicentennial of the birth in 1792 of the Italian opera composer Gioacchino Rossini, we publish here a version of one of his works which has been adapted for youthful voices. It comes from his grand opera written for the Paris stage in 1829, *Guillaume Tell*, which was based on Friedrich Schiller's 1804 drama, *Wilhelm Tell*.

Previously, this column has featured little known settings in the original German of the poems of Schiller, for whom the Schiller Institute was named. One result has been to provide a pathway for English speakers to appreciate more fully the beauty of these poems, since only a shadow of a good poem is captured in translation, while a musical setting "translates" poetry into a more universal language. Moreover, we have tried to demonstrate how invariant features link widely different such settings. These settings, done in an era before our present dark age, point to the connection between language and music which is all but lost today.

The "Tyrolean Chorus" printed here adapts, in English translation of Rossini's French libretto, one of the numbers performed in Act IV of this enormously long and difficult opera—so long and difficult, in fact, that it is rarely staged today, al-

though a few recordings exist. Rossini, a master of the *bel canto* singing voice, who had studied Mozart's compositional techniques, expected his opera to be sung at the prevailing Paris pitch of 1829, which was A = 430 Hz (based on the Classical C = 256 Hz tuning), not today's A = 440 and higher. He also expected soloists to be able to execute rapid "floritura" passages in a very high range, something few can perform today.

The legendary figure of Tell, the archer who killed the tyrant Gessler, had been popular during the American and French revolutions. Schiller elevated the Rütli Oath [SEE page 3, this issue], an actual historical occurrence of 1291 which asserted the independence of the central Swiss cantons, into a universal fight against tyranny and for the inalienable rights of man enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

Not surprisingly, in an era when the restored French monarchy of Louis XVIII was anticipating another revolution (it came in 1830), and when the taste of Paris opera-goers had been banalized by extravaganzas, the libretto of *Guillaume Tell* departed considerably from Schiller's original drama. Yet Rossini found ways to express the defiant spirit of the Swiss in musical terms.

This chorus, set off by a ballet, is performed to "entertain" the haughty Austrian governor Gessler, who has just raised his hat on a pole in the Altdorf marketplace, demanding that every passerby bow to it. Gessler orders the mountain folk to express their gratitude for Austrian rule in song and dance. Later

in this act, Wilhelm Tell will enter the square, ignore the hat, and be condemned to shoot an apple from his son's head in the most famous episode of the story. But first, the locals make fun of Gessler by singing not of their thanks for the Austrian yoke, but of a mountain lass whose feet are as swift and free as a bird's flight.

Our arrangement of Rossini's five-part *a cappella* chorus into a soprano duo, incorporates the three men's parts into a keyboard accompaniment. It was used by the Ben Franklin Youth Chorus in Leesburg, Virginia for a "Tell Festival" in 1991, marking the 700th anniversary of the Rütli Oath. The melismatic passages sung on "Ah!" with their alternating leaps and scale-passages, provide a means to teach contrasting techniques of staccato and legato singing. The fortissimo and pianissimo measures teach the typically Italian style of setting off couplets by dynamic contrast. The children, aged eight to fourteen, thoroughly enjoyed this venture into Italian operatic singing and the world of Schiller.

The program also included two songs from the Schiller's original *Wilhelm Tell*, set in their German texts by Robert Schumann in his *Song Album for Young People*, and an abbreviated version of the Rütli scene from the play. We found that the interspersing of German and Italian music was better than either one by itself, because each had its own kind of beauty and technical challenges—the Rossini delighting for its bounce and vocal acrobatics, and the Schumann inspiring by its greater contrapuntal depth.

The study of classical settings of poetry is perhaps the most efficient way to learn the principles of poetic composition. Selections offered here are either previously unpublished, or no longer available in print.

Although the 700th anniversary has passed, a “Tell” project is an excellent way to introduce children to Schiller. For those interested in doing this, the Schumann songs (Op.

79) can be found in Vol. II of the Peters edition of his songs. A new translation of the play, including these two songs in English versions which with minor adjustments can

be sung to the Schumann music, is included in Vol. II of the Schiller Institute’s three-volume series, *Friedrich Schiller: Poet of Freedom*.

—Nora Hamerman

# Tyrolean Chorus

from the opera «Guillaume Tell»

Text adapted from the French of  
Stefano Vittorio Giuseppe Jouy e Ippolito Bis  
(1769–1844)

Music by Gioachino Rossini  
(1792–1868)  
Arranged for children’s chorus

**Soprano I & II**

**Piano**

**Allegretto** *p e leggero* *pp*

Swift as a bird, in sum-mer sky, ah!

**Allegretto** *p*

with fair-y feet, o maid-en fly, ah! Thy ra-diant glan-ces our

*ff* *pp*

plea-sure en-han-ces, thy joy-ous dan-ces the breez-es out-vie, ah!

*ff* *pp*

Ah! Swift as a bird in sum-mer

sky, ah! with fair-y feet, o maid-en fly, ah! Swift as a

bird, ah! o maiden fly, ah! Swift as a bird, ah! o maiden fly, ah! Thy

ra - dant — glan - ces our plea - sure en - han - ces, thy joy - ous — dan - ces the breez - es out - vic.