

Carl Maria von Weber
Overture to “Euryanthe”

CARL MARIA VON WEBER was born in Eutin, near Lubeck, apparently on November 18, 1786, and died in London on June 5, 1826. He composed his “grand heroic-romantic opera” “Euryanthe” to a libretto by Helmina von Chézy in 1822 and 1823; the first performance took place in the Kärntnertor Theater in Vienna on October 25, 1823.

THE SCORE OF THE OVERTURE calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

Following the enormous success of *Der Freischütz*, Weber was eager to continue forging a new path for German opera. In October 1821 he requested a libretto from an acquaintance with literary velleities, Helmina von Chézy. Overruling her protestations that she had never written a theatrical piece, knew nothing about opera, and had not even been to an opera for years, Weber presented her with samples of librettos he admired in order to give her some indication of what he was looking for. Everyone was hoping for a carbon copy of *Freischütz* (theater managers in the early nineteenth century were no different from television executives today), but Weber was determined to move into higher spheres and to write a serious, through-composed score.

Up until the 1820s, all German operas had fallen into the tradition of the *Singspiel*, literally a “sung play,” with spoken dialogue connecting independent musical numbers. Italian and French opera in the serious genres, at least, had already become completely musical, sung from beginning to end, thus avoiding problems involved in mixing the elevated tone of song with the more casual, often farcical air of dialogue. But in Germany, even operas aiming at the very highest level of ethical tone— *The Magic Flute* and *Fidelio*, for example—were not distinguished in a formal sense from the merest vulgar farce.

Weber was determined to change that. He planned to write music that would run from beginning to end of the work. It is unfortunate that he did not listen to Chézy when she insisted that she was not up to the task, because she was absolutely right. (In fact, her incompetence was ultimately responsible for the near loss of two important compositions: in addition to *Euryanthe*, she wrote the play to which Schubert composed his delightful *Rosamunde* music, but the colossal failure of the play itself meant that Schubert’s music went lost for decades until it was discovered almost by accident.) Even when she had sent him a hopeless first draft, Weber did not give up on her, possibly because he felt some pity for her: she had already been through two unhappy marriages and had become, by this time, a pathetic eccentric. In any case, Weber realized that the first draft of the libretto was quite impossible. He consulted other theatrical and literary people, including such estimable figures as Ludwig Tieck, but failed to take such advice as they offered. In the end, even though Act III alone was rewritten eleven times, the result was a tangled hodgepodge of incidents and insufficiently motivated characters. In fact, no libretto in the history of opera has ever been so vehemently criticized as this one, especially because the high level of Weber’s musical imagination makes it quite clear that under other circumstances, his opera might have been one of the great dramatic masterpieces.

The essential kernel of the plot is a common one, found in Boccaccio and many other sources: a husband boasts of his wife’s fidelity; he is then falsely convinced that she has been untrue; he attempts to avenge his honor by killing her, though she escapes; the false betrayer is discovered and punished; the couple is reunited. Besides having an old-fashioned plot, the libretto suffers also from absurdly stilted language. And the plot has some gaping holes, most obviously the fact that the heroine could have cleared up the entire mess when she was first accused but failed to do so for no other reason, it seems, than that the story would end too soon to make a full opera.

But what is important is how the composer reacts in his music, and there is no doubt that Weber produced a rich, colorful, dramatic, and brilliantly evocative score. In fact, no German composer after Weber could write an opera without taking *Euryanthe* into account: the rich use of chromatic harmony, far more daring than any composer of the time had employed; the varied orchestral color;

the determination to unify the score, rather than allow it to be a patchwork of independent numbers—all these things pointed the way to the future.

As was typical of his practice, Weber composed the overture last. In *Der Freischütz*, the overture had provided something of a dramatic summary of the story to follow: the conflict between good and evil was already laid forth in the music heard before the curtain rose. The overture to *Euryanthe* was not so closely connected to the drama, though it is without doubt a brilliant achievement. Rather than summarizing the opposing forces of the plot, Weber used two themes associated with his hero, Adolar, for the two main themes of the sonata-form overture. Following a fanfare-like statement with rushing string parts, the winds utter Adolar's firm declaration of faith, "Ich bau' auf Gott und meine Euryanthe" ("I trust in God and my Euryanthe"); the festive E-flat music associated with the court moves to the dominant, where first violins introduce his love song, "O Seligkeit, dich fass' ich kaum" ("O such bliss I can scarcely grasp"). Most of the remainder of the overture simply puts these themes through their paces, though there is an absolutely magical passage in the development section which quotes the music Weber wrote for a ghost scene, with the uncanny orchestral color created by the simple device of having eight solo violins, muted, playing against tremolos in the viola section. A fugato fills the heart of the development and brings about the return of the principal themes and a conclusion of festive brilliance.

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THE FIRST KNOWN AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF THE OVERTURE TO "EURYANTHE" was given by the New York Philharmonic under the direction of George Loder on May 15, 1844.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE OF THE OVERTURE was given by Georg Henschel on December 9, 1882, subsequent BSO performances being given by Wilhelm Gericke, Franz Kneisel, Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, Karl Muck, Max Fiedler, Otto Urack, Ernst Schmidt, Henri Rabaud, Pierre Monteux, Bruno Walter, Serge Koussevitzky, Richard Burgin, Charles Munch, Eleazar de Carvalho, Maxim Shostakovich (the most recent subscription performances, in December 1981), Emil Tchakarov, and Marek Janowski (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 5, 1990).