

Overture to Tannhäuser

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

Written: 1845

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Fourteen minutes

An opera overture “must encompass the general spirit of the action without the misuse of musical means, and conduct it toward a solution that corresponds ‘apprehensively’ to that of the drama.” So said Richard Wagner, the celebrated German opera composer. The way an overture should connect with the following drama is through the character of the two themes presented. Wagner presented this theory about the opera overture shortly before he wrote *Tannhäuser*. Its overture fits his equation perfectly.

Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* is really a combination of two different stories: the legend of Tannhäuser from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (a collection of German folk poetry) and the legend of the singers’ contest. Tannhäuser is first seen with Venus, goddess of sensuous delights. Tired of this sort of thing, Tannhäuser leaves Venus in search of a purer love, finding it embodied in the woman Elisabeth. Tannhäuser encounters some monks and decides to go on a pilgrimage to Rome to receive a pardon from the Pope. The Pope responds that it would be a surer thing to see his staff break into blossom than for him to receive redemption. Dejected, Tannhäuser returns to Elisabeth. He engages in a singing contest with other knights. They threaten him and—like Beethoven’s *Fidelio*—Elisabeth intercedes. Eventually, it is through her death that Tannhäuser gains redemption—and the Pope’s staff blossoms!

The musical themes of the overture deal strictly with Tannhäuser. You will first hear the pilgrim’s hymn played softly by clarinets, bassoons and horns. It is repeated, this time played much louder and more heroically by the trombones. The faster section of the overture is the

Venusberg music, representing Venus and her sensual pleasures. This music gives way to a return of the pilgrim's hymn of the beginning. This time, ceaselessly murmuring strings accompany it in the background. The overture ends with a blaze of glorious brass. The sacred wins out over the profane.

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Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra in F minor, Op. 21

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Written: 1829

Movements: three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

Frédéric Chopin was one of the greatest pianists of all time, but his reputation rests on remarkably few public concerts; he gave only three after the age of twenty-five. He played most of his pieces for small elite parties at the various salons in Paris. He wrote only six pieces for piano and orchestra, all of them before he turned twenty-one.

Chopin was almost entirely self-taught. He developed a style in which the melody, most often played in the right hand, had a singing lyrical quality. Chopin also helped define *tempo rubato*, that “robbing” of time that gives music from the nineteenth century its “push-pull” quality. He played very lightly, almost daintily.

Chopin wrote his *Second Piano Concerto* when he was nineteen. Actually, it was the first concerto he wrote, but he published it some years after his only other concerto. Unlike most concertos where the orchestra and solo instrument sometimes compete against each other, this concerto is all about the piano. It has the standard three movements. The first starts with a long orchestral introduction, presenting the two main themes. The piano enters, plays the same themes, adds new material, and then develops the first theme. The orchestra and piano then restate the opening.

The second movement has a beautiful slow melody with a dramatic middle section. Chopin's youthful infatuation with the singer Konstancja Gładowska served as the inspiration for this music. He wrote about it to his friend Tytus Wojciechowski:

I have met my ideal, whom I have been faithfully serving for six months without making mention of my feelings. I dream about her, and the *Adagio* of my new concerto has taken shape under her influence. . . . It is unbearable not to be able to free oneself of an oppressive burden. You know to what I am alluding. I am therefore entrusting to the piano what I have sometimes spoken of to you.

The final movement is what the eminent English music critic Donald Francis Tovey called "a delightful example of the long ramble through picturesque musical scenery, first straight up a range of keys and then straight down again which Chopin, for reasons unknown to history, called a rondo."

Symphony in D Minor
César Franck (1822–1890)

Written: 1887–88

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 40 minutes

When Nicholas-Joseph Franck arrived in Paris with his thirteen-year-old son César, it was with the hopes and dreams of a pushy stage father. César was only ten when he earned a first prize in piano at the Liège Conservatory, so papa was then ready to take the world by storm with his precocious son. César enrolled at the Paris conservatory, where he again won the *premier prix* in piano. However, by the age of twenty his career as a virtuoso wasn't going anywhere, so the Francks returned to their native Belgium. César eventually escaped his father's clutches, moved back to Paris, got married, supported himself by teaching private lessons, and worked as an organist at a small church. Ultimately, he got a more prestigious appointment at the basilica of Saint Clotilde, where he spent the rest of his life. César also drew a small circle of students around himself, known as the *bande à Franck*. (They would become the next generation of France's leading composers.) Nowadays, his fame rests on the music that he wrote during the last ten years of his life. Perhaps the best known is his *Symphony in D*.

The short melodic idea that begins the *Symphony in D* forms the basis for the entire work. Slow, dark, and foreboding, it is reminiscent of a similar theme used by Beethoven, Liszt, and Wagner to evoke the idea of "fate." After an extended slow introduction—nearly six minutes long!—the symphony finally gets going. Eventually, a second theme emerges, much more positive in tone, that some call the "faith" motive. After substantial development, the "fate" theme returns, this time presented with awesome power by the brass.

Franck combines the standard slow second and fast third movements of a symphony

into a single movement. The English horn begins the beautiful main theme accompanied by harp and pizzicato strings. In the middle of this movement, there is a brief diversion, introduced by the clarinet. Explaining the last movement, Franck wrote, "The finale takes up all the themes again, as in Beethoven's Ninth. They do not return as quotations, however; I have elaborated them and given them the role of new elements."

César Franck had his detractors. "Incompetence pushed to dogmatic lengths," declared Charles Gounod. Others insisted that his music was "Cathedrals in sound." Nevertheless, Franck's *Symphony in D Minor* almost single-handedly brought symphonies by French composers back to concert halls.

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