

Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*
Program Notes by Dr. Diane Retallack

Walpurgis night is the eve of May 1 when, according to German legend, the witches and devils dance on the Brocken Peak of the Harz Mountains. The name can be traced to St. Walburga, a missionary abbess of the 8th century. Mysterious stories about her burial became confused with a pagan fertility goddess called Waldburg. Current explanations were not available in the 18th century, however, and an entirely different attempt to explain the origin of the legend sparked the imagination of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In a letter to his close friend and confidante, Carl Friederich Zelter, Goethe writes: (Nov. 3, 1812)

“... one of our German antiquarians has endeavoured to rescue, and to give an historical foundation for the story of the witches’ and devils’ ride on the Brocken, a legend which has been current in Germany, from time immemorial. His explanation is that the heathen priests and patriarchs of Germany, when they were driven from their sacred groves and when Christianity was forced upon the people, used to retire at the beginning of spring with their faithful followers to the wild, inaccessible heights of the Harz mountains, in order, according to the ancient custom, there to offer prayer and flame to the unembodied god of heaven and earth. And further, he thinks, they may have found it well to disguise a number of their own people so as to keep their superstitious foes at a distance, and that thus, protected by the antics of devils, they carried out the purest of services.

I found this explanation somewhere, a few years ago, but cannot remember the name of the author. The idea pleased me, and I have turned this fabulous story back again into a poetical fable.”

In the poem, Goethe casts these "heathen priests and patriarchs of Germany" as Druids. With the discovery of native peoples in new worlds, and the romanticizing of the "noble savage," coupled with primitive attempts to explain the past unknown with the rising study of anthropology, there was a craze of interest in the Druids, and it would not have been much of a stretch for Goethe to portray the heathen Saxons as Druids, although their dates and locations of existence had nothing to do with each other. The poem is directly suggestive of the campaign of Charlemagne and his Christian soldiers against the heathen Saxons in the eighth century.

The poem was written in 1799 as a solitary piece and should not be confused with the Walpurgisnacht scenes in *Faust*. Goethe wrote the poem as a ballad to be set to music, and sent it immediately to Zelter, but after several attempts at composition, Zelter abandoned the project.

It is little wonder that the poem eventually found its way into the hands of Felix Mendelssohn. Zelter introduced Mendelssohn, his prize pupil, to Goethe when Mendelssohn was just a boy aged twelve, and the musical child prodigy and old master poet formed a warm relationship which grew as Mendelssohn matured.

Mendelssohn began the composition in 1830, right after a visit with Goethe, and agonized over the project for two years, as was typical of his composition process, only to completely revise it ten years later and arrive at a final form in January of 1843. The element of fantasy inspired Mendelssohn's most characteristic and successful compositions. In the image of the Walpurgisnacht, the classically trained Mendelssohn appears to have been pushed to his romantic extreme. Letters to his family concerning the first edition reflect a conservative hesitancy, uncertain as to whether or not the bass drum should be

employed, while acknowledging that a tremendous racket must be made, and proclaiming that his is probably the only piece written about the witches' dance on the Brocken that does not use the piccolo. Mendelssohn returned to the *Walpurgisnacht* ten years later to give the piece its full worth, and we find the witches' dance in the final version to be certainly his wildest, most raucous chorus, complete, incidentally, with bass drum and piccolo.

The cantata begins with a full concert overture depicting "Bad Weather", the main theme of which is reminiscent of the introductory theme of the "*Scottish*" *Symphony*. Foreshadowings of spring alternate with cold wintry winds until the springtime fully blooms with a fluttering, descending motif similar to a theme which appears in the first movement of Brahms' *Second Symphony*. The main spring theme is taken over by soloist and chorus to begin "Es lacht der Mai!" (May is laughing!) The story unfolds like an unstaged opera, with soloists as well as chorus assuming characters in the drama. Symbolic motifs and returning thematic material provide musical and dramatic unity.

Beyond the realm of fantasy, *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* encompasses some deeper philosophical concerns. Mendelssohn wrote to Goethe to inquire about the philosophical meaning of the poem. Goethe's reply was included in the first edition of the piano-vocal score published in 1844:

"The principles on which this poem is based are symbolic in the highest sense of the word. For in the history of the world, it must continually recur that an ancient, tried, established, and tranquilizing order of things will be forced aside, displaced, thwarted, and, if not annihilated, at least pent up within the narrowest possible limits by rising innovations. The intermediate period, when the opposition of hatred is still possible and practicable, is forcibly represented in this poem, and flames of a joyful and undisturbed enthusiasm once more blaze high in brilliant light."