

Richard Wagner

“I write music with an exclamation point!”

Richard Wagner was a prominent German composer, conductor, and **librettist** born in 1813 in Leipzig, Germany. His extraordinary works revolutionised operas and have had a significant influence on the history of Western music.

Wagner was interested in literature and theatre from an early age and wrote his first play at age 13. He began music lessons around this time as he was determined to set his plays to music. In 1831, Wagner enrolled at Leipzig University, devoting himself entirely to the study of musical composition. He composed *Die Feen* (The Fairies) at 20 years old, his first complete opera, based on a story written by the Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi.

One of Wagner's greatest contributions to music was the *Leitmotif*; a recurring musical theme designed to represent a character or subject in an opera that evolves with the progress of the drama on stage. This technique is particularly associated with Richard Wagner. The Leitmotif was so ground-breaking it changed the way music could tell a story without the use of words or visuals. Many examples of the Leitmotif can also be found across film scores as many film composers continue to use this technique today. John Williams' soundtrack to the film series, *Star Wars*, was inspired by Wagner's orchestration and leitmotifs.

Richard Wagner was celebrated for his operas, which he called music dramas. His work is composed of rich harmonies, complex texture, and elaborate tonal shifts. Wagner aimed to create complete works that brought together music, visuals, poetry, and dance, inspired by myths, legends, and universal themes. His four-part music drama *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung), based on Nordic mythology, is an excellent example of this.



DID YOU KNOW?

Wagner was greatly inspired by Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* which is about the idealistic pursuit of world peace.

FUN FACT

The Bridal Chorus, from Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, became a popular choice for nuptials after Queen Victoria's daughter chose it for her wedding ceremony in 1858. "Here Comes the Bride", as it is also known, is still popular today!

MUSICAL TERM

Librettist: A writer of librettos; which are the texts and words used in musical works such as operas.

