

RICHARD WAGNER (1813–83)
Siegfried Idyll (1870)

Wagner wrote his *Siegfried Idyll* shortly after the birth of his only son Siegfried – named after the hero of the opera on which he was working at the time – as a surprise birthday-cum-Christmas present for his wife Cosima. She awoke on Christmas morning 1870 (the day after her 33rd birthday) to hear its opening strains performed by a small ensemble on the staircase of their villa in Tribschen, Switzerland, overlooking Lake Lucerne: ‘As I awoke ... no longer could I imagine myself to be dreaming ... such music! When it died away, Richard came into my room with the children and offered me the score of the symphonic birthday poem. I was in tears, but so were all the rest.’

The music’s tender opening section is based – like most of the *Idyll*’s thematic material – on a theme from Act 3 of Wagner’s opera *Siegfried* (the third part of his *Ring* cycle), where it is sung by the Valkyrie heroine Brünnhilde to the words ‘Ewig war ich, ewig bin ich’ (Ever was I, ever am I). Often dubbed the motif of ‘eternal womanhood’, it beautifully evokes the iconic image of mother and child. Later, a solo oboe plays a lullaby reminiscent of the old German song *Schlaf, Kindlein, schlaf* (‘Sleep, baby, sleep’), but in fact an original tune first noted down by Wagner in his diary on New Year’s Eve 1868, when he was clearly anticipating his son’s birth the following June. Intermittent horn notes, followed by a series of trills, indicate that the child is now sound asleep. As woodwind, marked *dolce* (sweetly), introduce another theme taken from the opera *Siegfried* at the point where Brünnhilde hails the ‘glorious’ hero (‘O Siegfried, Herrlicher’), the mother imagines her child as a handsome young man, a descending clarinet figure suggesting her maternal pride at the thought. Later comes birdsong (Wagner heard a bird singing at the moment of Siegfried’s birth, noted it down and used it here), heroic hunting horns and a more turbulent passage suggesting Siegfried’s worldly woes and his discovery of passionate love. At the end the mother gives up dreaming of her son’s future and the music settles gently back into its opening image of eternal womanhood.

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