

**Overture to *The Flying Dutchman* (1841)****Richard Wagner** (*Reek-hart Vahg-ner*)

Born May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany

Died Feb. 13, 1883 in Venice, Italy

*Wagner wrote the Flying Dutchman overture in 1841. The premiere performance was given at the Royal Opera House in Dresden on January 2, 1843.*

Minna Wagner must have wondered, as the wind howled in the rigging and towering waves thundered over the deck of the little merchant ship, what had ever possessed her to bind herself for life to an incomprehensible lunatic like Richard Wagner. She and Richard and an enormous, smelly Newfoundland dog named Robber had been on the lam for over a month, fleeing creditors who threatened to throw Richard in jail if he didn't pay up the huge bills his extravagant tastes had accumulated in the Latvian city of Riga. Unable to get legal visas, they had scurried across the Russian border with the aid of friends who bribed Cossack guards to look the other way while they, dog in tow, ran down a hill, snuck across a ditch and made their way to a smuggler's shack on the Prussian side. Then they were taken by back roads to the port of Pillau to catch a ship for London. During this phase of the ordeal, the rickety coach overturned, throwing Richard into a manure pile and injuring the pregnant Minna severely enough to cause her to miscarry. But the worst was yet to come. Wagner's friends had booked passage on a small merchant vessel, the *Thetis*. One morning before dawn, Minna, Richard and Robber crawled through high, wet grass to a dinghy on which they glided furtively up to the ship. Robber had to be laboriously hoisted up the side and the fugitives concealed themselves below deck until the *Thetis* cleared harbor. Now Richard breathed a sigh of relief and looked forward eagerly to the eight-day voyage to London, then on to Paris and a new life of fame and fortune.

The voyage took not eight days, but three and a half weeks. Contrary winds and raging storms drove them off course several times. They took shelter in a Norwegian fjord, but when they ventured out, another storm hit them and drove them onto a reef. The figurehead of *Thetis* was torn off the bow and Minna's trunk with her clothing and silver was washed away. The crew, familiar with the tall tale of Vanderdecken, the dreaded Flying Dutchman, started looking at their Saxon passenger with undisguised suspicion every time they came for a cup of grog from the brandy cask stored under his bunk. They drank a lot of brandy on this voyage. It was obvious: this unwanted passenger with his obnoxious dog and fidgety wife had brought a curse on the ship. They would sail on forever and never make it to London. And what was Richard doing while all this was going on? Although Wagner the man was wretchedly seasick through most of the turbulent journey, Wagner the composer was busily absorbing sense-impressions and storing them up for future reference. The rhythmic echoes of the seamen's chanteys off the rocks of the fjord at Sandvika as they anchored and furled sail, the howl and roar of the incredibly violent storms that tore at the ship, the deceptive calms followed by hurricanes with towering waves, all these found their way into his musical imagination, along with the crew's mutterings about the cursed Dutchman. When they finally reached the mouth of the Thames, Minna, her nerves strained past the breaking point, frantically pestered the exhausted captain every time she saw a light or heard a fog bell. Meanwhile Richard, in excellent spirits, took a long and refreshing nap, a new opera simmering in his ever-burning creative oven.

The Wagners eventually wound up in Paris in August of 1839, and while Richard struggled to get the attention of the powers who ruled the world of Parisian opera, he worked on the libretto of *The Flying Dutchman*. He could generate little interest in his projects, and wound up taking odd jobs doing arrangements of other composer's operas and writing articles on music for the *Gazette musicale*. He wrote the music for *The Flying Dutchman* in a high-pressure burst of creativity in August and September of 1841. The overture, as was his habit, was written last. Unable to get a performance in Paris, Wagner submitted the work to the opera house at Dresden, where it was premiered in 1843. *The Flying Dutchman* was Wagner's first major success. It led to his being hired as Music Director of the Saxon Court in Dresden where he was able to stage performances of his other operas.

The overture tells the story of the opera in miniature: stark, fierce chords in the woodwinds and strings plunge the listener immediately into the middle of a wildly raging storm at sea as the motive of the accursed Dutchman peals out in the horns. This one of the most brilliant and gripping storm scenes in music. The Dutchman is a sea captain who once swore that he would sail around the Cape of Good Hope in spite of winds, storms and Hell itself. As punishment for his blasphemous vow he is doomed to sail the seas until he can find a woman capable of total devotion unto death (Minna must have snorted and narrowed her eyes when she heard this). As the overture opens, stormy seas drive his ship off course to a Norwegian fjord (called Sandvika) where he hears a girl, Senta, singing. The storm dies down and we hear the gentle melody of *Senta's Ballad* from the second act of the opera, in which she tells the Dutchman's story and declares that she herself is the woman who can save him from his unhappy fate. There is a jolly sailor's dance, but this is soon overwhelmed by the storm. In her eagerness to save the Dutchman, Senta leaps toward the ghost-ship from a cliff and dies. The music softens as Senta's theme returns, glorified and radiant and she and the redeemed Dutchman are seen rising from the sea heavenward.

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