RICHARD WAGNER: THE EGOCENTRIC

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany, in 1813. He was the son of a clerk in the city police court who died when Richard was only six months old. Wagner was a precocious child who began showing an early interest in literature. He wrote his first tragedy in free Shakespearean style at the age of 14. As a musician, Wagner began studying piano at the age of 12 but never really developed into a fine performer on the instrument.

However, by the time he was 19, several of his works had been performed publicly. And at the age of 20, he began his professional career as a musician when he became the chorus master for a nearby theater. While there and in several positions that followed, Wagner began composing operas.

Throughout Wagner's life he had a very difficult time having his works performed. The main reason for this was because so many of his works called for enormous forces – huge orchestras and grand-scale scenery – most of which was not available at even the largest opera houses in Europe.

Wagner married in his mid-twenties and was soon appointed as a conductor to the king of Saxony in Germany. For the next six years, Wagner was very busy composing his own operas and producing operas of other composers. However, because Wagner was involved in a revolutionary uprising in 1848 and 1849, he was forced to flee and was exiled to Switzerland. While there he wrote two very important books: The Art Work of the Future (1850), and Opera and Drama (1851). Both described Wagner's approach to opera. He believed that this form should be different from the operas that were being composed at the time. Wagner believed that the world revolved around him and that most of the world did not understand him. Because of this egocentric attitude, Wagner often alienated people around him.

While in Switzerland, Wagner began laying the foundations for many of his later works that would gain him great acclaim. In particular, he began his work for four music dramas that were all part of what was called Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Ring of the Nibelungs). Each of the four sections of this epic lasts three to five hours, and the entire epic must be put on over a four-day period.

Wagner's ideas on music would set the stage for much of what was to come in the twentieth century, and his works will always be noted for their grand scale and use of extremely large forces. Wagner died in Venice, Italy, in 1883 at the age of 70.