

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

Kirill Petrenko Conducts Humperdinck's Hänsel und Gretel

Thursday, May 27, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Kirill Petrenko, conductor · Samantha Hankey, Hänsel · Elena Villalón, Gretel
· Alexandra Ionis, Gertrud · Wolfgang Koch, Peter · Gerhard Siegel, Ginger-
bread Witch · Serafina Starke, Dew Fairy · Shannon Keegan, Sandman · Vokal-
helden, children's choir

approximately 120 minutes

Engelbert Humperdinck

1854–1921

120 minutes

Hänsel und Gretel (complete opera, staged)

THE COMPOSER

Engelbert Humperdinck (1854–1921) was a German composer remembered above all for one work, the fairy-tale opera *Hänsel und Gretel*. Born in Siegburg in the Rhineland, he wrote his first music as a child, entered the Cologne Conservatory in 1872 against his parents' wishes and continued his studies in Munich from 1876. In 1879 he was among the first winners of the Mendelssohn Award and used it to travel to Italy, where he met Richard Wagner in Naples. Wagner invited him to Bayreuth, and Humperdinck assisted with the preparation of *Parsifal* and taught music to Wagner's son Siegfried. Years of teaching followed, in Barcelona and Frankfurt among other places, before the success of *Hänsel und Gretel* in 1893 made him famous almost overnight. He later taught composition in Berlin, where Kurt Weill was among his pupils, and wrote further stage works, notably *Königskinder*, which in its first version called for a kind of delivery halfway between speech and song. A stroke in 1912 left his left hand paralysed, though he went on composing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Hänsel und Gretel began as a family entertainment. In 1890 Humperdinck's sister, Adelheid Wette, was writing a little play on the Grimm fairy tale for her children to perform, and she asked her brother to set a few of its verses to music. He obliged with a handful of songs. Then the idea would not let him go. The songs grew into a play with music and spoken dialogue, and over the next two years, working in Frankfurt, he turned that into a full opera with a Wagnerian orchestra.

Humperdinck was nearly forty and had never written an opera. He had, though, served the best apprenticeship available: as a young man he had been invited to Bayreuth by Wagner himself and had assisted with the preparation of *Parsifal*. What he took from Wagner is audible on every page of the score, in the rich orchestration, the continuous musical flow and the way themes recur and are developed in the orchestra. What makes the opera his own is that he applied all this to tunes that sound like nursery songs, and in two cases are.

Richard Strauss conducted the first performance at the Court Theatre in Weimar on 23 December 1893. The success was immediate. Within a year the opera had been taken up by dozens of German theatres, and it soon travelled abroad. Because of the date of its premiere, and no doubt the gingerbread, it has been a Christmas piece ever since. The Berliner Philharmoniker present it, unseasonably, at the end of May.

Adelheid Wette softened the Grimms' story considerably. In the original the parents abandon their children in the forest to die. In the opera an exasperated mother, who has just spilled the family's supper, sends them out to pick strawberries, and both parents rush after them in horror when they realise where the children have gone. Wette also added the Sandman and the Dew Fairy, and the angels who guard the sleeping children. Even the witch's victims fare better: she bakes children into gingerbread, and at the end they are brought back to life.

The roles are distributed in a way that surprises newcomers. Hänsel is sung by a mezzo-soprano and Gretel by a soprano, both adult singers who have to ride a large orchestra. The witch was written for a mezzo-soprano but is sometimes given to a tenor, as it is here.

These performances are staged in the Philharmonie, with stage direction by Matthias Davids and sets and costumes by Andrew D. Edwards. They form part of the celebrations for 25 years of the orchestra's education programme, and the children's chorus is sung by the Vokalhelden, the choir drawn from that programme. The orchestra recommends the evening for children aged six and over.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The prelude. It opens with four horns playing the melody of the children's evening prayer, and it ends with the same music. In between come several of the opera's other themes, woven together with great skill.

Folk songs, real and invented. The first song of the opera, “Suse, liebe Suse”, is a genuine German nursery song, and Humperdinck treats it as Wagner would a leitmotif, developing it in the orchestra. Most of the other tunes that sound traditional are his own, among them the dance duet “Brüderchen, komm tanz mit mir” and the father’s drinking song with its “Ral-la-la-la” refrain. The second act opens with the score’s other authentic folk song, Gretel’s “Ein Männlein steht im Walde”, which is a riddle: the little man in the wood with the red coat and black cap is a rosehip.

The Witch’s Ride. The orchestral interlude between the first two acts, based on the broomstick music from the father’s account of the witch. This is Humperdinck at his most Wagnerian, and its wild string writing owes something to the “Ride of the Valkyries”.

Evening Prayer and Dream Pantomime. The children’s duet “Abends will ich schlafen gehn” is the best-known music in the opera. The orchestra then takes up the tune alone and builds it into a long, radiant interlude as the angels descend.

The witch. Listen for her galloping broomstick song, “Hurr hopp hopp”.

The ending. The children dance their jig from the first act, and in the closing bars everyone joins the father in his motto, that when need is greatest God stretches out his hand, sung to the melody of the Evening Prayer with which the prelude began.

THE STORY

Act I. Hänsel and Gretel, the children of a poor broom-maker, are alone at home, hungry and supposed to be working. They dance instead. Their mother, Gertrud, comes home, loses her temper, knocks over the jug of milk that was to be supper and sends them into the forest for strawberries. The father, Peter, arrives in high spirits with a sack of food, having sold all his brooms. When he hears where the children are he is appalled: the Gingerbread Witch lives in that forest. The parents hurry out to find them.

Act II. In the forest the children have eaten the strawberries they picked, and night is falling. They are lost and frightened. The Sandman appears and sprinkles sand in their eyes; they say their evening prayer and fall asleep, and fourteen angels come down to keep watch.

Act III. The Dew Fairy wakes them. In front of them stands a house made of cake and sweets, and they begin to nibble at it. The witch catches them, shuts Hänsel in a cage to fatten him and sets Gretel to work. When she asks Gretel to look into the oven, Gretel pretends not to understand, and when the witch demonstrates, the children push her in. The oven explodes, the gingerbread children around the house come back to life, and the parents arrive for the final thanksgiving.

Tonight's artists

Samantha Hankey *Hänsel*

Hänsel is a trouser role, a boy sung by a mezzo-soprano. Samantha Hankey has sung the part on stage, at Lyric Opera of Chicago, and brings to it her experience of opera's other great boys, Octavian and Cherubino.

Samantha Hankey is an American mezzo-soprano. She took both her bachelor's and her master's degree at the Juilliard School, and in 2018 won the inaugural Glyndebourne Cup and prizes at the Operalia competition. Her roles include Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*, which she has sung at the Metropolitan Opera, Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*, Mélisande at Santa Fe Opera and Hänsel at Lyric Opera of Chicago, and she has appeared at the Royal Opera House in London and the Zurich Opera.

Elena Villalón *Gretel*

Gretel carries much of the opera: she has the first song, leads the Evening Prayer and outwits the witch. Elena Villalón sings the part in all three performances.

Elena Villalón is a Cuban-American soprano and an alumna of the Houston Grand Opera Studio. She has won prizes at the Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition, and has sung Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* and other leading lyric roles at Oper Frankfurt. She has also appeared at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and at Santa Fe Opera.

Alexandra Ionis *Gertrud*

Gertrud, the children's mother, has one concentrated scene in the first act, in which anger gives way to despair at the family's poverty. Alexandra Ionis sings the role.

Alexandra Ionis is a mezzo-soprano, born in Moldova and raised in Berlin. She studied at the Berlin University of the Arts and the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory in Milan, and was a member of the opera studio of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. She has sung a good deal of contemporary music, including the world premiere of Péter Eötvös's opera *Sleepless* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. In 2024 she made her debut at the Bayreuth Festival as the Second Norn and Siegrune, and she has sung Fricka in a concert performance of *Die Walküre* with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under Simone Young.

Wolfgang Koch *Peter*

Peter, the broom-maker, enters singing and brings the opera's first good news, then delivers the tale of the Gingerbread Witch. Wolfgang Koch comes to the part from the heaviest Wagner roles, Hans Sachs and Wotan among them.

Wolfgang Koch is a German bass-baritone, best known in Wagner. He studied at the University of Music in Munich and with Josef Metternich and Gianni Raimondi, and began his career in the ensembles of the Stadttheater Bern and the Stuttgart State Opera before going freelance. He has sung Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Frankfurt, at the Vienna State Opera and at the Royal Opera House in London, Alberich in Hamburg, and Wotan in the *Ring* at the Bayreuth Festival in 2013.

Gerhard Siegel *Gingerbread Witch*

The witch was written for a mezzo-soprano but is sometimes sung by a character tenor, as in these performances. Gerhard Siegel is closely associated with another fairy-tale villain for character tenor, Wagner's Mime.

Gerhard Siegel is a German tenor, born in Trostberg. He trained in Augsburg and sang in the companies of Trier, Dessau and Nuremberg before working freelance. He is particularly associated with Mime in Wagner's *Ring*, the role in which he appeared at the Bayreuth Festival from 2006 to 2008 and which he has also sung at the Royal Opera House in London. His repertoire further includes Herod in *Salome*, Florestan in *Fidelio*, Bacchus in *Ariadne auf Naxos* and the title role in *Parsifal*, and he has appeared at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Serafina Starke *Dew Fairy*

The Dew Fairy (the ‘Dewman’ in the orchestra’s cast list) wakes the children at the start of the third act with a short, bright aria. Serafina Starke sings it.

Serafina Starke is a soprano who studied in Salzburg and Munich. She took part in the Young Singers Project at the Salzburg Festival in 2022, has appeared at the Bavarian State Opera and at the Easter Festival in Baden-Baden, and from 2024 to 2026 was a member of the International Opera Studio of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin.

Shannon Keegan *Sandman*

The Sandman appears only once, in the second act, to send the children to sleep with one of the gentlest songs in the score. Shannon Keegan, whom the orchestra’s cast list gives as a contralto, has sung the part on stage in Stuttgart.

Shannon Keegan is an American mezzo-soprano. She was a member of the opera studio of the Staatsoper Stuttgart in the 2022/23 and 2023/24 seasons and is a prizewinner of the Ottavio Ziino competition. In concert she made her debut with the Berliner Philharmoniker under Kirill Petrenko in Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, and she returned to the orchestra for Strauss’s *Die Frau ohne Schatten* at the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden.

Vokalhelden *children's choir*

The gingerbread children who come back to life at the end are sung by the Vokalhelden, the choir of children and young people drawn from the Berliner Philharmoniker’s education programme, which marks its 25th anniversary this season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years**

Carolyn Abbate, Roger Parker, W. W. Norton 2015

A single-volume history of opera for general readers by two leading scholars; it sets fairy-tale opera and the generation of German composers after Wagner, Humperdinck's world, in the larger story.

ACCESSIBLE **Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth**

Barry Millington, Oxford University Press 2012

An illustrated, readable life of Wagner that covers the first Bayreuth festivals and the making of Parsifal, on which the young Humperdinck worked as an assistant.

DEEPER **Richard Wagner's Music Dramas**

Carl Dahlhaus, Cambridge University Press 1992

Dahlhaus explains how Wagner's mature operas work, from leitmotif to continuous orchestral texture: the techniques that Humperdinck learned at Bayreuth and applied to a fairy tale.

SOURCES

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3. Hansel and Gretel: Quick Start Guide, Houston Grand Opera. <https://www.houstongrandopera.org/backstage-pass/quick-start-guide-hansel-and-gretel>
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9. Samantha Hankey, Royal Ballet and Opera. <https://www.rbo.org.uk/people/samantha-hankey>
10. Samantha Hankey, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/profiles/samantha-hankey>
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17. Gerhard Siegel, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerhard_Siegel
18. Gerhard Siegel, Bayreuther Festspiele. <https://bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/fsdb/performers/gerhard-siegel>
19. Serafina Starke, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/serafina-starke>

Engelbert Humperdinck · Hänsel und Gretel (complete opera, staged)

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22. Keegan, Shannon, Éva Marton International Singing Competition. <https://martoncompetition.hu/competitors-2024/keegan-shannon-396>
23. Concert on 09.03.2025: Vokalhelden, Wolff, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56252/>
24. A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393348958>
25. Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199933761>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-05-27-petrenko>

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