
On the Overture

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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Edition 1.0

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Source

On the Overture

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis

In Paris and Dresden

Richard Wagner's Prose Works

Volume 7

Pages 153-165

Published in 1898

Original Title Information

Über die Ouvertüre

Published in 1841

Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen : Volume I

Pages 194-206

Reading Information

This title contains 4764 words.

Estimated reading time between 14 and 24 minutes.

Notes are indicated using parenthesis, like (1).

Page numbers of the original source are indicated using square-bracketed parentheses, like [62].

[152]

Translator's Note

The following article originally appeared in the *Gazette Musicale* of January 10, 14 and 17, 1841 under the title "De L'Ouverture." The few variants between the French and German forms I have noted *in loco*.

[153]

On the Overture

IN earlier days a prologue preceded the play: it would appear that one had not the hardihood to snatch the spectator from his daily life and set him at one blow in presence of an ideal world; it seemed more prudent to pave the way by an introduction whose character already belonged to the sphere of art he was to enter. This Prologue addressed itself to the spectator's imagination, invoked its aid in compassing the proposed illusion, and supplied a brief account of events supposed to have taken place before, with a summary of the action about to be represented. When the whole play was set to music, as happened in Opera, it would have been more consistent to get this prologue sung as well; instead thereof one opened the performance with a mere orchestral prelude, which in those days could not fully answer the original purpose of the prologue, since purely instrumental music was not sufficiently matured as yet to give due character to such a task. These pieces of music appear to have had no other object than to tell the audience that singing was the order of the day. Were the weakness of the instrumental music of that epoch not in itself abundant explanation of the nature of these early overtures, one perhaps might suppose a deliberate objection to imitate the older prologue, as its sobering and undramatic tendency had been recognised; whichever way, one thing is certain—the Overture was employed as a mere conventional bridge, not viewed as a really characteristic prelude to the drama.

A step in advance was taken when the general character of the piece itself, whether sad or merry, was hinted in its overture. (01) But how little these musical introductions could [154] be regarded as real preparers of the needful frame of mind, we may see by Händel's overture to his *Messiah*, whose author we should have to consider most incompetent, had we to assume that he actually meant this tone-piece as an Introduction in the newer sense. In fact, the free development of the Overture, as a specifically characteristic piece of music, was still gainsaid to those composers whose means of lengthening a purely instrumental movement were confined to the resources of the art of counterpoint; the complex system of the "Fugue"—the only one at command for the purpose—had to help them out with their prologues to an oratorio or opera, and the hearer was left to decipher the fitting mood from "dux" and "comes," augmentation and diminution, inversion and stretto.

The great inelasticity of this form appears to have suggested the need of employing and developing the so-called "symphony," a conglomerate of diverse types. Here two sections in quicker time were severed by another of slower motion and soft expression, whereby the main opposing characters of the drama might at least be broadly indicated. It only needed the genius of a Mozart, to create at once a master-model in this form, such as we possess in his symphony to the "Seraglio"; it is impossible to hear [155] this piece performed with spirit in the theatre, without obtaining a very definite notion of the character of the drama which it introduces. However, there was still a certain helplessness in this division into three sections, with a separate tempo and character for each; and the question arose, how to weld the isolated fractions to a single undivided whole, whose movement should be sustained by just the contrast of those differing characteristic motives.

The creators of this perfect form of overture were Gluck and Mozart.

Even Gluck still contented himself at times with the mere introductory piece of older form, simply conducting to the first scene of the opera—as in *Iphigenia in Tauris*—with which this musical prelude at anyrate stood mostly in a very apt relation. Though even in his best of overtures the master retained this character of an introduction to the first scene, and therefore gave no independent close, he succeeded at last in stamping on this instrumental number itself the character of the whole succeeding drama. Gluck's most perfect masterpiece of this

description is the overture to *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Here the master draws the main ideas of the drama in powerful outline, and with an almost visual distinctness. We shall return to this glorious work, by it to demonstrate that form of overture which should rank as the most excellent.

After Gluck, it was Mozart that gave the Overture its true significance. Without toiling to express what music neither can nor should express, the details and entanglements of the plot itself—which the earlier Prologue had endeavoured to set forth—with the eye of a veritable poet he grasped the drama's leading thought, stripped it of all material episodes and accidentiæ, and reproduced it in the transfiguring light of music as a passion personified in tones, a counterpart both warranting that thought itself and explaining the whole dramatic action to the hearer's feeling. On the other hand, there thus arose an entirely independent tone-piece, no matter whether its outward structure [156] was attached to the first scene of the opera or not. To most of his overtures, however, Mozart also gave the perfect musical close, for instance, those to the *Magic Flute*, to *Figaro* and *Tito*; so that it might surprise us to find him denying it to the most important of them all, the overture to *Don Giovanni* were we not obliged to recognise in the marvellously thrilling passage of the last bars of this overture into the first scene a peculiarly pregnant termination to the introductory tone-piece of a *Don Giovanni*.

The Overture thus shaped by Gluck and Mozart became the property of Cherubini and Beethoven. Whilst Cherubini (02) on the whole remained faithful to the inherited type, Beethoven ended by departing from it in the very boldest manner. The former's overtures are poetical sketches of the drama's main idea, seized in its broadest features and musically reproduced in unity, concision and distinctness; this notwithstanding, we see by his overture to the *Water-Carrier (Deux Journées)* how even the dénouement of a stirring plot could be expressed in that form without damage to the unity of the artistic setting. Beethoven's overture to *Fidelio* (in E major) is unmistakably related to that of the *Water-Carrier*, just as the two masters approach the nearest to each other in these operas themselves. That Beethoven's impetuous genius in truth felt cramped by the limits thus drawn around it, however, we plainly perceive in several of his other overtures, above all in that to *Leonora*. Beethoven, never having obtained a fit occasion for the unfolding of his stupendous dramatic instinct, here seems to compensate himself by throwing the whole weight of his genius upon this field left open to his fancy, from pure tone-images to shape according to his inmost will the drama that he craved for; that drama which, freed from all the petty make-weights of the timid playwright, in this overture he let spring anew from a kernel magnified to [157] giant size. One can assign no other origin to this wondrous overture to *Leonora*: far from giving us a mere musical introduction to the drama, it sets that drama more complete and movingly before us than ever happens in the broken action which ensues. This work is no longer an overture, but the mightiest of dramas in itself.

Weber cast his overtures in Beethoven's and Cherubini's mould, and though he never dared the giddy height attained by Beethoven with his *Leonora*-overture, he happily pursued the dramatic path without wandering to a toilsome painting-in of minor details in the plot. Even where his fancy bade him embrace more subsidiary motives in his musical picture than were quite consistent with the form of overture expressly chosen, he at least knew always to preserve the dramatic unity of his conception; so that we may credit him with the invention of a new class, that of the "dramatic fantasia," whereof the overture to *Oberon* is one of the finest examples. This piece has had great influence upon the tendency of more recent composers; in it Weber took a step that, with the truly poetic swing of his musical inventiveness, as we have seen, could but attain a brilliant success. Nevertheless it is not to be denied that the independence of purely-musical production must suffer by subordination to a dramatic thought, if that thought is not grasped in one broad trait congenial to the spirit of

Music, and that the composer who would fain depict the details of an action cannot carry out his dramatic theme without breaking his musical work to atoms. As I propose to return to this point, for the moment I will content myself with the remark that the manner last described led necessarily downwards, inclining more and more towards the class of pieces branded with the name of "potpourri."

In a certain sense the history of this Potpourri begins with Spontini's overture to the *Vestale*: whatever fine and dazzling qualities one must grant this interesting tone-piece, it already shews traces of that loose and shallow mode of working-out which has become so prevalent in the operatic overtures of most composers of our age. To [158] forecast an opera's dramatic course, it was no longer a question of forming a new artistic concept of the whole, its complement and counterpart in music; no, one culled from here and there the most effective passages, less for their importance than their showiness, and strung them bit by bit together in a banal sequence. This was an arrangement often even still more tellingly effected by potpourri-concoctors working on the same material later. (03) Highly admired are the overture to *Guillaume Tell* by Rossini and even that to *Zampa* by Herold, plainly because the public here is much amused, and also, perhaps, because original invention is undeniably displayed, especially in the former: but a truly artistic ideal is no longer aimed at in such works, and they belong, not to the history of Art, but to that of theatrical entertainment.—

Having briefly reviewed the development of the Overture, and cited the most brilliant products of that class of music, the question remains: To what mode of conception and working-out shall we give the palm of fitness, and consequently of correctness? If we wish to avoid the appearance of exclusiveness, an entirely definite answer is no easy matter. Two unexampled masterpieces lie before us, to which we must accord a like sublimity both of intention and elaboration, yet whose actual treatment and conception are totally distinct. I mean the overtures to *Don Giovanni* and *Leonora*. In the first the drama's leading thought is given in two main features; their invention, as their motion, belongs quite unmistakably to nothing but the realm of Music. A passionate burst of arrogance stands in conflict with the threatenings of an implacable over-power, to which that Arrogance seems destined to submit: had Mozart but added the fearful termination of the story, the tone-work would have lacked nothing to be [159] regarded as a finished whole, a drama in itself; but the master lets us merely guess the combat's outcome: in that wonderful transition to the first scene he makes both hostile elements bow beneath a higher will, and nothing but a wailing sigh breathes o'er the place of battle. Clearly and plainly as is the opera's tragic principle depicted in this overture, you shall not find in all the musical tissue one single spot that could in any way be brought into direct relation with the action's course; unless it were its introduction, borrowed from the ghost-scene—though in that case we should have expected to meet the allusion at the piece's end, and not at its beginning. (04) No: the main body of the overture is free from any reminiscence of the opera, and whilst the hearer is fascinated by the purely-musical development of the themes, his mind is given to the changing fortunes of a deadly duel, albeit he never expects to see it set before him in dramatic guise.

Now, that is just the radical distinction of this overture from that to *Leonora*; while listening to the latter, we can never ward off that feeling of breathless apprehension with which we watch the progress of a moving action taking place before our eyes. In this mighty tone-piecer as said before, Beethoven has given us a musical drama, a drama founded on a playwright's piece, and not the mere sketch of one of its main ideas, or even a purely preparatory introduction to the acted play: but a drama, be it said, in the most ideal meaning of the term. (05) The master's method, so far as we here can follow it, lets us divine the depth of that inner need which must have ruled him in conceiving this titanic overture: his object was to condense to its noblest unity the *one* sublime action which the dramatist had weakened. and delayed by paltry details in order to spin out his tale; to give it a new, an ideal

motion, fed solely by its inmost springs. This action is the deed of a staunch and loving heart, fired by the one sublime desire to descend as angel of salvation into the very pit of death. [160] One sole idea pervades the work: the freedom brought by a jubilant angel of light to suffering manhood. We are plunged into a gloomy dungeon; no beam of day strikes through to us; night's awful silence breaks only to the moans, the sighs, of a soul that longs from its deepest depths for freedom, freedom. As through a cranny letting in the sun's last ray, a yearning glance peers down: 'tis the glance of the angel that feels the pure air of heavenly freedom a crushing load the while its breath cannot be shared by you, close-pent within the prison's walls. Then a swift resolve inspires it, to tear down all the barriers hedging you from heaven's light: higher, higher and ever fuller swells the soul, its might redoubled by the blest resolve; 'tis the evangel of redemption to the world. (06) Yet this angel is but a loving woman, its strength the puny strength of suffering humanity itself: it battles alike with hostile hindrances and its own weakness, and threatens to succumb. But the suprahuman Idea, which ever lights its soul anew, lends finally the superhuman force: one last, one utmost strain of every fibre, and the last bolt falls, the latest stone is heaved away. In floods the sunlight streams into the dungeon: "Freedom! Freedom!" shouts the redemptrix; "Freedom! Godlike freedom!" the redeemed.

This is the *Leonora*-overture, *Beethoven's* poem. Here all is alive with unceasing dramatic progress, from the first yearning thought to the execution of a vast resolve.

But this work is unique of its kind, and no longer can be called an Overture, if we mean by that term a tone-piece destined for performance before the opening of a drama, merely to prepare the mind for the action's character. On the other hand, as we now are dealing, not with the musical artwork in general, but with the true vocation of the Overture in particular, this overture to *Leonora* cannot be accepted as a model, for it offers us in all-too-warm anticipation the whole completed drama in itself; consequently it [161] either is un-understood or misconstrued by the hearer not already well-acquainted with the story, or, if thoroughly understood, it undoubtedly weakens the enjoyment of the explicit dramatic artwork it precedes.

Let us therefore leave this prodigious tone-work on one side, and return to the overture to *Don Giovanni*. Here we found the drama's leading thought delineated in a purely musical, but not in a dramatic shape. We unhesitatingly declare this mode of conception and treatment to be the fittest for such pieces, above all because the musician here withdraws himself from all temptation to outstep the bounds of his specific art, i.e., to sacrifice his freedom. Moreover, the musician thus most surely attains the Overture's artistic end, to act as nothing but an ideal prologue, translating us to that higher sphere in which to prepare our minds for Drama. Yet this in nowise prevents the musical conception of the drama's main idea being given most distinct expression, and brought to a definite close; on the contrary, the overture should form a musical artwork entire in itself.

In this sense we can point to no clearer and finer model for the Overture than that to Gluck's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and will therefore endeavour to illustrate by this particular work our general conclusions as to the best method of conceiving an overture. (07)

Here again, as in the overture to *Don Giovanni*, it is a contest, or at least an opposition of two hostile elements, that gives the piece its movement. The plot of *Iphigenia* itself includes this pair of elements. The army of Greek heroes is assembled for a great enterprise in common: under the inspiring thought of its execution, each separate human interest pales before this one great interest of the gathered mass. Now this is confronted with the special interest of preserving a human life, the rescue of a tender maiden. With what truth and distinctness of characterisation has Gluck as though personified these opposites in music! In what sublime proportion has he measured out the two, and [162] set them face to face in such a mode as of itself to give the conflict, and accordingly the motion! In the ponderous unison of the iron

principal motive we recognise at once the mass united by a single interest; whilst in the subsequent theme that other interest, that interest of the tender suffering individual, forthwith arrests our sympathy. This solitary contrast is pursued throughout the piece, and gives into our hands the broad idea of old Greek Tragedy, for it fills us with terror and pity in turn. Thus we attain that lofty state of excitation which prepares us for a drama whose highest meaning is revealed to us already, and thus are we led to understand the ensuing action in this meaning.

May this glorious example serve as rule in future for the framing of all overtures, and demonstrate withal how much a grand simplicity in the choice of musical motives enables the musician to evoke the swiftest and the plainest understanding of his never so unwonted aims. How hard, nay, how impossible would a like success have been to Gluck himself, had he sorted out all kinds of minor motives to signal this or that occurrence of the drama's, and worked them in between these eloquent chief-motives of his overture; they here would either have been swallowed up, or have distracted and misled the attention of the musical hearer. Yet, despite this simplicity in the means employed, to sustain a longer movement it is permissible to give wider play to the drama's influence over the development of the main musical thought in its overture. Not that one should admit a motion such as dramatic action alone can supply, but merely such as lies within the nature of instrumental music. The motion of two musical themes assembled in one piece will always evince a certain leaning, a struggle toward a culmination; then a sure conclusion seems indispensable for our appeasement, as our feeling longs to cast its final vote on one or other side. As a similar combat of principles first lends to a drama its higher life, it is thus by no means contrary to the purity of music's means of effect to give its contest of tone-motives a termination in keeping [163] with the drama's tendency. Cherubini, Beethoven, and Weber, were led by such a feeling in the conception of most of their overtures; in that to the *Water-Carrier* this crisis is painted with the greatest definition; the overtures to *Fidelio*, *Egmont*, *Coriolanus*, with that to the *Freischütz*, quite clearly express the issue of a strenuous fight. The point of contact with the dramatic story would accordingly reside in the character of the two main themes, as also in the motion given to them by their musical working-out. This working-out, on the other hand, would always have to spring from the purely musical import of those themes; never should it take account of the sequence of events in the drama itself, since such a course would at once destroy the sole effectual character of a work of Tone.

In this conception of the Overture, then, the highest task would be to reproduce the characteristic idea of the drama by the intrinsic means of independent music, and to bring it to a conclusion in anticipatory agreement with the solution of the problem in the scenic play. For this purpose the composer will do well to weave into the characteristic motives of his overture certain melismic or rhythmic features which acquire importance in the dramatic action itself: not features strewn by accident amid the action, but such as intervene therein with determinant weight, and thus can lend the very overture an individual stamp—demarcations, as it were, of the special domain on which a human action runs its course. Obviously these features must be in themselves of purely musical nature, therefore such as bring the influence of the sound-world to bear upon our human life; whereof I may cite as excellent instances the trombones of the Priests in the *Magic Flute*, the trumpet-signal in *Leonora*, and the call of the magic horn in *Oberon*. (08) These musical motives from the opera, [164] employed at a decisive moment in its overture, here serve as actual points of contact of the dramatic with the musical motion, and thus effect a happy individualisation of the tone-piece, which in any case is meant as a suggestive introduction to one particular dramatic story.

Now if we allow that the working-out of purely musical elements in the overture should in so far accord with the dramatic idea that even its issue should harmonise with the dénouement of the scenic action, the question arises whether the actual development of the drama or the changes in the fortunes of its principal personages should exert an immediate influence on the

conception of the overture, and above all on the characteristics of its close. Certainly we could only adjudge that influence a most conditional exercise; for we have found that a purely musical conception may well embrace the drama's leading thoughts, but not the individual fate of single persons. In a very weighty sense the composer plays the part of a philosopher, who seizes nothing but the *idea* in all phenomena; his business, as that of the great poet, lies solely with the victory of an Idea; the tragic downfall of the hero, taken personally, does not affect him. (09) From this point of view, he holds aloof from the entanglements of individual destinies and their attendant haps: he triumphs, though the hero goes under. Nowhere is this sublimest conception more finely expressed than in the overture to *Egmont*, whose closing section raises the tragic idea of the drama to its highest dignity, and at like time gives us a perfect piece of music of enthralling power. (10) On the other hand I know but one exception, of the first rank, [165] which seems to flatly contradict the axiom just laid down: the overture to *Coriolanus*. If we view this mighty tragic artwork closer, however, the different conception of the subject is explained by the tragic idea here lying solely in the hero's personal fate. An inconciliabile pride, an overbearing, overpowering, and overweening nature can only rouse our sympathy through its collapse: to make us forebode this, horror-struck see it arrive, was the master's incommensurable work. (11) But with this overture, as with that to *Leonora*, Beethoven stands alone and past all imitation: the lessons to be drawn from creations of such high originality can only be of fruit for us when we combine them with the legacies of other masters. In the triad, *Gluck*, *Mozart*, and *Beethoven* we have the lodestar whose pure light will always lead us rightly even on the most bewildering paths of art; but who should single *one* of them for his exclusive star, of a surety would fall into the maze from which but one has ever issued victor, that one Inimitable.

Notes

Note 01 on page 7

From here to the end of this paragraph the French differs a little: "Ces ouvertures étaient courtes, consistaient souvent en un seul mouvement lent, et l'on peut retrouver les exemples les plus frappants de ce mode de construction, quoique étendu considérablement, dans les oratorios de Haendel. Le libre développement de l'ouverture fut paralysé par cette fâcheuse circonstance qui arrêta les compositeurs dans les premières périodes de la musique, savoir l'ignorance où us étaient des procédés sûrs par lesquels on peut, l'aide des hardiesses légères et des successions de fraîches nuances, étendre un morceau de musique de longue haleine. Cela ne leur était guère possible qu'au moyen des finesses du contre-point, la seule invention de ces temps qui permit un compositeur de dévider un thème unique en un morceau de quelque durée. On écrivait des fugues instrumentales; on se perdait dans les détours de ces curieuses monstruosité de la spéculation artistique. La monotonie et l'uniformité furent les produits nets de cette direction. Ces sortes de compositions étaient surtout impuissantes exprimer un caractère déterminé et individuel. Haendel lui-même ne paraît pas s'être aucunement soucie que l'ouverture s'accordât exactement avec la pièce ou l'oratorio. Il est par exemple impossible de pressentir par l'ouverture du *Messie* qu'elle doit servir d'introduction une création aussi fortement caractérisée, aussi sublime que l'est ce célèbre oratorio."—Tr.

Note 02 on page 8

The French had: "Il faut seulement remarquer que dans la manière de voir de ces deux grands compositeurs, qui ont du reste de nombreux points d'affinité, Cherubini" etc.—Tr.

Note 03 on page 9

This sentence was represented in the French by: "Pour un public auquel on demandait ainsi moins de réflexion profonde, la séduction de cette manière de procéder consistait tout la fois dans un choix habile des motifs les plus brillants et dans le mouvement agréable, dans le papillotage varié qui résultait de leur arrangement. C'est ainsi que naquirent l'ouverture si admirée de *Guillaume Tell*" etc.—Tr.

Note 04 on page 9

From "unless" to the end of the sentence, did not appear in the French.—Tr.

Note 05 on page 9

This last clause was absent from the French.—Tr.

Note 06 on page 10

From "higher" to the end of the sentence was represented in the French by: "Semblable à un second messie, il veut accomplir l'oeuvre de rédemption."—Tr.

Note 07 on page 10

See also the special article upon this work in Vol. III.—Tr.

Note 08 on page 11

In the French this sentence took the following form: "Mais on ne doit jamais perdre de vue qu'ils doivent être de source entièrement musicale et non emprunter leur signification aux paroles qui les accompagnent dans l'opéra. Le compositeur commettrait alors la faute de se sacrifier lui et l'indépendance de son art devant l'intervention d'un art étranger. Il faut, dis-je, que ces éléments soient de nature purement musicale, et je citerai comme exemples" etc.—Tr.

[Note 09 on page 12](#)

In the French this sentence ran: "Le compositeur ne doit résoudre que la question supérieure et philosophique de l'ouvrage, et exprimer immédiatement le sentiment qui s'y répand et le parcourt dans toute son étendue comme un fil conducteur. Ce sentiment arrive-t-il dans le drame à un dénouement victorieux, le compositeur n'a guère à s'occuper que de savoir si le héros de la pièce remporte cette victoire, ou s'il éprouve une fin tragique."—Tr.

[Note 10 on page 12](#)

The French contained the following additional passage: "Le destin élève [?-enlève] ici par un coup décisif le héros au triomphe. Les derniers accents de l'ouverture qui se montent à la sublimité de l'apothéose, rendent parfaitement l'idée dramatique, tout en formant l'œuvre la plus musicale. Le combat des deux éléments nous entraîne ici impérieusement, même dans la musique, à un dénouement nécessaire, et il est surtout de l'essence de la musique de faire apparaître cette conclusion comme un fait consolateur."—Tr.

[Note 11 on page 12](#)

The second half of this sentence is not represented in the French.—Tr.