

*Overture to The Merry Wives of Windsor* • Otto Nicolai (1810-1849)

SCORED FOR: TWO FLUTES, TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS, TWO BASSOONS, FOUR HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TIMPANI, CYMBALS, BASS DRUM, AND STRINGS.

Otto Nicolai is among a long list of musicians who had an unfortunately short life. Although he was German by birth, his career as an opera composer began in Rome. With several successes under his belt, he moved to Vienna where he was appointed Kapellmeister in 1841. During this time he founded the Vienna Philharmonic and continued to compose operas he hoped would be performed at the Vienna State Opera. After years of having his work rejected he left for his native Germany, settling in Berlin. The work for which Nicolai is remembered today, his comic opera *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, was composed during this time and was first performed on March 3, 1849 with Nicolai conducting. The opera was a great success, but sadly it was the last major work that Nicolai composed, as he died only two short months after the premiere. The complete opera receives an occasional revival today, but its overture is a staple of the orchestral repertoire.

The libretto of the opera closely follows the Shakespeare play of the same name on which it is based. The plot concerns the courtier, rogue, and self-proclaimed 'Gentleman of the Shade' Sir John Falstaff (who is not portrayed very kindly in this work as compared to his knightly roles in other plays) and his cronies who take a road trip from London to the provincial town of Windsor. While there they set up camp at the local tavern and lay out plans intended to create mischief and scandal in this otherwise peaceful community. The townspeople quickly catch on to their schemes, but instead of confronting their visitors directly, they decide to give the unwanted guests a taste of their own medicine. One botched plan after another leaves the legendary romancer Falstaff miffed, wet (from being thrown off a bridge into the River Thames), and smelling of dirty laundry.

The overture begins with the music of the opera's final scene titled "Moonrise Over Windsor Forest." An almost imperceptible shimmering in the high violins sets the scene as the basses and cellos enter with the principal theme, which is then imitated by successively higher pitched instruments. A somewhat faster transitional passage follows featuring a short staccato motive bantered about the orchestra, contrasted by a lyrical melody in the violins. After a brief pause, the principal part of the overture commences in a lively tempo. This music is drawn from the final prank pulled on Falstaff as a swarm of neighbors dressed as forest fairies and insects punish him for his wrongdoings to the town and its citizens. They tease, pinch, tweak, poke, pummel and sting him until he begs for mercy and is forgiven. There is little mistaking the insects and their work in the music; listen for the dialog between the woodwinds and the violins as they laugh, buzz and bite at Falstaff. A second more lyrical and charming melody is introduced in short order, which, oddly enough, is never used in the opera. This second melody was so beautiful in fact that Wagner was not the least bit ashamed to

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