

WOS Repertoire

Fall 2025

Pagans and Pitchforks and Psalms

An All- Mendelssohn Program

Verleih' uns Frieden, 5'

Psalm 42, Op. 42, 25'

Intermission

Die erste Walpurgisnacht, Op. 60, 35'

Verleih uns Frieden was composed after Mendelssohn's 1931 visit to the Vatican, using Martin Luther's German translation of the medieval antiphon *Da pacem, Domine*. The text (Give peace, O Lord) is the incipit of a Latin chant. In English, this text entered the *Book of Common Prayer* as one of the preces at Morning and Evening Prayer (Evensong).

Psalm 42, Op. 42 „Wie der Hirsch schreit“ is a cantata setting of Martin Luther's translation of the Bible. At the work's first performance, in 1838, Mendelssohn conducted the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, with Clara Novello (daughter of the British publisher) as soprano soloist. He was the orchestra's musical director from 1835 until his death in 1847. Schumann opined that it was the “highest point that he [Mendelssohn] reached as a composer for the church. Indeed the highest point recent church music has reached at all.” Mendelssohn himself described it as “my best sacred piece... the best thing I have composed in this manner, [a work] I hold in greater regard than most of my other compositions.”

This text is traditionally used at baptisms and at Easter to represent the rebirth of the soul with imagery of water and consolation. As the psalmist prays for salvation and laments his remoteness from God, he expresses his desire for the renewal of the divine presence.

Die erste Walpurgisnacht (The First Walpurgis Night) is a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe telling of efforts by Druids in the Harz mountains to practice their pagan rituals in the face of new and dominating Christian forces. Walpurgisnacht is the eve of the Christian feast day of Saint Walpurga, an 8th-century abbess in Francia, and is celebrated on the night of April 30 and the day of 1 May. Christians prayed to God through the intercession of Saint Walpurga in order to protect themselves from witchcraft. In parts of Europe, people continue to light bonfires on Saint Walpurga's Eve to ward off evil spirits and witches.

The story of the oratorio is about how a prank allows for a local tradition to take place in spite of opposition from an intolerant new regime. The Druids and local heathen would celebrate May Day, but, as a women's chorus warns, this is now forbidden. The Druid priests counter that those who fear to sacrifice deserve their chains. A comic solution emerges as a Druid watchman suggests a masquerade of the Devil, spirits, and demons to frighten the occupying Christians. The Christians are scared away, and the Druids and heathen are left to celebrate Spring and the Sun.