

## Telling the Story Visually: Do you choose essential or literal elements?



*Hansel and Gretel* is a story foremost, and whether it is relayed in the form of a written folk tale that can be savored at length or a temporal, sung operatic performance, the Grimm tale is told through words and images. According to folklorist Maria Tatar, *Hansel and Gretel* is a story that “celebrates the triumph of children over hostile, predatory adults.” How should those adults be depicted? What visual elements are absolutely crucial for every telling? Is a realistic gingerbread house essential? Must the children be young and adorable looking? Should the hag be ugly?

Clearly there are as many different answers and interpretations as there are storytellers. Perhaps distilling the barest skeleton of the story can elicit hints for a personal visual depiction—two children live with their parents near the woods, the

children are sent into the forest to find food, a witch entices them into her tasty house, and the children outwit her in order to escape. And when the children escape in the original Grimm fairy tale, they *put what they could into their pockets*; they appropriate the riches of the witch and take the jewels back home to their father. The *happily ever after* ending suggests that the “perfect happiness” is a result of the acquisition of material wealth. One could also argue that the “children and the ogre” tale reflects the basest animal instincts—I will eat you before you have a chance to eat me.

*Hansel and Gretel* is a multi-layered story, one of the richest kinds of stories. It is a folk tale. It is a tale told over and over, like a folk song that is sung over and over, like a stone in a mountain creek that is washed over and over, until all the rough edges are worn. It is a tale that can be depicted literally, with a cute little gingerbread house and children wearing *lederhosen*, and it is a tale that can throw complicated children and adults into the forest of scary predators. We are all richer when we explore the many layers imbedded in the tale.

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**Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.**  
Director of Education  
megan@pittsburghopera.org  
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**Pittsburgh Opera**  
2425 Liberty Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
www.pittsburghopera.org

PITTSBURGH OPERA  
E D U C A T I O N

**Hansel and Gretel**

Music by Engelbert Humperdinck • Libretto by Adelheid Wette

Study Guide to the Opera

Annie Leibovitz Shoots Hansel & Gretel for Vogue  
<http://www.puppiesandflowers.com/?p=3169>

**Far From Home** They venture out to hunt for wild strawberries in the woods, where Gretel's lily-white frock shines against the dark foliage of the Tree-men. Before long, though, they're hopelessly lost. Dior pleated silk-chiffon dress. Fendi platform Mary Janes. Tree-men costumes courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera.

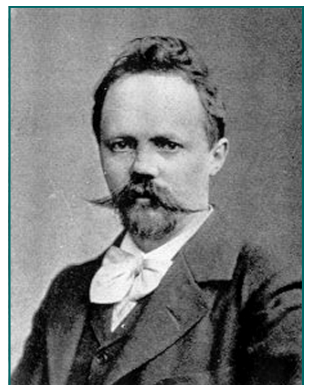


### A Reluctant Composer, An Accidental Success

Engelbert Humperdinck was born near Bonn, Germany and planned to become an architect. While studying architecture at the University of Cologne, the composer Ferdinand Hiller persuaded him to switch to composition. Humperdinck had composed music for piano from the age of seven; at the university he progressed so quickly that he won prizes and a trip to Italy that was to change his life. In Naples, he met Richard Wagner, who invited him to Bayreuth in 1880 to assist in the preparation of *Parsifal*. As a disciple of Wagner, Humperdinck learned much about orchestration and *leitmotifs*, and how to write glorious polyphony.

Beginning in 1882, Humperdinck taught at prestigious conservatories in Barcelona and Cologne and was an editor for Schott's music publishers. He was a professor at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, the director of a music academy in Berlin, and was also a music critic. Those were heady days in the musical circles of Germany—Wagner's *Ring Cycle* was complete and he was recognized as the master of German opera.

When Wagner died in 1883, some composers sought to maintain the prestige of German opera by imitating Wagner's style, but two other schools emerged—“Volksoper” (popular opera) and “Märchenoper” (fairy-tale opera). People turned with relief from the misty depths of mythology to the more familiar, enchanted world of the fairy tale, to subjects their grandparents had enjoyed. The transition was made easier because Humperdinck upheld an honest appearance of loyalty to Wagner: the music of *Hansel and Gretel* is, in fact, a peculiar mixture of German folk melody and Wagnerian polyphony. In total, Humperdinck composed nine works for the stage, but his earliest—*Hänsel und Gretel*—is his most well known. His sister had asked for songs to use in her version of a Grimm fairy tale. At first reluctant, Humperdinck completed the songs, and then the opera that is beloved to this day.



Engelbert Humperdinck  
1854–1921

# Hansel and Gretel Synopsis

*Märchenoper* (fairy tale opera) in three acts.

**ACT I.** In the house of a broom-maker deep in a German forest, Hansel and Gretel have been left by their parents, who are off in town. The children are supposed to be at work, making socks and brooms; instead, Gretel recites a nursery rhyme, which Hansel interrupts with complaints of hunger. Gretel teases her brother, calling him a complaining grump. She shows him a pitcher of milk hidden in the cupboard that their mother is saving for supper. To entertain her brother, Gretel teaches Hansel a folk dance. Suddenly Gertrude, their mother, comes home and angrily reproves them for playing when they should have been working. In her anger, the mother knocks over the pitcher of milk. When Hansel is caught grinning at this misfortune, his mother chases him out of the house and sends Gretel after him into the woods to find wild strawberries. She falls asleep just as the voice of her husband Peter is heard singing in the distance. Slightly tipsy when he arrives, he surprises Gertrude with all the food he has bought and tells her that he sold his brooms to a wedding party for the best price he has ever received. They celebrate their good fortune with a toast and he then asks where the children are. When Gertrude tells him that they have gone to the woods, he is horrified. He tells her about the Witch who lives there and who bakes children into bread. The two rush off to find Hansel and Gretel.

*Intermission*

**ACT II.** In a forest glade, Gretel sings another nursery rhyme and then begins making a wreath of wild flowers. Hansel picks the last of the wild strawberries. He offers his basket to Gretel, who eats one; as they start to leave, a cuckoo calls, and the children parrot the bird's call, eating strawberries all the while. As darkness falls, they realize they cannot refill the basket, and worse, that they are lost. Their fears multiply as they see visions of wild animals behind every tree. An old man appears, scattering gold sand and promising restful sleep. When the Sandman leaves, the two children kneel to say their prayers and quickly fall asleep. In their dream, Hansel and Gretel are surrounded by a host of children, who seem to have a message for them.

*Intermission*

**ACT III.** The Dew Fairy brings morning to the world of the forest. The children awake and find themselves still in the forest. They happen upon a magical house, filled with cakes and sweets. When Hansel breaks a piece off from the gingerbread house, they hear a voice from somewhere inside the dwelling. An old lady comes out and offers them desserts of all kinds; when they refuse her temptations, she puts a spell on them and locks Hansel in a cage. Gretel is released from the spell to help set the Witch's table. Gretel has overheard the Witch's plan to bake her, and while the Witch feeds Hansel to fatten him up, Gretel whispers the Witch's magic words, which break the spell on Hansel. Hungry for Gretel, the Witch calls her to the oven. Gretel cleverly asks the Witch to show her how to make the oven work. As the Witch leans in, Hansel and Gretel push her in and slam the door. The oven gets hotter and hotter until it explodes. Suddenly, the room is filled with other children. Hansel recites the Witch's spell and the children spring to life. As Peter and Gertrude rush in and embrace their children, a gingerbread cake of the Witch is found in the oven. Before eating, all join in giving thanks for their deliverance.

—Courtesy of *Opera News*, freely adapted



The famous literary monument to Brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm by Syrius Eberle.

Located in the Neustadt marketplace in Hanau, Germany, the sculpture is a tribute to the brothers who collected and published 200 native folktales, wrote a 33-volume German dictionary, and worked as librarians, lawyers, and professors.

## Characters of *Hänsel und Gretel*

**Gretel** [GREY-tuhl] *soprano*

A young girl who, along with her brother, is lost in the woods and captured by a witch.

**Hansel** [HEN-zuhl] *mezzo-soprano*

Gretel's brother.

**The Witch**

*soprano, mezzo-soprano, or tenor*

A devious woman named Rosina Dainty-mouth who lures Hansel and Gretel into her candy house.

**Gertrude** *soprano*

The mother of Hansel and Gretel.

**Peter** *baritone*

A broom-maker and the father of Hansel and Gretel.

**Sandman** *soprano*

He puts sand in Hansel and Gretel's eyes and makes them fall asleep in the forest.

**Dew Fairy** *soprano*

He sprinkles dew on the children in the morning to wake them up from their slumber in the forest.

**Children and Angels**

There once were two children . . .

Long, long ago . . .

In a faraway land . . .

## Transforming a Folk Tale into an Opera

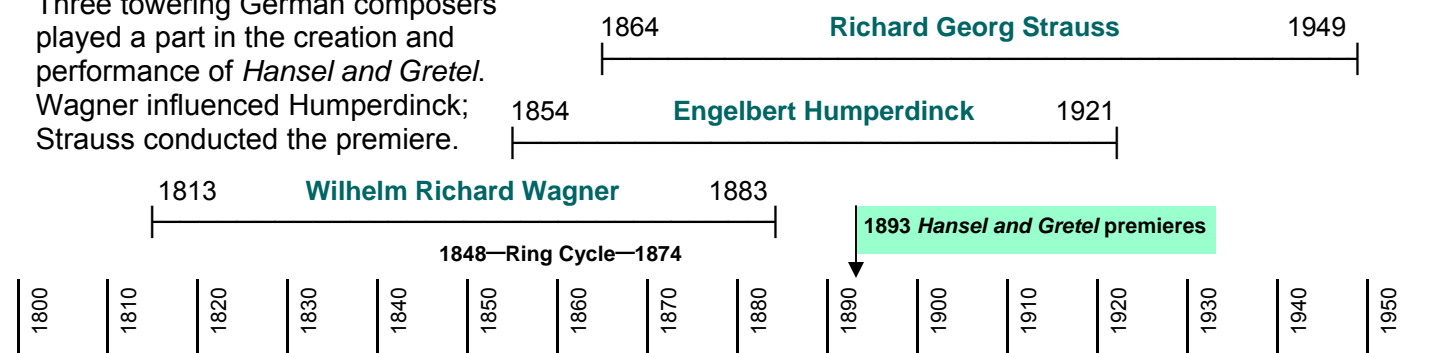
Read dozens of the 200 folk tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, and common themes emerge—a character is put to a test, honesty or cleverness is rewarded, characters are transformed into something better, and *of course*, characters live happily ever after. In 1890, when Adelheid Wette, the sister of composer Engelbert Humperdinck, proposed that he set some folk songs to music for a "Hansel and Gretel" performance by her children, he adapted several well-known treasures, such as "Susy, Little Susy" and "I Am a Little Man." After a private performance of the *singspiel* version, Humperdinck turned it into an opera. He used the memorable tunes of the folk songs as *leitmotifs* throughout the work, continually developing them melodically and harmonically. The result is a cohesive, yet familiar blend of romanticism and melodies that are "old friends"—much like familiar phrases in folk tales.

In addition to using folk music sources, Humperdinck and Wette modified the Grimm fairy tale by adding characters to serve musical purposes. The Sandman, Dew Fairy, Angel Chorus, and Gingerbread Children are unique to the opera and their lovely music provides a welcome contrast to the Witch's music. In the folk tale, the stepmother attracts much disdain, but the mother in the opera is overshadowed by the witch, whose "Hocus pocus" and "Witch's Laugh" culminate in a "Hop" scene that is the fiery highlight of the opera. Brothers and sisters—Hansel and Gretel, Humperdinck and Wette—will forever be linked to an opera described by R. Strauss as "a masterpiece of the first rank."

### POWERFUL GERMAN TIMELINE

Three towering German composers played a part in the creation and performance of *Hansel and Gretel*.

Wagner influenced Humperdinck; Strauss conducted the premiere.



*Hänsel und Gretel* premiered on December 23, 1893 at the Hoftheater, Weimar, with Richard Strauss conducting. The opera was speedily taken up by touring companies, gathering praise from Emperor Wilhelm II at its Berlin premiere in 1894. The opera was also enormously successful abroad, and was the first opera to be broadcast complete from an opera house in Europe (Covent Garden) in January 1923.