

# *Harmony*<sup>TM</sup>

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## About the Cover

by

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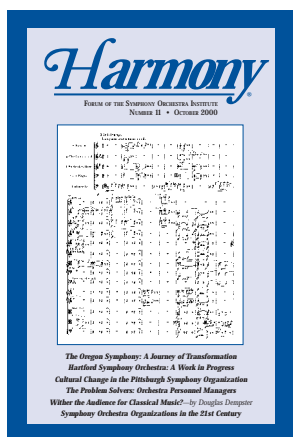
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## About the Cover



For the cover of this issue, we have picked one of the most famous passages in all music, the opening of the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, in order to highlight a signal moment in the history of American music. On February 10, 1866, Theodore Thomas conducted the American premiere of this revolutionary music, less than a year after the world premiere of Wagner's opera in Munich. (The complete opera waited another 20 years for its first New York staging.) In this, as in so many musical matters, Thomas was a pioneer. When the critics railed against the *Tristan* prelude—the *New York Times* dismissed it as “absolutely without significance”—Thomas only

strengthened his resolve to keep playing the music of Wagner, whom he considered a genius on a par with Beethoven. Seven months later, Thomas led the American premiere of the *Meistersinger* Overture. In time, Beethoven and Wagner became the twin pillars of his programs.

Thomas had inaugurated a series of evening concerts with his orchestra in December 1864, a defining step in the career of this visionary American conductor and musical organizer. His intent in launching these “symphony soirées” was to bring the most important and “serious” music to the public. (The series immediately provided stiff competition to the New York Philharmonic: for a five-concert subscription, Thomas charged five dollars, substantially less than the Philharmonic's eight.) The first season, which coincided with the final winter of the Civil War, Thomas lost money, but he made many new friends for orchestral music and attracted key supporters, including William Steinway (of the piano family) and Gustav Schirmer, the music publisher.

When Thomas announced his second season in the fall of 1865, he reaffirmed his commitment to presenting new scores “which belong to the modern school and have never been played in this country,” alongside the works of the “great masters.” Thomas recognized that Wagner and other progressive composers of the day “represent the growth and effort of our own times,” and he expected

audiences to share his conviction and his curiosity. This was part of a programming ideology that would remain Thomas's hallmark and set the policy for major orchestras in the future: a careful balance of familiar landmarks, little-known works by major composers, and new music.

Thomas's orchestra didn't even have a name at first; sometime during the second season, when the *Tristan* prelude was premiered, it became known informally, and then officially, as the Theodore Thomas Orchestra. It couldn't claim a home base until the following season, when Thomas and the orchestra inaugurated New York's brand new Steinway Hall. That season Thomas's riskiest programming choice was his own transcription of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*. When the audience hissed the unfamiliar score, Thomas launched a tradition that persists in concerts of new music to this day: he simply turned around and played it again.

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*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*