

FACT SHEET

Ballet Music: Giselle Act II

Adam (1803- 1856)

Composed: 1841

Genre: Classical Ballet

Length: approx. 40 mins

First Performed: 18 June 1841, Opéra, Théâtre de l'Académie

History:

Giselle is based on a legend which describes spectres of unmarried women who return to seek revenge on the living. These 'wilis' were featured in an earlier book '*De l'Allemagne*' by Heinrich Heine, although the story of *Giselle* was hugely inspired by the dancer Carlotta Grisi, who was to take the title role at its premiere. The role of Giselle is now one of the most sought-after in ballet, as it demands both technical perfection and outstanding grace and lyricism, as well as great dramatic skill.

On 28 June 1841, *Giselle* was premiered at the Paris Opéra. Soon after this, a serious disagreement with the new director of the Opéra-Comique led Adam to use his money and open a theatre of his own, the Opéra-National which opened in 1847. Unfortunately the Revolution of February 1848 led to the closing of the theatre in March of that year, leaving Adam severely in debt. To repay these debts, Adam became Professor of Composition at the Conservatoire, among his pupils being a future composer of ballet and opera, Léo Delibes, who we have featured at the start of this concert.

Synopsis:

In the first act, a young village maiden named Giselle is in love with a man she knows only as Loys. In reality, the man is called Albrecht, a nobleman who has disguised himself as a peasant and is betrothed to Bathilde, daughter of the Duke. When Giselle discovers this treachery, she is grief-stricken and goes mad, then dies; one version of the story says she dies of a broken heart while another says she commits suicide in her madness.

The music we will hear tonight is taken from the second act. Here, Giselle's perpetual love for Albrecht saves him from the wicked magic of the wilis, vampiric ghosts of betrothed girls who were betrayed by their lovers and died before their wedding day. Though their leader, Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, forces Albrecht to dance again and again, Giselle intervenes long enough to spare his life and allow him to survive until the dawn. At sunrise, the wilis must return to their grave; Giselle must return as well but not before showing Albrecht that she forgives him for his deceit. The two pledge their love to each other and she returns to her grave. Sadly, they will forever be separated; Giselle is now a wili for the rest of eternity.

Structure:

Act 2

Introduction, halte des chasseurs et apparition des feux follets

(The huntsmen rest and Will-o'-the-Wisps appear)

Apparition de Myrthe et évocation magique

(Myrthe appears – magical evocation)

Pas de premières Wilis

(The Wilis appear)

Apparition de Giselle

(Apparition of Giselle)

Entrée des paysans

(Peasants enter)

Entrée du Prince et apparition de Giselle

(The Prince enters and sees the spectre of Giselle)

Entrée d'Hilarion, scene et fugue des Wilis, Grand pas de deux

Adage

Variation I: Andante

Variation II: Andante moderato

Valse (interpolated)

Ensemble des Wilis

Finale

Performers:

Vladimir Jurowski *conductor*
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

The Music:

Adam composed the score for *Giselle* in collaboration with choreographers Jules Perrot and Paris opera ballet-master, Jean Coralli, and the young ballerina who would make a name for herself in the title role, Carlotta Grisi. The libretto was written in just three days by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Théophile Gautier who was infatuated with Grisi. Adam took a similarly short time to compose the ballet score, taking a week to sketch out his ideas and three weeks to complete it. However, Adam's work was not simply like the 'cut and paste' scores that many opera and ballet works had become. Apart from the fact that the score was the first to use all new composition, another prominent feature of the music for *Giselle* is the use of "leitmotiv" (a theme that recurs in the music to refer to a specific character or emotion) as a narrative device. Adam was not the first to use leitmotiv in a ballet; François Halévy was perhaps the earliest in his 1830 score for *Manon Lescaut*. Leitmotifs used in the work include Albrecht's theme in C major and Giselle's in G major which becomes the first love theme as they pluck the daisy. Hilarion's is in E minor, and the main love theme is in A major. The wilis' theme is heard in Act I when Berthe mentions the wilis and returns again in Act II. With such a carefully constructed score, interweaving dance with narrative, both choreography and music can convey the drama equally.

Music for the "Peasant pas de deux" was composed by Frédéric Burgmüller and added for the first performance to please a wealthy patron whose mistress was Nathalie Fitzjames, the dancer who took the part of the peasant girl. It is used to this day, although the placement in Act I varies, as does the number of dancers dancing it.

Since its composition in 1841, the enormous popularity of *Giselle* has resulted in many alterations being made to suit changes of choreography.