

Next on

Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, April 2nd, 2011, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

[Richard Wagner](#) (1813-1883). *A Faust Overture* (1840/44/55). Philadelphia Orchestra, Wolfgang Sawallisch. Angel 56165. Tr 3. 12:43

[Robert Volkmann](#) (1815-1883). Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 33 (1855). Peter Bruns, cello, Mendelssohn Chamber Orchestra Leipzig, Jürgen Bruns. Hänssler 98.594. Tr 4. 16:36

[Richard Wagner](#). *Overture to Rienzi* (1840). Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, Yakov Kreizberg. Pentatone 041. Tr 2. 12:53

Two composers are born within two years of each other, and they both die in the same year. One is world-famous; the other is almost unknown.



Richard Wagner hasn't previously appeared on *Discoveries*, where we usually focus on under-the-radar composers. But there are two slightly less-played works, both from the same year early in his career, that show his voice struggling to be heard. Well, Wagner was always struggling against something, it seems (whether real or imagined), and 1840 found him in Paris, writing librettos as well as music when he wasn't scraping a living from commercial arranging.

The beginnings of *A Faust Overture* come from this time. Wagner wanted to write a symphony on the subject of the Goethe play, but that didn't materialize, so he worked it into a concert overture. He also wanted the Paris Opera to take up *Rienzi*, but the continual disappointment of hopes raised and dashed, the leitmotiv of pursuing creditors (the threat of debtor's prison had prompted his flight to France in the first place), and the acceptance of *Rienzi* in Dresden brought Wagner to Germany and eventual celebrity. *Rienzi*, interestingly, is really a French opera: in five acts, with finale ensembles, ballet, and the grand spectacle (anticipating *Götterdämmerung*) of a building crashing down at the end. Even with revisions cutting it to under six hours, *Rienzi* is the longest of all Wagner operas. And that's saying something.



Robert Volkmann is the polar opposite of Wagner, not only in fame, but in temperament. He trained to follow in the footsteps of his father, a church musician, learning organ, piano, violin, and his favorite instrument, cello. He taught voice in Prague and piano for a time, played organ and directed the choir at a Budapest synagogue, and wrote reviews for the music journal in Vienna. He composed all the while, his music inhabiting the sound-world of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Schumann. And yet we detect something else. Perhaps from his time in Prague and his years in Hungary, the belt loosens just a little. An avuncular approach to form and the rippling of slavic folk rhythms charm us just when we think we've got him figured out.

It was a piano trio that caught people's attention in the early 1850s. The pianists von Bülow and Liszt played it, as did another giant of the time, the violinist Joachim. Volkmann had just moved to Vienna from Budapest, and now—in the center of the European cultural world—he was starting to make waves. A publisher took on his entire music catalog, important people sought him out, and he was writing the concerto that was to become the most significant work for cello between Schumann and Brahms. With all this going for him, at the height of his fame... he moved back to Budapest.

After three years in Vienna he'd missed his friends in Hungary, missed the life in his adopted country. Liszt offered him a job at the National Academy of Music, he became a professor, and little by little he stopped composing. He said that the desire of some to pigeonhole him as a modern composer in the mold of Liszt or as a traditionalist in a wig was quite beside the point. "One side sees me as a musician of the future, while others see a ponytail on me... I want neither to be a futurist nor a ponytail, simply Volkmann."

There was one other giant of the time who saw the real composer, who could discern the art from the hype. And it was someone who knew a thing or two about hype, certainly, but also about the struggle to find one's own voice. Yes, Richard Wagner, that creator and destroyer of staged gods, admired the church musician's son, Robert Volkmann.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).