

the madness and death of king ludwig

King Ludwig II (b.1845), the king of Bavaria from 1864 until his death in 1886, was a champion of art and architecture. He had many castles built, including the fantastic and well-known Neuschwanstein.

Ludwig was the patron of Richard Wagner. In fact, the interior of Neuschwanstein was inspired by the same myths and legends that Wagner chose for his operas, in particular, *Lohengrin*. Ludwig helped Wagner clear all his financial debts, as well as finance the construction of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth and sponsor the production of many of Wagner's operas.

The fascination Ludwig had with these fairy-tales formed a large part of his known eccentricities and may have been what led to his downfall.

On the 10th of June 1886, the state of Bavaria sent one Bernhard von Gudden, psychiatrist, to examine Ludwig. The king was declared insane and promptly deposed from office. The following day, both Ludwig and von Gudden's bodies were found floating in Lake Starnberg...

When I was asked to write a fanfare to go in an all-Wagner programme, I was drawn by this real-life saga. The mystery of how Ludwig met his demise has never really been resolved. Based on what I've read, whether he was in fact insane is also debatable.

The Madness and Death of King Ludwig is scored for a large ensemble of seventeen brass instruments, percussion and eight double basses. It begins low in the depths of the double basses and rises up – an idea that parallels the opening of the first opera in the *Ring* cycle, *Das Rheingold*. The brass instruments enter in a slow stately fashion until building up to a huge climax. Then the first of two quotations from the *Ring* can be heard. It is the music that is used to describe acceptance of destiny, or fate, from Act II of *Die Walküre*. From this blossoms some very frenetic and troubled music that climaxes with three-note brass chords that appear as 'towers'. Now the second quotation from the *Ring* is heard. It is the prelude to *Das Rheingold* and it emerges between these towers before forming fully into the Rhine-journey music from *Götterdämmerung*. This music eventually descends into chaos and from this emerges chords that fade in and out and overlap each other in a kind of cloud-like formation. The piece concludes with three pounding single notes that allude, briefly, to a funeral march.

The Madness and Death of King Ludwig was commissioned by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra as part of the Australia LNG Composer-In-Residence programme 2007-2009.

James Ledger 2008