

The life of Richard Strauss

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Introduction

Richard Strauss poses a unique challenge in modern music. His predilection for mixing the trivial and the sublime, for undercutting the extraordinary with the everyday, defies our stereotype of nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers. Indeed, Strauss embodies a fundamental dichotomy that will be a recurring focus in this study of the man and his music. Strauss's world was one clearly divided into two distinct but frequently overlapping spheres of professional and domestic life. Beyond these two spheres, Strauss showed little interest: he had no time for Wagnerian philandering, no space for Brucknerian religious piety, no patience with the insecurities that haunted Mahler, no understanding of the jealousies that plagued Schoenberg. Where other composers derived their creative spark through struggle or personal tragedy, Strauss would simply not indulge. He did not see discipline, order, and stability as obstacles but rather as catalysts for creativity. He once said of Wagner, whose music he admired most of his life, that the brain that composed *Tristan und Isolde* was surely as "cool as marble." It is a statement that says far more about Strauss than Wagner in its emphasis on technique over emotion.

Hans von Bülow once dubbed young Strauss as Richard III (because, after Wagner, there could be no direct successor), but that very persistent focus on Strauss as post-Wagnerian has obscured the fact that the role model for Strauss the man was more likely Johannes

Brahms, whom he met at a crucial time in his life. Brahms, whose rise to prominence coincided with the rise of Viennese liberalism, cultivated a bourgeois image; his apartment was neat and orderly, his books, manuscripts, and printed scores were arranged with remarkable precision. As a composer who was born in the 1830s, Brahms's bourgeois-artist persona was in consonance with its time, but for a creative individual of Strauss's generation the duality of bourgeois and artist was one of increasing conflict. Here is where Strauss stood apart from his contemporaries, for – to the contrary – he saw no such conflict as he eagerly embraced the bourgeoisie of a new generation. The culture industry that was in its infancy during the days of Brahms had come into fruition by the early twentieth century, and no one recognized this phenomenon any better than Strauss, the most successful composer of his time.

On one level Strauss remains one of the most often performed, widely recorded composers of our century, and seems therefore to be readily accessible. Yet on another level we inevitably confront a private, contradictory human being who seems to elude our grasp. Was Strauss a man deeply rooted in inner antagonisms, or did he merely wear several masks? How, indeed, does one come to terms with the creator of temporally adjacent works such as *Symphonia domestica*, with its harmless depiction of family life, and *Salome*, an opera that combines oriental exoticism and sexual depravity? How do we reconcile the avid Bavarian card player with the man of letters who quoted Goethe with ease? What do we make of a composer who, in *Krämerspiegel*, warned that art remains vulnerable to crass business interests, yet who himself conducted concerts at Wanamaker's department store in New York? And, especially important, how does one understand the artist who claimed to embrace Wagner, yet in practice seemed to reject him?

Strauss, the master skat player, kept those cards close to his chest at the table and also in life; he was aloof and seemingly phlegmatic in public, yet extroverted and sanguine in his music. The composer who seems to reveal so much of himself in his works loathed real self-

revelation beyond the purely musical realm. Averse to the neo-Romantic posture of the artist set apart from worldly life, Strauss cultivated the image of a composer who treated composition as everyday work, as a way of merely earning an income. But however true this persona may have been on one level, it was no less a pose, a mask so real to others that he could disappear behind it, allowing Strauss the artist his necessary seclusion for creative work. In short, no one was more aware of this man-vs.-artist (the bourgeois-artist) paradox than Strauss himself. He was, after all, the composer who, as memoirs and documentary film footage show, enjoyed conducting his most moving musical passages with minimal body gestures and with a face devoid of emotion.

As a modernist, Strauss also realized the inability of contemporary art to maintain a unified mode of expression. From *Don Juan* to *Der Rosenkavalier* and beyond, Strauss reveled in creating moments of grandeur only to undercut them – sometimes in the most jarring fashion. Unlike Mahler or Schoenberg, who both held to a Romantic view of music as a transcendent, redemptive force, Strauss confronted the problem of modernity head on and came to his own idiosyncratic conclusions. Thus, in a paradoxical way, Strauss exploited a Wagnerian musical language to criticize a metaphysical philosophy behind that very language. His attraction to Nietzsche stemmed from a fundamental desire to debunk the metaphysics of Schopenhauer, specifically the denial of the Will (that primal, unknowable, life force) through music.¹ All life is suffering, according to Schopenhauer, and that primal, metaphysical drive could either be quieted through aesthetic contemplation or entirely negated through an ascetic, Parsifal-like saintliness. Strauss, who had no interest in saintliness or redemption through music, embraced Nietzsche who transformed Schopenhauer's fatalistic "will to life" into an celebratory "will to power." Nietzsche, in short, sought to affirm the very life that Schopenhauer sought to deny, and he also provided the effective apparatus for Strauss's joyful – and life-long – agnosticism in the 1890s.

In an essay written shortly before his death, Strauss lamented (in

unmistakably Nietzschean terms) that this aspect of modernity – the recognition of an unbreachable gap between the individual and the collective – went largely unnoticed in his works dating back to the 1890s.² In his late essay, Strauss refers to this dichotomy in Act III of *Guntram*, though it could apply as easily to such tone poems as *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Indeed, in a sketch to the opening of this symphonic work, Strauss writes: “The sun rises. The individual enters the world, or the world enters the individual.” Strauss’s late essay also implies disappointment that for a younger generation of composers a different view of modernism had emerged – one that prized technical progressivity, whereby musical style was viewed as an obligatory, linear process along the axis of tonality–atonality. This Schoenbergian notion of an organic, unified stylistic evolution (with its obvious German-Romantic roots) was alien to Strauss, who recognized, if anything, a profound disunity in modern life and saw no reason that music should be any different. Strauss treated musical style in an ahistorical, often critical fashion that arguably prefigured trends of the late twentieth century. He seems to foreshadow what Fredric Jameson calls the postmodern “collapse of the ideology of style.” For Schoenberg and his high-modernist followers there was an implicit perception of “aesthetic immorality” in composing contemporary music in a tonal idiom that was viewed as outworn and moribund. This moralistic aesthetic continued until well after World War II and could merge in and out of a political discourse with remarkable inconsistency, where composers such as Stravinsky or Webern, who enjoyed an aesthetically moral high ground, were forgiven various political sins or had their views misrepresented altogether.

Historians of music often look for an inner unity in a composer’s repertoire and, in turn, in the broader connection between that repertoire and the composer’s Age. Scholars who have studied the music dramas of Richard Wagner or the symphonies of Gustav Mahler along such lines have been richly rewarded. Yet, the extensive Straussian *œuvre* – which shows a composer equally at ease in the concert hall, recital hall, ballet, cinema, and opera house – is far more resistant to

cultural biographers in this respect. Strauss once suggested that his body of work was one “bridged by contrasts,” and, indeed, there are hardly two adjacent works that continue in the same mode: tragic or comic. *Ein Heldenleben* is preceded by the anti-heroic *Don Quixote*, and the hyper-symbolic *Frau ohne Schatten* is followed by the light sex-comedy, *Intermezzo*. But in exploring these contrasts one finds intriguing connections: the two tone poems probe and critique heroism in its various guises, while the two operas explore domestic relationships on both mundane and metaphysical levels. Indeed, if there is a significant consistency in Strauss’s compositional output, it is in his desire to suggest the profundities and ambiguities to be found in everyday life, even in the apparently banal. The sublime final trio of *Der Rosenkavalier* is based, after all, on a trivial waltz tune heard earlier in the opera.

But beyond all the contrasts, paradoxes, and incongruities there is indeed a coherent shape to be found in Strauss’s compositions. His output begins with a focus on lieder and purely instrumental composition: solo piano and chamber music at first, then orchestral music by the 1880s. Toward the end of the decade, he becomes preoccupied with the narrative potential of symphonic music and by the turn of the century, after an intense exploration of the tone poem, Strauss moves on to the stage, and opera remains his principal preoccupation over the remaining decades. Yet after *Capriccio* (1941), the elderly Strauss bade farewell to the theater and returned to those instrumental musical genres of his youth. And there were, of course, the lieder that wove their way throughout Strauss’s career at various critical junctures, from the naive youthful pieces to the exalted orchestral songs at the very end of his life.

The ideal likeness of Strauss would not be a painting, drawing, or sculpture; rather, it would be a mosaic: coherent from afar, but upon closer view made of contrasting fragments. Those who shared this closer perspective have, in fact, offered conflicting images of the man: generous, petty, folksy, snobbish, visionary, provincial, tasteless, refined. His was a complex personality that seemed to offer itself to

the world without a filtering mechanism. Yet this may well have been the ultimate filter: the pretense of being unpretentious. In *Ariadne auf Naxos* Strauss set compelling music to the words, “music is a sacred art,” but he was the same composer who simultaneously insisted that, in capitalism, music is also a commodity, knowing full well the shock value of such a statement.

Strauss would ultimately argue that it was not his job to create a unified picture of himself. When Stefan Zweig, his one-time librettist, suggested that the composer might write an autobiography, Strauss declined stating that he preferred simply to “provide some signposts and then leave it to the scholars to fill in.” The composer, thus, invites us to discover whatever there is to learn about him through his music: the cheap and the precious, the commonplace and the sublime. The key may not be to reconcile or resolve such contradictions, but rather to look at them in a dialectical way. What follows are six chapters that cover his early musical development, his emergence as a tone poet in the 1880s and 90s, his turn to the stage at the beginning of the twentieth century, the successes and misfires of the post-World War I era, the turbulent 1930s (a time of artistic and political crisis), and, of course, the period during the Second World War and its aftermath.