

RICHARD STRAUSS*

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Abstract

For middle school and up, an introduction to the post-Romantic composer Richard Strauss

1 Background

Richard Strauss was a German composer whose life spanned the late Romantic¹ and Modern eras of Western music². Like some others of his generation, Strauss was interested in using music not only to tell stories, but also to portray emotional and psychological states. (Sigmund Freud's work, which was the basis of modern psychology, became widely known in the early twentieth century and influenced many artists and musicians.)

Unlike most other serious composers who were working in the first half of the twentieth century, Strauss was not interested in exploring twelve-tone or other Modern methods of composition. His music remained late Romantic in style, strongly influenced by Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner, and other late-nineteenth-century composers. Like others in this tradition, Strauss often wrote for large orchestras, taking advantage of the many colors available to him through the different instruments. His music is usually tonal³ (unlike most Modern compositions), but heavily chromatic⁴, with lush, complex harmonies.

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¹"The Music of the Romantic Era" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11606/latest/>>

²"What Kind of Music is That?" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/>>

³"What Kind of Music is That?": Section Tonal, Atonal, and Modal Music <<http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/#s7>>

⁴"What Kind of Music is That?" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11421/latest/#p7f>>

2 Biography

Richard Strauss



Figure 1

Richard Georg Strauss was born in Munich on June 11, 1864. His father, Franz, was the principal horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra. Franz did not like the music of Wagner and others who were considered progressive at that time, so Richard's early musical training emphasized the more classical tradition of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann. Richard Strauss' early compositions reflect this upbringing.

But in 1884 he began conducting professionally, and began to be influenced by more progressive musical ideas. Strauss' conducting career included being appointed assistant conductor of the Meiningen Orchestra, third conductor (and later associate conductor) at the Munich Opera, assistant conductor at Weimar, and conductor of the Berlin Court Opera. He was also a guest conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic and toured widely, conducting many of the great orchestras of the time. At the same time, Strauss was gaining a reputation as a brilliant composer. Throughout the late 1880's and the 1890's he composed many tone-poems; most of his operas came after 1900. With the former came fame; with the latter, some notoriety as well as considerable financial success. The even more notorious Oscar Wilde wrote the text to **Salome**, but many of Strauss' operas were collaborations with the Austrian writer Hugo von Hoffmannsthal.

In his later years, Strauss spent more time on music for smaller ensembles, both vocal works and non-programmatic instrumental pieces. As most serious composers became ever more Modern, Strauss' music became increasingly out of step with the times. (For example, the lush, Romantic-sounding *Der Rosenkavalier* was written after the riot-inducing *Salome* and *Elektra*.) Yet these late works were still of high quality

musically and remain popular with performers and audiences.

World War II brought some financial difficulties; his royalty payments were frozen during the war. Widely recognized as Germany's greatest living composer, Strauss was made an official in the Third Reich. Although he did not appear to be an enthusiastic supporter, neither did Strauss seem to particularly object to the Nazis. Facing a de-Nazification tribunal after the war, Strauss went into voluntary exile in Switzerland in 1945; he did not return to Germany until 1949, after his formal acquittal. He died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria, on September 8, 1949.

3 Music

NOTE: If you are looking for the famous composer of waltzes, that's Johann Strauss (no relation).

Richard Strauss is best known for his symphonic poems and his operas. He also wrote many Lieder (German art songs), and some piano pieces, choral works, and chamber music.

Strauss did not write symphonies for the orchestra; he wrote what he liked to call **tone-poems** (a term that he invented). These symphonic poems, unlike symphonies, have only a single movement which does not have a standard (expected) form. The tone-poems are often very **programmatic** - that is, they suggest a story, scene, or idea - and Strauss felt free to choose the form for each tone poem that best fit its subject.

Probably the most familiar of his tone-poems is *Also Sprach Zarathustra* ("Thus spake Zarathustra"), because of its prominent fanfare-like use in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Other well-known tone-poems include *Tod und Verklärung* ("Death and Transfiguration"), *Don Quixote*, *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* ("Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks"), and *Ein Heldenleben* (the autobiographical "A Hero's Life").

Der Rosenkavalier, full of the sounds of Viennese waltz, is Strauss' most popular opera. *Salome* and *Elektra*, with their intense musical portrayals of disturbed personalities, were originally considered scandalous, but also established his reputation as a great opera composer.

4 Suggestions for Further Study

- Unless you are already fond of post-Romantic opera, you should begin listening to Strauss with the tone poems. There are plenty of recordings to choose from; some should be available at your local library. If you can, find a recording with notes that describe the story or ideas contained in the piece. Listening to programmatic music is more enjoyable when you know the "program". If you would like to hear some of his vocal music, an excellent place to start is with his very popular *Four Last Songs*. (You may want to note that the subjects of his operas are not really suitable for children.)
- There are many web pages dedicated to Richard Strauss: biographies, discussions of his operas, reviews of recordings, and so on. At the time of this writing, a good place to begin a search was the Richard Strauss site⁵.

5 Acknowledgments

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⁵<http://www.richard-strauss.com/>