

Richard Strauss, a Biography

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Abstract

A well known composer, reputable conductor and rarely known performer, Richard Strauss plays an important part in the history of Western Music. Alongside other very influential composers like Gustav Mahler, and Johannes Brahms, Richard Strauss placed a large mark in the pages of musical history, beginning to set new standards of tonality, form and other musical ideas that would usher in the twentieth century. Richard would find himself in a new world of music, freshly under the influence of composers such as Brahms, but more personally Wagner.¹ Strauss is said to be the greatest predecessor of Richard Wagner, which is apparent in some of his compositional techniques. A true icon, Strauss has earned his place alongside the greatest German composers in history.

Early Life

Born on June 11, 1864, in Munich in the kingdom of Bavaria, Richard Strauss was the son of a well established horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra and professor of the Royal School of Music, Franz Strauss. Richard's mother was Franz's second wife, Josephine². Both of Richard's parents were in a high standing social class, due to Franz's occupation and Josephine's hereditary wealth from her family's brewery. The two would be able to support their only son throughout his life until he set out with his own career.³ During this time Germany wasn't even considered a country, which didn't happen until Richard was seven years old.⁴

¹ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, The New Groves Dictionary for Music and Musicians, Edited by Stanley Sadie and J. Tyrrell. London: Macmillan, 2001. XXIV, 497.

² Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works*, Vol. 1, Barrie & Rockliff, 2.

³ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 2.

⁴ David Hurwitz, *Richard Strauss An Owner's Manual*, Amadeus Press, 2014, 1.

Like most famous composers, Strauss began showing his enhanced musical ability at a very young age. He began playing piano at the age of four, then eventually the violin at age eight.⁵ His first compositions were written when he was only seven years old, beginning with a Christmas Carol and then a Polka. Strauss produced his first orchestral score, *Festmarsch*, at the age of twelve, which was his first reputable major work. This was due to his connections with his uncle at one of the most successful and well-known publishing companies of the time, Breitkopf & Hartel.⁶ Later came several others including a Theme and Variations for Horn and piano (Opus 17), which he dedicated to his father in 1878.⁷ Strauss's early life led to be very successful, in many ways due to the support and drive provided by the musical and financial support of his parents.⁸ Many of his pieces were premiered by the small Orchestra known as "Wilde Gung'l", which was regularly under the direction of Franz Strauss, where Richard would also find his first several opportunities to perform with his violin as well, and occasionally run rehearsals.

From the early stages up until the 1880's, his father supervised and criticized all of his compositions. Franz Strauss was a very conservative and old-fashioned musician, who favored the styles of more conventional composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Up until his time spent with the *Wilde Gung'l* orchestra, most of Richard's work were concentrated around lieder, piano concertos and chamber ensembles. In 1882, he graduated from Ludwigs-Gymnasium and according to his father's wishes attended the University of Munich for a short period of time until the beginning of the next year.⁹ This short duration would awaken a

⁵ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 497.

⁶ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 3.

⁷ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 2.

⁸ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 3.

⁹ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 497.

new intellectual mindset within the composer as he would stray into more modern styles of composing. In 1883 he began traveling, first to Dresden, then to Berlin where he would expose himself to more musical diversity that would alter his technique even more.

Establishing A Career

While in Berlin, Strauss met Bülow, an established pianist and conductor of a Meiningen orchestra. The two had a very mutually respectful relationship. In 1884 Strauss was commissioned to write a two pieces for the ensemble, where he would make his conducting debut with the second, *Wind Serenade*.¹⁰ A year later he would be offered the position as the Assistant Court Director of Music, and would later become Head director after Bülow's resignation in that same year.

In Strauss's time away from home he began developing a new compositional taste that grew more and more away from his father. The dramatic shift is accredited to Bülow and Strauss's new friend Alexander Ritter, who were diligent followers of the new innovating musical techniques. Ritter was married to Wagner's niece, played violin professionally alongside Strauss in his composing career, and began having a great deal of influence.¹¹ Strauss found a new focus in compositions after discovering an interest in Liszt's symphonic poems.¹² Rather than his father's strict and formulated approach, Richard Strauss began focussing more on the aesthetically pleasing aspects he could produce with his music. In 1886 Strauss traveled to Italy from April to May, but then back home to take on the position of the third conductor of Munich Court Opera. He would have many premieres with this group his residency with them including

¹⁰ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 445.

¹¹ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 498.

¹² Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 498.

one of his earlier, more “Wagnerian” styled pieces, *Aus Italien*.¹³ He began taking several conducting positions all in several cities including Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig where he would meet Gustav Mahler for the first time.¹⁴

Strauss met Pauline de Ahna at Feldafing in 1887. She was the daughter of a major general who studied singing Munich Musikschule and would eventually take lessons with Strauss in 1889.¹⁵ In the upcoming years Strauss would travel across southern Europe and take several positions conducting larger ensembles, after two spells of illnesses from 1891-92. He would finally marry Pauline in the year of 1894, in the same year he took on his most dignified position yet, taking on Symphony Concerts in Berlin in memoriam of the death of Bülow. Strauss would connect with Munich once more accepting a position as Court Conductor.¹⁶ It would take only two years for Strauss to attain the role as Principal Conductor at Munich.¹⁷ During Strauss’s time in Munich he was rehearsing and performing new Wagner works, as well as composing his own poems.¹⁸ Strauss had to understand the direction of Germany's modern composers, both the extreme progressives as well as the “modern conservatives” of the time¹⁹.

After spending a year of stability with his wife as the Principal Conductor at Munich, in 1897 his son was born taking a name after the baby’s grandfather, Franz. One year after the birth of his child, the family moved to Berlin as Richard leaves his position at Munich to be contracted with the Berlin Hofoper. His new commissioner would further establish his reputation as a

¹³ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 445.

¹⁴ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 498.

¹⁵ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 498.

¹⁶ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 445.

¹⁷ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

¹⁸ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 499.

¹⁹ David Hurwitz, *Richard Strauss An Owner’s Manual*, 6.

brilliant composer of the time, one of these works being a rendition of *Don Juan*.²⁰ Strauss became high in demand as a conductor across the country, and would conduct over 71 performances with the Hofoper orchestra.²¹

An Established Composer and Conductor

Strauss would leave Munich for the final time in 1898 to assume the position as Conductor at the Berlin Court Opera, as well as principal conductor of Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1898.²² Around this time Strauss began composing operas as well, *Guntram*, *Sniggedicht*, and *Feuersnot* were the first few operas and stage works he produced. His works began growing more and more popular as his life and career progressed, still doing guest conducting as well as performance with his residence ensemble. He would cross paths with well-known librettist and dramatist Hofmannsthal at the turn of the century, in Paris.²³ In 1901 the first of many all-Strauss concerts was held in Vienna, which would lead to the first Strauss Festival in 1903 in London.²⁴ By this time, Strauss has long since given up any sort of instrumental performance in order to accommodate for the busy life of touring with his wife.²⁵

Strauss began touring outside of mainland Europe and traveled to Europe in 1902, and then to America in 1904.²⁶ Just as Strauss's life began to go in the direction he had only dreamed of, his father, mentor, and early inspiration, passed away on May 31, 1905.²⁷ It would seem that

²⁰ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 500.

²¹ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 500.

²² Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

²³ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 500.

²⁴ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

²⁵ David Hurwitz, *Richard Strauss An Owner's Manual*, 3.

²⁶ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 500.

²⁷ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

in the chaos and super involvement of Richard Strauss's instrumentation into the world's ear would prove to be too distracting to give his father's death any sort of zealous recognition. His busy conducting schedule left him with only summers to compose in a country home owned by Pauline's parents. Also in 1905, after much persuasion from Hofmannsthal, Strauss began writing music to set the play *Elektra* into an Opera and finished three years later.²⁸ In 1908 he would be named the General Music Director of Berlin Court Opera, and retain this title until the end of 1918. He also took on Symphony concerts of Berlin Court Opera from Weingartner, until 1920. While Strauss's life seems to be filling more and more with exciting progress for the now clearly established composer, after a decade into the new century, his mother passes away.²⁹

Final Years

After his time expired with the Berlin Philharmonic, he went back to the Intendant of State Opera for a whole year, then became the Director of Vienna State Opera.³⁰ Things began to slow down a bit for Richard Strauss as his son, Franz, married in January of 1924. In this same year Strauss abandoned any and all permanent positions to begin traveling as well as attending Festivals, and conducting operas.³¹

In 1933 Strauss became the President of Reichsmusikkammer, in addition to the German Composer's Guild, beginning a year later.³² Strauss achieved the ability for German Composers to obtain a copyright for their works.³³ This time was spent well personally for Strauss as his

²⁸ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 501.

²⁹ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

³⁰ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

³¹ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

³² Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

³³ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 503.

compositions became very popular with the German government. However, this starlight wouldn't last long as a scandal came about with accusations with the NAZI regime which would lead Strauss's resignation from Reichsmusikkammer.³⁴ During his employment with the government it was speculated that Strauss's work was intended for propaganda in favor of the regime, while many the reality of a composer's unsteady income may be persuaded in any direction that provides consistency.

After his scandal with government and resignation, Strauss was awarded the Gold Medal of Royal Philharmonic Society in London, in 1936.³⁵ Three years Richard and Pauline celebrated their Golden Wedding in Garmisch (a small town just outside of Munich)³⁶. From then out the couple spends their winters in Vienna away from Garmisch. They moved to Switzerland in 1945, after the end of World War II, and stayed there for four years. The war during the time reeked havoc in all ways imaginable for the Strauss family. Constant military harassment of Franz and his wife, along with travel complications for Richard and Pauline, their final months were spent in near perral.³⁷ The war brought utter destruction to Richard's home of Munich where monuments, opera houses and In September of 1949, after returning to Garmisch in May, Richard Strauss had a heart attack that lead to kidney failure.³⁸ Eight months later Pauline passed away.

³⁴ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

³⁵ Del Mar, *Richard Strauss, A Commentary*, 446.

³⁶ David Hurwitz, *Richard Strauss An Owner's Manual*, 1.

³⁷ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 504.

³⁸ Cormac Newark, *Richard Strauss*, 504.

Conclusion

Richard Strauss lived a very long and unquestionably successful life. Full of adventures both through music and the civilized world, Strauss gave himself an unshakable reputation. His compositions were always with the current trends and favored by the public, many are even still being performed today. Strauss took what his father instilled in him and spread it to the world, both by performing (or conducting) and composing. Despite any turmoils and roadblocks, he knew what it took to be successful. Richard Strauss will be a standard name in the development of Western Music from now until the end of time.

Bibliography

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