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Zoë Alexis Lang
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Introduction

During his lifetime, Johann Strauss Jr. (1825–1899) was one of the most popular composers in his native city of Vienna. Although it has been over a century since his death, his renown continues unabated. Even the most uninterested tourist in Vienna would find it difficult to avoid Strauss Jr. altogether. The official website of the city includes a twenty-four-hour webcam that features the statue of the composer.[1] As you board an Austrian Airlines flight, the waltzes of Strauss Jr. play. In Vienna's first district, where many of the city's historical buildings are located, dozens of salespeople dressed in replica eighteenth-century costumes sell tickets to go hear concerts prominently featuring Strauss Jr. waltzes along with Mozart and other Austrian favorites. Even a walk around the main thoroughfare, the Ringstrasse, includes the gleaming gold statue of Strauss Jr. in the Stadtpark – the same statue featured on the city's webcam.

But the Strauss Jr. phenomenon is no mere show for visitors. Key Viennese events also incorporate his compositions, such as the annual New Year's Concert held at Vienna's Musikverein and the many balls that take place around the city before Lent. Because it has become so commonplace, it is easy to think of the Strauss waltz as a kitschy memento from a bygone era, one that offers little commentary on social or political events. However, a more careful look beneath this ephemeral surface reveals a complex history intertwining this repertoire and Vienna.

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This book examines why the Strauss waltz remained a key part of Austrian culture during the twentieth century, despite the bewildering political and societal shifts that affected Austria during this time. This indefatigability stemmed in part from the general consensus that these works were unquestionably Austrian, even if the definition of "Austrian" remained hotly contested. Thus the Strauss waltz serves as a prism, refracting the variegated views of Austria that emerged during the twentieth century. This book demonstrates not only how deeply embedded the Strauss waltz is with its culture, but also the many ways in which this relationship manifested itself.

To claim that the Strauss family wrote the most Austrian of Austrian music might appear to be an exaggeration. After all, Austria has been called "the land of music" because of the contributions from its many illustrious composers.[2] Yet at the same time, Austria is by no means the only nation to make such a claim. Germans also have great pride in their musical heritage, a tradition that can be dated back to the early years of the eighteenth century.[3] Music is just one of many cultural traits that the two nations have in common, and such ambiguities caused considerable difficulties as Austrians attempted to create a cohesive national identity. The concept of modern-day Austria itself is a twentieth-century one. Prior to the Habsburg collapse in 1918 there was no desire to create a separate nation of the German-speaking regions. Indeed, this idea would be contrary to the central tenet of nationalism: ethnic groups, delineated through shared culture, should occupy their own territory. Language was often considered the best indicator of where boundaries should be since it was viewed as a fundamental expression of culture.[4] In this model, the only logical solution was to merge Germany and Austria together, an idea that failed to gain much interest during the nineteenth century. During the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848, there were debates about what role Austria should play if a unified Germany

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were to emerge: some advocated for a Greater Germany, which included the Habsburg territories, while others were opposed to inheriting the vast and unwieldy empire.[5] Bismarck opposed Austria joining Germany in 1871 because he had no interest in acquiring and modernizing the technologically deficient Austria. In contrast, some Austrians, such as Georg von Schönerer, continued to support unification, but such views were not widespread.[6] In the twentieth century, how alike the two cultures were perceived to be varied, depending on the larger context: for example, at the start of World War I, the two were depicted as unified to provide cultural justification for their military alliance. In contrast, Austrians presented themselves as inherently different from Germans after World War II, claiming that the country's annexation into the National Socialist state had gone against the most basic beliefs of its people.

Just as Germany and Austria could be seen as similar or dissimilar depending on context, the characteristics that defined their nations could demonstrate commonality or difference. Some commentators emphasized marked regionalisms in Austrian dialect as virtually constituting a separate language, while others claimed they were not sufficient to demarcate a distinct culture, since the underlying structure was too similar. Catholicism played a vital role in Austrian identity, but also in many regions of Germany. Determining what was German and what was Austrian proved to be difficult because cultural traits typically heightened the ambiguity instead of eliminating it.

Debates about music brought no more clarity. During the early 1800s, Berlin-based writers gave music significant clout by defining the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven as belonging to their cultural sphere.[7] Authors such as E. T. A. Hoffmann heard in these pieces specific traits of German culture, putting forward the assertion that music created in Vienna was not *ipso facto* Viennese.

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Audiences in Vienna, lacking the sophistication these writers claimed was unique to the Prussian capital, rejected the compositional masters, preferring instead the lighter operas of Rossini and other foreign imports – indeed, there was a long tradition of Italian opera in Vienna so it is not surprising that such works should appear prominently on the city's stages.[8] This idea of the Viennese as too fickle and superficial to understand the masterpieces of art being written in their city was one that was incorporated into biographies of these composers. Mozart and Schubert are two of the Viennese masters frequently depicted as rejected by their city, given little recognition for the genius of their works, and allowed to die in ignoble circumstances. However, more recent scholarship has shown that such narratives distort the facts.[9]

If the most famous Viennese composers did not exemplify the culture, then, who could? Unlike Germans, Austrians have an international reputation for lighter genres (in German, *Unterhaltungsmusik*) such as operetta and dances. For Austrian commentators seeking to differentiate their music from that of their northern neighbors, popular forms were ideal. These traits were also seen as a greater manifestation of the differences between the two nations. Germans were portrayed as dour, serious, and too concerned with work – a vestige of the Protestant Prussian culture that was viewed, particularly by Austrian commentators, as crucial in establishing modern Germany. In contrast, Austria was a land of hedonistic pleasure and sensuality even if its citizens lacked the productivity of Germans. Such categorizations were not limited to music but were frequently applied to any perceived cultural differences between the two countries.[10] It was only logical that Austria should produce high-quality music for entertainment, and the musical form that best captured this Austrian cultural trait – or, as they might prefer, *Gemütlichkeit* – was the waltz.

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Many commentators writing about the Strauss family had a tendency to conflate Viennese and Austrian culture. One reason for this bias is that the majority of these writers lived in Vienna and considered the capital city to epitomize the country as a whole. In the imperial days, Vienna was unique because it was the center of an extensive empire. However, even after the Habsburg collapse, the city differed from the rest of the nation. Vienna in the 1920s had around two million inhabitants, about a third of the country's population, and contrasted significantly with the rest of Austria, which tended to be alpine and rural. There was also a stark contrast politically between the capital city and other regions. During the inter-war period, "Red Vienna" supported the left-wing Social Democratic Party while the rest of Austria backed the right-wing Christian Social Party.[11] The capital had different ethnic groups, particularly from former Habsburg territories; also, unlike the rest of Austria, Vienna was home to a sizable Jewish population.[12] In 1922, Vienna became its own political entity with the same voting rights as the much larger – but more sparsely populated – provinces. As a result, the capital could exist on its own, a city-island set off from the rest of Austria. This is not to say that other Austrians did not seek to define their culture. One response to Vienna-centric models was the Salzburg Festival, founded in 1920, which instead stressed ties between Austria and southern Germany, particularly Bavaria and other Catholic regions.[13] Viennese culture, with its waltzes and coffee houses, was considered by some to be an unhealthy, decadent center that was not representative of Austria as a whole. For the Viennese, though, these qualities were precisely what made their city unique.

Often waltzes are pushed aside, presented as the musical manifestation of the decadence and escape from reality associated with *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.[14] Even scholars have adopted this viewpoint.

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Take, for instance, the description found in Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's book, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*: "In the popular imagination, the name "Vienna" is synonymous with Strauss waltzes, charming cafés, tantalizing pastries, and a certain carefree, all-embracing hedonism."[15] The same tone can be found in the renowned scholarly study of the *Jahrhundertwende* in Vienna, Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of Ravel's *La valse* (1920), a piece that Schorske claims is a "grotesque memorial" of the same Viennese culture described in *Wittgenstein's Vienna*.[16] Schorske's analysis generalizes the waltz as one phenomenon, placing it into the same category as Janik and Toulmin, a type of confectionary for the ears. Furthermore, while Ravel may have appropriated the form as a statement about European society, that is not to say that he or his contemporaries dismissed waltzes out of hand. In fact, this generation of composers, particularly in Austria, retained their admiration for the works of Strauss Jr.[17] Arnold Schoenberg, for example, arranged a concert featuring the works of Strauss Jr. in 1921 as a fundraiser for his Society for Private Musical Performances.

Perhaps dismissing the waltz is, in part, due to the fact that scholars who have researched the Strauss family tend to be Austrian, and their works in more limited circulation.[18] The centenary of the *Blue Danube* waltz debut, for instance, was fêted in the January and February 1968 issues of the *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift*, the primary periodical for Austrian musicology, but not in English-language publications.[19] Several biographies and volumes of essays on the Strauss family have appeared recently from Austrian scholars, particularly around 1999, the centennial of Strauss Jr.'s death. A key contribution is the now-complete, ten-volume documentary biography of Strauss Jr., *Leben und Werk in Briefen und Dokumenten*, edited by Franz Mailer, which finally provides a solid basis from

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which scholars can draw.[20] The Strauss family have received far less attention in English-language publications, with the exception of biographies such as Peter Kemp's 1985 *The Strauss Family: Portrait of a Musical Dynasty*.[21] The main exception is Camille Crittenden's study, *Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture*; however, as the title suggests, her study is primarily concerned with operetta and not the waltzes.[22]

While Johann Strauss Jr. receives the most attention in this book, the primary intention is to present not another biography, but the legacy of the waltz in Vienna and how this connection was grounded in concepts of nationalism. Little scholarly work on the relationship between the city and this dance has appeared, particularly concerning the ways this connection endured during the twentieth century.[23] The book aims to redress this lacuna by examining how Strauss family works were presented during this time. Recent trends in musical scholarship, and particularly the interest in interdisciplinary studies that could be loosely described as cultural history, suggest that the time is ripe to reconsider the relationship between the Strauss family and their native city.

The biography of the Strauss family has received attention, but accounts of their life story often distort the facts. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the family in Vienna and how they rose to such popularity. Because this history is not commonly known for most English-language musicologists, it aims to be a quick introduction to the salient events of the composers' lives. However, the chapter also considers recurring topics, such as the conflict between Strauss Sr. and Strauss Jr., and how these themes reflected larger concerns of the biographers, particularly those writing after the Habsburg collapse.

Chapter 2 examines the centennial celebration of Strauss Jr.'s birth in 1925, held in Vienna. Organizers arranged special concerts

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and stagings of his operettas, an exhibition at the city hall, and a ceremony at the Strauss Jr. statue in the Stadtpark. Many of these events were sponsored by the municipal and state government, and promoted the idea of Strauss Jr. as a national icon. Press coverage from the centennial shows the wide range of political views that co-existed in Vienna at the time; for some, Strauss Jr. was proof that Austrian culture was autonomous, while for others, his music demonstrated German values. Because this event was given so much coverage in the press, the centennial solidified the view that Strauss Jr. was a vital Austrian icon, not only as a symbol of the past, but one appropriate for the future.

With the declaration of the Rome–Berlin Axis in 1936, Austria was left in a vulnerable position and unable to fend off its annexation by Germany in 1938, after which there was no distinction between the two cultures.[24] Chapter 3 examines Strauss family works that emerged from the Pan-Germanic movement during the 1930s and 1940s. Biographies also emphasized connections to German culture by incorporating the language of the National Socialists: in his 1940 *Johann Strauß*, for example, the Austrian Erich Schenk shows how the waltz reached a level of unparalleled mastery through the efforts of Strauss Jr. The importance of this repertoire's connections to Austria can be seen in the frantic attempts to appropriate it as German. The most crucial means through which these works were redefined as belonging to a Greater German culture occurred with the establishment of the New Year's Concert, which started in 1939. This chapter contextualizes the event, demonstrating its role in attempting to redefine the image of Strauss Jr. as a German.

In spite of its popularity during the National Socialist period, the music of the Strauss family retained a place in Austria after World War II, as Austrians attempted to redefine themselves as different from Germans to avoid punitive measures by the Allies. During

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these years, it was revealed to the public that Johann Strauss Sr. was Jewish by the standard of the Nuremberg Laws – a fact that the National Socialists went to great lengths to conceal, even modifying official documents. Newspaper articles already in the 1950s revealed this Jewish ancestry and how it had been hidden. This revelation served as another way Austrians could differentiate themselves from the "invading force" that had allegedly taken over the country during the annexation. Chapter 4 investigates the manner in which the Strauss family was understood as Jewish after World War II, a categorization whose origins extend back to the early nineteenth century.

Of all the Strauss Jr. compositions, the one that best demonstrates the malleability of meaning is his 1889 *Emperor Waltz*, the subject of Chapter 5. This work appeared in widely divergent interpretations during the twentieth century. Schoenberg made an arrangement of it in 1925 that set the Habsburg anthem "Gott erhalte" in counterpoint with the main melody. Hans Heinz Scholtys's setting of the waltz for choir dating from 1935 advocated that Austrians throw off the legacy of the past and embrace their country's future as part of the German Fatherland. The *Emperor Waltz* was featured on the first New Year's Concert presented by the Vienna Philharmonic as a symphonic piece that reflected German musical values. This waltz also proved evocative for film-makers, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of three different productions that shared a title: a 1933 German film entitled *Kaiserwalzer: Audienz in Ischl*, a 1948 Hollywood movie by Billy Wilder, and a wholly different 1953 production that borrowed the 1933 title. These three films reflect very different approaches to the subject, ranging from a typical 1930s German musical film to Wilder's sharp critique of Austrian society.

Vienna remains the city of waltzes but for many this association is dated, the product of an unmediated and vapid nostalgia.

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Yet the Strauss family continue to provide cultural meaning for Austrians because of the unique prestige in which their works are held. This book investigates one means through which Austrians have defined themselves for the past century and a half: the Strauss waltz.

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