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978-0-521-02774-8 - Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma

Michael Kennedy

Excerpt

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PART I

1864–1898

Youth in Munich

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1 The family

On the surface, life was good to Richard Strauss. He was successful, world-famous, rich and happily married for fifty-four years. Look a little below the surface and we see a different picture, that of a composer who was in tune with the times for only the early part of his career. For most of his life he found himself at odds with the direction music was taking. The world left him behind and he retreated from the world. Strauss the composer was strong, powerfully individual and passionate. Strauss the man was cool, aloof, easily complaisant, with a vein not so much of weakness as of haughty indifference which was to cause his name to be tainted (unfairly, as I intend to show). The exuberant, forceful, extrovert Strauss of his twenties and early thirties, obviously an artist in appearance and manner, became the reticent, understating bourgeois who could have been mistaken for a banker. This change was reflected even in his style of conducting. The life which began with a comet-like blaze of sensational excitement ended with a long sunset in which exile and the threat of disgrace cast lengthening tragic shadows. The musical parallel is exact: from the rush of strings and the ringing trumpet tone of *Don Juan* to a song in which death is awaited in a garden where summer is dying. The enigma of Richard Strauss, the why and the wherefore of the man and the musician, will perhaps never be solved. It can perhaps be explained.

In the opinion of the Canadian musician Glenn Gould, writing in 1962, Strauss was ‘the greatest musical figure who has lived in this century’.¹ Yet a distinguished English critic, Rodney Milnes, writing in *The Times* in 1995, referred to the hypothesis that ‘the court of posterity is still reserving judgment on Richard Strauss’. There has never been a consensus about Strauss. For as many who find his music enriching, exciting and satisfying, there are equally as many who find it shallow and meretricious. Regarded in his youth as the arch-fiend of modernism, in his later years he was written off as an

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extinct volcano, an arch-conservative living off his own fat, composing by numbers. Not only in his later years, either. When *Symphonia domestica* was first performed in London in 1905, Ernest Newman regretted that a composer of genius should ever have fallen so low. Progressives wrote him off after *Der Rosenkavalier*, regarding him as a traitor to the cause of advanced music which they thought he had espoused in *Elektra*. But it was, and is, impossible to write off Strauss. Like him or not, he is a giant figure in the music of his time, a time which stretched from before Wagner's death to four years after the end of the Second World War – from Brahms and Bruckner to Boulez and Messiaen. Throughout that long composing career – a total of seventy-eight years – he remained true to a belief in tonality as the cornerstone of musical craft. To quote Gould again: 'In him we have one of these rare, intense figures in whom the whole process of historical evolution is defied'.² He is accused of having betrayed modernity. But this is a criticism by those who equate modernity with the extravagance of the *avant-garde*. Let Strauss's own words refute the allegation: 'Modern? What does "modern" mean? Give the word a different significance! Have ideas like Beethoven's, write contrapuntally like Bach, orchestrate like Mozart and be genuine and true children of your own times, then you will be modern!'

That defiance is what I admire most in Strauss. Even though his music increases in popularity year by year, it is still largely misunderstood and underrated. The superficial judgments on him linger on. I see him as in many ways a tragic figure, symbolising the struggle to preserve beauty and style in Western European culture, a struggle that he lost, although not through any deficiency on his own part. His greatness has not yet been fully discovered and understood. This book is an attempt to advance that discovery and understanding.

There can be no real understanding of Strauss without acknowledgment of three fundamental strands in his personality: he was German and proud of it, steeped in love of and admiration for German art and culture; he was bourgeois and content to be so; and he regarded the family as the governing factor in life and morality. Overriding even these factors was his Nietzschean total absorption in art. Art was the reality in his life. The only purpose of life, he said, was 'to make art possible. Christianity had to be invented in order, after Phidias, to make possible the Colmar Altar, the Sistine Madonna, the

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Missa solennis and *Parsifal*.⁷ Yet he never became pretentious, was never a poseur. He remained practical, down-to-earth and modest within a knowledge of his worth. His music is almost wholly autobiographical. As a subject for music, he told Romain Rolland, he found himself just as interesting as Napoléon or Alexander the Great. That was in 1902. In 1949, three months before he died, he wrote: ‘Why don’t people see what is new in my works, how in them, as is found otherwise only in Beethoven, the human being visibly plays a part in the work?’³ Not only Beethoven, of course, but let that pass.

A comparison between Strauss and three of his contemporaries is pertinent. Of his relationship with Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) more will be said in some detail, but the chief difference between them is the absence from Strauss of any curiosity about the religious ethic in human life. Where Mahler agonised over the meaning of human existence, searched for a God and contemplated the possibilities of an after-life, Strauss had no interest in these subjects. True, he composed four movements of a Mass in D (o.Op. 31) in 1877, but solely as an exercise in setting a well-known text for unaccompanied choir. He shared a worship of Nature with Mahler, but even this was without the spiritual element which drove Mahler on. Strauss also lacked the immediate and intense pulling-power with an opera audience which Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) enjoyed. Although several of Strauss’s operas were sensational successes, they did not make so wide a general appeal as Puccini’s and that is still the case. Perhaps he had most in common with Edward Elgar (1857–1934), not so much musically, although both were masters of colour and of binding their own experiences into their music, as in life-style. Both married the daughters of generals and seemed content to have their lives organised by them; both kept a distance between themselves and their colleagues; and both made conscious efforts not to appear ‘artistic’ in any flamboyant sense. Elgar could have been mistaken for a retired general or country squire, Strauss for a prosperous bank manager. But whereas Elgar was a prickly, uptight personality, Strauss was phlegmatic, at any rate outwardly. Of all of them, Strauss enjoyed the most congenial musical upbringing, pampered would not be too strong a word. Yet, like Elgar, he never attended a music college or conservatory.

Strauss’s sister Johanna, three years younger almost to the day, has left an

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idyllic account of their childhood⁴ which is no doubt accurate even if one suspects a view through rose-tinted glasses. The parentage is interesting. Their father was Franz Strauss, born illegitimate in 1822 to Johann Urban Strauss, a 22-year-old court usher's assistant, and the daughter of the master-watchman (town-musician) in Parkstein, Eastern Bavaria (they never married). Franz was brought up by uncles. His mother, Maria Kunigunda Walter, played several instruments and at the age of five Franz started to learn the violin and later the clarinet, guitar and all the brass instruments. He also sang rather well. His first job, at the age of fifteen, was guitarist in Munich to Duke Max, brother of King Ludwig I and father of Elisabeth ('Sissy') who became Empress of Austria. During these years of service at the ducal court at Schloss Possenhofens, he developed into a virtuoso on the horn (the unvalved *Waldhorn*) and wrote several works, including a concerto for the instrument. After ten years, in 1847, he joined the Bavarian Court Orchestra, the orchestra of the Court Opera in Munich, as principal horn. Four years later he married Elise Seiff, daughter of an army bandmaster. Their first-born, a son, died of tuberculosis aged ten months. During a cholera epidemic in 1854, Elise and their baby daughter, also ten months old, died. Like Verdi, Franz Strauss at the age of thirty-two had seen his family wiped out. The experience, coming after a hard childhood in which he had been virtually abandoned by his parents, left him embittered and inflexible. After two years he met the eighteen-year-old Josepha (Josephine) Pschorr, one of five daughters of the wealthy owner of the Pschorr brewery, which at that time was at 11 Neuhauserstrasse in the city. The brewery was founded by Josephine's grandfather, Joseph Pschorr, who died in 1841. His wife was heiress to another brewery family, the Hackers. Their son Georg succeeded him and he in turn was succeeded in 1867 by his only son Georg, Richard Strauss's uncle. An orchestral player's salary was insufficient to allow Franz Strauss to propose to a girl from a rich family; it was seven years before he did so. He was by then forty-two, she was twenty-five. They were married on 29 August 1863 and lived in a flat on the second floor of 2 Altheimereck, not far from the brewery, and there, on 11 June 1864, their first child Richard Georg was born.

Richard wrote⁵ that his mother told him that from his earliest childhood he smiled at the sound of the horn and cried loudly when he heard the

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violin. His father practised diligently at home and his horn sounds through his son's music from the first works to the last. Scarcely any work by Strauss fails to include a memorable passage for the horn. In his reminiscences of his father, Strauss gives a fair assessment of Franz's musical taste and credo:

He would have considered it dishonourable ever to revise an artistic judgment, once he had accepted it as correct, and he remained inaccessible even in old age to any of my theories. His musical trinity was Mozart (above all), Haydn and Beethoven. To these were added Schubert, as song-writer, Weber and, at some distance, Mendelssohn and Spohr. To him Beethoven's later works, from the *finale* of the Seventh Symphony onward, were no longer 'pure' music (one could begin to scent in them that mephistophelian figure Richard Wagner). He approved of Schumann's piano compositions up to op.20; but his later compositions, because they were influenced by Mendelssohn and because of their rhythmic monotones and repetition of phrases, were labelled 'Leipzig music' and were therefore valued less highly. . . Where music ceased to be an assembly of sounds and became, consciously, music as expression, my father followed only with mental reservations. He approved of *Tannhäuser* but *Lohengrin* was too sweet for his taste and he was incapable of appreciating the later Wagner.⁶

Indeed he was. Franz Strauss loathed Wagner and they clashed several times. Strauss was no ordinary horn-player. By virtue of his natural authority, he became what might today be called the orchestra's shop steward, its spokesman. In addition, he was so good a player, in spite of being an asthmatic, that there could be no question of his dismissal when he expressed himself vehemently. Wagner arrived in Munich in the year of Richard Strauss's birth, 1864. The court conductor was Franz Lachner, but within three years he had been replaced by Wagner's acolyte Hans von Bülow, who conducted the first performance of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in 1865 and 1868 respectively. During rehearsals of these operas Franz Strauss argued with Bülow and Wagner, but played the music so conscientiously and beautifully – he said Wagner's horn parts were really clarinet parts – that Bülow called him 'the Joachim of the Waldhorn' and Wagner remarked that he was 'an intolerable blighter, but when he plays his horn one cannot stay cross with him'.

Neither Wagner nor Franz emerges with much credit from some of the tales Richard Strauss told. As a favour to Hermann Levi, who became

Munich court conductor in 1872, Franz agreed to play in the Bayreuth orchestra for the world première of *Parsifal* in 1882. (The favour was in gratitude for Levi's having conducted the first performance of Richard's first symphony the previous year.) At a rehearsal Franz Strauss announced to the orchestra that he had arranged for a communal lunch, price one mark, in the Bürgerverein. Wagner interrupted, saying he had arranged for a communal lunch in the Festspielhaus restaurant. Strauss said that did not suit the players, they preferred to go home after the rehearsal and eat in the town. 'Then eat your sour gherkins where you please', the composer snapped. Strauss wrote from Bayreuth to his wife: 'You can have no conception of the idolatry that surrounds this drunken ruffian. There is no ridding me now of my conviction that the man is ill with immeasurable megalomania and delirium, because he drinks so much, and strong liquor at that, that he is permanently drunk. Recently he was so tight at a rehearsal that he almost fell into the pit.' Was this true? – other writers are silent on Wagner's drinking habits. When the news of his death in February 1883 was given to the Munich orchestra by Levi, all except Franz Strauss stood as a mark of respect.

The conductor Hans Richter once said: 'Franz Strauss's son may count himself lucky that he has not his father in the orchestra.'⁷ But he had him at home and that was not easy. As the son laconically remarked: 'My father was very irascible; making music with him was always rather an anxious pleasure. . . . But I learned how to play well when I accompanied him time and time again in Mozart's beautiful horn concertos and in Beethoven's horn sonata.'⁸ The only occasion on which Richard lifted the curtain a little higher on his relationship with Franz was in March 1900 in Paris with Romain Rolland, who recorded in his diary for 9 March:

I ask him if his little boy (who is three) will be a musician. He hopes not; because he remembers the sorrow he caused his father and believes that of necessity his son, if he were to be a musician, when he is twenty would consider him a Philistine. He did as a matter of fact have to go through struggles with his family, with his father who was very musical, but of the old school . . . and understood nothing of his son's invention. Indeed, until he had achieved success he was always on the side of the critics against him, endlessly telling him: 'Can't you see? All that's absurd, it's not music'. And since he is afraid of being the same to his own son, he hopes he'll be a painter or sculptor.⁹

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1 Strauss and his sister Johanna as children

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Richard described Franz at home as ‘extremely temperamental, quick-tempered and tyrannical’. The only words he ever uttered in public about the effect of this marriage on his mother were these:

My delicate mother required all her meekness and goodness to allow the relationship between my parents, sustained as it always was by genuine love and high esteem, to continue in undisturbed harmony. To what extent the very sensitive nerves of my mother suffered through all this, I cannot today decide. My mother had always to be so careful of her nerves that, although she had an artistic temperament, she was unable to read much and frequently had to pay for visits to the theatre and concerts with sleepless nights. She never uttered a cross word and she was happiest when she was allowed to spend the summer afternoons alone and quietly, busy with her embroidery in the beautiful garden of my uncle [Georg] Pschorr’s villa.¹⁰

Some reading between the lines is required here. Strauss’s sister Johanna, describing their mother as ‘kindness in human shape’, related how Josephine would try to act as peace-maker and mediator when father and son quarrelled over musical matters, as they obviously did very often, especially when Richard became a converted Wagnerian. The first signs of a crack-up appeared in April 1885, just before Richard’s twenty-first birthday, when Josephine went into a nursing-home for treatment of a ‘nervous disorder’. She was then just forty-seven and one may deduce that her ailment was partly menopausal. She was certainly a manic-depressive who convinced herself that her family was persecuting her. Given an overdose of morphine to calm her, she became ravingly insane. She was in the nursing-home for two months. Five months later she returned for five weeks more. There was then a remission for eight years, but between 1894 and 1909 she spent many periods in ‘institutions’ varying in duration between a month and nearly a year. In 1899 she spoke to Johanna about standing in her way and of ‘removing herself so as not to damage Otto’s career’. This was a reference to Lieutenant Otto Rauchenberger, the infantry officer Johanna had married on 8 July 1895.

How his mother’s illness affected Strauss can be read in a letter he wrote to Johanna during their mother’s first episode in 1885 in which he said that it was a waste of time trying to comfort ‘Papa’ who was ‘becoming more and more unsociable. I think he feels that he’s doing dear Mama a moral wrong

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of some kind if he allows himself to be distracted and doesn't sit all day brooding on our misfortune. Even though I'm forever preaching to him that on the contrary it's his duty to keep himself strong and fit by diverting and dispersing the dark thoughts for the sake of Mama and Hanna and me, it doesn't have any effect and I'm often at a complete loss to understand what has happened to the moral strength of which a man should possess more than a woman. . . I hope my resolution will hold out until you come home.'¹¹

It is significant that when Josephine Strauss's illness recurred in 1894, Strauss shortly afterwards began to sketch his tone-poem *Don Quixote* which contains the most sympathetic and vivid musical illustration of mental delusion. Because of what had happened to his mother, Strauss deliberately cultivated a laconic, 'laid-back' and equable temperament, suppressing the tendency to choleric outbursts which he inherited from his father. He chose a wife of extremely volatile and explosive temperament through whom he could vicariously experience a side of his own nature which he suppressed with unusual if not invariable success. Perhaps it is also significant that in *Don Quixote* the horn, his father's instrument, is heard less prominently than in any of his major works. The most profound and illuminating of his orchestral masterpieces is haunted by the fate of his mother.

Strauss's letter to his sister gives us a bigger clue to his philosophy in later life than might at first be supposed. His mother's first bout of severe depression was the climax, clearly, of many years of domestic tension of which Strauss must have been sensitively aware. The duty 'to disperse dark thoughts' is a profoundly telling phrase and was something that he applied to himself. When it came to his own marriage, his principal aim was to live in comfort and security, albeit he chose a wife of extreme, but not neurotic, temperamental volatility. The image of himself that he presented to the world was of easy-going geniality. It was not a false image, but it hid a volcanic temperament that found expression in music. And it hid an inner fear of the 'dark thoughts' that haunted him, as we shall see.

If the tension at home exerted a major formative influence on Strauss's character, it also had its effect on his musical development and education. The next chapter will trace that development.