
'Freely after Nietzsche'

According to Strauss's subtitle, *Also sprach Zarathustra* is a 'tone poem freely after Nietzsche'. Any commentary on the work must start from the implications of that description. The central claim is that *Zarathustra* is in some way 'poetic', a term which in the history of nineteenth-century music had carried many resonances. By Strauss's time, music's desire to be considered poetic had hardened into at least one genre, the symphonic poem, a description invented by Liszt for the cycle of twelve single-movement orchestral pieces composed in his Weimar period. Since each of these works had a programme (whether a detailed preface, an allusive title, or a pre-existing text such as a poem), 'symphonic poetry' and programme music were usually seen as in some measure related. The Lisztian symphonic poem accordingly was sucked into the debate over programme music which involved composers, historians and aestheticians (together with the musical journalists who acted as propagandists for the various standpoints within the controversy).

Superficially, Strauss used the label 'tone poem' to distinguish himself from Liszt. He applied it to a series of one-movement works (each with stated or implied programmes) which could easily have been confused with Lisztian symphonic poems. The confusion was rendered all the more likely because of his known admiration for Liszt. When composing *Macbeth* (the first of his tone poems), Strauss spoke of it in one letter as 'a kind of symphonic poem but not after Liszt'.¹ The description tacitly admits the possibility of confusion and attempts to combat it, but cannot shake off the root of the confusion, the existence of a label, 'symphonic poem', which seems to define the work in advance. That label was never actually discarded in private, and Strauss used the description 'symphonic poem' for *Zarathustra* in his correspondence.² For public consumption, however, he preferred 'tone poem'. In this he may have been motivated by a certain need to be seen as going beyond Liszt, to the point that he drew a cloak over certain real aspects of his music. Equally, he may have felt that to cling to a Lisztian genre and description overlooked the important contribution made to his style by Wagnerian music drama (see chapter 2).

Strauss: *Also sprach Zarathustra*

Ex. 1 *Also sprach Zarathustra*, bars 5–6, Nature motive



Ex. 2 bars 30–2, Longing motive



Ex. 3 bars 150–3, Disgust motive



Ex. 4 bars 35–8, Faith motive



Ex. 5 bars 251–9, Dance or Zarathustra motive



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Ex. 6a bars 23–4, Dread motive



Ex. 6b bars 95–6, Life-urge motive



Ex. 6c bars 115–19, Passion motive



As a result of the influence of Wagner, early descriptions of *Also sprach Zarathustra* have a curious affinity with operatic guidebooks, particularly those that set out to identify leitmotifs and relate them to characters, concepts or places. In one of the first descriptions of *Zarathustra*, Hans Merian set forth such a list of leitmotifs with fairly clear labels. These labels have proved remarkably durable in accounts of *Zarathustra*, to the point that to discard them almost invites misunderstanding. The three main motives in this account were those of Nature (Ex. 1), Longing (Ex. 2) and Disgust (Ex. 3). To them he added others and named them in the manner of the guidebooks. The A flat hymnal melody beginning in bar 35 was the Faith theme (Ex. 4), the high B major motive from bar 251 was the Dance theme (Ex. 5).³ The procedure proved extendable by adopting labels from Arthur Hahn's published programme for the work to produce Dread, Life-urge and Passion

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themes (Ex. 6). Whereas the tradition of Liszt criticism had stressed transformation of themes, writers on Strauss preferred an approach based on a conceptual identification of themes, though in practice Merian's position was rather more complex than this description implies (see chapter 7). The result was two-fold: to weaken the perception of a symphonic element in Strauss's tone poems (an element which his private letters acknowledged), and to underline a certain narrative quality in his concept of 'tone poetry'; arguably the latter went beyond the degree to which Strauss himself was committed to programme music.

The symphonic element in Liszt's genre depended in part upon the compression of the traditional movements of the symphony into sections, in part upon the retention of sonata form as an overall framework. Elements of these strategies survive clearly in the Straussian tone poem, particularly in the earliest examples, *Macbeth*, *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung*. *Zarathustra* represents a rather different principle, however, which caused considerable difficulty amongst analysts. The composer-critic Hermann von Waltershausen noted that its form hardly seemed symphonic at all. Rather, it resembled a series of smaller units, the two- and three-part song-forms of German *Formenlehre* (which correspond roughly to the English binary and ternary, labels that are seldom used, however, with quite the same degree of precision as their German equivalents). In Waltershausen's interpretation, this type of structure was more suited to the kind of music drama that Strauss would later compose in *Salome*.⁴ In appearing to jettison the symphonic, *Zarathustra* was not uniquely innovative, since sonata form had already been under severe stress even in such works as *Tod und Verklärung* and *Don Juan*, partly through architectonic innovation, partly through tonal departures from earlier norms. *Zarathustra*'s immediate predecessor, *Till Eulenspiegel*, had discarded sonata form completely in favour of rondo, its successor, *Don Quixote*, would adopt variation form, thus creating a triptych of works which seemed to depart formally from certain patterns of 'symphonic poetry', before Strauss returned to a more recognizably Lisztian outline in *Ein Heldenleben*.

In this can be seen a reflection of *Zarathustra*'s innovatory aspect and transitional place in the line of Strauss's tone poems. In his letters to potential conductors, Strauss had to stress several times the unusual length of the piece for a tone poem. Its duration of approximately half an hour comfortably outlasted *Tod und Verklärung*, the longest of the earlier tone poems, thus beginning the process of expansion that saw the genre move closer to, and ultimately beyond, the duration of a Brahmsian symphony, a development that indeed gradually saw the word 'symphony' reclaimed to describe,

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however loosely, the genre of Strauss's orchestral works (as in the *Sinfonia Domestica* and *Eine Alpensinfonie*). This sudden expansion in *Zarathustra* was matched by an increase in orchestral resources. Where some saw in this a reflection of Strauss's increasing self-confidence, others merely saw inflation. For each writer such as Karl Schmalz, who saw *Zarathustra* as a decisive change for the better, even an attainment of mastery, there have been others such as Ernest Newman who predicted obscurity for it (at least in comparison with the earlier, conciser tone poems).⁵ But the difference of opinion reflects one curious aspect of the work. In the process of acquiring the scale of the nineteenth-century symphony, it rejected many external traits of the symphony's form. As a result, its structure posed considerable difficulties for commentators (see chapter 7).

Part of the problem for *Zarathustra*'s critics was the programme. This, however, opened an area of controversy that seems to underlie virtually every facet of the work. The question of programme music is in fact a network of overlapping questions that embraces not merely its status in relation to absolute music, but also the problem of what is appropriate to a programme. Although both aspects will loom large in the following pages, it is the latter which undermined faith in *Zarathustra* among Straussians. Here the problem is not so much whether Strauss wrote a tone poem 'about' Nietzsche, as whether he should have done so. Thus Norman Del Mar doubted the wisdom of composing 'music about a visionary philosophy', and devising 'a piece of purely orchestral programme music around a series of ideological utterances' (assuming that these were Strauss's intentions).⁶ He followed a distinguished line of Straussians, including Waltershausen, who held it 'self-evident . . . that no living musical form can emerge from the speculative basis of the material', and the critic Leopold Schmidt, who took the opportunity to restate his initial doubts in a volume of essays to which Strauss himself provided the introduction.⁷ The word 'frei' in the subtitle seems to have been designed to undermine, if not refute, such doubts. But it also looks suspiciously like an attempt to forestall more general objections to the writing of 'symphonic poetry' at a time when the debate about programme music was as sharp as at any time in the nineteenth century (see chapter 5).

Most critics of Strauss's time were fully aware that programme music had existed before Liszt's symphonic poems. Yet the question of the validity of programme music, or more specifically, illustration and narrative in music, was debated even more vigorously on the battleground of Strauss's tone poems than in the past. Arguably the debate was founded upon a misunderstanding. As Carl Dahlhaus has noted, under the prevailing influence of Schopenhauer,

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‘absolute music and program music, symphony and symphonic poem, were linked in a manner that flies in the face of popular aesthetic clichés about the “formalism” of the one and the “formlessness” of the other’. The basis of the link lay in the belief that programmes might initiate works as ‘form motives’ or present aids to interpretation (as they do in both Liszt and Strauss), but that they could not compensate for flawed structure by literary coherence;⁸ this view stands behind Strauss’s oft-quoted and apparently surprising insistence that ‘so-called programme music has absolutely no existence’.

It is a term of abuse in the mouths of all those who can imagine nothing of their own. In the same way, the word kitsch is a favourite of those who, like the fox leering at the grapes, envy the ‘effect’ which the *Tannhäuser* or *Oberon* overtures or Schiller’s *Räuber* make. . . A poetic programme can truly be a stimulus to new formal structures, but where the music does not arise logically from itself, it becomes ‘literature music’.⁹

If this represents a Schopenhauerian view, then it is difficult to disentangle from Lisztian practice. Strauss had no doubt that the ‘fundamental principle of Liszt’s symphonic works, in which the poetic idea was also at the same time the element shaping the form’, had become ‘the guiding principle of my own symphonic work’.¹⁰ This is certainly explicit enough and suggests that if Strauss distanced his tone poems from Liszt, he must have required strong support from factors other than the aesthetic. In context, however, it is important to remember that Strauss knew not only Liszt’s symphonic poems and their defence in Liszt’s prose works, but also Wagner’s critique (see chapter 2).

In the last resort, Strauss wrote ‘tone poems’ only partly as a result of specific influences from Liszt and Schopenhauer. As Dahlhaus has pointed out, the use of ‘poetic’ in Liszt (but also in Schumann and many other nineteenth-century writers on music) was not an aesthetic or technical description but a value judgement that reflected a general trend; as poetry sought increasingly to be musical, so music sought to acquire the poetic, not by the prose of programmes but in its own right.¹¹ Thus Nietzsche compared his *Also sprach Zarathustra* to music (*EH* 295), it was frequently described as a prose-poem, and Strauss reworked it ‘freely’ as a tone poem; the categories of aesthetic description appear to break down. Later, the ‘musicality’ of Wilde’s prose-play *Salomé* would be taken over by the apparently ‘naturalistic’ illustration of Strauss’s music.

Nonetheless, it was one thing to write programme music under the aesthetic aegis of a philosopher (Schopenhauer), quite another to write music ‘about’ a philosopher (Nietzsche). In applying the title *Also sprach Zarathustra* to his

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tone poem, Strauss entered a sphere of ideas that did indeed seem to lie beyond music, but only as long as Nietzsche's philosophy was considered in its destructive mode. Among Strauss's contemporaries, there were in effect two perceptions of Nietzsche. On the one hand was the destroyer of nineteenth-century idols, chiefly religion. The agent of destruction was above all the aphorism, short, startling, and designed as the explosive prelude to a wider critique. In his critical books, Nietzsche directed his attack against the 'herd' morality of Christianity, elevating in its place a species of individualism that chimed with a certain strain of libertarian thought in Strauss's intellectual surroundings (see chapter 2). Eventually, the individual of Nietzsche's philosophy took on the infinitely richer shape of the Superman, who is identified at peril with the 'blond beast' of Aryan imaginings; rather he is to be seen as the revaluer of morality through the Will to Power, as the incarnation of the central Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence. In the figure of the Superman, Nietzsche created the second side to his message, the positive of life-affirmation. In *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the figure of the Superman carried individualism forward into a picture of saying yes to life that sought to replace the values of religion and the herd. The Superman was equated with the acceptance not merely of life, but of death as the necessary condition for life, the tragic background that made the infinitely recurring circumstances of life a cause for celebration.

In practice, this double image was not always easy to perceive and interpret. Amongst the critics of Strauss (see chapter 5), the image of the destroying (and hence unmusical) Nietzsche was always to the fore, with this much justification: books such as *Also sprach Zarathustra* depended upon a startling juxtaposition of the aphoristic and the rhapsodical, which effectively placed the revaluation of values even at the heart of life-affirmation. More subversive was the implication in Nietzsche that an element of parody lay underneath even the positives of his philosophy. Among Strauss's admirers, the destructive Nietzsche took second place to the poetic and musical qualities of his language and images (while the parodistic qualities were ignored). The 'poetic' Nietzsche became an article of faith (and indeed has also haunted writing on Delius in an odd, distorting fashion). In Strauss's letters, there was a tendency at times to separate the poetic from the critical in Nietzsche, though Strauss was clearly at one period fascinated by both. As a consequence of this separation, Straussians have often taken 'freely after Nietzsche' as a reflection of the poetic strain in the philosopher, thereby refuting suggestions that Strauss had sought to set philosophy to music. The poetry was in the language, which some Straussians naively viewed as separable from the philosophy.

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Strauss took Nietzsche's book as a hermeneutic aid by scattering a group of Nietzsche's section headings through the score. The exact status of these headings is a confusing factor in the literature about Strauss's work, though few writers have made the mistake of assuming that the musical sections represent a simple depiction of the corresponding parts in Nietzsche's book. Broadly speaking, the problem is the degree to which they acted as incentives to Strauss's musical imagination. In this, Strauss's own comments in his sketches offer little help, since they provide a rather more oblique picture of the way in which composition and programmatic factors interact. But the key word here is 'composition', the actual conceiving and writing-down of the work rather than the structure that analysis may discern in it. In the history of *Zarathustra*, three strands of literary allusion may be discerned, which parallel the processes of inception (chapter 4), elaboration (chapters 4 and 6), and reception (chapter 5); needless to say, the strands are not quite separate. But broadly speaking, Strauss chose to reveal the section headings, not to disclose the manner in which Nietzsche had guided his thought in composing, but as a means of illustrating the structural basis of the work in performance.

Reception, however, is never controllable by the composer. *Zarathustra* was destined to be received in more than one medium, as is evident from the moment that the completed work passed into the hands of the publisher's arrangers for transcription into a variety of combinations of hands and pianos. With the passage of time, it has acquired stranger contexts. Thus the present writer has performed in an arrangement for military band, in which the first section, according to some a scornful reference to revealed religion, became the emotional climax and final section; Nietzsche, as it were, for the Salvation Army. Then there was the version of the famous opening for Caribbean steel band overheard in a Liverpool community centre some time in the seventies. What was interesting here was not the extraordinary sound of the opening major-minor changing-chord emerging from a jangle of harmonics, but the comment of a neighbour, 'What would Strauss have said if he had heard his *2001* performed like this?' Kubrick's film created a mass audience for Strauss's music that has added another strand to reception.

As a result, perceptions of the work have changed in the last twenty-five years; from a dance of Dionysian life-affirmation, it has moved to something altogether more grandiose, as is reflected in the changing approaches to performance. Strauss's work of half an hour's duration has started to expand in recent performances and recordings, growing more monumental, perhaps even Wilhelmine (to anticipate a minor theme of Strauss reception). The history of the reception of *Zarathustra* thus is partly the story of the revenge

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of Nietzsche's 'herd'. A mass audience came to the work only as its original title lost its force at a time when Nietzsche's name tended to be viewed with some suspicion; it gave ground to a new central image which was created in the mass media of film and television. Whether this means that the work has conclusively revealed an 'absolute' basis beyond programmes is debatable; what is beyond question, however, is that programme and structure are not inextricably linked in describing and assessing the work, as Strauss would doubtless have recognized. If, in subsequent chapters, the sequence 'programme, then structure' is broadly followed, it is more as a musicological convention than as a statement about Strauss's indebtedness to Nietzsche.

The Straussian tone poem as drama

Strauss's career as a composer was already well launched when he aligned himself with the New German School (as the group around Liszt had been named). So pronounced had seemed his Brahmsian heritage that his conversion counted as a minor sensation. Steinitzer records this in his account of the critic Paul Marsop rushing up with the latest news, 'Strauss has now become a Lisztian!'¹ In practice, Strauss's commitment to a Lisztian point of view was always qualified. It is evident that he prized Liszt's capacity to convey a certain tone by harmonic means, without the need of conventional contrapuntal techniques. This quality could be regarded as poetic, but was by no means confined to symphonic poems. Strauss was thinking of the oratorio *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth* when he observed that Liszt's sense of poetry was not dependent on counterpoint, but he could also have cited those places in Mass settings where composers traditionally reached for fugal techniques, but where Liszt in his 'Gran' Mass instead sought to create through harmony and orchestration a mood in keeping with the text. Strauss would have connected such moments to the linking of 'the triumph of harmony' and expressive potential in the writings of his favourite aesthete, Friedrich von Hausegger.² Undoubtedly the idea of the poetic for Strauss was also dependent upon the nineteenth-century orchestra's greater range of tone-colour. This range Strauss sought to capture but not initially to expand. In *Macbeth* and *Don Juan*, the recognizably Straussian feature is the way in which the orchestra was used, rather than any novel colours (though *Macbeth* made telling use of the bass trumpet, and *Don Juan* of the glockenspiel). It is important to stress this factor from the outset, simply because the image of Strauss as illustrator or narrator would be unthinkable without his mastery of orchestral technique; the problems that critics found in his concept of programme music sprang in large measure from a purely musical ability to wield a purely musical instrument with remarkable vividness. Nonetheless, the Lisztian aspect of Strauss's musical heritage was more particularly