ROUNDING WAGNER'S MOUNTAIN

Richard Strauss's fifteen operas, which span the years 1893–1941, make up the largest German operatic legacy since Wagner's operas of the nineteenth century. Many of Strauss's works were based on texts by Europe's finest writers: Oscar Wilde, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Stefan Zweig, among others, and they also overlap some of the most important and tumultuous stretches of German history, such as the founding and demise of a German empire, the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic, the period of National Socialism, and the postwar years, which saw a divided East and West Germany. In this first musicological book to discuss all Strauss's operas, Bryan Gilliam sets each work in its historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and literary context to reveal what made the composer's legacy unique. Addressing Wagner's cultural influence upon this legacy, Gilliam also offers new insights into the thematic and harmonic features that recur in Strauss's compositions.

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For Grace and Stephanie
in memory of their Nana

CONTENTS

FIGURES

PREFACE

In his memoir *The World of Yesterday* (*Die Welt von Gestern*), Stefan Zweig reports his first meeting with Richard Strauss. It was on 20 November 1931 in Munich's Four Seasons Hotel, where they were exploring possibilities for a new opera project. Zweig relates how Strauss admitted that Wagner was the last master of the genre, so high a peak that no one could get above it. "'But,' he added, with a broad Bavarian grin. 'I solved the problem by making a detour [*Umweg*].'"[1] Strauss's Bavarian grin was a fundamental part of his persona, and the composer toiled daily to make his creative life look easy, even effortless. What, indeed, had Strauss been doing on this detour of nearly fifty years?

The simple answer is that – with his fifteen operas – he had been creating the greatest German operatic legacy since Richard Wagner. After Wagner's final music drama, *Parsifal* (1882), German opera entered a period of serious artistic decline. Wagner's impact on German opera was as powerful as it was unique, and those who continued to compose stage works based on such themes as redemption, idealized love, and musical salvation were destined to fail. As I will detail later, the more weighty and serious the material, the closer such operas came to unintentional Wagnerian farce. What had begun with Wagner as aesthetic conviction had deteriorated, in lesser hands, to hollow aesthetic posturing. Wagner's shadow loomed large; he had reached Olympian heights. The mountain-loving Strauss was not afraid of high altitudes; he simply saw no reason to climb Wagner's metaphysical mountain and knew the potential pitfalls that lay along the path of such a perilous and fruitless journey, one that Hans Pfitzner, among others, had undertaken in vain.

Among the major composers of his day, Strauss stood alone in his conviction that, after *Parsifal*, music could no longer serve as a substitute for religion; in fact, it could not even serve an ethical purpose. Strauss, the only successful German opera composer of his generation, developed a different artistic voice, one that spoke of the irrelevance of mountainous metaphysics to the modern world. Wagner was the "preacher," but Strauss preached against preaching. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's and Max Stirner's godless, life-affirming individualism, Strauss believed that the only religion for a new century was the act of artistic creation. Strauss the nonbeliever, the practitioner

[1] See Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 437. *Die Welt von Gestern* was first published in 1942; it was first published in English in 1943.

of Bergsonian *élan vital*, was indifferent to post-Wagnerian notions of redemption through music.

What set Strauss apart from his German contemporaries was a unique musical atheism. Read in this context, the metaphysical Ernst Bloch's remarks – that we hear a "brilliant hollowness" in Strauss's work, and that he possessed a "profound superficiality" – are not much of an indictment. Like many others, Bloch, a Wagnerian and the most romantic of the twentieth-century Marxist philosophers, saw a utopian function in music. Strauss, to the contrary, saw no need to fill those purported lacunae where God once reigned.[2]

Musically, Strauss was undoubtedly a post-Wagnerian. He extended the musical side of what Wagner had begun – the ability to translate images and gestures into the purely sonic realm, the chromatically enriched diatonic harmonic language, the remarkable orchestrations. This is the musical standpoint from which we should approach Strauss's operatic works. What was new about his operas, however, was not the obvious post-Wagnerian musical techniques, but the anti-German humanism and cinematic pictorialism of his music, his delight in shocking his listeners, his irony, and his detachment from his material. Strauss uniquely embraced the triangular relationship of philosophy, humor (as protest against tradition), and the erotic, sometimes in a single opera. No other German composer of the time embraced all three, least of all in one work.

Strauss's first success, *Salome*, exemplifies these very traits, and they continued to manifest themselves, in different ways, in all the more modern – less Nietzschean, less ego-assertive – operas that follow. The protean Strauss sensed and savored the disunities of modern life and did not believe in masking them with a unified style. His first major step in this new direction was *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910), with its incongruous stylistic layers and anachronisms. The traditionalist Arnold Schoenberg, in 1923, disparagingly called Strauss the "only revolutionary in our time."[3] Strauss's laws of contrast (as opposed to Adorno's laws of history or his *Tendenz des Materials*, the laws or necessities of musical materials) and unflagging lifelong desire to communicate the visual into music separated Strauss from his less successful contemporaries.

Among other things, this book seeks to gainsay three common tropes on Strauss as an opera composer that persist to this day. The first is that after a brief but intense engagement with Johannes Brahms, Strauss "converted" to Wagnerism in the

[2] Bloch's use of the word *Spuren* refers to just the kind of emptiness, the lacunae, he hears in Strauss. See Bloch, *Spuren* (1930), translated into English by Anthony A. Nassar as *Traces* (Stanford University Press, 2006). Adorno also dismissed such Blochean notions, but for different philosophical reasons. See Adorno's "Bloch's 'Traces': The Philosophy of Kitsch," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *New Left Review* 1, 121 (May–June 1980), http://newleftreview.org.

[3] Arnold Schoenberg, "New Music," in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 137. In this context Schoenberg thinks of himself as an evolutionary, as part of a continuum of a great Austro-German musical heritage, where "the laws of earlier art can be applied to the new" in this evolutionary process.

mid-1880s; the second is that *Der Rosenkavalier* was a conscious retreat toward popular taste; and the third is that Strauss was an unreflective, card-playing *Bürger* who paradoxically wrote remarkable music. A careful reading of Strauss's childhood letters to Ludwig Thuille shows that the composer was fascinated with Wagner far earlier than has been thought. And his interest in Brahms, brief though it was, formed an important component of Strauss's musical maturation in the early 1880s.

As for popular taste, we should keep in mind that *Salome* was more in tune with fashionable European sensibilities than any opera of its time. Strauss proudly bragged that the royalties from this opera, written for a young bourgeoisie hungry for scandal and titillation, paid for his villa in Garmisch. *Salome* was far less Deathridge's "fatal conclusion" to Wagnerian opera than a new beginning.[4] Audiences and critics failed to understand Strauss's subtle critiques of Wagner in *Guntram* and *Feuersnot*; but *Salome*, ironically subtitled *Music Drama*, was the first clear debunking of Wagnerism, more specifically *Parsifal*: in Strauss's sarcastic response, the ascetic redeemer is not redeemed, but beheaded.

In researching his pathbreaking book, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition: The Philosophical Roots of Musical Modernism*,[5] the American Charles Youmans did what few Germans bothered to do: he went through Strauss's vast library of thoroughly read volumes by Goethe, Wagner, Arthur Schopenhauer, Eduard Hanslick, and Siegmund von Hausegger (all containing numerous marginal annotations by the composer) to reveal a side of the composer that he wished to hide behind his phlegmatic mask. In part, this book extends Youmans's arguments concerning Strauss's orchestral music to his music for the stage.

One anecdote will suffice to illustrate Strauss's quiet Socratic delight in appearing nonreflective, choosing instead to let others do the talking. Bloch, who had remarked on Strauss's "profound superficiality," confessed in old age to having been duped by Strauss when he was a young man of twenty-six. In a conversation with the literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Bloch, then in his seventies, described an evening with Strauss in November 1911. The composer had conducted *Elektra* on the eighth of that month in Berlin. He told Reich-Ranicki that the two

> spoke about *Elektra*, but Bloch did most of the talking while Strauss, who ate dumplings and drank beer, remained silent. Only once in a while did he mumble something in agreement. Bloch said it became a "horrible" evening. He was suddenly struck by terrible thoughts: this Strauss, this Bavarian beer drinker, he did not at all understand the subtle, exquisite, wonderful music of *Elektra*. As [Bloch] thought about it, he laughed cheerfully – *surely at himself*.[6]

[4] John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), p. 225.

[5] Charles Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

[6] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), p. 342. My italics.

Since the change of the millennium we have seen fresh discourse on nineteenth- and twentieth-century German musical culture and identity, and Strauss's role as an opera composer is vital to that conversation. His operas, with libretti by Oscar Wilde, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Stefan Zweig, mirrored the social, political, and aesthetic concerns of their age. But even beyond these issues, Strauss's operas were remarkably successful. Like his beloved Mozart, Strauss believed in the harmony of contrasts, both within a work and between adjacent works: successive operas should contrast with one another. Therefore, my study situates them chronologically and, for the most part, in dialectical pairs. (An exception is Chapter 5, in which I discuss a triptych of marriage operas wherein Strauss examines the subject through the lens of the metaphysical, the comic, and the mythological, respectively.) By considering the contrasts, we learn of the similarities and, ultimately, better understand the whole corpus of his stage works.

My study examines these works as a life's project with important recurring themes, beginning with the primary one, the very "detour" he mentioned to Zweig: Strauss's *Umweg* (or *Sonderweg*) as an opera composer, his initial engagement with the various Wagnerisms of his day, and his ultimate rejection of all of them beyond musical technique. Other recurrent themes include Strauss's late-industrial materialism, egoism, and humanism; the composer as pictorialist, his cinematic explicitness, debunking Wagner with the latter's own tools; Strauss's historical skepticism, his law of contrast versus the Adornean stylistic demands of history; and the centrality of marital relationships, reflecting Strauss's fondness for finding profundity in the everyday.

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This book took way too much time. Tennis is supposed to be a solace to someone working on a book, not the source of serious injury, which laid me up on various occasions. But the series editor, Arthur Groos, wisely assured me he preferred to wait for something good and complete rather than abridged and compromised. Barbara Norton, my "triage copy editor," helped pull together over six years of material into a coherent whole. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my good-hearted mother. She warned me toward the end that I might be writing a work with a posthumous dedication to her, and she was – as always – right. I dedicate this book to her memory.