

PART I

Family, Friends, and Collaborators

CHAPTER I

*Family and Upbringing**Chris Walton*

Richard Strauss's biography begins with a lie, at least in his own telling of it. Late in life, he wrote of how his father, Franz Strauss (1822–1905), was born the son of a watchman in Parkstein, north-east of Nuremberg.¹ In fact, as Richard later admits, the watchman was his father's uncle, Franz Michael Walter. Franz Strauss was illegitimate, though he kept the surname of the man who had abandoned him and his mother. By the time Richard committed his family reminiscences to paper in the 1940s, he had long been a dominant force in German music life. So, for a prince of music, such proximity to bastardy presumably had to be obscured. Strauss's progress as a musician was invariably determined in large part by his family circumstances and their socio-economic and cultural position in early Wilhelmine Germany. This chapter will look at the very different backgrounds of his parents, the impact of Strauss's humanistic schooling, his early music education, and then reflect on issues of mental health and how they might have co-determined the composer's socialization.

Music played a major role in Franz's family. Two cousins became professional violinists (Benno and Josef Walter), and music brought Franz to the Bavarian capital in 1837 as a guitarist in the folk music band of Duke Max in Bayern. Franz then switched his focus to the horn, joining the Munich Court Orchestra in 1847. In 1851, he married Elise Seiff, a daughter of a military music director. But their first child, a boy, died of tuberculosis in 1852, and then Elise and their second child, a daughter, died in the cholera epidemic of 1854. Franz married again nine years later, this time to Josepha Pschorr (1838–1910, also known variously as Josephine/Josefa/Josefine), the daughter of the wealthy Munich beer baron Georg Pschorr – a remarkably good match for an illegitimate musician.

¹ Richard Strauss, "Reminiscences of My Father," in *Recollections and Reflections*, ed. Willi Schuh, trans. L. J. Lawrence (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1953), 127.

The city of Munich underwent immense changes in the mid-nineteenth century, not least thanks to the interests of its ruling family. Ludwig II (r. 1864–86) is justly famous as Richard Wagner’s patron, but he was merely continuing a family tradition of supporting art, music, and architecture. The Bavarian education system was also one of the most advanced in Europe, with statutory schooling having been introduced in 1802, some 70 years before England. Although Bavaria was on the losing side of the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and was compelled to join the German Reich on Prussian terms five years later, it retained considerable sovereignty and benefitted from the late-century upswing in the German economy. Munich itself acquired the trappings of modernity, from electric street lighting and trams to a municipal sewage system, with concomitant improvements in public health. The young Richard Strauss was thus doubly fortunate. Through his father, he profited from the vibrant music life of a thriving, modern metropolis, while his mother’s rich family provided access to a superior education and entry into the upper echelons of society. The Pschorrs were music lovers too, and Richard would later play at many house concerts in their villa. Comparisons are generally fraught, but it can be instructive to consider that Strauss’s early cultural and social environment had more in common with that of Mendelssohn than, say, with Mahler or Schoenberg.

Josepha’s family, however, did not shower their wealth on their illegitimate son-in-law. Franz’s first marital apartment belonged to the Pschorrs, but it was tiny and situated just behind their large brewery-cum-beer hall on the Neuhauser Strasse in the city center. It was here that their first child, Richard, was born on June 11, 1864. Not long afterwards, the Strausses moved to a nearby apartment without running water on the corner of Sonnenstrasse and Schwanthalerstrasse, where their daughter, Johanna, was born in 1867. Two years later, Franz and family moved back to the beer hall, into an apartment on the third floor provided by Josepha’s brother Georg, now the head of the family firm. However, the walls were infested with bugs and had to be treated with the arsenic compound “Paris green” to kill them off. So Franz Strauss, although nominally head of his own family, was both dependent on the beneficence of his in-laws and aware that their generosity had its boundaries. Franz also followed the example of the Pschorrs in joining the *alt-katholische Kirche* (Old Catholic Church) in the 1870s, a breakaway movement from the Roman Catholic Church that disavowed the Pope’s claims to infallibility. It remains moot whether Franz was acting out of conviction or to promote his familial and professional interests (his boss, Intendant Karl von Perfall, was also an

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open supporter of the anti-infallibles). It was furthermore thanks to the Pschorrs – more precisely, to an inheritance from Josepha’s grandmother in 1874 – that Franz was able to buy a grand piano and take the family on summer holidays in the years thereafter. They later also funded the publication of Richard’s early music.

It was Franz’s orchestral colleagues who gave Richard his early music lessons (August Tombo for piano, cousin Benno Walter for the violin, then court conductor Friedrich Wilhelm Meyer for harmony and counterpoint), just as they provided Richard with his formative experiences of opera and concerts. Richard’s school education formed a profound counterpoint to his father’s purely musical environment. When he moved up to high school in 1875, to the Ludwigsgymnasium, Richard received a humanistic education with an emphasis on the German classics and the literature of the ancients that remained a source of inspiration throughout his life. This school was the second oldest of its kind in Munich and a place where the future intellectual, social, and military elites of Bavaria rubbed shoulders. Richard’s affinity for all things Greek (he later delighted in calling himself a “Greek Teuton”) was also kindled in high school, finding initial musical expression in a setting of a chorus from Sophocles’ *Elektra* composed in 1881.

In 1882, Strauss enrolled at Munich University to attend lectures in philosophy, aesthetics, Shakespeare, and Schopenhauer, though these studies were soon abandoned when it became clear he would pursue a career in music. Strauss’s educational background was thus very different from that of near-contemporaries such as Schoenberg, Wolf, Janáček or, further afield, Debussy and Elgar, all of whom came from less affluent families and whose general schooling ceased in their early to mid teens. Although Strauss later modestly downplayed his school achievements, it was clearly the Ludwigsgymnasium that helped to turn him into one of the most erudite, best-read composers of his generation. His teenage years were also significant for the friendships he established with men such as Friedrich Rösch, Arthur Seidl, and Max Steinitzer. As an adult, Strauss was notoriously reserved, remaining on formal, “Sie” terms with even his closest colleagues. By contrast, it seems he retained a deep affection for his male friends from early youth.

The music of Strauss’s teens reveals none of the individuality of a Mendelssohn or a Schubert, but instead a remarkable gift for assimilation. Listening chronologically to his works of the 1870s and early 1880s is like getting a potted audio-history of his father’s favorite Austro-German repertoire, starting with Haydn, Mozart, and early Schubert before moving

swiftly through to Beethoven and ending with Mendelssohn. These were standard influences for a composer of Strauss's time and place, though he remained as yet immune to the teenage Wagner enthusiasm that we find in Hugo Wolf and others (probably because his father Franz would not have countenanced it anyway). Strauss was already writing notes "as a cow gives milk," to use his own later simile, and was also unencumbered by any trepidation towards his predecessors. Whereas Brahms had labored for years on his first symphony, Strauss wrote his at sixteen in D minor, the iconic key of Beethoven's Ninth, and it was given its world première by the Munich Court Orchestra under Hermann Levi in 1881. Strauss's Second Symphony, Op. 12, composed in 1883 and 1884, was his last big work before he left for Meiningen. The shadow of Brahms lies heavy on it but, while there are hints of the later Strauss, especially in the Scherzo, it is primarily fascinating for the passages that sound more like Mahler, Dvořák, Bruckner, or even foreshadow Sibelius's middle period. This symphony is like a crossroads from which Strauss could have gone in any one of several directions, with nothing here to suggest that its composer would soon become the leading composer of the progressive school.

Unlike Mahler, Wolf, or Debussy, Strauss never attended a conservatory, presumably because his father's professional circle could provide whatever learning opportunities he desired. The years between leaving full-time education and moving to Meiningen as Hans von Bülow's assistant in 1885 were mostly spent composing, performing, and networking. Strauss visited other major German-speaking centers including Leipzig, Dresden, Frankfurt, Vienna, and Berlin, taking care to become acquainted with all kinds of movers and shakers from the field of music and beyond. Fewer than 20 years had passed since Prussia and Bavaria had been at war, and Strauss's later correspondence leaves us in no doubt that he was acutely aware of his Bavarian background when among northern Germans (for a contemporary comparison, one might imagine a young man from Alabama negotiating the intellectual elites of post-bellum New York). But Strauss mixed easily with everyone, from the Berlin intendant Botho von Hülsen to Joseph Joachim, Philipp Spitta, the conductor Robert Radecke, the pianist Karl Klindworth, the composer Heinrich von Herzogenberg, the mathematician Alfred Pringsheim (Thomas Mann's future father-in-law), the publishers Bock and Spitzweg, and finally Bülow and Brahms. Strauss's gift for assimilation clearly extended well beyond the composing sphere and seems to have remained with him throughout his later years in Berlin and Vienna. Whereas Mahler worked his way up from one provincial theater to the next, Elgar made ends meet

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as a violin teacher, and Wolf worked as a hack journalist, Strauss moved effortlessly among the Central European elites as if he belonged naturally to their number (aided, no doubt, by the musical and business connections of his father and maternal uncle, respectively). When Bülow had an opening for an assistant in Meiningen, Mahler was desperate to be chosen; instead, the position more or less fell into Strauss's lap. Strauss was not alone in his immediate family in being so upwardly mobile; his younger sister Johanna married a lieutenant in the Bavarian army, Otto Rauchenberger, who was later ennobled by the Emperor and ended the World War I as a lieutenant general.

Altogether, the pre-Meiningen Strauss comes across as a thoroughly "normal" young man, who, despite being highly gifted and a bit nerdy, remains keen to enjoy the convivial aspects of a big city. He took dancing lessons with his peers, attended society balls, flirted with girls, enjoyed holidays in the countryside, had a circle of male friends who stayed loyal for years to come, and socialized easily with everyone including those much older than him. From 1883 to about 1885, he even indulged in an affair with a married woman, one Dora Wihan, the (purportedly unhappy) wife of the cellist Hans Wihan from the Munich Court Orchestra. Dora later ensured the destruction of Strauss's letters, so we will never know the details. But all in all, the young Strauss is almost unrecognizably different from the "aloof and phlegmatic" man described by later commentators.² The reason for the change in him might lie in family developments that first came to a head in April 1885.

The dominant influence on Strauss's early aesthetic was his father, whose virtuoso musicianship was coupled with a violent temper and a hatred of any music more modern than the early Romantics. In her later life, the composer's sister, Johanna, wrote that their father "was very strict and we had a holy respect for him . . . if [Richard] became over-exuberant and Father became strict, my tears soon helped to calm him down and Mama in her gentleness poured oil on the troubled waters."³ Richard himself wrote late in life of how his father was "an embittered character . . . with a violent temper, tyrannical," and he too contrasted this with his mother's "gentleness." He recalled how she "frequently had to pay for visits to the theatre and concerts with sleepless nights . . . she was

² Bryan Gilliam and Charles Youmans, "Strauss, Richard," *Grove Music Online*, accessed August 18, 2019, www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

³ Johanna von Rauchenberger-Strauss, "Jugenderinnerungen," in *Richard Strauss Jahrbuch 1959/60*, ed. Willi Schuh (Bonn: Boosey & Hawkes, 1960), 9–10.

happiest when she was allowed to spend the summer afternoons alone and quietly, busy with her embroidery, in the beautiful garden of my uncle Pschorr's villa, where we children also used to go after school . . ."⁴

Since those concerts and theater visits were presumably coupled with her husband's orchestral engagements, perhaps Franz was the real cause of Josepha's sleeplessness. Franz himself once remarked on having suffered corporal punishment as a child, so when his daughter relates how he once battered his wooden desk because a horn pupil made a mistake, she seems to be intimating that Franz's violence was at times directed at more than just furniture. If Josepha and her children were happier in the garden of her brother's villa than with Franz in the insect-infested, arsenic-laced walls of their third-floor apartment, this could have exacerbated feelings of inadequacy that Franz's lowly background might already have engendered in him. To be abandoned by one's father, beaten by one's uncle, and then to lose a first wife and two children – all this would leave deep scars in anyone's psyche. So, if Franz indeed found release for his emotional baggage through physical violence, it is likely that Josepha was its principal object. When Richard writes that he "cannot say" if his father's violence affected his mother, he has already answered the question. Corporal punishment of one's children and even of one's wife was legally permissible in Bavaria at the time, but this does not mean that it was everywhere the norm, for it was a matter of contentious, contemporary debate across Germany.⁵

In April 1885, Josepha finally experienced a breakdown of some kind, was diagnosed with "melancholy," and briefly incarcerated in the Upper Bavaria mental home in southern Munich. All in all, Josepha was confined to this institution over a dozen times during the next 25 years, with stints lasting from one to six months. Her diagnosis progressed to "hysteria" by 1898 and then to "manic depression" in her final years (she died of pneumonia in 1910 while in the clinic). So when her son began depicting "female hysteria" on stage with his characters Salome, Herodias, Elektra, and Klytämnestra, he was recreating states of mind that leading doctors had diagnosed in his own mother. In doing so, perhaps he endeavored to find some kind of personal catharsis.

According to expert opinion in Munich at the time, Josepha's condition was potentially hereditary, leaving her offspring with a "reduced resistance"

⁴ Strauss, "Reminiscences of My Father," 131.

⁵ Sace Elder, "A Right to Beat a Child? Corporal Punishment and the Law in Wilhelmine Germany," *Central European History* 47, no. 1 (2014), 54–75.

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to mental illness that could be triggered by “unfavorable influences.”⁶ Josepha is one of very few patients whose files went missing from the archives of her former clinic, and it seems likely they were judiciously “lost” during the Nazi period to protect Strauss and his family (had she been born 60 years later, the Nazis would have forcibly sterilized her, and in fact, her clinic became the first to participate in the Nazis’ euthanasia of the mentally ill). While any objective assessment of Josepha’s condition remains impossible, the chronology suggests that she was committed at certain times to save her son from embarrassment; for example, she was incarcerated exactly nine days before Richard’s engagement to Pauline de Ahna and was let out again after the formalities had ended.

If one were afflicted with mental illness in the late nineteenth century, then Bavaria was the place to be, because the precarious mental state of the local royals had prompted much investment in the science of psychiatry. The head of Josepha’s asylum during her first stay was Bernhard von Gudden, an enlightened man who died soon afterwards in mysterious circumstances at the Starnberg Lake along with his most famous patient, King Ludwig II. Von Gudden was succeeded as head by his son-in-law, Hubert von Grashey, though it seems to have been the theories of von Gudden’s assistant, Emil Kraepelin, that had the biggest impact on psychiatry in Munich (Josepha’s final diagnosis, “manic depression,” was a term he standardized).

In light of his family background, Strauss’s departure for Meiningen in 1885 has broad significance, offering a convenient demarcation line at the end of his childhood. The vehemence with which he abandoned his father’s straitjacket aesthetic, siding instead with the New Germans, suggests less a desire to cut the paternal apron strings than to shred, burn, and bury them. He had hitherto composed mostly absolute music, but now expunged the traditional genres from his catalog – there would be no Third Symphony, no more piano sonatas, no more string quartets, but symphonic poems and music dramas instead. And he would seek out progressive father surrogates to replace his own conservative model, first Hans von Bülow and then Alexander Ritter (though he would in turn shred those apron strings too). Perhaps just as important, Strauss was able to put his unstable mother behind him; when perusing the dates of

⁶ Emil Kraepelin, *Psychiatrie: Ein Lehrbuch für Studierende und Aerzte*, 6th ed. (Leipzig: Barth, 1899), 1:95, and 7th ed. (Leipzig: Barth, 1903), 1:120. Both editions were condensed, adapted, and translated by A. Ross Diefendorf as *Clinical Psychiatry: A Text-Book for Students and Physicians* (New York: Macmillan, 1902 and 1907).

Josepha's confinements, it becomes obvious that Strauss never rushed home when she was ill but continued with his career commitments.

Mahler's complaint that he was "thrice homeless" is often quoted: a Bohemian in Austria, an Austrian in Germany, and everywhere a Jew. While Strauss never had to cope with the insidious injustices of anti-Semitism, one could nevertheless construct for him a similar state of non-belonging: as an "Old Catholic" in a Roman Catholic city, as a Bavarian in Prussia, and everywhere the son of an irascible horn player and a hysteric. Unlike Mahler, who so often comes across as anguished and suffering, Strauss seemed to glide through life with Teflon ease, unmoved by whatever might hurt him. But this was surely an act of will. If all he had inherited from his mother was a "reduced resistance" to her condition, then he could at least endeavor to ensure that no "unfavorable influences" would impinge on him. He could immerse himself in the rigors of hard work, submit to a precise professional and domestic regimen, and keep to a strict diet with daily exercise. He could cultivate a cold, unmoving exterior to keep at bay any hint of inner turmoil, not least from himself. And most of all, he could earn money – lots of it – partly to serve as a cushion for his wife and son, should he ultimately share his mother's fate, but mostly because he will have learned from Uncle Pschorr that wealth brings a status that can wash away the societal sins of poverty, illegitimacy, and even mental illness. Perhaps the enigma of the cold and distant composer adept at depicting red-hot emotion in music can best be solved by pondering the little boy raised back in that bug-infested apartment with an impoverished and violent but ambitious father; a submissive, unstable mother; and a wealthy uncle.