Composer Profiles

Richard Strauss
Born: Munich, Germany - 1864
Died: Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany - 1949

Biography
Richard Strauss was the son of Franz Strauss, an influential horn player in the orchestra of the Munich Opera under the direction of Hans von Bülow. He had participated in the Wagner premieres of Tristan und Isolde and Die Meistersinger, and had an enormous amount of influence within the orchestra. In the years following the birth of his son, Franz noticed that Richard possessed great musical promise.

Educating Richard himself, Franz Strauss taught the boy the literature of the Romantic nineteenth-century, particularly the works of Schubert and Mendelssohn. After graduating from the Munich Gymnasium, Richard enrolled in the University of Munich and later played piano in Berlin. It was in Berlin that Strauss met Bülow, who was immediately taken with the young composer after hearing his Serenade for Winds in E-flat, Op. 7. Strauss was offered the post of assistant conductor in Bülow’s Meiningen orchestra, and after learning conducting by carefully observing Bülow, succeeded him as principal conductor in 1885. As a conductor, Strauss is equally as famous as his orchestral works; his career includes posts in Munich, Weimer, Berlin, and Vienna. In 1885, Strauss’s compositional style began to fundamentally change. Inheriting the concept of the orchestral tone poem from Franz Liszt, Strauss began his transformation with Ars Italien, Op. 16 (1886), and continued with a series of tone poems including Don Juan (1888), Tod und Verklärung, Op. 24 ("Death and Transfiguration", 1889), and Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30 ("Thus Spake Zarathustra", 1896). In 1894, Strauss married the soprano Pauline de Ahna. Although known for her temper and outspoken nature, Pauline was a great source of happiness and inspiration for Strauss, resulting in many of his influential compositions for soprano, including the famous Vier letzte lieder ("Four Last Songs") for soprano and orchestra.

After 1904, Strauss composed several stage works that have left a dramatic impression in the history of opera, particularly in Salome, Op. 54 and Elektra, Op. 58. Both operas stretched tonality to its limits, and their gruesome and almost horrific texts led to many critics’ revulsions. In 1910, however, Strauss took a more anachronistic approach in Der Rosenkavalier, Op. 59 ("The Rose Knight"), based on a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who would collaborate with Strauss on a number of additional operas. Rosenkavalier is much more traditionally tonal than his earlier operatic works, and remains Strauss’ most popular opera. Though considered the greatest composer in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century, Strauss never again composed harmonies as radical as his previous works. In 1933, when Strauss was sixty-eight, the Nazi Party controlled by Adolf Hitler rose to power. Though Strauss never formally joined the Nazis, he was still an incredibly influential figure, and was appointed as the president of the State Music Office.
Ignoring the German bans on music by Mendelssohn and Debussy, and by using a Jewish librettist, Joseph Zweig, in his comic opera *Die schweigsame Frau*, Strauss was eventually dismissed from his post in 1935. Though against the ideology of the Third Reich, Strauss cooperated with the Nazis primarily to keep his family (his son, Franz, had married a Jewish woman) safe. When the Allied Forces invaded Germany in April 1945, Strauss was detained by American soldiers at his home. Strauss announced, “I am Richard Strauss, the composer of *Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*”. One of the soldiers, who happened to be a musician, later placed an “Off-Limits” sign on the front lawn of Strauss’ home. Following the war, Strauss continued to compose mostly orchestral works, including the *Metamophosen* for 23 solo strings and the *Vier letzte lieder* (“Four Last Songs”). Richard Strauss died on September 8, 1949 at the age of 85.

**Works**

Strauss began his compositional career very early; his first published piece is a march at the age of twelve. Deriving from his early education, Strauss’ early works are reminiscent of the Romantic style of Mendelssohn, and by age twenty had many to his credit. His first tone poem, *Aus Italien*, was more catered to the school of Liszt and Wagner, but what separated Strauss from his older and current contemporaries was his mastery of orchestral sound. In 1904, Strauss edited and expanded Hector Berlioz’s *Treatise on Instrumentation*, which remains one of the most influential orchestration texts in the world. Strauss' tone poems are considered one of the gems of the orchestral literature, and have been compared to the Beethoven symphonies for their influence on the evolution of the modern orchestra. While beginning in the same nationalistic Germanic vein of Wagner and Mahler, Strauss quickly departs by creating a highly complex texture in an increasingly dense harmonic framework. He takes chromaticism to its limits, while stopping short of breaking with tonality; he leaves that to Schoenberg. The concept of a programmatic back story is also highly critical in Strauss’ tone poems. They are usually quite detailed in their content, and involve several musical episodes where the story is directly referred to by effects in the orchestra, including muted trumpets to symbolize bleating sheep in *Don Quixote*, or sharp pizzicatos as the clashing of swords in *Ein Heldenleben* (“The Hero’s Journey”). Strauss wrote over a dozen operatic works, although *Salome, Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier* are the only ones to remain in the permanent repertoire. Though Strauss brings chromaticism and harmonic departure to a new point in the first two, with *Rosenkavalier* begins a period of much more traditional harmony. Never again for the remainder of his life did Strauss experiment so boldly with tonality.

**Suggested Listening**


Other: *Metamophosen* for 23 solo strings, *Horn Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major*, Op. 11, *Vier letzte lieder* (“Four Last Songs”)