

Oboe Concerto in D Major, TrV 292—Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss lived a long and productive life, striding across the musical landscape of Europe from teenage success to triumph in old age. He was the son of a prominent musician (one of the world's great horn players), and wrote works in his youth that are still performed and admired. He married a well-respected soprano, had children who loved him, and enjoyed a warm, stable family life. The works of his early maturity, the 1880s and 1890s, that garnered world wide praise are his tone poems for orchestra, and they remain central to our standard repertoire, among them: *Don Juan*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, and *Death and Transfiguration*. He soon turned to the composition of operas, and that remained his focus for the rest of his life. He is arguably the most significant composer of opera of the twentieth century. He composed in other genres, as well, including major contributions to German song, or *Lieder*, following in the grand tradition of Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, and Mahler. In his old age, after World War II, his reputation was somewhat sullied by a putative collaboration with the Nazi government when he briefly served as president of the *Reichsmusikkammer*, the official government bureaucracy overseeing music. There was a brief period of reconsideration of the stature of his reputation, but he was soon cleared of complicity.

Early in the war, he wrote what was to be his last opera —further activities in that sphere were simply unfeasible in the crumbling Third Reich. He retired with his family to his sumptuous villa in Bavaria, far from the horrors of the war, and underwent a remarkable renewal of creativity—and in new, or rather, old, directions. As the war ground to an end, and in the aftermath, up to his death in 1949, he turned again to instrumental music. The legacy of this period is significant: two major works for wind ensemble, the remarkable *Metamorphosen* for twenty-three solo strings, and his second horn concerto. Of course, the most beloved of his last works is the very last of them, the immortal *Four Last Songs*—four beautiful meditations by an old man, who has lived a long rich life, on the meaning and experience of death. In all of these late works, there is much of a return to an earlier, lush Germanic romantic style, of which he was the master when young. And from this time, as well, is a work in a genre in which he had averred no interest—an oboe concerto.

The story is a well-known one. During the first days of peace in May of 1945, Bavaria was filled with American soldiers, generally poking around. As soon as it was known that the man whom many considered the most important composer of the century was living nearby, those with an artistic bent beat a path to the great man's door. Among them was a young enlisted man, John de Lancie, first oboe with the Pittsburgh Symphony before being drafted. De Lancie, observing that there were so many solicitous and beautiful solos for the oboe in all his works, had Strauss ever considered writing an oboe concerto? Strauss dismissed the idea with a "harrumph," and that was the end of that. Or so he thought. In 1946 de Lancie was informed to his utter surprise that Strauss' oboe concerto was finished and that de Lancie had first American dibs on it. In the meantime de Lancie had moved on to the position of second oboe in the Philadelphia Orchestra (he later became Director of the Curtis Institute of Music) and protocol would not allow him to perform it, since the principal had no interest. In matter of fact, the first performance was given in America with M. Miller as the soloist. You may remember him as "Mitch" of "Sing Along with Mitch" on 1950s television—he was a professional oboist before all of that, though.

The concerto soon became a central part of the repertoire for all advanced oboists—it's a real challenge. It has much that folks who love Strauss look for: lyrical, soaring lines, bold harmonic shifts, virtuoso solo writing, nuance without preciosity, and remnants of a great German classic and romantic tradition—all rolled into one. It certainly doesn't spare the soloist, however. It begins, after a little fluttering in the cellos, with the infamous, unstinting oboe solo—over fifty measures without even a tiny break! While the solo oboe rhapsodizes, the fluttering continues almost unabated in the accompaniment to set the active tone of the movement; it's also a clever way to set off the opportunity for the lyricism of the soloist to come to fore. The characteristic harmonic adventuresome of Strauss' late period is part of the charm, as well. The "fluttering" gently has the last say as the movement ends. The composer chooses to open the second movement more or less as he began the first: the nervous little figure that pervaded before is with us again—more gently—and the soloist, once more, spins forth a long soaring solo. The leisurely pace continues, with ample opportunity for lyricism in both the orchestra and the solo oboe. At the end a cadenza for the soloist is softly accompanied by pizzicato strings, almost like an operatic recitative—not altogether inappropriate for such a composer of opera as Strauss. It leads us directly to the last movement, a happy, energetic affair that bounces merrily along until another cadenza for the soloist ensues in the middle of the movement. Strauss—like Tchaikovsky—was a natural master of the waltz, and a couple of waltz-like excursions take this ingratiating concerto home. Strauss, like Verdi before him, was truly an "Orpheus at eighty," and this concerto is *prima facie* evidence of that wonder.

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