

One of the most reliable joys of a musician's life is to share the stage with the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Richard Strauss. As melodists, orchestrators and humanists, they have few equals, and their lives' work represent two of the pinnacles of the art of orchestral writing. Although they led very different lives, in different centuries, there is a great deal of common ground between them: Great success at an early age, their love of the human voice in general, and of opera in particular. Both men broke new ground for the orchestra, expanding its size and range of sound, yet remaining grounded in the traditions of their masters. Strauss, in fact, held Mozart up as a model throughout his creative life: He dedicated his *Symphony for Winds*, subtitled *From The Happy Workshop*, to "the beneficent spirit of the immortal Mozart, at the end of a life full of gratitude." Above all, both composers were compelled to write music of great sensual beauty, to address the great themes of love and death with their incredible craftsmanship, sensitivity and humanity.

Mozart, Overture to Don Giovanni

The commission for Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* followed on the heels of his greatest triumph, *The Marriage of Figaro*. As was often the case with him, he worked on the piece up to the last minute: The overture was finished the day before the first performance! As always though, the finished product betrays nothing but assurance. The overture begins with the imposing music for the entrance of the 'stone guest', the terrifying spirit who condemns Giovanni to hell at the end. The emergence into the D major Allegro establishes the ambivalence of the opera, its characteristic balance of humour and tragedy.

Strauss, Capriccio and Der Rosenkavalier Waltzes

Strauss' last completed opera, *Capriccio*, shares the quality of transfiguration with all of his late works, a preoccupation that, as we shall see, dates back to his formative years. The concept for the opera originated in 1934 with Stefan Zweig, Strauss' Jewish librettist, who had fled Nazi Germany for England. The score was finished in 1941, a few months before the 78-year-old Strauss moved his family to Vienna to protect them from the Nazis. His family included a Jewish daughter-in-law, Alice, and two grandchildren. Strauss's fame and negotiating skills probably allowed them to survive the war, but he was unable to save Alice's grandmother, who was taken to Theresienstadt concentration camp while he was working on *Capriccio*. Eventually 26 of Alice's relatives would die in the camps. In February 1942, just months before the *Capriccio* premiere, Stefan Zweig committed suicide. As the premiere approached, the problem of nightly air raids had to be considered. Since raids usually occurred between 10 and 11 pm, the performance started at 7 pm, and ran in a single extended act without an intermission so that the audience could, with luck, find their way home before the air raids began. *Capriccio* played to sold-out houses in Munich until, a year later, the opera house was destroyed by Allied bombs.

In the midst of all of this chaos and tragedy, Strauss created one of the most fascinating and sophisticated works in the entire opera repertory. It is a suave, beautiful dramatization of the old debate about the relative importance of words and music, in life and art. The idea is drawn most clearly and poignantly in this last scene, where the Countess Madeleine reflects on her men, and her music:

The ending of the opera... I must determine it, I must choose... decide? Is it the words that move my heart, or is it the music that speaks more strongly... Fruitless effort to separate the two. Words and Music are fused into one ... bound in a new synthesis. Secret of the hour... one art redeemed by the other! And, though I lived five hundred thousand years, save you, miraculous fair, there could not be another creature hold sway over me. Through fresh veins I must needs let flow my blood, my own with you are filled to overflowing, and new love then could find not room nor pause. Their love enfolds me, tenderly woven out of verses and sounds. Shall I destroy this fabric? Am I myself not already

woven into it? Decide for one? For Flammant, the great spirit with the beautiful eyes – for Olivier, the powerful mind, the passionate man? Now, dear Madeleine, what says your heart? You are loved, but whom do you love now? You found it sweet not to know... you sought to make a pact with love, and now you yourself are in flames and cannot save yourself! In choosing the one you will lose the other! Does one not always lose, when one wins? You look back at me ironically? I want an answer and not your questioning look! You do not answer? Do you want to be consumed between two fires? You mirrored image of Madeleine in love, can you advise me, can you help me to find the ending for their opera? Is there one that is not trivial?

Mozart, *Bella Mia Fiamma*, Addio!

Mozart completed his concert aria "*Bella mia fiamma...Resta, o cara*" on November 3, 1787, less than a week after *Don Giovanni's* triumphant premiere in Prague. Mozart was staying nearby, at the cottage of his friends the Duscheks. Franz Duschek was an excellent composer in his own right, a teacher, and a pianist; his wife, Josepha, was a brilliant soprano with whom, the rumour goes, Mozart was "perhaps a little in love." It was as a present to his hosts that Mozart composed "*Bella mia fiamma*". A famous story relates that Josepha locked him in the pavilion of her garden with a supply of writing materials, refusing to release him until the aria was done. Mozart, in turn, threatened to destroy the piece unless Josepha could sing it perfectly at sight!

It is worth noting that big concert arias like this one were not at all minor or casual by-products to Mozart's output. In fact, they would often reach much larger audiences than his symphonies or concertos – then, as now, a star singer was always a bigger draw than a great composer, whatever his reputation. Though the text was for a long while believed to be by Mozart's great operatic collaborator Lorenzo Da Ponte, who was with him in Prague, we now know it to be from one D.M. Sarcone, based on the myth of Proserpina and her mother Ceres. Ceres has separated Proserpina (the "*bella fiamma*" in question) from her mortal lover Titano, whom Ceres has decreed will die, and who here expresses his anguish.

Strauss, *Death and Transfiguration*

The story of Don Juan (*Don Giovanni*) proved as stimulating to the young Richard Strauss as it had to Mozart, and provided the eponymous theme to his first great tone poem. But the young Strauss was a card-carrying Wagnerite, and ran into trouble with Cosima Wagner, that composer's formidable widow, who was both an admirer of Strauss and the self-proclaimed custodian of her late husband's ideals; she was harshly critical of both the subject matter of Don Juan and its explicitness. Cosima urged Strauss to seek 'eternal motives' that could be perceived at many levels. Strauss's response was polite: 'I think I have understood, and I look forward to producing evidence next time we meet, in the form of my third symphonic work [*Death and Transfiguration*] ... that I have perhaps already made a significant advance.' As perhaps the most metaphysical of his tone poems, *Death and Transfiguration* is based not on a literary text but on the composer's own narrative: a dying artist, obsessed by an artistic ideal, is transfigured at the instant of death to recognize it in eternity.

Strauss commissioned a poem post-facto from his friend, the poet Alexander Ritter, which illustrated the program and ideas underlying the piece. My (heavily edited) translation:

In a small, barren room, dully lit by the stump of a candle, a sick man lies on his cot. He lies in wild desperation, struggling with death. Now, exhausted, he has sunk into sleep, and the quiet ticking of the clock on the wall is the only sound. On his pale face is a sorrowful smile: At the very frontier of existence, does he dream of the golden days of childhood? Death does not grant its victims sleep or dreams for long; it shakes him awake, and the battle begins anew. The urge for life and the ineluctable power of death – what a terrible struggle! This time, there is no victory, and the room is

silent once more. Sinking back, wearily, feverishly, the sick man sees his life pass before him, scene by scene. Childhood's sweet innocence; then the bolder games of youth, the discoveries of new strengths and desires; then the battles, the hot joys of manhood. To take everything that seemed sacred, and to shape it into an even more transfigured form: This was the noble impulse that accompanied him through life. The cold, indifferent world placed endless barriers before him. Whenever he neared his goal, he was met by a thundering "Halt!" "Turn the fence into a ladder, and climb, ever higher and higher!" What he sought all this time with his heart's deepest longing, he still seeks, bathed in a mortal sweat, seeks...but alas, does not find. Finally, inevitably, the blow of death's iron hammer rings out. It breaks his body in two, covers his eyes in eternal darkness. But, in that moment, he hears, resounding mightily from above, that which he sought below so ardently: The redemption, the transfiguration of the world!

The musical subdivisions of *Death and Transfiguration* are clear, though their relationship to its form is less so. The piece is constructed, like a symphony, in four sections:

- I. Largo (The sick man, near death)
- II. Allegro molto agitato (The unrelenting battle between life and death)
- III. Meno mosso (memories of life gone by)
- IV. Moderato (transfiguration)

The work has a quiet, syncopated introduction ('breathing irregularly'), then an agitated exposition ('racked by terrible pain'), followed by an episodic developmental space: dreams of childhood, youthful passions. What follows is the principal theme of the work, that of the artistic Ideal. The restatement of this lofty melody in the extended coda is what Strauss termed the 'point of culmination', and it is indeed one of the most exquisite moments in all his symphonic works: even his arch-conservative father was moved.

In a sense, *Death and Transfiguration* represents the young Strauss' idea of the symphonic form, 'transfigured' through poetry and programme into a tone poem, the preferred genre of the revolutionary Romantics. It is neither fully a symphony nor tone poem, not entirely narrative or lyric. This dichotomy resonates throughout Strauss' (and Mozart's) life and music – at once a reactionary and a revolutionary, a dreamer and a pragmatist, a philosopher and a businessman (though this was much more the case for the shrewd Richard than the financially feckless Wolfgang.) It is poignant to hear, in tonight's concert, that searching, ambivalent creative nature manifested in such beautiful forms, both at the beginning and the end of his long life. Interesting also, that as a man of 24, he wrestled with the most agonizing questions of life and death; and as an old man, chose as his final work none other than *Capriccio*, a dramatically austere, but musically sumptuous meditation on the dualities of word and music, and of art and reality. In his final moments, as he lay on his deathbed in 1949, having watched the Old World of German culture literally falling apart and exploding before his eyes, having spent 6 decades wrestling with philosophy, art and religion, he said to his daughter-in-law:

"It's a funny thing Alice, dying is just the way I composed it in Death and Transfiguration"