

RICHARD STRAUSS

Macbeth
Don Juan
Tod und Verklärung
Festmarsch in C

Kirill Karabits

Staatskapelle Weimar

RICHARD STRAUSS

Macbeth

Tondichtung nach Shakespeare
für Orchester op. 23 (TrV 163) 21:09

Don Juan

Tondichtung für Orchester op. 20 (TrV 156) 17:21

Tod und Verklärung

Tondichtung für Orchester op. 24 (TrV 158) 25:17

Festmarsch

in C-Dur für Orchester (TrV 157) 6:45

Staatskapelle Weimar

Kirill Karabits Dirigent

A Kapellmeister with Visions

Early Tone Poems by Richard Strauss

For the young Richard Strauss, the music world was clearly divided into good and evil. In this, he followed the stance of his father, Franz Strauss, a horn player of great renown, but one of conservative tastes. Mozart and Beethoven were regarded as gods in the Strauss household; Schumann and Brahms already had a whiff of the new-fangled about them. But anything going beyond these musical idioms, especially the so-called New German School of composers including Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, was refused point-blank. Although Strauss senior, on account of his profession, being a member of the Munich court orchestra, took part in the premieres of “Tristan und Isolde” and “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg”, Wagner remained a red rag to him – he went so far as to refer to the composer as “Mephisto”. And his son Richard happily took the same line: “The other day I went to see ‘Siegfried’”, the fourteen-year-old wrote to a school friend in 1878, “and I tell you, I was as bored as a pug.”

There is a certain irony in the fact that, of all people, it was the conductor Hans von Bülow – having premiered the afore-mentioned Wagner operas in Munich, thus acting as “Mephisto’s” assistant, so to speak – who would become Richard’s greatest supporter. When Bülow, during his tenure as music director of the Meiningen court orchestra, appeared in the Bavarian capital in 1884 with his ensemble, he included in his programme the Suite for wind instruments, Op. 4, by the twenty-year-old Strauss. On top of that, he also invited the young composer to conduct the piece himself, as a guest artist at the concert. This enquiry was somewhat piquant for Strauss, for he was still inexperienced in that field – the only orchestra he had conducted up to that point was “Die Wilde Gungl”, an amateur orchestra based in Munich which his father had been directing since 1865. But Strauss dared – and won. Bülow made him his deputy at Meiningen, marking the beginning of a stellar conducting career which would later take him to the top positions at the Berlin and Vienna opera houses.

In Meiningen, Strauss not only acquired the necessary assurance in standing at the helm of an orchestra, but he also experienced an artistic moulting. This was thanks to the orchestra’s concert master, Alexander Ritter, thirty-one years his senior and a fervent proponent of Wagner and Liszt: he managed to win over the young Kapellmeister to the progressive music of the “New Germans”. The result was that Strauss now regarded the genre of the symphony and sonata form as an “empty shell”. He also demanded that “new thoughts should seek out new forms”. Strauss himself found them in Liszt’s symphonic poems and of course in Wagner’s advanced harmonic language, which were to serve him as guiding parameters in his prospective oeuvre.

In late 1886 he promptly set about his first tone poem, choosing, exactly as Liszt had done with his “Hamlet”, a Shakespearean drama as his model: “Macbeth”. The music to this “harsh and gruesome” subject matter would need to be “of a very wild nature”, Strauss remarked, stating that this had turned out to be the “most independent and purposeful” of his works. The process, however, had not been without effort. The fact that Strauss produced three versions before he was satisfied with the score speaks volumes. He completed the first version on 9 January 1888 and sent it to his mentor Bülow, who expressed irritation not only in view of the numerous dissonances but also because he felt that a work entitled “Macbeth” should not end with a

triumphal march of his adversary, Macduff. Strauss yielded to the latter, altering the finale to have a dark ending, portraying Macbeth's death. It was in this version that the tone poem was premiered on 13 October 1890 by the Weimar court orchestra, who had engaged Strauss as Kapellmeister one year previously. Later on, however, Strauss revised his instrumentation, most notably thinning out the inner parts in order to depict the main themes more vividly.

The work's long genesis had one advantage: in the end, Strauss was able to make use of an instrument which he had only encountered in Bayreuth in 1890 at performances of the "Ring" cycle – the bass trumpet, which emphasises the sombre soundscape. He did not attach a detailed programme to his "Macbeth". It is apparent, however, that the tone poem is not a precise portrayal of the drama's plot; it does not describe how the Scottish general Macbeth murdered King Duncan in order to assume the throne himself, nor how he is killed in a duel with Macduff, the legitimate heir. Instead, Strauss constructs a sonic psychological study of the title character. Following the opening fanfare representing monarchy, he portrays Macbeth using two themes: an aggressively boastful one, and a melodic line ascending from the depth of the orchestra, appearing as a voice of the subconscious – an expression of the dark desires and anxieties driving Macbeth to murderous frenzy and self-destruction. His power-hungry wife is also characterised with her own thematic profile, oscillating between deceptive beauty and grotesque hideousness. With his "Macbeth", Strauss created a nocturnal piece with an oppressive sense of doom. Perhaps that was the very reason why this work never achieved the same level of popularity as his subsequent work in that genre, "Don Juan".

Curiously, Strauss noted down the first sketches for his second tone poem in the courtyard of Padua cathedral, which he visited on 24 May 1888 as part of a journey to Italy: the "chaste" environment stands in grotesque contrast to the erotic mindscape of the "Don Juan" material. Even the opening of the piece, with its victoriously soaring first theme, appears as the epitome of virility and vitality – it symbolises the triumphal conquests of the fiery hero. Don Juan's complete mastery of the art of seduction is also demonstrated in the calmer and tender passages, for instance when the ecstatically melodious solo violin ascends into the highest register, or when the oboe works its charm with silky cantilenas. "Jolly merriment, punctuated by sighs of pain and joy", Strauss noted above the score in his sketchbook. His reference was Nikolaus Lenau's "Don Juan" whose motto was: "Off and away for ever more new victories". Accordingly, in his tone poem, Strauss celebrates the rapture of the moment with spirited, blazing music which is kindled anew time and again until it eventually burns out at the end, the pallid sounds of the final bars dying down, mirroring the life of the protagonist who, in Lenau's verse drama, perishes with self-loathing and weariness.

With his "Don Juan", completed by 30 September 1888 within just four months, Strauss had found his unique and energetic musical language. However, at the request of his future boss, the Weimar Intendant Hans Bronsart, the celebrated premiere occurred one year later, on 11 November 1889 at his new artistic home with the Weimar court orchestra. To perform the premiere, Strauss had originally hoped for a larger orchestra with a bigger string section, but in the event decided not to alienate his future employer. And since Franz Liszt, his idol, had produced most of his symphonic poems in Weimar during his tenure as Kapellmeister (1843-1861), Strauss certainly felt that he was in the best of company.

His first weeks in the Thuringian capital were marked by turbulence. For alongside the subscription concerts and opera performances he had, according to his contract, to conduct, by 18 November 1889 Strauss also completed his third tone poem, "Tod und Verklärung" ["Death and Transfiguration"].

With this work, however, he did not follow in Liszt's footsteps but explored entirely different thematical avenues: for his subject matter, rather than turning towards world literature or mythology, he produced his own, dramatising in music "the hour of death of a person who has pursued the highest aspirations, so was probably an artist". For a 25-year-old who had neither suffered grave illness himself nor experienced another person dying, this might have seemed a peculiar subject. But Strauss was less concerned with death itself than with the role of the artist – and thus also himself. "Tod und Verklärung" therefore marks the beginning of that long series of works in which he contemplates himself and explores his identity, such as "Ein Heldenleben" ["A Hero's Life"], "Symphonia domestica" and the opera "Intermezzo", which are all conceived as self-portraits.

In contrast to "Macbeth" and "Don Juan", for "Tod und Verklärung" Strauss provided a detailed programme which one can follow whilst listening. The tone poem begins very softly, depicting the faltering breaths of the dying person who then, literally at the beat of a drum, rears up in mortal agony. In the end, however, he catches sight, in the next world, of what he was not able to create on earth. And this magical moment is illustrated by Strauss with the ravishing theme of transfiguration soaring up higher and higher in endless melodic arches. He must have been very fond of this idea, for he cited it again at the very end of his life in his song "Im Abendrot" ["At Sunset"] of 1948. "Tod und Verklärung" earned him much admiration, in particular for its graphic depiction, even if the Viennese master critic Eduard Hanslick commented mockingly: "What is missing in this realistic clarity is a final, crucial step: the dimly lit sickbay of the dying man on a real stage; his death throes, his visions, his dying – all mimed – and to complement it the Straussian music in the orchestra. The nature of his talent really points the composer to the path of music drama." And, as is well-known, this is exactly what was to occur.

The brass-saturated orchestral textures and the chromatic, often sequenced, writing of his tone poems are of course a far cry from his early ideals and the world of his father. But he never broke with him. When "Die Wilde Gungl" celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1889, Strauss composed a festive march in C major which was premiered by Franz Strauss in Munich on 1 February 1889. For this occasion, Strauss junior naturally opted for a completely different idiom: the opening sounds like a mixture of fairground and emperor's birthday, although it could not be described as a jubilant fanfare. Strauss reins in the brass instruments, concentrating instead on the violins, indulging in melodies winding their way upwards. The basic pulse remains solemn – there is no hint of the "youthful fiery pulse" that Lenau describes in his "Don Juan". If one did not know that this music was written by a 24-year-old, one would take it for the work of an older gentleman wistfully remembering better days. The "evil" element in music had long since been de-demonised for Strauss – the "good", however, had not lost its magic.

Susanne Stähr

Translation: Viola Scheffel

STAATSKAPELLE WEIMAR

Founded in 1491, the Staatskapelle Weimar is one of the oldest orchestras in Germany and among the most illustrious in the world. Its history is closely associated with some of the world's best-known musicians, including Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Franz Liszt, and Richard Strauss. Established as the premier musical institution of classical Weimar and part of the Hoftheater Weimar, the orchestra continued to attract attention through the achievements of Liszt and Strauss during the 19th century. These two celebrated figures not only improved its quality and reputation, but also led the Hofkapelle in world premieres of numerous contemporary orchestral works and operas.

These positive developments were brought to an abrupt end when the National Socialists seized power. After the calamitous events of World War II, conductor Hermann Abendroth re-established the Staatskapelle Weimar, restoring it to its former grandeur and quality. Since the 1980s, conductors Peter Gülke, Oleg Caetani, and Hans-Peter Frank as well as the current honorary conductor George Alexander Albrecht, who led the orchestra from 1996 to 2002, have left a lasting mark. In the following years, Albrecht was succeeded by Jac van Steen, Carl St. Clair, Stefan Solyom, and most recently by Kirill Karabits, who took the reins of Thuringia's only A-level orchestra in September 2016.

Both in its extensive concert activities and its opera productions at the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, the Staatskapelle has worked to cultivate its great tradition while also combining it with innovation. A wide range of CD recordings reflect its impressively diverse repertoire. World-class soloists and conductors perform regularly with the Staatskapelle Weimar, which is nationally and internationally renowned as a top-level concert orchestra. In past years, the ensemble has made guest appearances in Japan, Israel, Spain, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Great Britain and the US as well as at renowned festivals and major concert halls throughout Germany.



KIRILL KARABITS

Since September 2016, Ukrainian-born Kirill Karabits has held the position of General Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Deutsches Nationaltheater and Staatskapelle Weimar. In addition, since 2008 he assumes the position of Chief Conductor of Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

Kirill Karabits has worked with many of the leading ensembles of Europe, Asia and North America, including the Cleveland, Philadelphia and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, Philharmonia Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Filarmonica del Teatro La Fenice, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Münchner Philharmoniker and the Dresdner Philharmonie. In 2016, he conducted the Russian National Orchestra on their tour of the US and in two concerts at the Edinburgh International Festival. Summer 2016 also saw his debut with the Chicago Symphony at the Ravinia Festival. A prolific opera conductor, the 2016-17 season saw his debuts at the Deutsche Oper Berlin and Staatsoper Stuttgart. He has also conducted at Glyndebourne Festival Opera, Staatsoper Hamburg, English National Opera, Bolshoi Theatre and at the Wagner Geneva Festival.

Working with the next generation of bright musicians is of great importance to Kirill Karabits. Thus he commits himself as Artistic Director of I, CULTURE Orchestra, an orchestra of talented, young musicians from Poland and other East European countries. In 2012 and 2014 he conducted the televised finals of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Award.

In recognition of his achievements in the UK, Kirill Karabits was named Conductor of the Year at the 2013 Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards.



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e-mail: info@audite.de

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