

RICHARD STRAUSS**Suite from *Der Rosenkavalier***

Richard Strauss was born in Munich in 1864 and died in Garmisch, Germany in 1949. He composed his opera *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1909 and 1910 and it was first performed at the Dresden Opera in 1911. In 1944 he prepared the Suite from the opera in collaboration with conductor Artur Rodzinski. The Suite is scored for 3 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 4 clarinets, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 1 or 2 harps, celeste, and strings.

Strauss first worked with librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal on *Elektra*, his opera based on Sophocles. The two men had hugely different personalities—Strauss was the extrovert, of course, and Hofmannsthal the more reserved—but they worked well as a pair. After *Elektra*, Strauss is said to have remarked, “Next time I shall write a Mozart opera.”

This was *Der Rosenkavalier*, Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s most successful project. The story is set in Vienna in the mid-eighteenth century. The impoverished Baron Ochs wishes to marry the young (and quite rich) Sophie. Tradition says that he must send her a silver rose; to find an appropriate delivery man, he consults the opera’s central character, the aging Princess Maria Theresa. The princess suggests the boy Octavian, who is the princess’ lover and, at the moment, disguised as one of her maids. Octavian is sent, and when he and Sophie fall in love, the plot, as they say, thickens.

Strauss was emphatic that this should be a comedy. To Hofmannsthal he wrote, “Don’t forget that the audience should also *laugh*, not just smile or grin! I still miss in our work a genuinely comic situation: everything is merely amusing, but not *comic!*” For his own part Strauss supplied music that is lyrical and filled to brimming with waltzes: “I have not departed from the path of the text’s gay vivacity, which, however, never oversteps the bounds of grace and elegance.”

The Suite comprises several elements taken from the opera along with a newly composed ending for the final waltz. It begins with the Prelude to the opera; the rambunctious horns lead us to the themes identifying Princess Maria Theresa and Octavian. Then, in some of the most beautiful and tender music of the suite, we see—through the princess’ eyes—the young Octavian as the Rosenkavalier. During the duet between Octavian and Sophie (oboe and horn) the boorish Ochs barges in with a great discord. After an interlude of waltz music we hear the sentimental Princess Maria Theresa as she realizes she has lost Octavian. The grand Ochs waltz brings the suite to a close.

Der Rosenkavalier was composed at a time when Wagnerism was (some might say *finally*) waning. It was propitious that it was this time that Strauss decided to write “a Mozart opera,” and that he collaborated with a man who was sophisticated and urbane on matters of life in general and sex in particular. In a way that Mozart’s comedic operas so often do, *Der Rosenkavalier* gives us characters with human foibles and a situation both touching and familiar: at its heart is the story of a beautiful woman beginning to realize her age, but who knows that life—and love—will go on.

Four Last Songs

Strauss completed his “Four Last Songs” in 1948 but never heard them performed. They were premiered in London in 1950 by Kirsten Flagstad, soprano, and the Philharmonia Orchestra under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler. The score calls for solo soprano, 4 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, celeste, and strings.

Richard Strauss had led an astonishingly energetic life: even in his eighties he was still composing, still conducting, and still carrying on a schedule that would give a much younger man pause. He spent his final years in Switzerland, composing a few minor pieces “to keep his hand in.” He made a successful postwar trip to London for a festival of his music, but he was tired, in ill health, and he felt himself to be “played out.” During his frequent bouts of lassitude Strauss spent most of his time studying scores—Mozart and Wagner—and

reading Goethe, Nietzsche, Greek drama, and Chinese philosophy. One day his son Franz remarked that he should compose some songs to overcome his brooding; to everyone's astonishment, that's exactly what he did.

Strauss had already begun to set a poem by Joseph von Eichendorff called *Im Abendrot* (*At Sunset*) the previous year. He took it up again, and set three more songs to texts by Herman Hesse as well. Though we call them the "Four Last Songs," Strauss never intended them to be grouped as a set. That was the idea of his friend Ernst Roth, the chief editor at his publisher Boosey and Hawkes, who had them published under that title. He also established their order of performance, which is generally but not always followed: *Frühling* (*Spring*), *September*, *Beim Schlafengehen* (*Going to Sleep*), and *Im Abendrot*.

Though he was still a Romantic to his very core, these songs are not about a heroic struggle with death as a force to be overcome. They are, rather, a tender recognition of the seasons of life and an acceptance of its end. They seem also to be a recognition of the primary influences in Strauss' life: his wife Pauline, a renowned soprano who had performed many of Strauss' lieder; and his father, Franz Strauss, principal horn of the Munich Court Orchestra for 42 years and the musician who gave Strauss his lifelong appreciation of the French horn and his lifelong devotion to Mozart.

Frühling (*Spring*) is a vivid recollection of the life left behind. As the poet dreams, the music soars; the sights, sounds, and fragrances of life embrace him. The setting of the text is astonishing at every turn: spring begins "in somber shadows" of the orchestra; "the song of birds" warble on and on; the "blue skies" bring the soprano to her high register, the word "miracle" to her highest, most ardent note. The orchestral close brings a sound "bathed in light."

September is the beginning of the end of things. "The garden grieves" in autumnal orchestral colors as musical phrases droop and rhythms gradually slow. The luminous ending brings the glow of a solo horn as the soprano "closes her wearied eyes."

The opening of *Beim Schlafengehen* (*Going to Sleep*) is somber, the soprano entering in mid-phrase. We now come to the human element, as the poet meets "the starry night like a tired child." Between the final verses we come to a violin solo of great dignity and calm acceptance. As the poet's soul "would soar free in flight" the music is at its most intense, holding fast to the joy of life yet taking flight "in night's magic circle."

Strauss creates the metaphor for himself and his beloved wife in *Im Abendrot*: "through sorrow and joy we have walked hand in hand." The things left behind—the sensuous sunset, the valleys, the larks—are achingly real. Yet when the question arises—"Is this perhaps death?"—it is asked not with fear but with peace. In the end the French horn quotes from Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*, composed sixty years before, with the motive representing fulfillment.

Strauss spent a lifetime devoted to the human voice; there were none better at turning words into music. These "Four Last Songs" are the pinnacle of his achievements in the vocal arts, and at the same time the most personal. "Tired of wandering," Strauss accepted the end of his life with sublime serenity.

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