

Richard Strauss
(1864-1949)

***Tod und Verklärung*, Opus 24. Tone Poem**

When compared with his contemporaries, especially Mahler and Debussy, though he too was known as a fine musician and a great conductor, Richard Strauss received an uncommonly high estimation as a composer – and it came very early. Before he was 21 he was being paraded as the successor to Brahms and Wagner – and so it is that the gargantuan tone poems he wrote in his 20's and early 30's entered the international repertoire immediately. Moreover, because of his successes in Munich and his triumphs at the court in Dresden, - before his 21st birthday he had heard his music interpreted by the foremost conductors of the day. One of them, Hans von Bülow, in jest referred to Strauss as Richard the III. The implication was that Richard Wagner was Richard the I and that therefore no one could possibly fill the slot of Richard the II. Bülow continued to show real support for Strauss recommending him to a position at the Weimar Opera during which time *Macbeth*, *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* were written.

The Bülow story is worth mentioning, briefly, because it points to a specific philosophy of life that is crucial to understanding Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss and perhaps even the fabled conductor Otto Klemperer. Why would Bülow remain so faithful an acolyte of Wagner's music, when his wife, Franz Liszt's daughter Cosima, had an illicit affair with Richard Wagner, and then in 1870 without warning, upped and left him, taking two of his four daughters, ostensibly the ones fathered by Wagner. I point to the philosophy of Johann Kaspar Schmidt – or as he is better known Max Stirner, who was a huge influence on Bülow, Wagner, Strauss and others. Stirner was a nihilist, existentialist, and above all an 'individual anarchist'. The thrust of his philosophy was as follows. *What a man owned, was everything around him that he could take and defend. There was no barrier to property – physical or intellectual, and certainly no morality to conduce otherwise. Everyone was entitled to act in the same way.* Artists drew inspiration from this – to be able to use whatever palette they chose without concern, allowing a 'free for all' when reviewing traditional structure. So Bülow may have recognized that Wagner's actions were in alignment with this theorem and above all respected that Wagner's iconoclastic approach to composition was also in alignment with Stirner's artistic philosophy. We know that Richard Strauss thought highly of Stirner, and was heavily mentored and guided by Bülow, who worshipped Stirner.

It is in this atmosphere that one can grasp the sonic explosion, the sheer orchestral depth and volume revealed in the Tone Poems. Strauss had mastered compositional parameters. He also knew that he had and everyone around him knew it too. In 1889 Strauss left Munich to go to Weimar where he had found favour with Cosima (Bülow) Wagner. He took with him sketches for *Tod und Verklärung* and the score of the completed *Don Juan*. Having played it on the piano for his hosts, there was an instant buzz, and a performance was scheduled in Weimar. Strauss was convinced that the orchestra would not be able to manage the score, replete with strenuous difficulties that up to that point were unknown in orchestral playing. He conducted it on 11 November 1889. It was by far his biggest triumph to date, and he was thenceforward adopted as the successor to Wagner by the 'Wagnerites'. The completion of *Tod und Verklärung* followed soon after, and seven months later the premier was given at a concert in

Eisenach. This was a particularly joyous time for him, because Pauline de Ahna, whom he had met and fallen in love with in Leipzig two years earlier, had joined the Weimar company and sang *Isolde* in a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*. She was to become Strauss' wife and *Tristan* was to remain one of his favourite operas. It is worth noting that Strauss is famed for his extraordinary operas, all written after 1900- all acclaimed, and if considered unsuccessful, in anyway, were only in comparison to his own operas. He also developed a fabled relationship with librettist Hugo von Hoffmansthal, in as successful a collaboration as Mozart and da Ponte, or Verdi and Boito. The **expectations** of the musical world were at peak frenzy. They remain at peak frenzy to this day, every time Strauss is on the concert programme, which is where they have remained, since the penning of *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* in 1888/9.

Tod und Verklärung depicts the death of an artist, after a poem by Alexander Ritter. It is so immediate and visceral in its depiction that no one will have any difficulty in following the thread of emotion. From the opening bars, one hears the faint breathing of a dying man, followed by his faint heart beats (timpani). The scene is set for a final earthly battle as the soul attempts to free itself from its mortal coil, and falling back to the bed, invokes the heroic life well led that flashes before the dying man's eyes. Finally, he succumbs and the soul is 'transfigured', in one of the most glorious moments in the entire symphonic repertoire. When Strauss lay on his death bed September 8th, 1949- in the same position as Ritter's artist – his daughter-in-law beside him, he remarked "It's a funny thing Alice, dying is just the way I composed it in *Tod und Verklärung*".

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