

Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*:
A Tone Poem Depicting the Spiritual Evolution of Man

by Justin Baumann

Regarded as the most important German composer of his time, after the deaths of Wagner and Brahms, Richard Strauss was internationally established and respected by the time he began to compose the music to *Also sprach Zarathustra*, an instrumental tone poem set to Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's masterpiece of the same title. For nearly eight decades Richard Strauss composed in many different genres, however he became best known for his operas and tone poems. The latter, under which *Also sprach Zarathustra* falls, were fashioned after Franz Liszt's "symphonic poems." The symphonic poem was by analogy a word poem, set to music. The symphonic poem used melody and harmony to express musically what poetry could express literally. The content of the symphonic poem could sometimes be alluded to by literary plays, themes, or poems, and also by paintings, pictures, or statues. Franz Liszt, who Richard Strauss admired, achieved enormous success for his symphonic poems through the harmonic interpretations of the classic stories of *Orpheus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Strauss, in an effort to define a style uniquely his, adopted the label "tone poem" for his works of a similar style, although privately Strauss used the term "symphonic poem" in reference to *Also sprach Zarathustra*. However, in public performance, in an attempt to distinguish his work from Liszt's, Strauss subtitled *Also sprach Zarathustra*, a "tone poem freely after Nietzsche." From the title of the work the subject was given, and at the time it was a subject of some controversy. Opponents of Strauss's programme questioned his morality in choosing a subject such as Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, which

states that God is dead, and urges man to reevaluate his values. “The revaluation of morality which he embodied was aimed against conventional religion and was expressed as the Will to Power, which is synonymous more with living life than with achieving political power.”¹ This point has historically been misinterpreted, most infamously by Adolf Hitler during the reign of the National Socialist party in Germany.

Born in Munich, Germany on the 11th of June 1864, Richard Strauss was the first of two children born to Franz Strauss, a brilliant yet hardworking musician who would turn out to be Richard Strauss’s most important influence. Instrumental music was central to Richard Strauss’s young life, and he had all of the advantages of growing up in the bustling metropolitan center that was Munich. By the time he was four he began piano lessons, and at age six he was composing. At age eight he started to study the violin with his cousin Benno Walter, leader of the court orchestra in Munich, and at 11 he embarked upon a five-year study of composition with Friedrich Wilhelm Meyer.

Franz Strauss remained Richard’s prime influence, exposing him to the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Richard’s childhood compositions consisted mostly of lieder, piano pieces, and chamber music. Early on it was apparent that Richard Strauss had a firm grasp on classical harmony, phrasing, and form. As the young Strauss matured, his interest in orchestral music grew. His father directed the “Wilde Gung’l,” an amateur orchestra, and Richard Strauss joined the ensemble as a violinist in 1882. Here, with the “Wilde Gung’l,” Strauss learned about orchestration, under his father’s

¹ Williamson, John, *Strauss, Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 21.

tutelage. Some of his first orchestral works were written for the group. These included marches, concert overtures, and two symphonies, one in D minor and one in F minor. However, the highlights of his early work with this ensemble were his pieces for woodwind and his concertos for violin and horn.

Strauss spent the winter of 1882-3 enrolled in the University of Munich. Here he discovered Shakespeare and art, along with philosophy and aesthetics, the latter of which would have an incredible affect over his life and his work. His first encounters with philosophy were with Schopenhauer. However, soon after his fame spread throughout Europe, Russia, and America, an exhausted and ill Strauss sought peace in Greece and Egypt, where he was introduced to Nietzsche. The ruthless German philosopher, Nietzsche, wrote searing and destructive criticisms of the age that he lived in, and *Also sprach Zarathustra* is just that. Here, in Nietzsche's most popular work, the *Übermensch* (superman) develops his own morality independent of "the herd," (those who follow organized religion and are "enslaved" by it). The *Übermensch* ultimately finds truth and happiness in "his knowledge of freedom, a freedom that comes from the acknowledgment that God is dead and that therefore there is no judgmental higher being to whom a debt must be paid."² These ideas were an inspiration for Strauss, for he too believed in man's ability to overcome religious superstitions and achieve greatness on his own terms. Nietzsche influenced Strauss by helping to "affirm his agnosticism as well as his lifelong

² Carol A. Diethe, "Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche," *Encyclopedia of German Literature*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), vol. 2, 766.

belief in the individual's power to change the world around him, controlling his destiny without promise of a hereafter.”³ Nietzsche's works also helped in Strauss's refutation of Christianity. “Strauss's objection was to any religion which relieved its followers of responsibility for their actions by means of confession.”⁴ These ideas helped shape the tone poem, but they are not the subjects that Strauss based his work on. Strauss stated that his intention was “to convey in music an idea of the evolution of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of development, religious as well as scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman.”⁵ Nietzsche's writings were the inspiration for the music, however the music was not a direct interpretation of his drama.

The earliest sketches of the tone poem, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, are dated from February 1894, however more than a year later Strauss was still deep in the thought process of composing his new work. The categories in which he developed ideas for the music were drawn from emotional states. These states included, “contemplation,” “worship,” “doubting,” “despair,” “experience,” and “recognition.” These were to be

³ Bryan Gilliam and Charles Youmans, “Richard Strauss,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 24, 507.

⁴ Michael Kennedy, *Richard Strauss* (London: Dent, 1976) 24.

⁵ Williamson, 28

“broad feelings for mood rather than specifics.”⁶ Intense composition began in March and April of 1896, and by the end of August the 108-page full score to *Also sprach Zarathustra* had been finished. The piece went from early sketches to work on a short score, which was developed simultaneously with the full score. “He reduced the task to three main lines of attack; the chapter headings [from Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*], of which he selected eight as being particularly suggestive to his musical sensibilities; the conflict between the unyielding figure of ‘nature’ and the Spirit of Man with its sense of purpose and achievement; and finally the evolution of Man himself from a primitive being towards the Superman through the symbolical figure of Zarathustra.”⁷ (The Greeks call him Zoroaster, and he is believed to have lived during the time of the Buddha, approximately sixth century b.c. Zarathustra isolated himself from society and returned occasionally urging man to “shed the inferior gods, creeds, and customs set up and familiarized amongst less-developed mentalities.”⁸) “The first of these [lines of attack] gave him the sections of the projected composition with their varied characteristics; the second he depicted through a parallel conflict of opposing tonalities, while the third supplied an overall design.”⁹ While still working on the score, Strauss’s publisher, Aibl, gave a proof to the conductor Arthur Nikisch. Nikisch praised the work

⁶ Williamson, 31

⁷ Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary On His Life and Works* (New York: Glencoe, 1962), 134

⁸ Del Mar, 133

⁹ Del Mar, 134

in progress, and expressed his pleasure in being the second man, after Strauss himself, to conduct the piece in Berlin on the 30th of November. *Also sprach Zarathustra* was first performed live on the night of November 27th in Munich. However, even before the first performance, many conductors and venues were showing interest in the new work by the composer. Strauss's letters document incredibly successful performances of *Also sprach Zarathustra* in numerous European cities before the turn of the century. Strauss toured Germany, as well as other parts of Europe, conducting this new work, which he cherished as his finest musical accomplishment to date. He was quoted to say that *Also sprach Zarathustra* was his masterpiece, "by far the most important of all my pieces, the most perfect in form, the richest in content and the most individual in character."¹⁰

Zarathustra's prologue, from Nietzsche's work, is quoted in the preface to the score. He has left the comforts of family and home and he is addressing the rising sun. Thus, Strauss begins the music with the beauty and simplicity of a sunrise. The opening section is built around the pure tonality of C major to represent Nature. From a deep C, Strauss builds the simple Nature motive, or *Naturtheme*, to G and finally to C, an octave above the initial C. The *Naturtheme* is heard three times by trumpets playing in unison and proceeds to *tutti* exclamations of alternating major and minor modes. This alternation between major and minor "has a human significance and the doubtful ambiguity of the alternation indicates man's perplexity at the sublime but

¹⁰ Williamson 39

insoluble mysteries of nature.”¹¹ This harmonic development is supported by pounding timpani triplets, beating for the fundamental spark of man’s intellect, and a powerful C major chord held by the organ, which sustains this chord for two beats after the orchestra rests.

“Man has stood in awe before the overwhelming presence of Nature and now the theme of his inquiring spirit rears itself.”¹² This first section is titled *Von den Hinterweltlern*, literally “Of the Backworldsmen,” and is expressive of Man in his most primitive state. The Longing motive, introduced here in B minor, symbolizes Man’s quest for a divine explanation of life in order to feel emotionally comfortable. From the hopeless longing of a solo viola, Strauss progresses towards Man’s desire to free himself from religious superstition and ignorance.

Conflict now arises as Man’s quest for spiritual independence contradicts Nature and the religious ideals that he has created for himself. A polytonal effect is created here to symbolize this conflict. The Nature motive, in C major, is played within the B major tonality, an effect that has intrigued listeners since the first production of the piece.

The opening notes of the Gregorian *Magnificat* are now sounded to symbolize the church, as the organ plays the six-four of D major. This is followed by a new theme that modulates from a six-four in G minor where a diminished seventh carries over to a six-four in C minor. “Strauss maintains a ‘developmental’ tension by refusing to move

¹¹ Del Mar, 135

¹² Del Mar, 135-36

unequivocally to any key.”¹³ This tension introduces the concept of man’s self-denial in a new section titled, “Of Joys and Passions.” The melancholy setting of C minor symbolizes the naturally low origin of Man’s emotions, until the climactic announcement from the trombones introduce a new theme of great significance. This motive, most often recognized as the “Disgust motive,” is symbolic of the defiance of Man’s “emotional indulgence.”¹⁴ “It stands mid-way between the two opposing tonalities of B and C through its affiliation to both, although each is distorted – the one into the diminished triad, the other the augmented.”¹⁵ The unresolved contrary action of B and C is the primary characteristic of Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which imparts a unique quality of tension and tonal expansion in the late Romantic era. Taking tritonal and subdominant functioning into account exposes an intricate relationship of B and C. The dominant of B is F# major, which is the tritone of C. However, the subdominant of C is F, and the tritone of F is B.

From “Of Joys and Passions” the music flows into an adverse section entitled *Das Grablied*, “Song of the Grave.” Nebulous tones in B minor lift the orchestra into another climax, which diminishes into dense polyphony to meet familiar past themes on the wings of descending chromatic scales. “At the actual climax the music moves to C major and the *Naturtheme* rings out momentarily on the trumpet, as if the sun had briefly

¹³ Williamson, 95

¹⁴ Del Mar, 139

¹⁵ Del Mar, 139

pierced the heavy clouds.”¹⁶ However, Man’s struggle continues as the music returns to B minor, and the mysterious forces, which never cease to relent, shroud the sun.

The following section, entitled *Von der Wissenschaft*, “Of Science,” or “Of Learning,” is a fugue theme that utilizes all twelve notes of the chromatic scale for an all-encompassing feeling of wisdom shrouded by gloom. The music begins to rise again; the fugue is abandoned momentarily as the Nature motive sounds, along with the Disgust motive. This interruption of the fugue has inspired a great deal of interpretation. In Nietzsche’s work, Zarathustra speaks of leaving behind the scholars that have left him unsatisfied. The restatement of the Nature and Disgust themes, along with excited woodwinds and violin swells, indicate Zarathustra’s denial of false knowledge. The fugue resumes and with an introduction to *Der Genesende*, “The Convalescent.”

“The Convalescent” seems to follow Nietzsche’s narrative closer than the previous sections. It is a fevered fluctuation of orchestral dynamics and color. The Nature motive is pronounced again and soon sinks into B minor before another manic tantrum of energy. This behavior parallels that of Zarathustra in Nietzsche’s *Der Genesende*: “Zarathustra leaps up ‘like a madman,’ and cries out in such a voice as to terrify his attendant animals. He calls up his ‘most abysmal thought’ and cries out ‘disgust, disgust, disgust – woe is me!’ He then falls into a seven – day trance from which he rises to tell of how the monster of disgust, the ‘great disgust at man,’ crept into his throat. But he bit its head off. His animals affirm the eternity of existence. Zarathustra

¹⁶ Del Mar, 139

wonders if animals are as cruel as man, who enjoys tragedy above all things.”¹⁷ The animals ask Zarathustra, “ Has perhaps a new knowledge come to you, a bitter, oppressive knowledge?”¹⁸ Man makes an effort to transcend his self-imposed disgust (signaled by giant fanfares), which leads to excited trills before a climax segues into the Dance – Song, or *Tanzlied*.

The Dance of the Superman reveals itself as a Viennese Waltz. The Nature motive returns in C major, however descending chromaticism cause tension between C and B. A variation on the Joys and Passions theme is introduced and the Disgust motive appears, adding to the conflict in tonality. The music swirls upward in a tremendous climax until a powerful C major proclaims the superiority of the Nature motive. Finally, as the Midnight Bell rings, the piece culminates into the *Nachtwandlerlied*, “Song of the Night Wanderer.”

The music slowly decrescendos, and the tolling of the Midnight Bell grows ever softer. Happiness washes over Zarathustra as he proclaims his “Midnight Message of the Victory of Eternal Joy over Woe.”¹⁹ Once again the tonal center moves from C to B, as a melody of emancipation sounds. Radiant themes mingle in the air until the Nature motive, in C major, and the great B major of Man’s Will end the piece in polyphonic beauty. Nature returns to remind Man that he is from the earth, and will

¹⁷ Williamson, 61

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1969), 234

¹⁹ Del Mar, 144

eventually return to the earth. However, man still struggles to transcend his nature.

Strauss's tone poem expresses this paradox by "showing the conflict between Man and Nature basically unresolved and as irreconcilable as the two nearest and yet harmonically so distant keys of B and C." ²⁰

²⁰ Del Mar, 145

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