

Oboe Concerto by Richard Strauss

Sadly, all good things, so they say, must come to an end. So it was for some three centuries, German and Austrian classical music reigned supreme, as the heart of Europe gave birth to a dazzling constellation of composers that included Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wagner, Mahler, Bruckner, and more besides. Coming at the tail end of this astonishingly fertile era was Richard Strauss, a composer Glenn Gould once described as the most important of the 20th century. Strauss straddled the late romantic and early modern era, leaving a formidable legacy of works including spell-binding operas such as *Salome* and *Elektra*, magnificent tone poems such as *Ein Heldenleben* and *Don Juan*, and other smaller gems including the *Four Last Songs* and the Oboe Concerto we are playing this evening. These latter two works emanated from his last few years when the composer was in eighties and enjoying what has often been described as his “Indian summer.”

The inspiration for Strauss’s Oboe Concerto came from a conversation he had at the end of World War II with a 21 year old American corporal in the army unit that had secured the area around the Bavarian town of Garmisch where Strauss was living in April 1945. The corporal, John de Lancie, happened to be in civilian life Fritz Reiner’s principal oboist with the Pittsburgh Orchestra and knew Strauss’s works well. Although they enjoyed many discussions, Strauss quickly dismissed the idea of an oboe concerto with a big “No”, but apparently the germ of an idea had been planted. Within a few months, much to de Lancie’s surprise, Strauss completed his score for just such a concerto. The work was premiered on February 26, 1946 in Zürich, by a different oboist, but Strauss asked for the rights to the first US performance to be given to de Lancie. However, by that time de Lancie had moved to the Philadelphia Orchestra as second oboe, which by protocol meant that opportunities for playing concertos had to be given to the principal. Later de Lancie became principal, but, ironically, he only got to perform the work once during his 30 year tenure.

After the ravages of the war and with Germany’s opera houses in shambles, Strauss was forced by necessity to turn his attention away from writing operas to smaller works. Not surprisingly, therefore, his late works – which include his hauntingly beautiful *Four Last Songs*, *Metamorphosen* (an unusual work composed for twenty-three solo instruments), and the Oboe Concerto – have a very different aesthetic from the sweeping grandeur of his tone poems and operas. Gone are the programmatic elements and the bombast of a gigantic orchestra required by works such as the *Alpine Symphony*. In the Oboe Concerto, Strauss harkens back to the leaner, more restrained romantic and classical models of his youth, but seen through the lens of someone who had lived through the turmoil of the early 20th century. The Straussian motifs, though, in all their purified and refined elegance, remain.

The first movement begins with an oscillating motif, one that reappears throughout the work, in the cellos followed by 57 measures of unbroken lyrical exposition on the solo oboe, a feat of breathing that has been known to elicit dread in many a soloist. Even after this, the soloist rarely gets a break with a part full of angular leaps and colorful chromatic inflections that are often reminiscent of the colors he used in his earlier operas and tone poems. The concerto consists of three interconnected movements in which motifs and melodies appear and reappear, almost without regard to the normal classical conventions of keeping each movement somewhat insulated from each other. The opening cello gesture reappears at the beginning of the slow second movement, launching the oboe onto a

sinuous line that ends in an elaborate cadenza. The last movement takes the form of a classical rondo and is broken into two sections, a *Vivace* and final exhilarating *Allegro*, almost giving the sense of a work in four movements.

With Strauss's death coming only a few years later in 1949, this work along with his *Four Last Songs*, represents not only the twilight of one the world's greatest composers but also the twilight of the Germanic powerhouse of musical composition. It's as if an even greater allegorical significance had been cast upon Wagner's final opera in his Ring cycle, *Götterdämmerung* (*The Twilight of the Gods*), for today we revere those great German composers almost as gods. Long gone they may be, but forever may we continue to celebrate their life-affirming legacy.

Program notes by Julian Brown © 2014
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