

Richard STRAUSS
(1864 – 1949)

French horn Concerto No.1 in E-flat Major, Opus 11

Allegro
Andante
Allegro

Richard Strauss was born into a family of means - his father, Franz Strauss, was the principal hornist in the Munich Court Orchestra and his mother was the daughter of a prosperous Bavarian brewer. This meant that Richard was free to pursue whatever career he wished. He demonstrated musical aptitude at an early age and extensive training in piano, violin, theory, harmony, and orchestration equipped him to produce music of extraordinary polish and maturity by the time he reached adulthood. Although he mastered traditional music theory, Richard quickly grew beyond it, fascinated by the relatively new field of program music (music that is intended to evoke images or convey the impression of events) and adopted the musical language of the Romantic era. By the time he completed his formal education, in 1882, he had already composed more than 140 works. His father, a musical conservative, pleaded with him to abandon his experiments, and urged him to return to the Classical era compositional traditions of simplicity, balance, and symmetry. There is no evidence that Richard paid any attention to this advice based upon his compositional output.

Following his successful conducting debut in 1884, Strauss' eminence as a conductor paralleled his rise as a composer and he held posts at the Munich Opera, the Weimar Court Orchestra, the Royal Court Opera in Berlin, and the Vienna State Opera. From the beginning of Strauss' career as a composer, it was evident that the orchestra was his natural medium. With the composition of "Aus Italien" in 1886, Strauss embarked on a series of compositions that represents both one of the pivotal phases of his career and a body of music of central importance in the late-Romantic repertoire. Along the way, he brought the tone poem to its pinnacle in works such as "Don Juan", "Ein Heldenleben", "Don Quixote", "Also sprach Zarathustra." When the political situation in Europe became malignant in the 1930s, profound political naïveté led to Strauss' confused involvement in the Nazi propaganda machine. Eventually, he alienated both the Nazis and the Allies but, by the end of World War II, the denazification tribunals cleared his name and, in 1949, he returned to Garmisch, where he died three months after his 85th birthday celebrations.

When Strauss began work on his first concerto for the horn, at the tender age of 18, he already had the equivalent of a lifetime of experience in virtuoso horn playing, having witnessed his father's long hours of practice. The concerto is structured in the then-standard three movement form, but has the effect of two movements as the first two are played without a pause between them. Although concerti typically began with the orchestra stating the main themes and the soloist elaborating upon them later, Strauss took the opposite approach by having the soloist begin a heroic theme after a single strong chord from the orchestra.

OF NOTE

The elder Strauss never played either of his son's horn concerti in public, although he read through them at home with Richard playing an orchestral reduction on the piano. It is reported that Franz Strauss complained that there were "too many high notes." This may have been a subterfuge as the concerto was well within the range of what he performed publicly in his professional positions. It is very likely that, as a musical conservative, he simply did not like his son's music. Richard dedicated the score to another virtuoso hornist, Oscar Franz, who, ironically, never performed it.