

OSM

Strauss, November 4th and 6th, 2008

Strauss and Decker : a historical encounter

Richard Strauss, *Der Rosenkavalier*, Suite

Richard Strauss, *Burleske*

Richard Strauss, *Symphonia Domestica*

Today's program is inspired by the last concert conducted by Strauss (1864-1949) himself, in London, October 1947, marked by the spell of the late-romantic music: nostalgia, wittiness, *bel canto*, gentleness, triviality, tenderness. The program includes two orchestral works, essentially large tone poems, which frame a brilliant piece of piano virtuosity, supported by audacious orchestration. The *Rosenkavalier Suite* recalls the most beautiful passages of the opera, including many melodies of infinite charm. *Sinfonia domestica*, similar to the inquisitive eye of a camera in a reality show, reveals the composer's family life, in a "lyrical and humorous" way. In the middle part of the program is the *Burleske*, a score full of ingenious pianistic effects.

***Der Rosenkavalier*, Suite (1911)**

The operatic comedy *Der Rosenkavalier* - The Knight of the Rose - was almost the contemporary of Schoenberg's melodrama *Pierrot lunaire* (1912). But what a difference ! It came after *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), gloomy, dreadful musical tragedies, at the peak of modernism. In order to understand Richard Strauss, the composer of *Der Rosenkavalier*, a short outline of his career may help to explain the artist's paradox.

Strauss' life was long and rich, at the turn of the last century he was Verdi's contemporary, witness of Brahms's and Mahler's symphonies, Wagner's unconditional admirer, connoisseur of Stravinsky's and Bartók's audacities, observer – at a distance – of Debussy's innovations. His last years coincide with Messiaen's youth and Boulez' first works. What could be better?

Richard Strauss belongs to the German musical tradition, in the era of that country's industrial and commercial development. Even the most romantic artists, with their heads in

the clouds, couldn't ignore its reality. For Strauss, a down-to-earth musician, there was never any conflict between artistic and commercial values; he was a clever businessman, one of the few musicians of his time who made a fortune composing operas. What a contrast, in comparison with the difficult life of most of his contemporaries: Debussy, Bartók and the three Viennese composers.

At the beginning of his career, he shocked audiences as a dangerous modernist, first with his tone poems, then with his early operas. Inspired by Liszt and Wagner, he created a masterly synthesis integrating musical drama in orchestral form. His audacious tone poems, especially *Don Juan* and *Till Eulenspiegel*, are a genial blend of romantic heritage and recent musical explorations.

His operas follow the same trend: they are immense tone poems, composed according to the same principles. Voices are used as a part of the orchestral web. For particular melodramatic moments, Strauss invented enchanting melodies, Italian *bel canto* revisited by the reminiscence of Mozart, with a touch of Wagner.

Concerning the *Rosenkavalier* orchestral Suite, in spite of the immediate success of the opera, Strauss was reluctant to write a short orchestral version of the highlights of the score. Finally, in 1924, the composer allowed two musicians, Otto Singer and Karl Alwin, to arrange the music in order to accompany the silent movie adaptation of the *Rosenkavalier*. Later on, other popular arrangements were put in circulation, without Strauss' permission, so that he finally decided to make his own version in 1934. The last one (1945), the best known suite, is an anonymous arrangement approved by Strauss; it is a charming orchestral storytelling, not very far from film music. A world of dreams, a fairy-tale, and, at the same time, a huge commedia, with a touch of sadness about human vulnerability.

Is it necessary to recall the summary of the plot? The secret is in the music: the magnificent orchestra, virtuosity of the voices, the art of polyphony, the magic of the melodies. As an homage to the music of the past, it blends elements of Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Verdi with Viennese waltzes, everything, of course, filtered through Strauss's own style. Removed from the lighthearted libretto, this music is also a subtle meditation on the passing of time and the mystery of love. Each note is a pure joy.

Burleske (1885)

It is a joke: burla. The score demands a high level of virtuosity, although avoiding the classic conventions of the piano concerto. The young composer - he was then only 21- explores the paths of the “new music”, in a dialogue between piano and orchestra following free sonata form. The percussion plays an important role, in particular the timpani as soloists, in the interplay with the piano, filled with harmonic, orchestral and formal inventions. The sharp, satirical character of the work reminds us of the tone poem *Till Eulenspiegel*, and anticipates Strauss’ future works.

Sinfonia domestica (1902)

“Shouldn’t I compose a symphony about myself? Why not? I consider myself as interesting as Napoleon or Alexander!” Nothing less. Tongue in cheek, the statement gives the pitch.

Sinfonia domestica is a program symphony, a musical story-telling, whose subject is the composer’s « My own self ». After the heroic self-portrait of the tone poem *A Hero’s Life*, *Domestica* represents in a partly lyrical, partly humorous way, a day in the life of the musician’s bourgeois family.

“ ‘Home, Sweet Home’ as written by Richard Strauss”, according to the slightly mocking headline of a New York review, after the première in Carnegie Hall, March 1904. For the audience, curious about the domestic idyll, here is a short account of the program and the structure of the symphony. The score follows the organization of the classical symphony; however, the four movements play in a continuous succession, as in a tone poem. To the orchestra of Wagnerian dimensions Strauss added four saxophones, eight horns, a solo oboe d’amore, and finally, “just” four trumpets. The program is straightforward: the first movement (*Bewegt-Nimble*) - the portrayal of the family, and the profile of each of the characters: father, mother and child in the morning ambiance. The next one, *Scherzo (Munter - Wiegenlied - Lively- Cradle song)* is dedicated to the child, its games and the parents’ happiness, concluding with the tender cradle song. The third part, *Adagio (Langsam- Slow)*, is in a meditative mood, tender and sensual, depicting the intimacy, dreams and worries of the young couple, till awakened by the striking clock. The *Finale (Sehr lebhaft -Very animated)*, conceived as a double fugue, represents a lively row with a happy conclusion of the stormy family scene: all of them join “singing” a traditional popular song, while the colorful, sparkling, orchestration creates an exciting climax.

Putting aside the anecdotal aspect of the symphony, it would be interesting to mention Romain Rolland's advice, sent to the composer after its Parisian première (1905): "The Adagio is admirable; and especially the Finale...full of joy and grandeur, you rarely achieved that before." After such praise, he goes on, more reluctantly: "What good is this program which belittles the work, makes it appear puerile? ...There is nothing to see in the program but pretty mediocre events. ...What is interesting in the work is not the recounting of these events, but the powerful interior forces which stirred them up. The program can only mislead one's attention and falsify the character of the work." Strauss wisely admitted Rolland's comments: "A programme is the pretext for the musical expression and development of my emotions; it is not meant to be a simple musical picture of ordinary life. It would be antagonistic to the spirit of music." Was he sincere? The most interesting side of the work is its orchestration, the ingenious thematic material of classical limpidity, the sense of contrast and the amazing polyphonic skill, foreshadowing the composer's future dramatic productions.

Dujka Smoje
October 4th, 2008