

Strauss—DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

(Recorded January 23, 1960)

Wagner—SIEGFRIED IDYLL

(Recorded January 24, 1960)

Pierre Monteux conducting the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

During the spring of 1864 the secretary to King Ludwig II of Bavaria sought out Richard Wagner. Bankrupt and resigned to ruin, the composer suddenly found himself a royal favorite. By May he was housed in a handsome villa on Lake Starnberg and frequently visited the young monarch at the neighboring castle of Berg. But the glamor of this new situation quickly palled upon Wagner. He longed for female companionship. His choice was Cosima von Bülow, daughter of his friend Franz List and wife of his disciple Hans von Bülow. She had already indicated willingness to join her late to his.

At the end of June, Cosima, with her two children, journeyed to Lake Starnberg. A week later Bülow arrived to find his wife established as Wagner's mistress. The enraged husband had to accept an inferior position in a strange ménage à trois. In Cosima's honor Wagner started a string quartet, a form unusually intimate for him. This never-completed work was the germ from which the *Siegfried Idyll* grew.

By the end of 1865 public outrage over Wagner's scandalous behavior forced him to flee Bavaria. In mid-April of the following year he moved into a charming estate called Triebchen, situated near Lucerne. Cosima soon joined him.

While still Frau von Bülow, she bore Wagner three children. The youngest, a boy, was born at Triebchen in June 1869, when the composer was at work on the last act of *Siegfried*. He celebrated the arrival of his son—not surprisingly named Siegfried—by inserting two melodies from the unfinished Starnberg quartet into the final duet of the opera. The first melodies Brünhilde's lyrical "Ewig war ich"; she sings the second when describing the hero as the "Herr der Welt." Although these themes were constructed to dovetail contrapuntally in the quartet, Wagner did not combine them in the opera, where they are heard successively. But in the later *Siegfried Idyll* he was to unite them as originally intended.

Cosima's birthday fell on December 21. On Christmas day of 1870 she was awakened by the premiere performance of the *Siegfried Idyll*, played by a group of 15 musicians distributed along the stairway of the villa. Young Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the few friends to whom Wagner had confided his plan for this birthday-Christmas surprise first entitled *Triebchen Idyll* with Fidi (a diminutive of Siegfried) Bird-song and Orange Sunrise. When news of Fidi's birth had been

brought to Wagner, the rising sun was illuminating the orange wallpaper of his room with a fiery glow—a marvelous omen to the proud father.

"Yes, yes," Wagner remarked to Cosima, "we know the origin of it." The work is a taut tapestry woven of evocative themes recalling to the lovers the early days of their relationship at Starnberg, its culmination in Siegfried's birth at Triebchen and their general domestic bliss. The folklike theme heard throughout the piece was, in fact, first set down in Wagner's diary late in 1868. The composer mixes this tune, written for his baby daughter Eva to accompany a bit of doggerel, with the Starnberg quartet melodies and with other motifs from the as yet unfinished *Ring*: the song of the wood bird, rustlings of the *Waldweben*, the theme of magic slumber and snippets from the duet of Brünhilde and Siegfried on the mountain suggest a glorious future for Fidi.

The *Idyll* was first performed by a flute, an oboe, two clarinets, a bassoon, a trumpet (played by Hans Richter), two horns and a few strings. When the composer later conducted the work at Mannheim for the Wagner Society, he requested 27 strings, the winds remaining at their original number. He wanted the *Idyll* performed by about 35 musicians. At Triebchen both the size of the staircase and the expense had forced him to limit his orchestra to about half the desired size.

By refusing to publish the *Idyll*, Wagner hoped to control performances of what was for him a family piece. But, during Bayreuth days, he borrowed 10,000 florins from Schott against a hazy promise to deliver to this firm one day some purely orchestral works. These were never written, and Wagner found himself forced to surrender the *Idyll* in order to satisfy Schott's claim.

Bülow, Cosima and Alexander Ritter are the main links between Wagner and Richard Strauss. In 1885, Strauss, aged 21, became Bülow's assistant conductor at Meiningen. There the impressionable young man met Ritter, son of Julie Ritter (one of Wagner's earliest patrons), husband of Wagner's niece Franziska and a fanatic disciple of the Bayreuth master. Bülow and especially Ritter made Strauss a Wagnerite. Cosima's approval sealed his conversion. In 1891 she invited him to conduct *Tristan und Isolde* at Bayreuth.

The *Siegfried Idyll* descends from the symphonic poems of List, works that abstract the essence of a general poetic idea or mood. *Death and Transfiguration*, too, is indebted to List, but it is dependent upon a

definite, naturalistic "libretto," a pictorial development betraying Ritter's influence. A dying man sits faithfully, his irregularly throbbing heart being graphically depicted in the strings. For a while pictures from various stages of his life pass before his mind's eye in a kind of abbreviated *Heldenleben*. Then, convulsively, his body rears up to engage in its final struggle. Death claims him. The heart ceases to beat, and the liberated soul rises.

Ritter turned this macabre scene, conceived by the composer, into a dreadful poem printed in the score and frequently offered as a program note to explain a piece which, despite some youthful sentimentousness, has survived because of its qualities as absolute music. Its formal disposition is free, reflecting the List-Wagner device of thematic transformation. Only later would Strauss attempt to cast his literary music in classical molds, to fashion *Till Eulenspiegel* as a giant rondo, *Don Quixote* as a series of variations and to give *Ein Heldenleben* traits of the sonata.

Like *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration* is superior to many of Strauss' later orchestral works in the clarity of its rich orchestration. Its melodic material is long-breathed and bold and does not lapse into those fretful contrapuntal lines that, striving to compensate for a decline in inventive power, agitate the program symphonies. Strauss was in his mid-twenties when he began to plan this work, whose premiere took place at Eisenach in 1890. It soon became popular, and even so hostile a critic as Hanslick conceded the brilliance of its orchestral technique.

Death and Transfiguration remained dear to Strauss throughout his career. He alluded to it in *Ein Heldenleben*; and, most movingly, in the superb song *Im Abendrot*, completed in 1918, the old and weary master had recourse to the theme of transfiguration as he set the question of the poet Eichendorff: "Can this perhaps be death?"

—ROBERT W. GUTMAN

Author of "Richard Wagner: His Life, His Mind, and His Music"

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