

Richard Strauss & Vienna

It is natural we should equate Richard Strauss with Vienna. After all, he wrote the quintessential Viennese opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, a glittering yet poignant work shot through with waltzes that seems to define the soul of the 18th-century city. The fact that *Rosenkavalier* is so much more than a nostalgic Neverland of an opera is what keeps its characters and their situations so alive and makes it meaningful to listeners today. In fact, there's a Viennese saying, "All you need to know to get through life can be found in the libretto of *Der Rosenkavalier*."

However, *Rosenkavalier* did not have its premiere in Vienna but in Dresden. So did Strauss' "other" Viennese opera, *Arabella*. In fact, only two Strauss operas had their first performances in Vienna: the second version of *Ariadne auf Naxos* in 1916 and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* in 1919. By contrast, nine of Strauss' 15 operas premiered in Dresden. He did become co-director of the Vienna State Opera in 1919, but was, as he himself put it later, "dismissed" in 1924. Those five years are a much shorter time than the two decades he had spent with the Berlin Court Opera (1898–1918). During World War II, Vienna offered a refuge when Strauss had become persona non grata to the Nazis and his Jewish daughter-in-law and grandsons were in danger in Germany. But however much he enjoyed Vienna and treasured the opportunities to make music with its fabled orchestra and other top-rank musicians, he always remained a guest. He was, after all, a Ger-

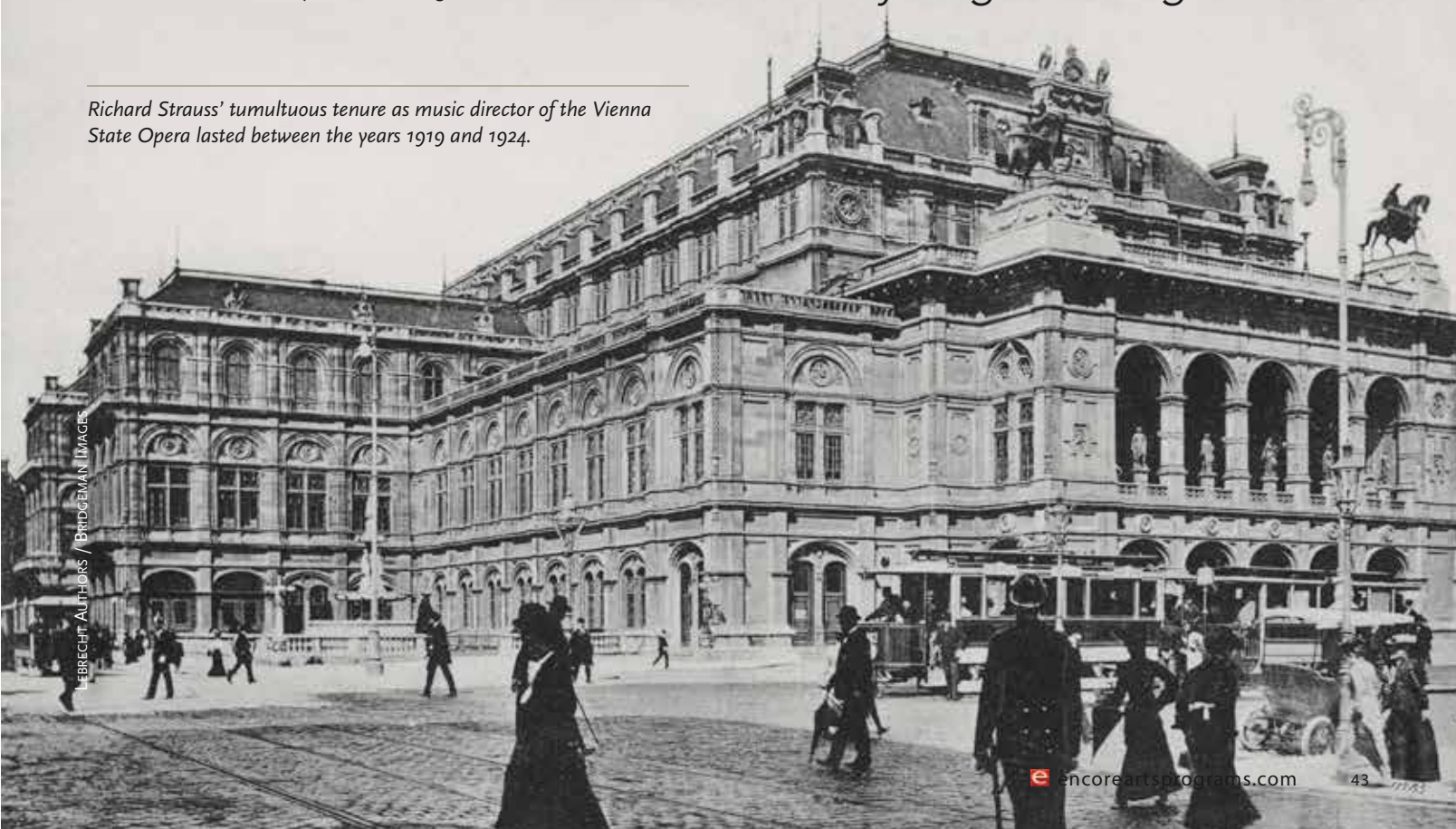
man, not an Austrian. For many Americans today that can seem like a distinction without much of a difference, but a century ago it was enough to make Strauss' tenure at the Vienna State Opera a nightmare, rather than the dream job he had hoped it would be.

Strauss stepped foot in Vienna for the first time in December 1882. He wrote back home to his parents in Munich with all the savoir faire of a typical 18-year-old boy that it was "... just an ordinary city like Munich, only the houses are bigger, more palaces than inhabitants. The girls aren't any prettier than they are in Munich." His weeklong stay was designed to introduce himself to prominent musicians and to make his music known. Toward that end he and his cousin, the violinist Benno Walter, gave a concert on the fifth of December in the old Bösendorfer concert rooms. On the program was the premiere of Strauss' Violin Concerto with the composer at the piano in place of an orchestra. "The concert went well," he reported home. "The hall was reasonably full thanks to the complimentary tickets, my violin concerto was very well received; applause after the first F major trill, applause after each movement, two bows at the end. I at least didn't make a mess of the accompaniment." In addition to meeting an impressive number of people in the music world, he managed to attend *Tannhäuser* and *Traviata* at the opera, take in a concert, and see Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Burgtheater.

He did not make it back to Vienna for 13 years and then it was to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic on tour. Six years after that, he was

The German composer's relationship to the Imperial City was anything but straightforward

Richard Strauss' tumultuous tenure as music director of the Vienna State Opera lasted between the years 1919 and 1924.



back in town to conduct the Kaim Orchestra in a concert of his own work in the Musikvereinsaal. It was the first all-Strauss concert in the city and the soloist was his wife, Pauline. Eduard Hanslick, the venerable Viennese critic, was not impressed with Strauss' music. After hearing *Till Eulenspiegel* in 1896, conducted by Hans Richter, Hanslick had written, "How many charming, witty ideas spring up in the work, but not a single one that does not instantly have its neck broken by the speed with which the next one lands on its head." But in 1901, Hanslick liked Pauline, praising her "excellently trained, rich, sweet soprano voice" and after some more compliments concluded, "we may surely call her his better and more beautiful half," words that later found their way into the libretto of Strauss' autobiographical opera *Intermezzo*.

By the time of that all-Strauss concert the composer was 36 years old and world-famous. All his major tone poems had been written except for *Sinfonia Domestica* and the *Alpine Symphony*, as well as most of his songs. He had held several posts in Germany, beginning in Meiningen and ending with the Berlin Court Opera, the most prestigious theater in Germany. Along the way he had conducted the 1893 world premiere of Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* in Weimar as well as appearing at Bayreuth (where Wagner's widow, Cosima, had tried unsuccessfully to interest him in one of her daughters). He kept up a formidable schedule of concerts throughout Europe, appearing everywhere, it seemed, except Vienna. But that would soon change.

While in Vienna for that first all-Strauss concert, he met with his friend Gustav Mahler who was determined to give *Feuersnot*, Strauss' second opera, at the Vienna Court Opera. Censorship problems delayed Mahler's plans and the opera was premiered in Dresden, but finally arrived in Vienna the next year. After that, Vienna saw more of Strauss. Almost every year he gave concerts, either as a conductor or as pianist in a *Liederabend* (baritone Franz Steiner was a favorite partner after Pauline retired from singing). Though Strauss' operas often continued to face censorship problems, the Vienna Court Opera began programming them. He began a long association with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1906 and in 1916 the revised *Ariadne auf Naxos* became the first of his operas to premiere in Vienna.

The end of the First World War brought sweeping changes throughout Europe. Strauss was at a crossroads. He was working on the music for *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (which would not premiere until 1919) and realized it would be his last big Romanic opera. But where to go artistically? He wanted to explore something lighter, something more in the vein of the Prologue to *Ariadne*, but how to go about that? The situation at the Berlin Opera was deteriorating and Strauss was ready to move on. Rumor had it that Hans Gregor, the director of the Vienna Court Opera, would be leaving. Strauss was fond of Vienna. ("People are deceitful everywhere," he once remarked, "but in Vienna they're so pleasant about it.") Pauline had



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A 1925 photograph of Strauss with his wife Pauline (1863–1950) who shared in the composer's ambivalence toward Vienna.

always loathed Berlin with its Prussian manners, and living in such a beautiful, aristocratic city as Vienna appealed to her.

Strauss' appointment to jointly run the Vienna State Opera with Franz Schalk began on December 1, 1919. He agreed to commit five months of each year to Vienna, from December 15 to May 15. Schalk was "Head of the Opera House," Strauss "Artistic Supervisor." There was much undefined between them and the whole thing would be a constant work in progress. Typically for Vienna, no sooner had the news been announced than the second-guessing and the intriguing began. Austria was in a deep economic crisis, yet, according to the opposition, here they were paying a foreigner a gargantuan salary for just a few months' work rather than giving the job to one of their own, someone who would know how things were supposed to go in Vienna. The most outlandish rumors

appeared: the Opera would only give Strauss operas, and Puccini (a huge favorite in Vienna) would be banished.

But Strauss had his partisans as well. When Leopold Reichwein, one of the leaders of the Strauss opposition, entered the pit to conduct *Parsifal*, all hell broke loose in the auditorium, with the standees (the voice of God in Vienna) demanding, "Strauss! We want Strauss!"

Things began promisingly. Strauss had ambitious plans, born of decades of experience in the theater. He wanted to expand the Opera by utilizing other stages in the city, present new productions of the standard repertoire after thoroughly restudying the works, and introduce new operas. Franz Schalk would make it all happen through his day-to-day dealing with everyone involved. Schalk was Viennese and had been a popular conductor at the opera since 1901. He had often conducted Strauss' works and would, in fact, give the world premiere of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. But before too long, it became obvious Strauss' wonderful plans would have to be cut back.

Strauss' frequent absences, though guaranteed by contract, became a problem, as did the personalities of the two co-directors. Strauss complained that he could deal with a problem in ten minutes, while Schalk took a day to talk about it. Schalk, for his part, resented the fact that Strauss gave major singers leaves of absence to go sing his own operas in other houses, leaving Schalk the responsibility of casting operas and trying to fill the theater without their biggest stars. Schalk balked at Strauss' desire to engage some German artists whom Schalk regarded as "unartistic boches." In the past, the Emperor had the final say on matters at his opera. Now there were all sorts of committees and bureaucrats to be consulted. For the first time ever, the management had to deal with unions—all of which fell to the overworked Schalk.

To try and raise money to keep the Vienna Opera going, Strauss, Schalk, and the Vienna Philharmonic toured South America between August and November 1920 and then again in the summer of 1923 with the Opera itself. Summer was when Strauss was supposed to be free to compose, but the fact he was voluntar-

ily giving up that time did not seem to matter to his detractors. He realized things were deteriorating.

In 1924, Strauss turned 60 years old and there were multiple grand celebrations throughout the music world, including in Vienna. He had built a house in Vienna that befitted his status. The site was on Jacquingasse in the former private garden of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand at the Belvedere, leased to Strauss by the government of Austria for 60 years, after which the house (which he would build and pay for himself) and the land would become the property of Austria. Strauss donated the autographed score of *Rosenkavalier* (valued at \$25,000) to the National Library and that of *Schlagobers* (a ballet he had written for Vienna, valued at \$10,000) to the City Library. He also agreed to conduct 100 performances over a period of five years for no fee. (Later, the score to *Die ägyptische Helene* was added to the deal.) “I paid handsomely for my building site,” Strauss said later. “Indeed, I probably paid too much.”

In April he negotiated a new contract with the Vienna State Opera that stipulated Schalk would be retired after the 1924–25 season. But Schalk, too, was negotiating a new contract and his stipulated that in Strauss’ absence he had sole responsibility for making all decisions

Both Strauss’ son and daughter-in-law had warned him his way of dealing with Schalk and the Opera could not last. In November, while he was in Dresden, preparing for the premiere of his newest opera, *Intermezzo*, Strauss had visitors from the Ministry of Cul-

ture—by conducting opera and concerts and in lending his name to Schirach’s efforts and making no public anti-Nazi remarks—Schirach would personally guarantee the safety of Strauss’ family. Another inducement to the move was that the Allies regularly were bombing Munich, very close to Strauss’ home in Garmisch. So far, Vienna was out of range of the bombers. Strauss agreed. Pauline promptly informed Schirach, “When the war has been lost, we’ll give you refuge in Garmisch, but as for the rest of the gang...”

It is thanks to this agreement that we have the major recordings of Strauss conducting many of his works with the Vienna Philharmonic, plus some excerpts of him conducting at the Opera (Mozart’s *Idomeneo* and Strauss’ *Salome*) as well as recordings of radio broadcasts (now available on CD) where he accompanies several famous singers in his lieder.

Vienna celebrated Strauss’ 80th birthday in 1944 in grand style, with performances of some of his operas (the *Ariadne* from June 11 with an especially splendid cast is available on CD). That morning there had been a concert with the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by both Karl Böhm and the composer. Strauss was presented with a baton of ebony and ivory set with diamonds. He conducted *Till Eulenspiegel* with it but during intermission said to Böhm, “It’s damn heavy. I shouldn’t like to conduct *Götterdämmerung* with it. Give me another for the *Domestica*.” A week later he left Vienna—for the last time.

He was looking forward to the premiere of his opera *Die Liebe*

*“People are deceitful everywhere,” Strauss once remarked,
“but in Vienna they’re so pleasant about it.”*

ture. They informed him of Schalk’s new contract and demanded he agree to the clause about sole responsibility being Schalk’s in Strauss’ absence. Strauss refused. The argument lasted several days until one of them said he was empowered to accept Strauss’ resignation if it was offered. Strauss realized he had been outmaneuvered and snapped, “Then you can have it at once!”

Pauline was delighted. “Now we can move into our beautiful new Vienna house and live in and with Vienna society,” she said. “What my husband needs for his living he can earn in four weeks and then he can compose in peace.”

Though Strauss was no longer a part of the Opera management, he still valued working with the Vienna Philharmonic and many of the singers, and by the 1926–27 season he was once again making music regularly in Vienna. This on-going relationship became extremely valuable during World War II. Strauss’ beloved daughter-in-law, Alice Grab, was Jewish which, under Nazi law, put both her and his two grandsons at risk. Several times he was warned by officials in Munich that orders to arrest her had been received and conveniently “mislaidd” for the moment, but it was an untenable situation.

Baldur von Schirach, former head of the Hitler Youth, had been named *Gauleiter* or regional Nazi party leader of Vienna. His father had been theater intendant in Leipzig and he had known the Strauss family since he was a child. Unlike most high-ranking Nazi officials, Schirach was a genuinely cultured man who dreamed of returning Vienna to its former cultural glory. If Strauss would help him in this

der Danae in Salzburg that summer. There were endless difficulties. Sets and costumes had been destroyed in air raids in Munich, telephone and telegraph communications were spotty, at best. But everyone involved was determined this last unperformed opera of Richard Strauss would get the premiere it deserved. Then Goebbels declared total war and closed all the theaters—which included the Salzburg Festival. The *Gauleiter* of Salzburg personally pleaded with Goebbels to make an exception and Goebbels relented very slightly, allowing a dress rehearsal of *Danae* on August 16 and a concert by the Vienna Philharmonic—Bruckner’s Eighth Symphony, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler.

The dress rehearsal, for a performance that would never take place, was almost unbearably emotional for everyone in the theater. The Vienna Philharmonic played the score “with an unsurpassably beautiful sound” recalled Rudolph Hartman, who produced the opera. “Strauss himself looked over the rail of the orchestra pit, raised his hands in a gesture of gratitude and spoke to the orchestra in a voice choked with tears: ‘Perhaps we shall meet again in a better world.’ He was unable to say any more.” Later, backstage, he studied the score and pointed heavenward saying: “When I make my way up there, I hope I’ll be forgiven if I bring this along, too.” It was his last contact with the Vienna Opera and the Vienna Philharmonic. 🌟

Writer, lecturer, and teacher Paul Thomason is currently writing a book on the music of Richard Strauss.