

Xian Conducts Prokofiev & Strauss

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Anton Webern: *Im Sommerwind*

If the names Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern make you shudder because you think you dislike their music, think again. Perhaps no 20th-century composer underwent greater stylistic evolution than Anton Webern, one of Schoenberg's star pupils and an eventual master of 12-tone technique at its most succinct. Webern started out emulating the extravagant post-romantic language of Wagner and Strauss.

His early tone poem, *Im Sommerwind (In the Summer Wind)* subtitled "Idyll for Large Orchestra," is a prime example: twelve minutes of lush romanticism celebrating the communion with nature that can occur on a perfect summer day. It was his first attempt at a large orchestral composition. His impetus was a poem by the German author Bruno Wille, describing a summer day in bucolic surroundings, with sunlit forest and meadows given added life by the breeze. Webern never heard this work performed, but he retained the manuscript. In his later years, would pull it out to prove to students that his roots lay in Viennese tradition. Hearing this lovely music sheds fresh light on the inherent lyricism and expressivity of his later works.

Sergei Prokofiev: Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 63

Classicism and modernity find a splendid balance in this concerto, which was Prokofiev's last commission from the West before returning permanently to the USSR. The commission materialized from a group of admirers of the French violinist Robert Soërens. Prokofiev's opening theme is unexpectedly warm and lyrical, setting the mood for the entire concerto. The first movement is uncharacteristically subdued, perhaps not so flashy as other violin concertos, but overflowing with haunting, memorable themes.

A gentle spirit pervades the marvelous slow movement, in which the violin sings its sweet song above a steady triplet accompaniment from winds and pizzicato strings. Listeners who know Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* will recognize his harmonic vocabulary.

Prokofiev's genius may be most evident, however, in the *tumultuoso* finale, where his addition of castanets, triangle, and snare drum add zest and humor. The music historian Michael Steinberg has suggested that the Spanish accents in the finale were Prokofiev's bow to the city where he knew the work would first be performed. It is easy to understand this concerto's popularity.

Richard Strauss: *Ein Heldenleben*, Op. 40

Ein Heldenleben is one of Strauss' most celebrated tone poems. The title means "A Hero's Life," and the hero, of course, is Strauss himself. (Modesty was not his strong suit.) In fact, the work is autobiographical. When Strauss composed it, he had not yet written any successful operas. Thus it is ironic that he chose to "sum up" his career in this work. He was only 34 and would survive two world wars in the new century.

The work's six sections are played without pause:

- I. The Hero (main theme, horn section)
- II. The Hero's Adversaries (transition)
- III. The Hero's Companion (second principal theme)
- IV. The Hero's Deeds of War (development section)
- V. The Hero's Works of Peace (recapitulation)
- VI. The Hero's Retreat from the World and Fulfillment (coda)

The "Adversaries" section is a clear swipe at music critics. Strauss' "Companion" section is a portrait of his wife, née Pauline de Ahna, who was a soprano with a quick temper. The concertmaster solo that delivers her personality is sometimes petulant and capricious, elsewhere seductive. The "Works of Peace" segment includes quotations from earlier Strauss compositions. In the coda, Strauss retreats to the privacy and presumed happiness of his personal life. *Ein Heldenleben* showcases our excellent horn section, with ample opportunity to display the virtuosity of the entire orchestra.

Anton Webern: *Im Sommerwind*

Anton Webern

Born: December 3, 1883 in Vienna, Austria

Died: September 15, 1945 in Mittersill, near Salzburg, Austria

Composed: 1904

World Premiere: May 26, 1962 in Seattle, Washington; Eugene Ormandy led the Philadelphia Orchestra

Duration: 12 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes, two oboes, English horn, four clarinets (two in B-flat, two in A), bass clarinet, two bassoons, six horns, two trumpets, timpani, triangle, cymbals, two harps, and strings

Austria's Anton Webern had an extraordinary impact on the music of the 20th century. His output was modest and his works tended to be very short; however, he compressed both content and emotion into brief spans with admirable economy. He and his friend and colleague Alban Berg (1885–1935) were the most important students and protégés of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). Both men followed Schoenberg's lead in abandoning tonality and eventually adopted serialism as well. Webern's career was tragically ended by a bullet from an American soldier's gun, shot by mistake at the very end of the Second World War.

Webern commenced his musical career as a musicologist, earning a Ph.D. in Renaissance music in 1906. He was an intellectual, and his music is that of an abstract thinker. That stated, he was educated in the heady atmosphere of late 19th-century romanticism. The music he composed prior to his study with Schoenberg will astound listeners who only know his ascetic later works. Early Webern relies on the post-Wagnerian harmonic

vocabulary of late Brahms, mature Reger, and especially Richard Strauss. *Im Sommerwind* is a prime example.

This 12-minute tone poem was Webern's first attempt at a large orchestral composition. Its impetus was "Im Sommerwind," a poem by the North German author Bruno Wille (1860–1929), whose autobiographical novel *Offenbarungen des Wacholderbaums (Revelations of a Juniper Tree, 1901)* was a personal favorite of Webern. The poem is a description of a summer day in bucolic surroundings, with sunlit forest and meadows given added life by the breeze. Wille's free verse resonated with Webern, who loved being outdoors. He worked on the score during the summer months of 1904, completing *Im Sommerwind* on September 16 at Preglhof, a family estate where he customarily spent his holiday. He would meet Schoenberg just weeks later.

Late romanticism is evident in *Im Sommerwind*, with echoes of Wagner, Liszt, and Strauss. The music is forgivably derivative yet still shows clear signs of the composer who would emerge. One Webernian characteristic is the minimalist approach to the expanded ensemble (e.g., five clarinets, six horns, two harps). He carries Mahler's orchestral chamber music sonorities to an extreme. In some passages, so few instruments are playing that we wonder, where is this large orchestra?

Other Webernian traits are the close control of motivic development, command of counterpoint, and sense of formal balance. Yet what one hears is music of ravishing beauty, broad paragraphs of post-romantic, Straussian sound, with a keen ear for orchestral nuance. For example, he eschews low brass (perhaps the darker sounds of trombones and tuba were inconsistent with the pastoral subject matter) and the strings divide to as many as sixteen parts.

Webern never heard *Im Sommerwind* performed; in fact, the premiere did not take place until May 1962, when Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra performed it in Seattle. Webern often showed the manuscript to his own students, however, to prove that his roots were grounded in Viennese tradition.

Webern's Death: An American Tragedy

Music history is filled with bizarre stories of how composers expired. They range from unsolved murder (Alessandro Stradella, d. 1682 and Jean-Marie LeClair, d. 1764) to bicycle accident (Ernest Chausson, d. 1899); from poisoning from having ingested inedible mushrooms (Johann Schobert, d. 1760) to drowning as the result of a submarine torpedo (Enrique Granados, d. 1916). None is more ironic, however, than Anton Webern's death in 1945.

Late in April 1944, Webern was drafted into the Nazi air raid protection police. He was 60. The tide of the war had shifted. Within months, the Allies landed in France and the Russian army was advancing from the east. By early 1945, fuel and water throughout Germany and Austria were in short supply. Webern was desperate to remove his family from the near-daily bombings of Vienna and its immediate environs. At the end of March, he and his wife left their home in Mödling, south of Vienna. They traveled on foot with their daughter and two grandchildren to Mittersill, about midway between Innsbruck and Salzburg, to join their other daughters. Hitler committed suicide on April 30. One week later, Germany surrendered and the war in Europe was over. Allied forces would remain in Germany and Austria long afterward. The American army occupied Mittersill.

On September 15, 1945, Webern apparently violated a curfew by stepping out on the porch of his daughter's

home after dinner to smoke. He was shot three times in the abdomen and chest by an American soldier. The wounds were fatal.

The circumstances of the shooting remain confused. Some of the post-incident reports were contradictory. It now appears that Webern's son-in-law, Benno Mattel, was under investigation and surveillance by American military authorities for black market smuggling. The soldier who fired the shots at Webern may have thought he was aiming at Mattel.

Regardless, the events of that mid-September night snuffed out one of the century's most creative and lyrical voices.

Sergei Prokofiev: Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 63

Sergei Prokofiev

Born: April 23, 1891 in Sontzovka, Ukraine, Russia

Died: March 5, 1953 in Moscow, Russia

Composed: 1935

World Premiere: December 1, 1935 in Madrid, Spain; Robert Soërens was the soloist while Enrique Fernández Arbós conducted

Duration: 26 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, bass drum, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, castanets, violin solo and strings

A Young Lion Rattles Cages

With Prokofiev, the man is never far from the music. In his early works, the exuberance and rebellion of youth express themselves in iconoclastic, daring pieces that scandalized the pre-revolutionary Russian musical establishment (including the conservative Glazunov). Prokofiev exploited an adventurous vocabulary with glib abandon, pushing the boundaries of tonality with rhythmic drive to match his aggressive dissonance.

Prokofiev lived abroad from 1918 to 1934, first in the US and then in Paris. But his was a profoundly Russian spirit. Despite misgivings about the political climate in his homeland, he returned to the Soviet Union permanently in spring 1935. In his later years, his abrasive style ceded to a simpler, more accessible musical language that is most easily explained as neoclassicism but may actually have been prompted by political guidelines for composers dictated by the Stalinist regime.

From Sonata to Concerto: A Concept Evolves

Prokofiev started work on the Second Violin Concerto in 1935 in Paris; he completed the piece in the USSR at Voronezh and Baku. The commission materialized from a group of admirers of the French violinist Robert Soërens. Prokofiev had met him in 1932 in conjunction with the premiere of his Sonata for Two Violins. Soërens had performed the sonata with Samuel Dushkin, who was touring with Stravinsky at the time. Soërens was the soloist at the premiere of Prokofiev's concerto in Madrid in December 1935.

Prokofiev's initial concept had been a grand concert sonata for violin and orchestra, but as it progressed, the piece

grew beyond the confines of any sonata. True, no strong assertive profile is hinted at in the warm, opening solo measure of the first movement; this theme hardly bespeaks a hard-driving, aggressive movement. Yet Prokofiev's sense of balance is impeccable, and soon a more characteristically rhythmic pulse counters the lyricism that introduces the concerto.

The first movement is uncharacteristically subdued, perhaps not so flashy as other violin concertos, but it overflows with haunting, memorable themes. As biographer Harlow Robinson has observed:

What is most different about the Second Concerto is its predominantly *cantilena* character: its melodies are some of the most beautiful, flowing and lyrical that Prokofiev ever wrote. Nor does he cut them short, impatient with emotional display, as he did in many of his earlier compositions.

In short, the music has room to breathe, and we all breathe more effortlessly with it.

Prokofiev's genius may be most evident, however, in the *tumultuoso* finale, where his addition of castanets, triangle, and snare drum add zest and humor. The music historian Michael Steinberg has suggested that the Spanish accents in the finale were Prokofiev's bow to the city where he knew the work would first be performed. It is easy to understand this concerto's popularity.

Richard Strauss: *Ein Heldenleben*, Op. 40

Richard Strauss

Born: June 11, 1864 in Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949 in Garmisch, Germany

Composed: 1898

World Premiere: March 3, 1899 in Frankfurt, Germany; the composer conducted

Duration: 40 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes plus piccolo, four oboes (4th doubling English horn); three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, small snare drum, tenor drum, two harps, and strings; the score specifies 16 first violins, 16 seconds, 12 violas, 12 celli, and eight double basses

In a *New York Times* review of a performance of *Ein Heldenleben*, Bernard Holland once wrote, "There is a kind of exalted vulgarity in Strauss's tone poems; they are a guilty enjoyment."

Guilty as charged. We all love this deliciously decadent music, which persuades through the power of excess. *Ein Heldenleben* has been praised as the proudest of Strauss' compositions for orchestra and castigated as shameless self-aggrandizement. How strange to think of a young man of 34 reflecting back on a lifetime of accomplishment already so rich, as if his career were drawing to a close. In fact, all Strauss' great operas—including the masterpieces *Salome* (1905), *Elektra* (1909), and *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911)—lay in the future. He would live another half-century after composing *Ein Heldenleben*.

The piece is one enormous movement that subdivides into six major sections:

I. The Hero

- II. The Hero's Adversaries
- III. The Hero's Companion
- IV. The Hero's Deeds of War
- V. The Hero's Works of Peace
- VI. The Hero's Retreat from the World and Fulfillment

Strauss' printed score reflects none of these titles. All the programmatic information associated with these sections is gleaned from the composer's letters and remarks to friends.

Celebrating Oneself, Throwing Darts at the Critics

How does one bring coherence to a single forty-minute movement? Certain aspects of *Ein Heldenleben* are related to sonata form, for example the two principal contrasting themes. The strong, masculine horn theme represents the hero. That music contrasts with the feminine "companion" theme, stated by solo violin, which reflects every facet of his wife's personality. (The violin solo, incidentally, is exceedingly taxing for the concertmaster, amounting to several solo cadenzas.) Separating these two musical ideas is a transitional passage associated with the hero's adversaries, which in Strauss' case means the critics. Both Austrian and German music critics were, by and large, very favorable to Strauss. It remains something of a mystery why he portrayed them as so mean-spirited and despicable.

Controversial Battle Scene

Romain Rolland, the eminent French critic and one of Strauss' close friends, called *Heldenleben's* "Deeds of War" section "the most admirable battle ever portrayed in music." The segment has, however, generated controversy because of its incessant percussion. Its position within the whole functions as a dramatic and musical development. Similarly, the ensuing "Works of Peace" section is a sort of recapitulation-cum-episode, returning to former themes while introducing a transition. Finally, this monumental work closes with the hero's release from the world, in a grand, cathartic coda.

Master of Orchestration

Whether we hear this work as bombast, self-promotion, or autobiography, we must admire Strauss' superb command of the orchestra. Whatever mood he endeavors to express, he finds the ideal timbres and colors to deliver it. As George Marek has noted:

His zest for life, his virile vitality, his being unafraid to sing a song of long breath, his erotic force, which is never turned aside by embarrassment, and finally, the ability to handle the huge orchestra, squeezing from it all the richness of its tonal resources, an ability so sure that he seems like a modern-day Cagliostro—all these are found in this, the last of the great tone poems.

In the Composer's Words

Richard Strauss was not only a prolific composer and conductor, but also an active essayist and correspondent. Beginning in the 1880s and continuing until the year of his death, he wrote hundreds of articles, including analyses of his own and others' compositions, thoughts on the philosophy of music, the mechanics and art of conducting, and the creative process. The following are excerpts from one of his essays on the subject of inspiration. It was published in a collection called *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*

(*Reflections and Reminiscences*), issued in 1949. His observations reveal a knowledge of literature and philosophy as well as others' music—and an unexpected strain of humility.

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What is an inspiration? In general, a musical inspiration is known as a motive, a melody with which I am suddenly "inspired," unbidden by the intelligence, particularly in the morning immediately awakening, or in a dream [like Hans] Sachs in *Die Meistersinger* ... Did my imagination work independently at night, without my consciousness, without being bound to "recollection" [Plato]?

My own experience: When at night I am stuck at a certain point in my composition, and in spite of all my digging no further profitable work seems possible, I shut the piano or my sketchbook, go to bed, and when I wake up in the morning, the continuation is there. By means of which mental or physical process?

Or shall we term inspiration that which is so new, so thrilling, so compelling and which penetrates "into the very depths of the heart" [*Leonore*], that it cannot be compared with anything that preceded it?... What then is direct inspiration, primary invention, and what is the work of the intelligence in these divine forms? Where is the boundary between intellectual activity and imagination?

The question is especially difficult to decide among our classicists; the wealth of their melodies is so enormous, the melody itself so new, so original, and at the same time so individually varied, that it is difficult to determine the line between the first immediate inspiration and its continuation, its extension to the finished, expanded singing phrase. Particularly in Mozart and Schubert who died so young, and at the same time created a lifework of such colossal scope! (My father always said: "What Mozart did, that is, composed up to his thirty-sixth year, the best copyist of today could not write down in the same amount of time.") It must have been prompted by the flying pen of angels ...

"Genius is industry," Goethe is supposed to have said. But industry and the desire to work are inborn, not merely acquired. —Richard Strauss

Strauss' *Eroica*? Or His Autobiography?

E-flat major is the heroic key in music. As such, its roots are usually traced to Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, but in fact they stretch back even further than Beethoven, at least to Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and his Symphony No. 39. Richard Strauss chose deliberately when he set *Ein Heldenleben*, the last of his great tone poems, in E-flat. He wanted the associations with nobility of spirit and action. If there were any doubt about his intentions in this enormous work, whose title means "A Hero's Life" in German, Strauss dispelled it with his aggressive, assertive, and huge brass section. He wrote to a friend that he was scoring *Ein Heldenleben* for so many horns because they were a "yardstick of heroism."

Strauss intended *Ein Heldenleben* to be an illustration of his obstacles removed, of his achievements and triumphs. He demurred at acknowledging *Heldenleben* as an autobiographical work when he wrote it, insisting that the tone poem illustrated "not a single poetical or historical figure, but rather a more general and free ideal of great and manly heroism."

Liberal quotations from his own compositions, however, belie that declaration. The tone poem has been denounced as an unforgivable display of pompous egotism, an accusation that relates it to Wagner. Strauss' obsession with the noble hero is also a direct outgrowth of Wagnerian philosophy.

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