

Strauss vs. Strauss

Lexer Grande - "Theo"

Johann Strauss II and Richard Strauss were two composers in the German world during a musical period known as the Romantic era. While both artists produced great works during the same time period, there are many differences between them. This study will endeavor to compare and contrast both composers - not only as artists, but also as people. First, let's set the stage a bit, shall we?

What is the Romantic Era?

When most people listen to music performed by an orchestra, they consider it "classical" music. This however, is inaccurate. A better term for such a thing would be "orchestral" music, as the word "classical" only refers to an approximately 100-year span of musical compositions. Most orchestral music is organized into six time periods, which are indicative of the overall style of music produced. The "Middle Ages" spans from roughly 500 C.E. to 1400 C.E., the "Renaissance Era" from 1400 C.E. to 1600 C.E., the "Baroque Period" from roughly 1600 C.E. to mid-1700s C.E., the "Classical Period" from the mid-1700s C.E. to early-1800s C.E., the "Romantic Era" from the early 1800s C.E. to 1900 C.E., and simply "Twentieth Century" from 1900 C.E. onward. It should be noted, however, that there is not a hard break between one period and the next. The Romantic Era did not come to a dead stop on December 31, 1899, while the Twentieth Century era began on January 1, 1900. These are approximations, and there was a lot of overlap between two styles. Also, there were a few minor offshoots within these periods. Most notably, the "Impressionist Composers" produced works during the end of the Romantic Era and the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

The term “The Romantic Era” comes from the style of literature produced during this time period. In fact, many other forms of artwork influenced compositions during this time. These influences saw the emergence of new genres of orchestral works. The concert overture, while technically pioneered during the late-Classical Period, gained popularity during the Romantic Era and quickly became a staple of the most prominent composers. Program symphonies and symphonic poems also emerged as popular forms of composition. Compositions, generally speaking, were also written on a much grander scale than ever before. A greater number of instrumentation was used, and lengthier pieces were written. Wagner’s “Der Ring des Nibelungen”, for example, is an opera which takes four days to watch.

While the Classical Period saw a methodical, calculated, and mathematical approach to music, the Romantic Era departed from this with composers allowing themselves more freedom in their work. These works were infused with passion and emotion, just as other forms of art were during this time. Art during this time also saw a dramatic shift towards an emphasis on nature - a shift which greatly distinguished this period from the Classical era.

What was going on in Austria?

Austria saw a great deal of civil unrest during the Romantic period. Inspired by the French Revolution, the lower-class Austrians pushed for a constitution, voting rights, civil liberties, and equal representation in government. Initial efforts were ignored, and reasonably peaceful discussions quickly gave way to violent revolts. While the revolutionaries were determined in their efforts, they were incredibly disorganized. This disorganization was further fueled by the monarchy and the military, by pitting social and ethnic groups against one another. The revolutionaries made progress, however every time they did so they were ultimately pushed back by the military. This political “tug of war” continued throughout the revolution. During this time, Hungary also made

efforts toward autonomy from the Austrian empire. When Emperor Franz Joseph I took the throne, his efforts quickly defeated the revolutionists. Soon after, he was also able to regain control of Hungary, with assistance from Russia.

Germany in the late Romantic era

Germany (or Prussia, depending on the time period) saw itself involved in many wars throughout the Romantic era. Most notably, these include the Schleswig wars, the Austro-Prussian war, and the Franco-Prussian war. Wagner and Brahms, two of the greatest composers during the lives of the Strausses, died near the end of the 19th century. The end of the Romantic era saw a rise in anti-semitism in Germany, along with Adolf Hitler's rise to power. This led to the First World War in 1914. Needless to say, this was a particularly stressful time for anyone living in Germany.

Johann Strauss II

Johann Strauss II was born in 1825. His father, Johann Strauss I was already a prominent composer known throughout Europe, though he never gained the degree of fame that his son would eventually rise to.

Johann Strauss I wanted to be a musician at a young age, but his parents would not allow it. It was not until he attempted to run away from home that he was finally permitted to study. He began as a violinist, but later switched to the viola when a job opportunity presented itself. As an adult he directed his own orchestra, which achieved a great deal of popularity in Vienna. This orchestra's fame increased beyond Vienna, and even beyond Austria. They soon toured throughout Europe - in Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and even London. Strauss I was especially well-known for his waltzes, which may have influenced his son's work.

Strauss II also faced some problems when he decided to study music. His father had hoped that Strauss II would have a career in business, or as a banker. However,

the younger Strauss, like his father, took to music at a very early age. Fortunately for him, his mother recognized this and found him a teacher. Throughout Strauss II's childhood he was trained secretly, thanks to his mother's efforts. This all changed, however, when Strauss I left the family when Strauss II was 17. Now, he was able to enjoy his talents and his training openly. One may speculate that he would also be able to progress more quickly, without the constant fear of discovery. This makes Strauss II's accomplishments all the more impressive, as he did not "ride daddy's coattails" to fame and success, as many celebrities do today.

As for his status as a celebrity, Strauss never saw himself as one, and remained humble throughout his life. He never took his popularity too seriously, and was constantly plagued by his own insecurities. He was known for being especially sensitive and would go out of his way to avoid hurting other people's feelings. Ultimately he sought to please everyone around him, whether he knew them or not.

Strauss II was the classic, stereotypical eccentric tortured artist - a growing trend amongst Romantic period artists of all media. He was regularly at the mercy of his many phobias which included a fear of heights, a fear of tunnels, and a fear of hospitals, among others. In fact, when his first wife passed away he was not able to attend her funeral, due to his fear of cemeteries.

His love life was a bit of a roller coaster. His first wife, Henrietta, was a singer. Very likely, as a musician herself, she was supportive of Strauss's music and career. Sadly, she passed away after sixteen years of marriage. Strangely, Strauss married his second wife only six weeks later. His second wife, Angelika, was an actress. Sadly, she was the stereotypical upper-class, snooty celebrity. She also did not support his music. The combination of these two aspects led to their eventual divorce. Fortunately his third wife, Adele, was completely the opposite. She not only encouraged his talents, but also is the reason that so much of his music survives to this day. It was during Strauss's marriage to Adele that most of his greatest works were composed. Adele is also the primary reason for Johann Strauss's works having survived. As stated, Strauss did not take his popularity very seriously. As a result, he gave little thought to his

legacy. While many of his early works have been lost over time, it was Adele who took the initiative to preserve his compositions written during their marriage.

Johann Strauss II's popularity ensured that he would be consistently employed throughout his life. He was admired by other composers of the time period, such as Brahms, Wagner, and Verdi. He was a true musical genius and rarely, if ever, struggled to create beautiful compositions. His consistent employment had its downside, however. Johann Strauss was regularly called upon to meet unreasonable deadlines. Imagine hearing "I need a new waltz for my party this evening" and being expected to deliver. While composing came relatively easy to him, the overall physical and emotional strain eventually took its toll with a nervous breakdown in 1853. He took some time off, and his brother Josef left a successful career to direct the orchestra during Johann's recovery.

While his employers were usually Austrian nobility, Johann Strauss never forgot where he came from. During the Austrian revolution attempt, he was among the revolutionaries. This influenced his work, as he was known for "writing for the gallery," meaning that even the cheap seats would leave his concert happy. He may have worked *for* the rich, but he wrote *to* the poor. He was not foolish, however, as he knew that he still needed to appeal to Emperor Franz Joseph, who regularly attended his concerts. Thus, he often composed tributes to him, such as the "Kaizer Walzer".

During his career, Johann Strauss was best known for his waltzes, leading him to be known as "The Waltz King" which he is still regarded as today. While waltzes accounted for his most popular works, he certainly branched out beyond that. He wrote several operettas, most notably "Die Fledermaus", a musical comedy. He even wrote one full-length opera, "Ritter Pazman", which failed horribly during its first run.

Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss was born in 1864. His father, Franz Strauss was an accomplished horn player in Wagner's orchestra, however the two men hated each

other. Franz Strauss not only hated Wagner's music, but also loathed Wagner on a personal level. Still, Franz continued to perform for Wagner. Richard Strauss's musical gifts were discovered at a very young age. He began piano lessons at age four and composed his first piece, a short Christmas song, at the age of six. Unlike Johann Strauss, Richard Strauss's family encouraged his musical talents. His father found him a music teacher very early, however it was never intended that Richard would be some sort of musical prodigy. Franz ultimately wanted his son to have a full, well-rounded education regardless of its primary focus in music.

Richard Strauss's upbringing, while not incredibly wealthy, was definitely a privileged one. He never experienced poverty and was even able to enjoy luxuries that the lower class would never have been able to afford. While he had an enjoyable lifestyle, he was raised in a very strict household. His father adhered to strict gender roles, typical of the time. The man was the head of the household - a Kaiser in his own home. Despite this strict upbringing, Richard Strauss's childhood was an enjoyable one. It was the level of privilege that he enjoyed which allowed him to grow as a musician through his education. Richard showed a love for learning, and often took to learning new things very quickly. With his father often surrounded by great musicians, Richard had the best of teachers available to him. His piano lessons continued, and along the way he also studied the violin. Though he never mastered either instrument, he became a competent pianist as he got older. His musical accomplishments were not only encouraged by his immediate family, but also by his extended family as well. Richard's aunt, Johanna, was a talented singer, and he often wrote songs for her to sing. This helped to expand his library of early works - which is incredibly vast.

Richard's earliest musical influence was Mozart. His father practically worshipped the great composer, and Mozart's music dominated his earliest exposure to the art. His father was especially drawn to music of the Classical Period. Richard's upbringing also included the influence of Haydn and Beethoven. As a teenager, he

would often cross paths with Brahms. In fact, it was through this connection to Brahms that Richard Strauss's first symphony was performed by a professional orchestra when Richard was only seventeen years old.

His friendship with Brahms continued, and often Richard would frequently be the first to hear many of Brahms's works before they were even published. He would also regularly perform with Brahms's orchestra. At this point, Richard had become a competent pianist, but would also perform in the percussion section from time to time. His conducting debut would eventually be a performance of Brahms's Violin Concerto. His love of performing would never leave him, however. Even after Richard established himself as a conductor and a composer, he would still continue to perform as an active musician. This was an unusual thing for composers to do.

As the Romantic period continued at the beginning of the twentieth century, Richard Strauss's popularity continued to grow. Adolf Hitler was a fan of his work and when he rose to power, Richard Strauss found himself appointed to the State Music Bureau. Although Franz Strauss had been a staunch anti-semitic, Richard no longer shared these views. He had felt hostile towards the Jewish community earlier in his life, due to his father's influence, but these beliefs were far behind him. A major factor in this was the fact that he now had a Jewish daughter-in-law and grandson. He never joined the Nazi party, but took the position with the State Music Bureau and cooperated with the Nazis as a means of protecting his own family. He remained politically neutral but on a personal level, he strongly opposed the ban on the performance of music by Jewish composers. All of this had led many people to believe that Richard Strauss was an anti-semitic, but one needs to dig a little deeper to fully understand his motives.

Richard Strauss has a rather extensive library of compositions, but a few stand out above the rest. His "Burleske" is a particularly interesting work. This piano concerto was meant to be a joke - a spoof on the traditional concerto. Strauss himself originally hated the piece, as it was outrageously complex and early rehearsals of it were a complete mess. He later grew to love it, but it was still criticized for being too long. His opera "Der Rosenkavalier" is another standout. This comedic opera in three acts

featured a beautiful trio of female voices as its protagonists. Another popular piece was “Also Sprach Zarathustra”, a tone poem which saw an increase in popularity in the late twentieth century.

Strauss vs. Strauss

Here it is, folks. The moment you have all been waiting for. This project has literally been years in the making. When I was a senior in high school, I was the principal cellist of my high school orchestra. About halfway through the school year, I was invited to play with the Rhode Island college symphony. I am still not entirely sure how I caught their attention. My first concert with them was titled “Strauss vs. Strauss” and featured two compositions each from Johann and Richard Strauss.

The first thing I noticed was the vast difference in their styles. “The Waltz King” Johann Strauss did not appeal to me at all. As a cellist, I often found the music to be a bit of a snore. This is due to the overall construction of the average waltz. It is important to note that had I played the viola, I would have likely felt the same way. In a standard waltz, the cello/bass part features mostly what is called “down beats”. Count aloud to yourself, “one two three, one two three, one two three...” and put a little extra “oomph” on the “one”. This is your basic waltz beat. For a cellist, this is also the basic reason why cellists hate playing waltzes. The standard cello/bass part plays, “one, one, one, one “. At times, I genuinely found myself dozing off in my chair. While this is going on in the cello/bass section, the violas (and most often, the second violin section) are not having such a great time either. Using the same description as the cello/bass parts, the viola part would read “... two three, ... two three, ... two three, ... two three” with “two” and “three” often being the same note. The first violin section gets to enjoy the luxury of playing the beautiful melodies, backed by these other less-interesting parts. This is not unique to the strings section, however. The bassoon, for example would play a rhythm similar to the cello. It would be unfair of me to give the impression that this is always the case, however, as the cello parts, etc.

usually have their “stand out” moments with considerably more technical variety. This is simply the overall, generalized format which one can expect as a cellist when faced with a waltz on their music stand. Fortunately, the Johann Strauss portion of this concert did not solely consist of waltzes (I cannot remember which waltz we played. I even reached out to other musicians who played this concert with me, and they could not remember either. It was, after all, over a decade ago). We also enjoyed the opportunity to play the overture to “Die Fledermaus” which was one of the most fun pieces I have ever played. This was the reason I did not completely write Johann Strauss off as a composer whom I did not enjoy. While “Die Fledermaus” does include some waltz-ey sections, playing it is an overall enjoyable experience.

There is one more aspect of the standard waltz which should be pointed out. While I do not enjoy playing waltzes, I have never found and enjoyment in listening to them either. This is very likely due to the fact that the waltz, by its very nature, is not meant to be listened to. The waltz is first and foremost a dance. While I have had very little experience dancing a waltz, I have had some. These moments have always been exciting experiences for me, and I would jump at the opportunity to have more experiences like these. There is a vast difference between sitting in the audience, listening to an orchestra play a waltz, than getting up and dancing along with the music. In the past, I have often compared this to a Shakespearean play. Many people do not like reading Shakespeare, and I have never understood the fact that such an experience is thrust on the average high school student. This is because Shakespeare’s plays were not meant to be read, they were meant to be seen. Similarly, waltzes were not written to be heard, they were meant to be danced.

Still, Richard Strauss has always been my personal favourite of the two. This is partly because of the feeling I got at the beginning of my first rehearsal for this concert. Picture yourself as a high school student at your very first rehearsal in a college symphony. You are sitting in the last row of the cello section, immediately in front of the French horns. You have not had the chance to look at the music prior to today, as it had just been given to you when you walked in. You have no idea what to expect. This was

how my first rehearsal began. The first piece that we were working on was Richard Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier" and I had only minutes to skim through what I was about the play. The conductor began the piece, and I prepared to wait for my cue to come in, as the cello section does not play the first measure or two. I had no idea who played those first two measures, but I found out very quickly as the blaring fanfare of the brass instruments behind me nearly knocked me out of my chair. There was an excitement in those first few notes which instantly made me a Richard Strauss fan. This excitement only grew when we began to play his "Burleske" next. It was several weeks before I would hear the entire piece, as most of our rehearsal excluded the solo pianist. This is common among orchestras - get the rest of the orchestra going, then bring in the soloist and fit everything together. What endeared me to the "Burleske" from the very beginning was the timpani. I have always loved the timpani, and the "Burleske" features the timpani in a very big way. The first thing one hears when listening to the piece is a motif established by the timpani, which pops up throughout the piece. There is even a place in the composition where the pianist and timpani have a bit of a back-and-forth exchange between the two of them which is both complex and thrilling.

It is easy to understand why Richard Strauss's compositions evoke such emotional responses as opposed to Johann Strauss's pieces, when one looks at the circumstances surrounding their initial composition. Johann was under constant pressure. Remember, he frequently worked within unreasonable deadlines in order to meet the demands of his employers. This would not leave anyone much time to create, nor would it allow for the growth of one's art. Richard Strauss's career seems to have allowed him more freedom. He was able to try new things. He was able to take risks. He was able to enjoy his art. Facing the constant "I need a waltz for my party tonight" would not allow Johann Strauss to experience the same growth. Also, the difference in time periods heavily influenced their respective styles. Johann Strauss composed during the mid-1800s and his work, despite being completed during the Romantic era, still retains some evidence of Classical influences. Richard Strauss's later compositions appear to incorporate a more "twentieth century" style to them, something which would not be

present in Johann's work. As previously stated, there was no hard break from one musical era to another, and both Strausses demonstrate this gradual transition in their work.

Despite their stylistic differences, the works of both composers remain popular today. Richard's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" has been used throughout modern popular culture. Johann's waltzes are frequently used in television and film (mostly "The Blue Danube" and "Tales from the Vienna Woods"), including several episodes of the Simpsons. Coincidentally, both composers were featured in the film "2001: A Space Odyssey" which features Richard's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" and Johann's "The Blue Danube". This trend continues, with "Also Sprach Zarathustra" having been used in an episode of "Legends of Tomorrow" earlier this year. It would appear that the music of the Strausses will continue to be enjoyed by audiences for years to come.