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SPRACH ZARATHUSTRA

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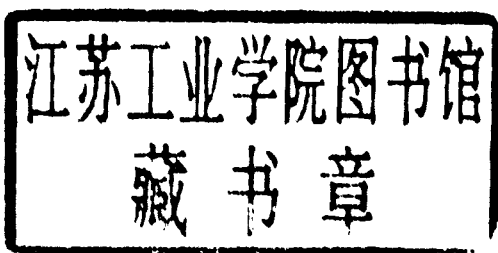
John

Strauss: *Also sprach Zarathustra*



John Williamson

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Strauss: *Also sprach Zarathustra*

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Acknowledgements

At least one reviewer of earlier titles in this series has claimed that it is specifically devoted to 'musical masterpieces'. *Also sprach Zarathustra* may sit a little awkwardly in such company, since its mastery is hardly uncontested; nor is it necessarily the most popular of Strauss's tone poems. A handbook about it runs the risk of being at least as much a study of a 'case' as of a masterpiece. I have not avoided the former aspect, for *Zarathustra* has its place in several discussions, about programme music, about theories of form, and about the nature of tonality in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps when such debates are finally understood in their full complexity, the 'mastery' of *Zarathustra* will be settled one way or the other. That it is of great importance in Strauss's development is hardly to be questioned. Ultimately, *Zarathustra* seems worthy of study for its place in the whole area of 'words and music', and for the manner in which it has overcome critical hostility to win new audiences in the last quarter of a century.

Of the various people who have contributed to this book, I should like to thank Dr Franz Trenner and Dr Robert Münster of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, who made it possible for me to examine photocopies of Strauss's sketches for *Zarathustra*. Dr Eveline Nikkels kindly sent me a copy of an as yet unpublished article on Strauss and Nietzsche. Julian Rushton provided numerous valuable suggestions and encouragements, and Penny Souster also was invaluable in urging me on to complete the book. Traditionally at this point one thanks also one's family; in the present case two of them insisted that the book be dedicated to them.

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Abbreviations

References to Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* in translation are always to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (rev. edn, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

The following abbreviations are used in referring to Nietzsche's work in translation:

FW (= *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*) *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974).

EH (= *Ecce Homo*) *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967).

References to pages are by Arabic numerals; references to sections or aphorisms are by Arabic numeral preceded by §.

Unless stated, all translations are my own.

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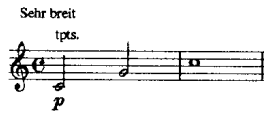
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'Freely after Nietzsche'

According to Strauss's subtitle, *Also sprach Zarathustra* is a 'tone poem freely after Nietzsche'. Any commentary on the work must start from the implications of that description. The central claim is that *Zarathustra* is in some way 'poetic', a term which in the history of nineteenth-century music had carried many resonances. By Strauss's time, music's desire to be considered poetic had hardened into at least one genre, the symphonic poem, a description invented by Liszt for the cycle of twelve single-movement orchestral pieces composed in his Weimar period. Since each of these works had a programme (whether a detailed preface, an allusive title, or a pre-existing text such as a poem), 'symphonic poetry' and programme music were usually seen as in some measure related. The Lisztian symphonic poem accordingly was sucked into the debate over programme music which involved composers, historians and aestheticians (together with the musical journalists who acted as propagandists for the various standpoints within the controversy).

Superficially, Strauss used the label 'tone poem' to distinguish himself from Liszt. He applied it to a series of one-movement works (each with stated or implied programmes) which could easily have been confused with Lisztian symphonic poems. The confusion was rendered all the more likely because of his known admiration for Liszt. When composing *Macbeth* (the first of his tone poems), Strauss spoke of it in one letter as 'a kind of symphonic poem but not after Liszt'.¹ The description tacitly admits the possibility of confusion and attempts to combat it, but cannot shake off the root of the confusion, the existence of a label, 'symphonic poem', which seems to define the work in advance. That label was never actually discarded in private, and Strauss used the description 'symphonic poem' for *Zarathustra* in his correspondence.² For public consumption, however, he preferred 'tone poem'. In this he may have been motivated by a certain need to be seen as going beyond Liszt, to the point that he drew a cloak over certain real aspects of his music. Equally, he may have felt that to cling to a Lisztian genre and description overlooked the important contribution made to his style by Wagnerian music drama (see chapter 2).

Ex. 1 *Also sprach Zarathustra*, bars 5–6, Nature motive



Ex. 2 bars 30–2, Longing motive



Ex. 3 bars 150–3, Disgust motive



Ex. 4 bars 35–8, Faith motive



Ex. 5 bars 251–9, Dance or Zarathustra motive



Ex. 6a bars 23–4, Dread motive



Ex. 6b bars 95–6, Life-urge motive



Ex. 6c bars 115–19, Passion motive



As a result of the influence of Wagner, early descriptions of *Also sprach Zarathustra* have a curious affinity with operatic guidebooks, particularly those that set out to identify leitmotifs and relate them to characters, concepts or places. In one of the first descriptions of *Zarathustra*, Hans Merian set forth such a list of leitmotifs with fairly clear labels. These labels have proved remarkably durable in accounts of *Zarathustra*, to the point that to discard them almost invites misunderstanding. The three main motives in this account were those of Nature (Ex. 1), Longing (Ex. 2) and Disgust (Ex. 3). To them he added others and named them in the manner of the guidebooks. The A flat hymnal melody beginning in bar 35 was the Faith theme (Ex. 4), the high B major motive from bar 251 was the Dance theme (Ex. 5).³ The procedure proved extendable by adopting labels from Arthur Hahn's published programme for the work to produce Dread, Life-urge and Passion

themes (Ex. 6). Whereas the tradition of Liszt criticism had stressed transformation of themes, writers on Strauss preferred an approach based on a conceptual identification of themes, though in practice Merian's position was rather more complex than this description implies (see chapter 7). The result was two-fold: to weaken the perception of a symphonic element in Strauss's tone poems (an element which his private letters acknowledged), and to underline a certain narrative quality in his concept of 'tone poetry'; arguably the latter went beyond the degree to which Strauss himself was committed to programme music.

The symphonic element in Liszt's genre depended in part upon the compression of the traditional movements of the symphony into sections, in part upon the retention of sonata form as an overall framework. Elements of these strategies survive clearly in the Straussian tone poem, particularly in the earliest examples, *Macbeth*, *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung*. *Zarathustra* represents a rather different principle, however, which caused considerable difficulty amongst analysts. The composer-critic Hermann von Waltershausen noted that its form hardly seemed symphonic at all. Rather, it resembled a series of smaller units, the two- and three-part song-forms of German *Formenlehre* (which correspond roughly to the English binary and ternary, labels that are seldom used, however, with quite the same degree of precision as their German equivalents). In Waltershausen's interpretation, this type of structure was more suited to the kind of music drama that Strauss would later compose in *Salome*.⁴ In appearing to jettison the symphonic, *Zarathustra* was not uniquely innovative, since sonata form had already been under severe stress even in such works as *Tod und Verklärung* and *Don Juan*, partly through architectonic innovation, partly through tonal departures from earlier norms. *Zarathustra*'s immediate predecessor, *Till Eulenspiegel*, had discarded sonata form completely in favour of rondo, its successor, *Don Quixote*, would adopt variation form, thus creating a triptych of works which seemed to depart formally from certain patterns of 'symphonic poetry', before Strauss returned to a more recognizably Lisztian outline in *Ein Heldenleben*.

In this can be seen a reflection of *Zarathustra*'s innovatory aspect and transitional place in the line of Strauss's tone poems. In his letters to potential conductors, Strauss had to stress several times the unusual length of the piece for a tone poem. Its duration of approximately half an hour comfortably outlasted *Tod und Verklärung*, the longest of the earlier tone poems, thus beginning the process of expansion that saw the genre move closer to, and ultimately beyond, the duration of a Brahmsian symphony, a development that indeed gradually saw the word 'symphony' reclaimed to describe,

however loosely, the genre of Strauss's orchestral works (as in the *Sinfonia Domestica* and *Eine Alpensinfonie*). This sudden expansion in *Zarathustra* was matched by an increase in orchestral resources. Where some saw in this a reflection of Strauss's increasing self-confidence, others merely saw inflation. For each writer such as Karl Schmalz, who saw *Zarathustra* as a decisive change for the better, even an attainment of mastery, there have been others such as Ernest Newman who predicted obscurity for it (at least in comparison with the earlier, conciser tone poems).⁵ But the difference of opinion reflects one curious aspect of the work. In the process of acquiring the scale of the nineteenth-century symphony, it rejected many external traits of the symphony's form. As a result, its structure posed considerable difficulties for commentators (see chapter 7).

Part of the problem for *Zarathustra*'s critics was the programme. This, however, opened an area of controversy that seems to underlie virtually every facet of the work. The question of programme music is in fact a network of overlapping questions that embraces not merely its status in relation to absolute music, but also the problem of what is appropriate to a programme. Although both aspects will loom large in the following pages, it is the latter which undermined faith in *Zarathustra* among Straussians. Here the problem is not so much whether Strauss wrote a tone poem 'about' Nietzsche, as whether he should have done so. Thus Norman Del Mar doubted the wisdom of composing 'music about a visionary philosophy', and devising 'a piece of purely orchestral programme music around a series of ideological utterances' (assuming that these were Strauss's intentions).⁶ He followed a distinguished line of Straussians, including Waltershausen, who held it 'self-evident . . . that no living musical form can emerge from the speculative basis of the material', and the critic Leopold Schmidt, who took the opportunity to restate his initial doubts in a volume of essays to which Strauss himself provided the introduction.⁷ The word 'frei' in the subtitle seems to have been designed to undermine, if not refute, such doubts. But it also looks suspiciously like an attempt to forestall more general objections to the writing of 'symphonic poetry' at a time when the debate about programme music was as sharp as at any time in the nineteenth century (see chapter 5).

Most critics of Strauss's time were fully aware that programme music had existed before Liszt's symphonic poems. Yet the question of the validity of programme music, or more specifically, illustration and narrative in music, was debated even more vigorously on the battleground of Strauss's tone poems than in the past. Arguably the debate was founded upon a misunderstanding. As Carl Dahlhaus has noted, under the prevailing influence of Schopenhauer,

'absolute music and program music, symphony and symphonic poem, were linked in a manner that flies in the face of popular aesthetic clichés about the "formalism" of the one and the "formlessness" of the other'. The basis of the link lay in the belief that programmes might initiate works as 'form motives' or present aids to interpretation (as they do in both Liszt and Strauss), but that they could not compensate for flawed structure by literary coherence;⁸ this view stands behind Strauss's oft-quoted and apparently surprising insistence that 'so-called programme music has absolutely no existence'.

It is a term of abuse in the mouths of all those who can imagine nothing of their own. In the same way, the word kitsch is a favourite of those who, like the fox leering at the grapes, envy the 'effect' which the *Tannhäuser* or *Oberon* overtures or Schiller's *Räuber* make. . . . A poetic programme can truly be a stimulus to new formal structures, but where the music does not arise logically from itself, it becomes 'literature music'.⁹

If this represents a Schopenhauerian view, then it is difficult to disentangle from Lisztian practice. Strauss had no doubt that the 'fundamental principle of Liszt's symphonic works, in which the poetic idea was also at the same time the element shaping the form', had become 'the guiding principle of my own symphonic work'.¹⁰ This is certainly explicit enough and suggests that if Strauss distanced his tone poems from Liszt, he must have required strong support from factors other than the aesthetic. In context, however, it is important to remember that Strauss knew not only Liszt's symphonic poems and their defence in Liszt's prose works, but also Wagner's critique (see chapter 2).

In the last resort, Strauss wrote 'tone poems' only partly as a result of specific influences from Liszt and Schopenhauer. As Dahlhaus has pointed out, the use of 'poetic' in Liszt (but also in Schumann and many other nineteenth-century writers on music) was not an aesthetic or technical description but a value judgement that reflected a general trend; as poetry sought increasingly to be musical, so music sought to acquire the poetic, not by the prose of programmes but in its own right.¹¹ Thus Nietzsche compared his *Also sprach Zarathustra* to music (*EH* 295), it was frequently described as a prose-poem, and Strauss reworked it 'freely' as a tone poem; the categories of aesthetic description appear to break down. Later, the 'musicality' of Wilde's prose-play *Salomé* would be taken over by the apparently 'naturalistic' illustration of Strauss's music.

Nonetheless, it was one thing to write programme music under the aesthetic aegis of a philosopher (Schopenhauer), quite another to write music 'about' a philosopher (Nietzsche). In applying the title *Also sprach Zarathustra* to his

tone poem, Strauss entered a sphere of ideas that did indeed seem to lie beyond music, but only as long as Nietzsche’s philosophy was considered in its destructive mode. Among Strauss’s contemporaries, there were in effect two perceptions of Nietzsche. On the one hand was the destroyer of nineteenth-century idols, chiefly religion. The agent of destruction was above all the aphorism, short, startling, and designed as the explosive prelude to a wider critique. In his critical books, Nietzsche directed his attack against the ‘herd’ morality of Christianity, elevating in its place a species of individualism that chimed with a certain strain of libertarian thought in Strauss’s intellectual surroundings (see chapter 2). Eventually, the individual of Nietzsche’s philosophy took on the infinitely richer shape of the Superman, who is identified at peril with the ‘blond beast’ of Aryan imaginings; rather he is to be seen as the revaluer of morality through the Will to Power, as the incarnation of the central Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence. In the figure of the Superman, Nietzsche created the second side to his message, the positive of life-affirmation. In *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the figure of the Superman carried individualism forward into a picture of saying yes to life that sought to replace the values of religion and the herd. The Superman was equated with the acceptance not merely of life, but of death as the necessary condition for life, the tragic background that made the infinitely recurring circumstances of life a cause for celebration.

In practice, this double image was not always easy to perceive and interpret. Amongst the critics of Strauss (see chapter 5), the image of the destroying (and hence unmusical) Nietzsche was always to the fore, with this much justification: books such as *Also sprach Zarathustra* depended upon a startling juxtaposition of the aphoristic and the rhapsodical, which effectively placed the revaluation of values even at the heart of life-affirmation. More subversive was the implication in Nietzsche that an element of parody lay underneath even the positives of his philosophy. Among Strauss’s admirers, the destructive Nietzsche took second place to the poetic and musical qualities of his language and images (while the parodistic qualities were ignored). The ‘poetic’ Nietzsche became an article of faith (and indeed has also haunted writing on Delius in an odd, distorting fashion). In Strauss’s letters, there was a tendency at times to separate the poetic from the critical in Nietzsche, though Strauss was clearly at one period fascinated by both. As a consequence of this separation, Straussians have often taken ‘freely after Nietzsche’ as a reflection of the poetic strain in the philosopher, thereby refuting suggestions that Strauss had sought to set philosophy to music. The poetry was in the language, which some Straussians naively viewed as separable from the philosophy.