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Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* and
the Musical Manifestations of his Philosophical Views

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In the late-nineteenth-century German music world, debates raged over programmatic versus absolute music; yet in regard to the claim that music carried within it a metaphysical level of significance or some unique potential for understanding truth, the two camps had no disagreement.¹ The view that music was an art particularly suited to conveying spiritual content was widely held and expounded by the likes of Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, and Eduard Hanslick, no matter their differences on the subject of programs.² Growing up in the midst of these debates, Richard Strauss actively sought out an existing philosophy of art that could accommodate his personal views about the role of music and reconcile differing philosophies introduced by his early influences; only by undertaking personal study of philosophical texts by Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, and understanding their implications in creating music, was Strauss able to find his own path forward as a composer. Strauss's intellectual shift away from the metaphysical view of Schopenhauer and Wagner toward a Nietzschean rejection of metaphysics is reflected in the program and music for the tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896), a work that exhibits signs and resolution of the philosophical crisis that was a major turning point in Strauss's personal and professional life.³ Since Strauss's notebooks and letters written to his philosophically minded friends (notably Cosima Wagner and childhood friend Friedrich Rösch) during this turbulent period have not been published in English translation, the scholarship of Charles Youmans will be the main source for insight into Strauss's philosophical worldview for this paper, and will be one of

¹ Charles D. Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2005), 10, 12.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Youmans, "The Development of Richard Strauss's Worldview," in *The Richard Strauss Companion*, edited by Mark-Daniel Schmid (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 81.

several important references in the interpretation of Strauss's musical choices in his tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

Youmans describes Strauss's early education in classical culture, literature, art, philosophy and history as being the inspiration for life-long, deep concern for his own education and pride in his wide-ranging fluency in classical topics and European culture, as well as a belief that intellectual consciousness was an important feature of his artistic persona.⁴ He had begun reading Schopenhauer in his teens, and Nietzsche soon after, and it is significant that he engaged the philosophical texts directly rather than coming to them through secondary interpretations and outside mediating influences; Strauss's working method as a philosophically concerned composer demanded that he work out for himself an idea of music's position in the intellectual and cultural spectrum.⁵

Strauss's worldview was also influenced by his encounters with some of the most important musical luminaries of his time. As a young composer, Strauss regularly came into contact with major figures in German music, including Hans von Bülow, Johannes Brahms, Cosima Wagner, and Clara Schumann, each of whom held strong beliefs about the cultural and philosophical significance of music. Strauss took seriously anyone who had a knowledge of music, but every influence and idea was subject to his own interpretation and personalization that would enable it to become part of Strauss's artistic personality for the rest of his life.⁶

In 1885, Strauss was appointed to his first professional assignment, as assistant to Hans von Bülow at Meiningen. Bülow was an important influence on Strauss's conducting style and music taste, and impressed Strauss with his incredible facility with and deep knowledge of the

⁴ Youmans, "The Development of Richard Strauss's Worldview," 65, 63.

⁵ Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid*, 16, 19.

music of the major composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷ Like Bülow, Strauss developed an expansive musical curiosity coupled with a knack for separating out the best elements of his influences, and incorporating these positive qualities into his own personal style in a productive way.⁸ During his season at Meiningen Strauss also met Alexander Ritter, an amateur composer and musician who had grown up with Bülow. Ritter introduced Strauss to Wagner's writings and to his own novel theories of Schopenhauer interpretation, the central theme of which was that music served a higher extramusical purpose.⁹ Ritter also made Strauss aware of the argument that Liszt and Wagner had drawn from Beethoven the concept of musical "expression," the notion that music had a spiritual content the communication of which was the musical art form's primary responsibility.¹⁰

Ritter's devotion to Wagnerian musical ideals played a significant part in his attempts to groom Strauss as Wagner's successor and indoctrinate him with his own brand of Wagnerism, but Strauss was ultimately unconvinced by Ritter's spiritual view of music. However, Ritter exercised influence by providing the most cogent and passionate argument for metaphysical significance that Strauss had ever encountered, and in dealing directly and critically with Ritter's theory Strauss also dealt with the principal vein of German musical romanticism that it represented.¹¹ Also, Ritter's introduction of a novel interpretation of Schopenhauer stimulated Strauss to return to the text for further study, which in turn prompted a philosophical crisis that

⁷ R. Larry Todd, "Strauss Before Liszt and Wagner," in *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, edited by Bryan Gilliam (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1992), 4.

⁸ Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2005), 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ Youmans, "The Development of Richard Strauss's Worldview," 77.

¹¹ Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 62.

ruptured Strauss's worldview as well as a number of personal relationships, including that with Ritter.¹²

Strauss undertook a thorough study of the work of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche during a year-long trip through Greece and Italy in 1892-93.¹³ In a notebook diary that Strauss began in early 1893, he advocated "affirmation of the Will" in place of denial called for by Schopenhauer, a newfound optimism that included language particular to the rhetoric of Nietzsche, in whose works Strauss found a ready-made and reasoned justification for the rejection of the spiritual in art.¹⁴ The works Strauss studied came from the middle and late periods of Nietzsche's career, after his break with Wagner; Strauss found this work helpful precisely because they had arisen from the same process of rejecting Wagnerian/Schopenhauerian metaphysics that Strauss was now experiencing.¹⁵

Around this time, Strauss's friend Arthur Seidl remarked in correspondence that Strauss would title his newest tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, but the subject matter would be drawn from *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878)—the work in which Nietzsche renounced Wagnerism unequivocally. *Menschliches* presented Strauss with conclusions that affirmed his insights after his study of Schopenhauer, especially concerning the rejection of 'Will' in music and moving beyond superstitious concepts and fears, providing Strauss a blueprint for overcoming metaphysics in his personal philosophy of art. Nietzsche's primary significance for

¹² Charles Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 62.

¹³ Youmans, "The Role of Nietzsche in Richard Strauss's Artistic Development," *Journal of Musicology* 21 no. 3 (2005): 319.

¹⁴ Willi Schuh, *Richard Strauss: A Chronicle of the Early Years 1864-1898* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 420-421; Youmans, "The Development of Richard Strauss's Worldview," 82-83.

¹⁵ Youmans, "The Development of Richard Strauss's Worldview," 81.

Strauss lay in his rejection of metaphysics altogether, and his advocacy of a new postmetaphysical optimism.¹⁶

Also sprach Zarathustra was widely seen as Nietzsche's masterpiece, the work which clearly laid out a doctrine as opposed to demolishing the systems of others. The central tenets of the book are the "revaluation of all values," the Eternal Recurrence, the Will to Power, and the advent of the *Übermensch*, conceived as a realization of the potential for living in man. The revaluation of morality which the *Übermensch* embodied was directed at conventional religion and was expressed as the Will to Power, a concept synonymous with optimism and living life free of metaphysics. In this context, the Will is not the aimless and unappeasable prime cause as Schopenhauer described it, but the property of the liberated individual.¹⁷ Strauss found in Nietzsche an intellectual position he deemed adequate to ground his musical works in a post-Wagnerian world.

The program of Strauss's *Zarathustra* was designed to highlight a central argument in Nietzsche's book: the tragic realization that metaphysical longing, the flaw that separates the human from the superhuman, cannot be permanently defeated but must be overcome again and again in eternally recurring cycles.¹⁸ Strauss's use of programmatic composition required he reduce the book to a single concise idea suited to musical elaboration. Here, the example of Liszt helped show the way by his choosing of subjects that boiled down to a "general human type" well suited to treatment as instrumental music. In Nietzsche's idea of "convalescence" Strauss saw a programmatic subject that implied a linear development—progress toward, through and beyond an epiphany—that seemed perfectly suited for the recommended kind of musical

¹⁶ Youmans, "The Development of Richard Strauss's Worldview," 81-82.

¹⁷ John Williamson, *Strauss: Also sprach Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 21.

¹⁸ Youmans, "The Role of Nietzsche in Richard Strauss's Artistic Development," 329.

treatment that programmatic practice was designed to effect.¹⁹ Strauss arranged a selection of section headings from Nietzsche's book for his musical sections, not in Nietzsche's order but his own, recreating a relationship between the headings that provided an outline for his poetic interpretation of the book and also reflected the concerns that were at issue for him in the work.²⁰

Strauss's *Zarathustra* outlines an individual's process of recognizing the Eternal Recurrence, beginning, as Nietzsche did, with the goal: a glorious sunrise as symbol of pure physicality separate from and antithetical to metaphysics. This is followed by three further stages: a crisis brought on by the realization that the process of overcoming metaphysical longing must be repeated eternally; a "convalescence" and acceptance of the recurrence; and a coda that captures the never-ending oscillation between optimism and despair by juxtaposing the key of nature, C major, with the key of metaphysical hope and longing, B.²¹ Strauss identified this confrontation between C and B as the motivating conflict of the work, set in terms of Nietzsche's prologue, in which Zarathustra declares his intention to "become like" the sun, in order to purge himself of the limiting characteristics of human nature.²²

The introductory section, untitled by Strauss but roughly corresponding to the prologue with which Nietzsche began his work, establishes the important image of the sun rising—the C - G - C 'Nature' motive representing the primal essence of the universe (measures 1-19). In this powerfully established C major motive, the physical, objective, explicitly non-human takes on a recognizable theme that stands available to mark the human Zarathustra's progress in his

¹⁹ Youmans, "The Private Intellectual Context of Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*," 114-115.

²⁰ Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 107-108; "The Role of Nietzsche in Richard Strauss's Artistic Development," 329.

²¹ Youmans, "The Role of Nietzsche in Richard Strauss's Artistic Development," 329.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, edited by Robert Pippin and Adrian Del Caro (West Nyack, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3; Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 194-195.

struggle to transcend himself. This struggle controls the harmonic structure of the work, with C major as the protagonist's goal and subsequent keys that lean toward C major representing his progressive yet ultimately futile attempt to transcend his humanity and become like nature.²³

The C major ideal is also juxtaposed with C minor segments that correspond to passages of Nietzsche's poem in which the lowly origins of human's emotional life are shown to come from his nature rather than from his spirit.²⁴ In Strauss's score, the C major prologue is followed by a short transition in C minor (measures 24-34) in the section marked with the heading "Von der Hinterweltlern." In Nietzsche's poem this section describes humans in their most unsophisticated state, struggling in an intellectual hinterland and longing for a "world beyond" that will provide easy emotional comfort.²⁵ The minor mode and orchestration in the lower registers suggests a gloomy atmosphere, hinting at the primitive stage of intellectual development indicated by the "hinterworldly" setting. The A-flat major section that follows is connected to the futility of human-made religion in the effort to transcend humanity, expressed in Zarathustra's declaration, "this god I created was of human make and madness, like all gods!"²⁶ Following "Von der grossen Sehnsucht," in which the motive of human "longing" for freedom from ignorance and narrow-minded superstition is first introduced in B, C minor returns in a self-contained section under the heading "Von den Freuden- und Leidenschaften" (measure 115).²⁷ Nietzsche describes the "passions" of the title as those things that were once considered evil but have been 'revalued' as virtues that must be embraced in order to overcome being

²³ Youmans, "The Private Intellectual Context of Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*," 115-116.

²⁴ Norman Del Mar, Foreword to *Also sprach Zarathustra: frei nach Friedrich Nietzsche, Op. 30* (London: E. Eulenburg, 1932), vii.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 20.

²⁷ Del Mar, Foreword to *Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30*, vii.

human.²⁸ Although this overcoming is a precondition of the arrival of the Übermensch, a figure who heralds the Eternal Recurrence and life-affirmation, the lush orchestration and passionate theme of Strauss's musical section do not seem match the abstraction of this part of Nietzsche's text. However, the use of C minor unites the sections and suggests a thematic link between the need to overcome human superstition and accept the natural passions as virtues in order to progress toward spiritual freedom.

Throughout the piece the Nature motive acts as both a reminder of the C-major goal and a reminder that the goal has not been reached, and its reappearance is confined to sections that lie between attempts to reach C until it is incorporated into the slow fugue subject in "Von der Wissenschaft."²⁹ Williamson points out that the fugue is here in an antique style, designed to emphasize traditional procedures, most prominent in the use of augmentation on the entry on B (measure 223).³⁰ This connection between old-fashioned baroque style and the scientific outlook can be seen as another example of a human invention that fails Zarathustra in his effort to transcend his humanity. The attempt to reach C here is closer than any others, but it fails as well, leading into "Der Genesende." Williamson argues that when the fugue resumes at the beginning of "Der Genesende," the antique style is replaced with a more modern fragmentation of subjects and a constantly changing array of motives.³¹ For Youmans the section recalls Berlioz, the fugue resurfacing as a grotesque caricature of the original staid and gloomy statement, depicting the violent unspooling of belief in scientific rationality in the face of Being and Nature.³² Both

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 25.

²⁹ Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 196.

³⁰ Williamson, *Strauss: Also sprach Zarathustra*, 81.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

³² Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 196.

interpretations make sense as the section spirals and builds into a climactic return of the Nature motive, triple-fortissimo, in full orchestra, followed by a measure of complete silence (measures 329-337).³³ This long pause is meant to correspond to Zarathustra's collapse after this confrontation with nature, overwhelmed by an epiphany of the abyss of material Being.³⁴ The secret of Eternal Recurrence is revealed to him when he awakes, and he realizes he must return eternally to his identical life, and will be forced ever after to struggle to overcome the instinctive desire to find psychological refuge in the idea of an afterworld.³⁵ Strauss's placement of "Der Genesende" at the center of the tone poem highlights the portion of Nietzsche's book most relevant to his own dilemma while musically illuminating the section as an encapsulation of Nietzsche's philosophy that he found most helpful.³⁶

In Nietzsche's poem, Zarathustra's "convalescence" is related not only to the realization that the Eternal Recurrence of metaphysical hopes as the inescapable existential quandary of humanity, but also to the recognition that this cycle must be accepted and embraced.³⁷ This is the self-knowledge that could not be provided by religion, human passion or scientific thought, and in Strauss's score the epiphany of "Der Genesende" is followed by "Das Tanzlied," the musical affirmation of life and imagination of a superhuman future (measures 409-629).³⁸ This section is firmly in C major, with references to the earlier use of A-flat major and an appearance in one form or another of the major motives that featured in the first part of the work. Williamson sees

³³ James Hepokoski, "The Second Cycle of Tone Poems," in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, edited by Charles Youmans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 174-175; Hepokoski, "The Second Cycle of Tone Poems," 99.

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 178.

³⁶ Youmans, "The Role of Nietzsche in Richard Strauss's Artistic Development," 330.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 177-178.

³⁸ Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 199.

this assemblage as representing all the ideas of the ascent of mankind being gradually imbued with the spirit of the Übermensch.³⁹ However, despite the optimism and lightness of “Der Tanzlied,” as well as its incorporation of the C - G - C Nature theme, it does not conclude with a triumphant climax in C major nor provide any closure, but evaporates into the B major coda signaled by the tolling of the “midnight bells.”⁴⁰ Strauss ends the piece once again highlighting the struggle between Nature’s C major and humanity’s B, a calm acceptance of the Eternal Recurrence with Nature having the last word.

The musical structure and treatment of themes in *Also sprach Zarathustra* show Strauss working through philosophical anxieties in order to embrace a post-metaphysical worldview. It is a reflection of Strauss’s private coming to terms with Nietzsche as well as his preceding philosophical influences that the basic musical operations in his *Zarathustra* make sense.⁴¹ Before his philosophical crisis, Strauss had great difficulty accepting that the role of music was to communicate spiritual content, or even that this content was true, that it existed or even that it was desirable. Strauss became obsessed with defining the precise nature of that content, which stimulated the most sustained period of philosophical study of his life, and it produced his only known diary of philosophical reflections. In the end, he unequivocally rejected the idea of metaphysical content in music, and devoted his mature orchestral compositions to proving that he was right.⁴²

³⁹ Williamson, *Strauss: Also sprach Zarathustra*, 74.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 183.

⁴¹ Youmans, *Richard Strauss’s Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition*, 194.

⁴² Youmans, “The Development of Richard Strauss’s Worldview,” 77.

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