

## **Burleske for Piano and Orchestra in D minor** **Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**

### **Biographical context:**

Richard Strauss was the first great composer since Mozart to be born into the family of a distinguished musician, famous in his own right. His father, Franz, was the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra and a professor at the Munich Conservatory. In addition to being one of Germany's foremost horn virtuosos, he also played the viola well enough to participate in a string quartet, and for twenty years conducted an amateur orchestra, which he raised to a fairly high level. As the exceptional musical talents of his son Richard became evident at an early age, Strauss Sr. was able to give him excellent professional advice and assist him throughout his musical education. When Richard was only 17, his *Symphony in D minor* was performed by the Court Orchestra under the direction of the famous Hermann Levi (who would premiere Wagner's *Parsifal* at Bayreuth the following year).

The man who did the most to help young Strauss's career was the great pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, and this in spite of the fact that Bülow counted Strauss's father among his musical enemies. In the 1860s, around the time Richard Strauss was born, Bülow conducted Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* in Munich and it came to violent clashes between him and his principal horn player who was a fierce opponent of Wagner's music. It is true that this conflict did not prevent either man from acknowledging the other's artistic excellence, and Franz Strauss mastered the difficulties of the detested Wagner's horn parts quite superbly. Nevertheless, there were feelings of hostility between Strauss Sr. and Bülow that persisted even after Bülow himself was estranged from Wagner in the wake of the Cosima scandal (Bülow's wife Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt, left Bülow for Wagner).

It is understandable, then, that the 19-year-old Richard Strauss approached Bülow with some apprehension when they met in Berlin during the winter of 1883-84; but Bülow was so impressed with the young man that he gave him a chance to conduct the Meiningen Orchestra of which he was the director. When the tryout went well, Bülow invited Strauss to be his assistant at Meiningen for the 1885-86 season. Since Bülow himself was absent during the second half of the season, this meant that Strauss had to take sole charge of the orchestra, as well as the chorus attached to it.

Strauss, a born conductor, met this challenge admirably. His apprenticeship with Bülow taught him lessons he would never forget. The greatest event during the months they spent together at Meiningen was no doubt the first performance of Brahms's Fourth Symphony, conducted by the composer himself. Strauss was awed by meeting Brahms and being present at such a momentous premiere. It is only natural that he came under Brahms's influence (his final conversion to Wagner did not take place until some years later).

Strauss wrote his *Burleske* shortly after his encounter with Brahms. Many of the work's themes and harmonic progressions have a distinctly Brahmsian flavor, but the structure of the work as a one-movement concert piece owes more to Liszt than to Brahms.

One of the most striking features of the *Burleske* is precisely the ambitious synthesis

Strauss attempted to achieve between different styles and musical forms. The original idea was a scherzo-type composition (“Scherzo” was even the first title Strauss intended to give the work); yet in its final form it contains many serious, sentimental, even dramatic elements besides playful ones. This ambivalence is evident already in the tonality of the piece: D minor, a traditionally “tragic” key since the days of Mozart, seems an unlikely choice for a piece called “Burleske.” Strauss clearly wanted to have it both ways; he seems to have striven to say everything in a single composition, while keeping a certain lightness of expression on top of it all. And there is no doubt that he succeeded. *Burleske* manifests the boundless energy of a young man of 21 who did not know the meaning of the word “impossible.”

The work starts with a rather unusual trick, a theme played by four solo timpani. The rest of the orchestra quickly responds, and the piano soon enters with the first of many witty statements, one of which contains an uncanny anticipation of a characteristic motif from *Till Eulenspiegel*. The second melody, whose beginning comes from the timpani motif with which the whole work began, contains a foreboding of an even later Strauss work, the opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. The various themes are organized in a large-scale sonata form. There is a audacious coda, in which the harsh D-minor chords of the orchestra alternate with the piano playing in the contrasting keys of E-flat minor, E major, and F major. The piano plays a cadenza that contains a unexpected quote from Wagner’s *Tristan* prelude. Just when we might think the work is over, there is a brand-new theme on the strings (only indirectly related to earlier materials), accompanied by delicate arpeggios on the piano. After a last re-statement of the piano’s opening melody, the initial timpani solo returns, and *Burleske* ends the way it began: with an unaccompanied D on the kettledrum.