

## Dvořák & Firebird – June 5 – 7, 2026

If the name Strauss inspires you to start humming *The Blue Danube*, you would be justly forgiven for thinking of Johann Strauss, the Austrian composer who wrote more than 500 waltzes, famously dubbed “The Waltz King.” But that Strauss is unrelated to Richard Strauss, the composer featured on this Masterworks. Richard Strauss, a child prodigy and renowned German composer of operas and tone poems, was recognized as one of Germany’s leading composers during his life, but he endured financial devastation and the traumatic destruction of his homeland in the Second World War.



Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss was born in Munich on June 11, 1864, the first of two children born to Josephine (descended from the brewing dynasty Pschorr) and Franz Joseph Strauss, a leading French Horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra, recognized as Germany’s acknowledged virtuoso

on the instrument. Music, which had helped Franz escape from crippling poverty, was a way of life in the Strauss home and the couple’s young son began piano at age four. A child prodigy, Strauss composed his first works at the age of six, and his mother wrote the lyrics for his pieces. He recalled, “My mother told me from a very young age I used to laugh and smile while hearing the French Horn. When I heard a violin, I cried intensely.”

Both parents supported and encouraged their son’s interest in music, and Franz raised his talented son with the ethics of hard work and fierce dedication. Strauss was a serious and complex student, described by his teachers as “active, keen, considerate but sometimes too quick and volatile.” By the time he was 18, young Strauss had already written 140

works. His *Festive March for Large Orchestra* was released in 1881 when he was 17. A violin concerto he composed was jotted down in a school notebook in 1882.

It is notable that Franz detested the works of Richard Wagner, one of the most famous composers of the day. But when young Strauss discovered the music of Wagner, he became a fan, writing “I still remember very well how at around 17 years of age I almost feverishly swallowed the score of *Tristan* and fell into a frenzy of enthusiasm.” In 1882, just one year before Wagner’s death, 18-year-old Strauss attended the famed Bayreuth Festival (a venue built for Wagner’s music) and the following year, the renowned Wagner conductor Hans von Bülow took Strauss under his wing. With Bülow as his mentor, Strauss’ career leaped forward. Bülow, director of the Meiningen Court Orchestra (one of Europe’s oldest orchestras) commissioned Strauss’ work *Suite for 13 Winds* and then invited the young composer to conduct the first performance of the piece in Munich in 1884. The composition enjoyed enormous success and that same year Bülow offered Strauss the position of assistant conductor with the Meiningen Court Orchestra.



Richard Strauss

In Meiningen, Strauss met composer/violinist Alexander Ritter, who urged Strauss to further his study of Wagner, as well as composers Liszt and Bruckner. With Ritter's influence, Strauss rejected the "classic" form in favor of the symphonic tone poem to express his musical ideas.<sup>1</sup> Strauss returned to Munich in 1886 to assume the position of third conductor of the Munich Opera. In 1886, Strauss composed *Out of Italy*, a symphonic fantasy in four parts. Other early tone poems, *Macbeth* and *Don Juan*<sup>i</sup> were composed in 1888, followed by *Death and Transfiguration* in 1889. The last two of these have become essential components in the repertoire of modern orchestras. After conducting successes at Bayreuth and his debut with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1890, Strauss' meteoric rise as a conductor was now matched by his prolific work as a composer.

In Munich in 1887, Strauss met Pauline de Ahna, the daughter of a Bavarian general, who he accepted as a pupil. Pauline was talented and a romantic relationship soon developed between the two. In 1889, when Strauss was appointed director of the Weimar Court Orchestra, Pauline followed Strauss to Weimar where she enjoyed a respectable career as a soprano, performing roles in Mozart operas and was cast as Isolde in a performance of Wagner's opera at Bayreuth. She originated the role of Hänsel in the Engelbert Humperdinck opera *Hänsel and Gretel*.

Strauss cast Pauline in a leading role in his first opera, *Guntram*, and the two were officially recognized as a couple. Their engagement was announced in May of 1894 and they were married in September of that year.



Pauline de Ahna and Richard Strauss

In 1894, Strauss was appointed as principal conductor in Munich and the newlyweds relocated there. In that same year, he dedicated his *Four Songs* to his new bride, further establishing his fame as a composer of lieder, or art songs. He composed lieder throughout his life as an artistic diversion from his larger instrumental pieces and was an acclaimed piano accompanist for his own works. He distinguished himself in this genre well into his older years.

The couple's only child, Franz, was born on April 12, 1897. The "success" of the Munich years was evidenced by Strauss' extraordinary composing output, resulting in some of his most famous tone poems: *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, (1895), *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896 - popularized by the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*), *Don Quixote* (1897) and *Ein Heldenleben* (1898). The family remained in Munich until 1898, when Strauss became conductor (and then director) of the Royal Court Opera in Berlin, followed by his position as musical co-director of the Vienna State Opera (1919-1924).



Pauline and son Franz

While enjoying his enormous success with tone poems, Strauss harbored a strong desire to create operas, drawing inspiration from his idol Richard Wagner. His first attempt in 1893, *Guntram*, did not resonate with audiences, and was withdrawn after only a few performances. But he made a triumphant return with his opera *Salome* (1905) inspired by Oscar Wilde's text. Strauss was so impressed that he wrote the German translation, not even bothering to use a librettist. The opera premiered in Dresden and enjoyed enormous artistic and financial success. It quickly became the epitome of modern opera music, and its financial success made it possible for Strauss to finally construct his own grand home, a villa in the Alpine ski town of Garmisch (about 90 minutes from Munich) which became the family residence. Up to that point, the young Strauss family lived with

<sup>i</sup>: Unlike the classical three-movement symphony, a symphonic tone poem is a work in one movement, intended to convey a specific story, emotion, or imagery through music.



Richard Strauss at his villa in Garmisch

Pauline's parents in Marquartstein, and it was there that Strauss composed *Salome*. With the construction of the new villa in Garmisch, Pauline became mistress of her own home.

In 1904, the couple embarked on a U.S. tour, and his large orchestral composition *Sinfonica Domestica*, dedicated to "my dear wife and our son," describes 24 hours in the life of the Strauss family including bathing the baby, quarrels and lovemaking. The world premiere of the piece, composed in 1903, was in New York City. Pauline was once again in the spotlight, with her interpretation of many lieder composed by her husband. Once they returned to Germany however, Pauline withdrew from the arts, and dedicated her time to raising their son, Franz, and managing their new home at Garmisch.

Strauss' successful collaboration with librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal led to many notable operas including *Elektra* (1908), *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), and *Die ägyptische Helen* (1927).

He resigned his position as general music director of the Berlin Opera House at the end of the First World War. In addition to the heartbreak brought about by World War I, much of Strauss' considerable fortune was lost. He had deposited virtually his entire fortune in the Bank of England, but when all of it was confiscated as "enemy assets" the family was left desperate. Undaunted, Strauss returned to composing lieder, including *Krämerspiegel* or *The Shopkeeper's Mirror*, and finished his opera *Woman Without a Shadow*, or *Die Frau ohne Schatten* in 1919. His appointment as Music Director of the Vienna State Opera brought new and exciting productions to the opera house. Luckily for Strauss, or perhaps because of his artistic leadership, the years between 1919 and 1924 were a particularly affluent time for the opera house.

With his family now settled in Vienna, Strauss toured the USA and South America, bringing his

music to the world. In 1920, yearning for a way to combat the profound sadness of the post-war era with the beauty of culture and to regenerate feelings of self-confidence in Austria, Strauss founded the Salzburg Music Festival, together with his librettist Hofmannsthal, set designer Alfred Roller and stage director Max Reinhardt, all of whom had worked together on the production of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Between 1922 and 1943, Strauss appeared as conductor of the Salzburg Festival sixteen times and the Festival remains in full swing today. The opening celebration of the 2026 Festival will take place July 18-19 and 24. [Festival Opening Celebration 2024 • Veranstaltungen • 19., 20. und 26. Juli 2024.](#)



Richard Strauss in Salzburg

In 1924, Pauline and Richard celebrated the marriage of their son Franz to Alice von Grab, the daughter of a Jewish industrialist. Strauss dedicated his *Wedding Prelude* to the young couple and completely financed a new residence for them. Franz and his bride moved into the new Strauss villa in Vienna upon its completion in 1925. It was one of the most expensive homes in the history of real estate. He also gifted the annual leasehold on the property to the republic of Austria and the city of Vienna, leaving his handwritten *Rosenkavalier* score to Austria, and his ballet *Whipped Cream* to the City. Strauss resigned from the Vienna State Opera in 1924 but remained in Dresden for the premiere of his opera *Intermezzo* that same year. He continued to work with his librettist, Hofmannsthal, until the poet's death in 1929. Strauss then formed a new relationship with the Jewish librettist Stefan Zweig.

In 1933, with the rise of Nazi rule in Germany, life became difficult for Strauss. His two grandchildren, Richard (born in 1927) and Christian (born in 1932)

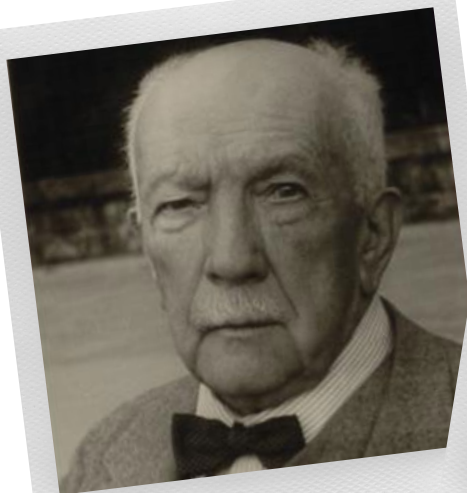
were half Jewish, and his collaboration with a Jewish librettist made him suspect in the eyes of the Reich. In 1933, he was made President of the German State Music Bureau, *Reichsmusikkammer*, an appointment that was a double-edged sword. While he accepted the position to “do good and prevent further catastrophe,” he was immediately suspected of being complicit despite his opposition to Nazi policies. At the request of the Reich, he also composed the *Olympic Hymns* for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

No doubt his acceptance of roles offered by the Nazi regime afforded his Jewish daughter-in-law and grandchildren some protection, but at the same time, his “Jüdisch Versippt” (intermarried) family led to enormous suspicion and discrimination. The Gestapo began to review Strauss’ letters, including one he had written to Stefan Zweig, expressing anger at the Reich and anti-Nazi sentiment. Strauss had insisted that Zweig’s name be listed in the program at the premiere of the comic opera *Silent Woman* in Dresden in 1935, and his decision to include the name of a Jewish artist in such a prominent position caused further suspicion and ruined any chance of the opera’s success. His collaboration with a Jewish librettist was unacceptable and the opera was banned after four performances. Strauss’ allegiance to the Reich was routinely questioned by Joseph Goebbels, the National Socialist Reichsminister of Propaganda

and Director of the State Cultural Bureau, but Strauss somehow managed to maintain his position. Yet, Goebbels and Strauss could not hide the contempt they felt for one another.

Strauss spent most of the war years at the villa in Vienna, where he remained with his family, as Berlin had already issued an order that the personal travel of their “leading men” (or in the case of Strauss, an aging composer) was prohibited. Royalties from works performed abroad were blocked, and his musical life in Germany and Austria was ruined. For the second time, his financial security was destroyed by war.

The sadness Strauss felt for his destroyed homeland inspired him to compose more works, rather than retreat into silence. In 1944, he had already begun work on a piece for strings. As Strauss faced failing health, Swiss conductor Paul Sacher devised a plan to help him. Sacher proposed a commission for a new work with an invitation to the world premiere in Zürich. Strauss renewed his attention to the string composition and the date on the score, March 13, 1945, suggests that the destruction of the Vienna Opera House the preceding day was the impetus he needed to complete the work. The commissioned work titled *Metamorphosen*, a study for 23 solo strings, stands a profound statement of the composer’s



Richard Strauss



Richard Strauss



Richard Strauss and his grandchild

deep mourning for the culture and musical life destroyed by the Nazis. It was this piece that enabled Strauss and his wife to escape to Switzerland in 1945.

Strauss was welcomed in Switzerland, and concerts were held in his honor, including a performance of his oboe concerto. Ultimately, the Allied denazification tribunals cleared Strauss of any accusations of collaboration with the Nazi regime.

Eventually, Strauss returned to his beloved villa in Garmisch, and for a few years re-lived some of his old fame and recognition. A Strauss Festival was performed in London in 1948, and Munich prepared several honors to recognize his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday. On September 8, 1949, just three months after his 85th birthday celebration, Strauss passed away at his home in Garmisch. In that same year Germany was divided into East and West. On his deathbed, he told Alice, his daughter-in-law, “I am not afraid to die. I have done my job.” As a fitting tribute, the slow movement from *Metamorphosen* was performed at his funeral.

Alice managed the Strauss archives at the Garmisch house until her death in 1991, and the Strauss grandchildren have since assumed such responsibilities. More than 75 years after his death, Strauss remains the most performed classical composer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Richard, Pauline  
and their son,  
Franz, circa 1905



## JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on June 5-7, 2026, to enjoy an exciting performance of *Death & Transfiguration* by Richard Strauss, *Carnival Overture* by Antonin Dvořák, a special new work by Curtis Stewart, our Artist In Residence, *Slavonic Dances/The Famous People*, with music inspired by Antonin Dvořák, an electric performance of *Zigeunerweisen* by Pablo Sarasate, featuring our guest artist Curtis Stewart and Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* all under the baton of HSO's Music Director, Carolyn Kuan.

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## Interested in hearing more of the music of Richard Strauss? Try these suggestions:

Enjoy Strauss' wonderfully playful tone poem, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, performed by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Maestro Zubin Mehta:

[\*\*New York Philharmonic Strauss Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks Zubin Mehta.\*\*](#)

Another popular favorite, *Ein Heldenleben*, is performed brilliantly by the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, under the direction of Valery Gergiev:

[\*\*Richard STRAUSS - Ein Heldenleben - Munich Philharmonic Orchestra - Valery Gergiev.\*\*](#)

Would you like a sample of some opera? Enjoy the final trio from *Der Rosenkavalier*, performed by Kathleen Battle, Frederica von Stade and Renee Fleming:

[\*\*Strauss -- Der Rosenkavalier, Final Trio -- K. Battle, F. von Stade, R. Fleming \(1992\).\*\*](#)

Yet another Strauss tone poem, *Don Quixote*, may be heard at the following link:

[\*\*Richard Strauss - Don Quixote | Lynn Harrell | Semyon Bychkov | WDR Symphony Orchestra.\*\*](#)

Delight in this performance of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, recorded at the Concertgebouw under the direction of Mariss Jansons and be sure to turn up the volume to hear the opening timpani solo:

[\*\*Strauss - Also sprach Zarathustra - Mariss Jansons | Concertgebouworkest.\*\*](#)

And finally, please take the time to listen to *Metamorphosen*, a moving tribute to the loss of German music and culture in World War II, conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen:

[\*\*Richard Strauss: "Metamorphoses" with Esa-Pekka Salonen | NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra.\*\*](#)



## WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

*Death and Transfiguration*, (*Tod Und Verklärung*) is performed by the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra, with Maestro Andrés Orozco-Estrada:

[\*\*Strauss: Tod und Verklärung - hr-Sinfonieorchester - Andrés Orozco-Estrada.\*\*](#)

For an extra treat, to enhance your understanding of *Death and Transfiguration*, please see this article:

[\*\*Strauss' "Death and Transfiguration": "From the Infinite Reaches of Heaven" – The Listeners' Club.\*\*](#)

Enjoy Dvořák's *Carnival Overture* performed by the BBC Orchestra, on the last night of the PROMS in 2012:

[\*\*Dvořák - Overture Carnival \(Last Night of the Proms 2012\).\*\*](#)

The only online version of Stewart's *Famous People*, based on Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*, is performed by the LaGuardia HS Philharmonic:

[\*\*Stewart: The Famous People \(Based on Antonin Dvorak's Slavonic Dances\) - LaGuardia Philharmonic.\*\*](#)

Enjoy this orchestral version of Sarasate's *Zigüernerweisen*, performed by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, with soloist Diana Adamyan:

[\*\*Sarasate: Zigeunerweisen - hr-Sinfonieorchester - Diana Adamyan - Alain Altinoglu.\*\*](#)

And finally, turn up the volume so you don't miss the opening bars of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* performed by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Peter Oundjian:

[\*\*Stravinsky: Suite from The Firebird \(1919 revision\) / Peter Oundjian - Toronto Symphony Orchestra.\*\*](#)



Richard Strauss conducting



## SOURCE MATERIAL

[Richard Strauss | German Composer & Orchestral Conductor | Britannica](#)

[Richard Strauss \(1864–1949\): Biography, Music + More | CMS - Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center](#)  
[Biography | Richard Strauss](#)

[Richard Strauss - World History Encyclopedia](#)

[Richard Strauss Biography, Facts, Videos, and Works - Classical Clips](#)

[Richard Strauss - New World Encyclopedia](#)