

# Richard Strauss & the Shopkeeper's Mirror

Aaron Alon Phi Omicron, Houston Alumni



Strauss as conductor.

After almost 40 years as an active composer of lieder, in 1906, Richard Strauss nearly ceased writing art songs. Some of his contemporaries believed Strauss had ended that stage of his compositional career;

but in 1918, Strauss returned to lieder composition with vigor, writing more lieder than in any other year of his life. The motivation for his cessation of lieder composition and later return to it reveals a rich story, centered on the creation of *Krämerspiegel*, Strauss's only true song cycle, and one of the most unusual cycles in recent history.

In 1903, the publishing house Bote & Bock agreed to publish Strauss's *Symphonia Domestica*. In return for this expensive investment (Strauss sold the piece for 35,000 DM), Strauss entered into contract with them to write a dozen new songs, since lieder generally generated considerable revenue. Two years earlier, dissatisfaction with the state of composers' rights led Strauss to form the *Genossenschaft Deutscher Tonsetzer* (GDT), whose objective was to have composers retain creative rights to their compositions. Consequently, Strauss showed unusual naiveté by entering into this contract with Bote & Bock, one of the primary opponents of the GDT. Sure enough, as Strauss came to demand more of his publishers, Bote & Bock proved immovable, and Strauss was legally bound to allow them to publish his next song cycle under their original terms. In 1906, Bote & Bock published Strauss's six op. 56 songs, which met half of his contractual requirement. It was in November, 1906, however, that Strauss began his mysterious withdrawal from lied composition.

The most important reason for Strauss's withdrawal from lieder composition was likely the sheer frustration of being contractually bound under what he considered unacceptable terms. Also, Strauss spent considerable time during this period at work on a different vocal medium: operas. Furthermore, Strauss's song recitals with his wife ended after their 1904 American tour, when Pauline had retired from singing. After a long and active performance career together,

Strauss lost the voice he imagined when composing lieder.

In 1918, Bote & Bock grew impatient and threatened Strauss with legal action if he did not soon produce the remaining six songs required by his contract. Strauss returned to lieder writing, beginning with what would become op. 68, but he had no intention of letting Bote & Bock publish it when he could get it published through Fürstner, and maintain performance rights and royalties to what promised to be a highly successful piece. Perhaps Strauss began these songs for Bote & Bock, but seeing their performance potential, decided not to use them for fulfillment of his contract.

Whether it was the threatened lawsuit that prompted Strauss to recommence lieder composition or the fact that he found a new voice for which to compose (Elisabeth Schumann), Strauss realized that in order to have op. 68 published by Fürstner, he was legally bound to produce a song cycle for Bote & Bock first. The lawsuit angered Strauss so much that he devised a plan by which he might exact revenge while also fulfilling his contract. Strauss commissioned literary critic Alfred Kerr to write a set of texts openly ridiculing the major publishers of the day. Their collaboration resulted in a cycle of twelve songs, which satirized the composer-publisher relationship, using puns and wordplay on the names of many publishing houses and their owners or managers.

Bote & Bock refused to publish the songs, as Strauss had anticipated, but rather than freeing him from his contract, they pressed forward with their legal action. As a result, Strauss was forced to quickly produce another set of songs, which they accepted for publication as op. 67. Since its inception, op. 67 has been rarely performed or recorded.

Quite atypically for Strauss, not only did Bote and Bock reject his cycle for publication, so too did all of the music publishers whom Strauss tried. Determined to get his work in print, Strauss arranged to have it published by art-publisher Paul Cassirer. *Krämerspiegel* (op. 66), or 'The Shopkeeper's Mirror,' was published and premiered in 1921, but the performance was kept private to prevent legal recourse. On Strauss's last birthday (1949), seven of the *Krämerspiegel* songs were played on Berlin radio. As a mark of how much Strauss's relationship with the publishing establishment had changed by then, publish-

ers Lienau and Reinecke complained that the songs which mocked them had been omitted from the broadcast! Despite the radio broadcast, by that time, *Krämerspiegel* had slipped into relative obscurity, but not before Strauss had extracted the piano prelude to the eighth song (generally named as one of Strauss's most beautiful melodies) for later use in his opera, *Capriccio*.

In 1959, *Krämerspiegel* reappeared on the music scene with a new Boosey & Hawkes edition. By noting Strauss's improved relationship with his publishers, it was at last possible for a music publisher to print the work, as *Krämerspiegel* could be depoliticized as an amusing historical satire, or perhaps, as Kerr suggested, an excuse for writing some charming music. The entire cycle was recorded by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau circa 1960, as a most unusual entry in Strauss's extensive body of lieder.

Strauss's legacy, though, is not only musical, but also legal. While his hopes of being released from his contract with Bote & Bock had been foiled, his larger vision of composer rights proved a reality. An offshoot of Strauss's GDT is still thriving in Germany today, defending the rights of composers. ▲

## SOURCES

Del Mar, Norman. *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works*. Vol. 3. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1973.

Gilliam, Bryan. *The Life of Richard Strauss*. Musical Lives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Petersen, Barbara A. "Die Händler und die Kunst: Richard Strauss as Composers' Advocate." In *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, 115-132. Ed. Bryan Gilliam. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.

Petersen, Barbara A. *Ton und Wort: The Lieder of Richard Strauss*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980.

Aaron Alon, Phi Omicron, Houston Alumni, continues to gain recognition as a composer. He recently had three compositions performed: solo flute at the Society of Composers, (Houston), oboe solo at the National Association of Composers/College Music Society, (San Marcos), and a composition for voice, cello and piano at the Sonus Chamber Music Society, (Houston). Read more about Aaron on page 6.