Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

“Festliches Praeludium,” Opus 61

The best-known concert hall in Vienna is the Musikverein, built in 1870, and in whose main hall, the “Goldener Saal” (“Golden Hall”), many famous works by Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, Strauss, and others were first heard. Feeling the need for more space, the city authorities in 1913 built the Konzerthaus, which consists of three halls—the Large Hall, the Mozart Hall, and the Schubert Hall. To celebrate the opening of these halls on October 19, 1913, a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was given, preceded by a new work commissioned from the composer then the most celebrated in the world, Richard Strauss. The Konzerthaus is still in use, but still overshadowed by the older Musikverein.

The enormous success of Strauss's Der Rosenkavalier in Dresden in 1911 was followed by the mixed reception of his hybrid opera-play Ariadne auf Naxos in Stuttgart in 1912. Strauss was already planning more operas and a huge orchestral work, the Alpine Symphony. But he responded readily to the commission for a short work to be called Festliches Praeludium as for a festive occasion and as prelude to the mighty Beethoven symphony. He naturally included a part for the new organ and called for an immense orchestra, with (ideally) ninety-six strings and six (or preferably twelve) extra trumpets to be located above the orchestra or at the sides.

Having edited a German version of Berlioz’s Grand Traité d’instrumentation, Strauss accepted Berlioz’s opinion that the organ sounds best in alternation with the orchestra, rather than simultaneously with it. Berlioz put this into practice in his Te Deum. Similarly, Strauss gives the organ the first entry, with three grand, unrelated chords, a motif that returns from time to time.

The key is C major, music’s fundamental key, to be reinforced, in Strauss biographer Norman Del Mar’s words, by “a series of Perorations leading to further and greater Perorations,” since the celebratory tone can have little space for softer music. Strauss’s main theme, first heard in the violins, is far from complicated, striding forward vigorously like the mountain-climber in the Alpine Symphony. But in the Praeludium’s grandeur, Strauss was not aiming for a transcendental vision of nature; this was simply to be a rousing, noisy piece to launch a new building into the future.

HUGH MACDONALD

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