

Richard Strauss

“Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks,”

after the old rogue’s tale, set in rondo form for large orchestra, Opus 28

**RICHARD GEORG STRAUSS WAS BORN IN MUNICH, GERMANY, ON JUNE 11, 1864, AND DIED IN GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN, BAVARIA, ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1949. HE COMPLETED “TILL EULENSPIEGEL’S LUSTIGE STREICHE” (“TILL EULENSPIEGEL’S MERRY PRANKS”) ON MAY 6, 1895. THE FIRST PERFORMANCE WAS CONDUCTED BY FRANZ WÜLLNER ON NOVEMBER 5 THAT YEAR, IN COLOGNE.**

**THE SCORE OF “TILL EULENSPIEGEL” CALLS FOR PICCOLO, THREE FLUTES, THREE OBOES AND ENGLISH HORN, TWO CLARINETS, CLARINET IN D, AND BASS CLARINET, THREE BASSOONS AND CONTRABASSOON, FOUR HORNS PLUS FOUR MORE AD LIB., THREE TRUMPETS PLUS THREE MORE AD LIB., THREE TROMBONES, BASS TUBA, TIMPANI, SNARE DRUM, BASS DRUM, CYMBALS, TRIANGLE, LARGE RATTLE, AND STRINGS.**

There was a real Till Eulenspiegel, born early in the fourteenth century near Brunswick and gone to his reward—in bed, not on the gallows as in Strauss’s tone poem—in 1350 at Mölln in Schleswig-Holstein. Stories about him have been in print since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the first English version coming out around 1560 under the title *Here beginneth a merye Jest of a man that was called Howleglas* (“*Eule*” in German means “owl” and “*Spiegel*” “mirror” or “looking-glass”). The consistent and serious theme behind his jokes and pranks, often in themselves distinctly on the coarse and even brutal side, is that here is an individual getting back at society, more specifically the shrewd peasant more than holding his own against a stuffy bourgeoisie and a repressive clergy. The most famous literary version of *Till Eulenspiegel* is the one published in 1866 by the Belgian novelist Charles de Coster: set in the period of the Inquisition in the sixteenth century, it is also the most explicitly politicized telling of the story, and it is the source of one of the great underground masterpieces of 20th-century music, the oratorio *Thyl Claes* by the Russian-German composer Vladimir Vogel.

Strauss knew de Coster’s book, and it seems also that in 1889 in Würzburg he saw an opera called *Eulenspiegel* by Cyrill Kistler, a Bavarian composer whose earlier opera *Kunihild* had a certain currency in the ’80s and early ’90s, and for which he was proclaimed as Wagner’s heir. Indeed, Strauss’s first idea was to compose an *Eulenspiegel* opera, an idea that appealed to him especially after the failure of his own exceedingly Wagnerian *Guntram* in 1894. He sketched a scenario and later commissioned another from Count Ferdinand von Sporck, the librettist of Kistler’s *Kunihild*, but somehow the project never got into gear. “I have already put together a very pretty scenario,” he wrote in a letter, “but the figure of Master Till does not quite appear before my eyes. The book of folk-tales only outlines a generalized rogue with too superficial a dramatic personality, and developing his character in greater depth, taking into account his contempt for humanity, also presents considerable difficulties.”

But if Strauss could not see Master Till, he could hear him, and before 1894 was out, he had begun the tone poem that he finished on May 6, 1895. As always he could not make up his mind whether he was engaged in tone painting or “just music.” To Franz Wüllner, who was preparing the first performance, he wrote:

I really cannot provide a program for *Eulenspiegel*. Any words into which I might put the thoughts that the several incidents suggested to me would hardly suffice; they might even offend. Let me leave it, therefore, to my listeners to crack the hard nut the Rogue has offered them. By way of helping them to a better understanding, it seems enough to point out the two Eulenspiegel motives [Strauss jots down the opening of the work and the virtuosic horn theme], which, in the most diverse disguises, moods, and situations, pervade the whole up to the catastrophe when, after being condemned to death, Till is strung up on the gibbet. For the rest, let them guess at the musical joke a Rogue has offered them.

On the other hand, for Wilhelm Mauke, the most diligent of early Strauss exegetes, the composer was willing to offer a more detailed scenario—Till among the market-women, Till disguised as a priest, Till paying court to pretty girls, and so forth—the sort of thing guaranteed to have the

audience anxiously reading the program book instead of listening to the music, probably confusing priesthood and courtship anyway, wondering which theme represents “Till confounding the Philistine pedagogues,” and missing most of Strauss’s dazzling invention in the process. (Also, if you’ve ever been shown in a music appreciation class how to “tell” rondo form, forget it now.) It is probably useful to identify the two Till themes, the very first violin melody and what the horn plays about fifteen seconds later,\* and to say that the opening music is intended as a “once-upon-a-time” prologue that returns after the graphic trial and hanging as a charmingly formal epilogue (with rowdily humorous “kicker”). For the rest, Strauss’s compositional ingenuity and orchestral bravura plus your attention and fantasy will see to the telling of the tale.

Michael Steinberg