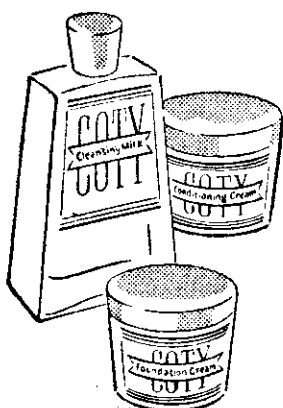


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DEATH OF A GENIUS

THE "flaming genius" and "supreme master of the orchestra," who revolutionised musical style in the '80s and '90s. and was recognised at the turn of the century as the greatest living composer, had become, with the passing of the years, the possessor of "a mere talent." Yet although the creative fire had died in him, the grand old man, as he was known affectionately to musicians, lived on to a remarkable age, the last surviving link in the chain of great Teutonic composers extending from Bach, Handel, and Beethoven to Wagner and Brahms.

"He was a genius." These words of Ernest Newman's sum up the musical world's view of Richard Strauss, and now that he has died at the age of 85 (on September 9 last) one can only mourn the passing of a great figure. His surviving compatriots, Schoenberg and Hindemith and the others, are lesser men.

Strauss was by most standards a remarkable figure. His rise to prominence was meteoric, and he became famous overnight as a great composer and conductor. His father, one of the greatest horn players of his time, was possessed by a bitter hatred of Wagner, which resulted in his son being educated on strict classical lines. The boy was something of a prodigy, a pianist at four and a composer at six. He studied with F. W. Meyer, but it was to von Bulow (whose post as conductor of the Meiningen orchestra he took over in 1885) and even more to Alexander Ritter, that he owed his awakening interest in modern music.

With the production of his symphonic fantasy *Aus Italien* in 1866, the pattern of Strauss's future public life became clear. "General amazement and wrath" was the reaction to its first performance, conducted personally by the 22-year-old composer, "because I have dared to go my own way and create my own form. . . . No one has become a great artist who was not held by thousands to be crazy." Even von Bulow did not approve of his "cacaphonic and programmatic" tendencies, but he welcomed the succeeding tone poems nevertheless—*Macbeth*, *Don Juan*, and *Death and Transfiguration*.

Sat Down to Conduct

Later Strauss became court conductor at Weimar, where he conducted programmes which he described as "madly modern." Curiously enough, although his music is often showy, vociferous and even pretentious, he was one of the most unobtrusive of conductors. Only very occasionally was the left hand used at all, while the almost imperceptible time-beating with baton neatly poised between finger and thumb would seem to have served little purpose without intensive work having previously been done at rehearsals. At the opera at Munich before the war he was in the habit not only of remaining seated at the conductor's desk and confining his gestures to his right hand and arm, but, after the opening bars, of propping his forearm on the side of the desk so as to use only his wrist and



RICHARD STRAUSS

fingers. He came in time to admire Wagner greatly, and although he normally sat while conducting, he would always stand to lead a Wagner composition.

He went on many concert tours of Europe, visited Britain and the United States on several occasions, and during the first World War became Hofkapellmeister under the Kaiser. Similarly he was President of the Reich Chamber of Music under Hitler, but his association with the Jewish émigré Stefan Zweig as librettist led to official disfavour. In asking Zweig for a further libretto, however, Strauss mentioned that it was quite safe to go ahead, as by the time he had written the score "the gang now in power" would be out. Unfortunately the Gestapo intercepted this letter, and only Strauss's international reputation saved him from liquidation.

His tone poems—*Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* (one of the cleverest scores ever written), *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *A Hero's Life*, *Don Quixote*, and others—were violently attacked on the basis of their acknowledged difficulty, their allegedly crude realism (sheep bleating and wind machines in *Don Quixote*, for instance), and their "unmelodious construction." *Salome*, first performed in 1905, was also difficult to perform, but it has become increasingly popular. "Objectional features" in the libretto led to its being edited before the first London production, and in the United States the critics applied such terms to the score as "bestial," "fetid," and "nauseous." Yet at a recent revival of the opera at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York it was described as "still one of the most exciting, novel, and important compositions of our times. . . . The glorification of decadence with musically soundest means, it glows and sparkles, thunders and sings." His most popular operatic success, however, was *Der Rosenkavalier*, which "the Met." alone has presented more than 70 times. This is a fascinating work and by far the best thing he ever wrote—one of the greatest of all operas.

A special memorial programme of Richard Strauss's works is being prepared by 2YA, and will be presented at a date to be announced later.

N.Z. LISTENER, SEPTEMBER 23, 1949.