Richard Strauss - *Metamorphosen*, Study for 23 Solo Strings

Richard Strauss

*Born June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany.*

*Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch, Germany.*

**Composition History**

Strauss composed *Metamorphosen* in the spring of 1945. The work is dedicated to Paul Sacher, who led the first performance on January 25, 1946, in Zurich. The score calls for ten violins, five violas, five cellos, and three basses. Performance time is approximately twenty-six minutes.

**Performance History**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Strauss’s *Metamorphosen* were given at Orchestra Hall on February 10 and 11, 1949, with Fritz Busch conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 29, 30, and 31, 2004, with Pinchas Zukerman conducting.

*Metamorphosen, Study for 23 Solo Strings*

Arturo Toscanini said, “To Strauss the composer I take off my hat; to Strauss the man I put it on again.” Toscanini could never forget how easily Strauss stepped in to conduct the production of Wagner’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth in 1933 from which he himself had withdrawn to protest Hitler’s ban on Jewish artists. While many important conductors and performers fled their homelands rather than cooperate with the Nazi regime, Germany’s most famous living musician stayed put, absorbed in writing music while the world waged war around him. It was Strauss's misfortune to live at a time that would pit his creative abilities against his understanding of the larger issues of the world—in a country where music and politics became inseparable at the height of World War II.

Shortly after the *Parsifal* episode, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, appointed Strauss president of the new state music bureau without even asking him. From that point on, Strauss could no longer lead the self-contained, private life he always had enjoyed. Even his work and his family no longer offered refuge—his new librettist, Stefan Zweig, fled to Switzerland because he was Jewish, cutting short a promising collaboration, and the welfare of Strauss’s own daughter-in-law, also a Jew, was now in danger.

Despite the ways the war touched his own life and the lives of many people he knew, it was ultimately through music that...
Strauss came to terms with the devastation of Nazi power. When he learned of the destruction of the opera houses in Weimar and Munich, he gave in to grief and outrage—his world had collapsed. Virtually every major opera house or concert hall in his land was now rubble. He wrote:

The burning of the Munich Court Theater, where Tristan and Die Meistersinger received their first performances, where I first heard Freischütz seventy-three years ago, where my father sat at the first horn desk for forty-nine years—it was the greatest catastrophe of my life; there is no possible consolation, and, at my age, no hope.

Strauss had led a charmed life. In a very real sense these were the most shattering personal losses he ever experienced—the great masterpieces of German music were his childhood textbooks and the halls and theaters themselves were familiar guideposts in the landscape he dearly loved. Shortly after the bombing of Dresden, the last German city to fall, Strauss began this work, a requiem of sorts for German civilization, for strings alone. It was finished in one month—a month during which Strauss finally confronted his past and once again became a great composer.

During this time, Strauss was reading the complete works of Goethe from cover to cover, and that’s probably where he found his title, Metamorphosen (Metamorphosis), for it was a word Goethe often used, as late as the titles of two of his last poems. Strauss never explained the choice; most listeners assume it refers to the way he develops his musical material. But in a work that’s as personal as anything Strauss ever wrote (including such autobiographical pieces as Ein Heldenleben and the Domestic Symphony), it’s inconceivable that his title doesn’t suggest a more profound kind of transformation.

After he had begun work on this score, Strauss recognized the similarity between one of his main musical ideas and the famous funeral march from Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony. Like a great novelist, he made the most of sheer coincidence and even allowed the cellos and basses to quote Beethoven’s theme in the final measures, where he wrote in his manuscript: “In Memoriam!” Another passage recalls a theme from King Mark’s lament in act 2 of Tristan and Isolde and its appearance in this requiem for German musical culture is apt.

With its dense chromaticism, intricate counterpoint, and Wagnerian drive sweeping toward a great climax, Strauss’s score is a memorial to a type of music that had been abandoned long before 1945. Metamorphosen might well have been composed thirty or forty years earlier, for Strauss had disdained all the more recent trends. After writing the early tone poems (brilliantly launched by Don Juan) and the spectacular operas Salome and Elektra, Strauss turned his back on the musical advances of the day. For the next three decades his music seemed to stand still, locked in another time.

Metamorphosen succeeds so brilliantly because Strauss at last found a way to address the present with the voice of the past.

Two days after Strauss finished Metamorphosen, the Americans took Nürnberg, where Wagner’s meistersingers once triumphed; two weeks later Hitler killed himself.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
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