

Composer's Corner...

Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss, the Bavarian son of an orchestral horn player who had worked for Wagner, married the Prussian soprano Pauline von Ahna in 1894. They frequently performed songs together, with Strauss playing the piano.

Pauline's military family looked down their noses at the plebeian Strauss, and Pauline herself frequently scolded her husband. In spite of this – or perhaps because of it – Strauss wrote Pauline some of his most beautiful songs, and dedicated much of his work to the soprano voice.

The Four Last Songs was Strauss's last work, written when he was 84. All four songs deal with the subject of death. The soloist is a soprano, and there is beautiful writing for horn: both are tributes to Strauss's wife and father.

Three songs are by Hermann Hesse, who wrote the famous novel *The Glass Bead Game*, about a fictional intellectual community dedicated to playing an elaborate mind-game. The fourth song is by Josef von Eichendorff, a Prussian poet, novelist and playwright.

In his setting for the last poem in the cycle, *Im Abendrot* (At twilight) Strauss quotes from his earlier tone poem, *Death and Transfiguration*, written 60 years before, which will also be performed at this concert. The quotation comes after the phrase 'Is this perhaps Death?'

Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration) is an orchestral tone poem depicting the death of an artist. It is four parts, during which the artist falls sick, battles with death, sees his life passing before him, and finally achieves the transfiguration he desires.

When Strauss himself was on his death bed, in 1949, he said to his daughter in law: 'It's strange, Alice, dying is just how I composed it in *Tod und Verklärung*.'

Jean Sibelius

Jean Sibelius was born into a Swedish-speaking family in Tavastehus, now Hämeenlinna, in western Finland. He grew up speaking both Swedish and Finnish. His early ambition was to be a violinist, but he gave up this idea when he realised he had begun his studies too late to be a virtuoso.

Sibelius began writing his Second Symphony (which has long been his most popular one out of the seven he composed) in Rapallo, Italy, in 1901, and completed it in Finland in 1902. He conducted the first performance in Helsinki the same year. He described the symphony as 'a confession of the soul.'

Sibelius made his trip to Rapallo as the result of money raised by a sponsor, Baron Axel Carpelan, who had given Sibelius the name for his tone poem *Finlandia*. Carpelan felt that the beauty and culture of Italy would inspire Sibelius in the same way that it had inspired Tchaikovsky and Strauss.

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