Richard Strauss

Metamorphosen (version for string septet)
Piano Quartet in C minor op. 13*
Prelude to *Capriccio* op. 85

The Nash Ensemble: Marianne Thorsen *vn**, Malin Broman *vn*, Lawrence Power *va**, Philip Dukes *va*, Paul Watkins *vc**, Pierre Doumenge *vc*, Duncan McTier *db*, Ian Brown *pf**

Hyperion CDA 67574 (78 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Since each of the works on this welcome new release employs a small chamber ensemble, one might wonder why Hyperion did not release this disc under the title *Richard Strauss: Chamber Music*; it is indeed difficult to find another obvious connection between three such very different compositions. In fact, by resisting this easy categorization, the producers have respected the fact that two of these pieces have rather complex generic affiliations. *Metamorphosen* (1945; TrV 290[1]) is recorded here in a version for string septet, but in its more familiar guise as a 'Study for 23 solo strings' it is normally grouped with Strauss's orchestral works rather than with his chamber music. Given its role in Strauss's last completed opera, the frequently excerpted Prelude to *Capriccio* (1941; TrV 279a) also defies simple categorization. Only the early Piano Quartet (1884; TrV 137) can without hesitation be classified as chamber music in the traditional sense; however, given that the two chronologically later pieces on this disc involve strings alone, the still earlier String Quartet in A (1880; TrV 95) might have been a more obvious choice for this compilation. However, this would have deprived the listener of a splendid reading of the Piano Quartet; indeed, the playing of the Nash Ensemble (NE) throughout this disc makes one realize anew that Strauss's excellence as a composer was not confined to the fields of programmatic orchestral music, opera and lieder. His output for smaller ensembles may be largely confined to periods at the beginning and end of his career, but it is nonetheless accomplished and, at times (as in these three works), inspired.

The Piano Quartet was completed on 1 January 1885, and was subsequently awarded first prize in a competition run by the *Wiener Tonkünstlerverein*, a gratifying early success for Strauss. The NE captures perfectly the alternating intensity and light-heartedness of this Brahms-influenced chamber piece. Around the time it was written, Strauss was in the throes what he later described as his 'Brahmsschwärmerei', a brief period of infatuation with a composer whom he subsequently came to view as 'leathery St Johannes'.[2] The older composer

[1] The most complete catalogue of Strauss's works is that compiled by Franz Trenner, *Richard Strauss: Werkverzeichnis*, Veröffentlichungen der Richard-Strauss-Gesellschaft Band 12 (Munich: Ludwig, 1993). This will be cited in text by the usual abbreviation TrV (Trenner Verzeichnis).

[2] The term 'Brahmsschwärmerei' is found in Richard Strauss, 'Aus meinen Jugend- und Lehrjahren', *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, 2nd edition (Zürich: Atlantis, 1957): 207. 'Leathery St. Johannes' occurs in a letter from Strauss to Dora Wihan, 9 April 1889, in

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completed his third and final Piano Quartet (op. 60) less than a decade before Strauss's only foray into this medium, and, perhaps not by coincidence, the two works share the same key (C minor). In the first movement of Strauss's Quartet, the debt he owes to Brahms is particularly pronounced.[3] The NE take this *Allegro* at a slightly more urgent tempo than do the Philharmonisches Klavierquartett (PK), although the earlier recording is certainly not mannered or indulgent. Perhaps the most echt-Straussian idea in this movement (itself the most significant portion of the work as a whole) is the final exposition theme, a gloriously effulgent melody in E♭, which is justifiably milked by the NE. The uncleared piano pedal in the final three bars of the movement will not be to everyone's taste, even if it does add to the climactic effect. In the perky Scherzo, the NE again chooses a sprightlier pace than do the PK, and resists the temptation to point up the reprise of the *molto meno mosso* trio section at the end of the movement by pulling back the tempo second time around. In the third movement, a highly sentimentalized Andante (think Rachmaninoff, or Liszt's *Liebestraum* No. 3), the NE restores the A♭ in bar 65 (the A♮ in the PK performance is surely a misreading). The polyrhythmic activity of the final movement has been well described as 'Schumannian' (the third movement of the latter's piano concerto springs to mind), and is performed with appropriate zest by the NE. In sum, this is a sparkling rendition of what in the oeuvre of a lesser composer might well be described as a near masterpiece. In terms of the trajectory of Strauss's development, the Piano Quartet shows complete technical mastery, although the language is still derivative: Strauss has yet to find his own voice. The NE recording has demonstrated that, in spite of these caveats, the work is successful on its own terms, and can be listened to with much pleasure.

One integral facet of Strauss's mature compositional style, which is foregrounded at the very end of the Piano Quartet, is his penchant for harmonic 'sideslips': those occasions when he suddenly shifts key for a very brief period before returning to the main tonality. The piquant intrusions of E minor within the strongly cadential C-minor progressions are no more than a youthful *jeu d'esprit* here, but such harmonic ambiguities are integral to the other two works on this disc. At the very beginning of *Metamorphosen* these same two tonalities are in fact pitted against each other: it is not until bar 8 that the opening E-minor sonority can be perceived to be subordinate to C minor, the main tonality in this highly chromatic work. This tonal opposition pervades every element of the work's structure, and is particularly evident in the last five bars of this recording. In the septet arrangement, which is based on Strauss's *Particell*,[4] an E-minor chord is interposed between the repeated iterations of the tonic C minor chord. Elsewhere, the septet, which was published as recently as 1995 by Rudolf Leopold, is essentially identical to the 23-instrument version. The balance of the NE recording is never at fault: even the section beginning in bar 278, where the cantilena line in the violins could have been swamped by the busily rushing

Willi Schuh, *Richard Strauss: A Chronicle of the Early Years 1864–1898*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 165.

[3] The relationship between the two works has been remarked on by Bryan Gilliam (*Richard Strauss*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 26), and particularly by R. Larry Todd ('Strauss before Liszt and Wagner: Some Observations', in *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, ed. Bryan Gilliam, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992: 3–40, here 5–7).

[4] The *Particell* bears the title 'Andante (für 2 Violinen, 2 Bratsche, 2 Celli, 1 Contrabaß)'. See TRV, 329.

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first viola part, is a model of contrapuntal clarity (in the original version, Strauss has given the melody to no fewer than eight instruments to ensure that it sings through). In comparison with Karajan's historic 1947 version with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, the NE provides a much more inflected and passionate account (although one has to make allowances for the disparity in recording technologies here, particularly when one is working from a copy of a private transfer to CD of the original mono recording). Passion is certainly not lacking in Kempe's 1973 reading, although the coordination occasionally leaves something to be desired (such as at bar 37). By and large, the NE achieves a fine balance between silken playing, and the jagged intensity demanded by the music. My one reservation with this performance concerned the all-pervasive 'Scotch-snap' rhythm, first heard in bar 10 as part of the theme that has echoes of the funeral-march movement from the *Eroica* Symphony (Strauss quotes Beethoven's theme in full some 492 bars later in the cellos and double basses, surtitled 'In Memoriam'). For me, this was too skittishly rendered – at times it was virtually double-dotted – and was out of keeping with the overall mood.

The elegiac tone and all-consuming intensity of *Metamorphosen* distance it from most of the other instrumental compositions Strauss produced in the last decade of his life, works that he described with characteristic irony as 'wrist exercises'.[5] It has been surmised that the piece was composed as an expression of the grief Strauss felt at the destruction wrought by the war. In the composer's *Tagebücher* from this period, there are pasted clippings reporting the devastation that resulted from the Allied bombing, and Strauss underlined any mention of opera houses or theatres that were damaged.[6] Lamentations about man's inhumanity to man and the destruction of civilization and culture also inform many letters from the period, and the vast majority of scholars have seen in *Metamorphosen* an expression of similar sentiments. However, given Strauss's notoriety (he had once held the post of President of the Reichsmusikkammer and thus had been publicly identified with the National Socialist regime) one contemporary journalist in 1947 went so far as to protest that the work was a *Grabgesang* for Hitler.[7] The cover artwork for the NE disc, *The Dangerous Hour* (1942) by the Czech painter Toyen (a.k.a. Maria Cerminova), which was undoubtedly chosen with *Metamorphosen* in mind, is potentially just as ambiguous, even though the

[5] The description 'Handgelenksübungen' occurs in a letter Strauss wrote to his future biographer, Willi Schuh, on 8 October 1943. See Richard Strauss, *Briefwechsel mit Willi Schuh* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1969): 50.

[6] Tagebuch Blau IV, 39 and inside cover. This is held with the rest of Strauss's diaries at the Strauss Villa in Garmisch-Partenkirchen (the Strauss family archive). I would like to thank Frau Gabriele Strauss-Hotter for allowing me access to this uniquely valuable collection of primary source material. The diaries are currently being edited for publication by Jürgen May and Walter Werbeck.

[7] Matthijs Vermeulen, 'Een dubbel schandaal: Het Concertgebouw herdenkt Hitler', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 11 Oct. 1947, 7; discussed in Timothy L. Jackson, 'The Metamorphosis of the *Metamorphosen*, in *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992): 193–241, here 201–2. Elsewhere in his article, Jackson speculates on a connection between *Metamorphosen* and Goethe's nihilistic poem 'Niemand wird sich selber kennen'. This idea has been taken up more recently by Charles Youmans, who has written briefly but insightfully on the work, situating it in terms of Strauss's lifelong devotion to Goethe and his overall intellectual/philosophical development. See *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005): 129–32.

artist's credentials as a political resistance figure are far more robust than are Strauss's, since her Surrealist paintings would have been classified as 'entartete Kunst' (degenerate art) in Hitler's Germany. The figure of the bird of prey with open wings brings the German *Reichsadler* unbidden to mind; however, the disturbing sight of the human hands where the bird's feet should be, resting on a wall topped with jagged pieces of glass (a *Kristallnacht* reference?), cautions one against any simplistic reading of the allegory.

The Prelude to *Capriccio* belongs to another world altogether, one redolent with rococo charm and elegance. This deliberately apolitical work engages with the oft-debated question as to whether words or music have priority in opera. This excerpt should more properly have been called the *Capriccio* Sextet, since the NE chose to record not only the *Einleitung* proper but also the music of the first part of Scene 1, without the admittedly peripheral vocal parts which are overlaid on a continuation of the glorious string-sextet texture (musically peripheral that is – the poet, Olivier and composer, Flamand, here lay out the main theme of the opera, 'Wort oder Ton?'). By contrast, Sawallisch's version (rec. 1957–58, digitally remastered 2000), which has been excerpted from his recording of the complete opera, ends where the curtain goes up (bar 149), at a point where there is an earlier strong cadential closure in the tonic key of F major. The resultant structure is necessarily different from that conveyed by the NE recording, since the music for Scene 1 reprises much of the opening material (bars 4–41 return transposed from C into F). However, even in the shorter version, a free ternary format may be discerned, courtesy of a typical Straussian gesture towards recapitulation of the opening material at bar 119 (as in earlier works such as *Ein Heldenleben*, the music thereafter pursues a rather different course). Separating these two loosely parallel sections is a more disturbed central episode: the rhapsodic, improvisatory quality of bars 45–63 and the increased passion when the piece turns towards the minor are particularly well conveyed in the NE recording. The Scene 1 material opens like a transfigured reminiscence of the opening – perhaps more of an extended coda than a recapitulation proper – and we are left luxuriating in the glorious sound-world that is characteristic of Strauss's last opera, simultaneously the first work of his 'Indian summer'.

In summary, this is a superb disc: the playing is of the highest standard, and Michael Kennedy's liner notes are particularly informative. We may be more familiar with Strauss's large-scale compositions than with his works for small ensemble (although in his operas Strauss frequently creates ravishing sonorities with chamber-like groups), but after hearing to these persuasive performances, one recognizes that the quality of his output in this area in some measure compensates for its relative scarcity.

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