

PART II

**Works**



## 4 The first cycle of tone poems

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“The Mannheim orchestra was very struck and astounded by the leap from my F minor Symphony to *Macbeth*,” reported Strauss after a rehearsal of the latter work in January, 1889.<sup>1</sup> This astonishment is not to be wondered at: there is a profound stylistic gulf between the staid Classicism of Strauss’s Second Symphony (which the orchestra performed under the composer’s direction in October, 1885) and his first tone poem with its corrosive dissonances, structural freedoms, and, most obviously, its overt reference to extra-musical subject matter. In the interim, Strauss had been converted to a “totally new way” of composing, one inspired by Liszt and Wagner.<sup>2</sup> While some of his earlier works display high levels of technical assurance, it was not until the first cycle of tone poems – *Macbeth* (1887–8, rev. 1891), *Don Juan* (1888), and *Tod und Verklärung* (1888–9) – that Strauss found a fully original voice. These three works mark the beginnings of an interest in poetic music that would dominate his output until the final decade of his life and would earn him widespread fame, even notoriety, throughout the German-speaking lands and beyond.

### The heir to Liszt and Wagner

When Strauss took up his first professional engagement as assistant conductor to the gifted if irascible Hans von Bülow in October, 1885, he could not have foreseen how significantly this position would change his life. At that time, Strauss was in the grips of what he later called his *Brahmsschwärmerei*, a juvenile passion for Brahms, and shortly after arriving at Meiningen he met his idol, who encouraged him and gave him valuable advice. Yet this was not the encounter that Strauss would later describe as the “greatest event of the winter in Meiningen.” This accolade was reserved for his acquaintance with a far less renowned figure: Alexander Ritter, then a violinist in the orchestra.<sup>3</sup> The importance of Ritter’s contribution to the young composer’s development was acknowledged by Strauss in one of his earliest autobiographical accounts, adding this lengthy aside to the tabular chronology for 1885:

Acquaintance with *Alexander Ritter*, who made me – I had been strictly Classically trained until that point, having grown up with only Haydn,

[59]

Mozart, Beethoven, and having just arrived at Brahms by way of Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Schumann – into a confirmed *musician-of-the-future* after years of affectionate efforts and teaching, in which he disclosed the music-historical importance of the works and writings of Wagner and Liszt. I owe to him alone my understanding of these two masters; he put me on the way that I now walk independently. He introduced me to Schopenhauer's doctrines.<sup>4</sup>

Ritter, himself a minor composer, had been a pupil of Liszt and had married Wagner's niece, factors that explain his fanatical enthusiasm for the two leaders of the so-called New German School. Over the course of that winter, Strauss's indoctrination began, and it continued when both men relocated to Munich in fall, 1886. In one sense, Ritter's impassioned advocacy was only the catalyst that aroused Strauss's latent sympathies for "progressive" music: ever since his secret study of *Tristan* at the age of seventeen, Strauss had been ambivalently fascinated by Wagner, in spite of his conservative training and the fulminations of his deeply anti-Wagnerian father. So while Ritter had not a tabula rasa to work on, he certainly deepened his young protégé's knowledge of the Wagnerian repertory, and firmly grounded Wagner's aesthetic project in Schopenhauer's philosophy, something that would complicate Strauss's Wagner reception in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> So far as can be established, Strauss's acquaintance with Liszt's music was minimal before Ritter took him in hand, but he quickly became convinced of its merits and remained a life-long enthusiast.

The progress of Strauss's musical realignment between 1886 and 1888 is difficult to chart with any exactitude, given the scantiness of the evidence. His decision to join the progressive *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* in March, 1887 – a society dedicated to the promotion of new music that had been founded under Liszt's auspices in 1859 – is one straw in the wind.<sup>6</sup> The clearest intimation of his changing compositional orientation is *Aus Italien*, the "symphonic fantasy" he wrote in 1886 after a visit to Italy. Described by the composer as his "first step towards independence," this work still adheres to the four-movement pattern he would later abjure, but marks a decisive step towards the tone poem on several fronts.<sup>7</sup> Most obviously, it marks Strauss's earliest venture into programmatic orchestral composition: the individual movements are given titles – "In the Campagna," "Among Rome's Ruins," "On the Beach at Sorrento," and "Folk Life at Naples," respectively – which can be related to the music to a greater or lesser extent.<sup>8</sup> The overt tone-painting of wind, waves, and bird cries in the third movement attracted much attention, to the evident chagrin of the composer, who strenuously argued that "the content of my work [is] the feelings aroused at the sight of the splendid beauties of Rome and Naples, not descriptions of these."<sup>9</sup>

Still more significant in Strauss's mind, to judge from his remarks, were the innovations of form and structure in *Aus Italien*. A couple of days after the premiere, he stated that the work "departed in almost every respect from the conventional symphony, i.e. from sonata form."<sup>10</sup> This claim is at most partially true – the "Rome" movement, in particular, is clearly in sonata form, as Strauss's later analysis confirms – but even as an aspiration, it is indicative of the direction of his thought.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of time, Strauss's initial enthusiasm for the work faded, and he came to a more even-handed estimation of its innovations. In the last decade of his life, he referred to *Aus Italien* as his "first hesitant effort" to implement a new compositional agenda, which he described as follows: "New ideas must search for new forms – this basic principle of Liszt's symphonic works, in which the poetic idea was really the form-shaping element, became from then on the guiding principle for my own symphonic work."<sup>12</sup>

Strauss's views on form, poetic idea, and the relationship between the two received detailed articulation in a lengthy letter he wrote to Bülow in August, 1888, effectively a manifesto for his new compositional bent. For reasons of tact, he refrains from criticizing Brahms, even though by now he was thoroughly disenchanted with his former idol. Similarly, Strauss avoids controversial appeals to Liszt or Wagner; instead he invokes Beethoven's indisputable authority for his new direction (the connection between Beethoven and the New Germans was something he repeatedly emphasized elsewhere). Citing Beethoven's overtures and his oeuvre in general as "unthinkable without the stimulus of a poetic subject," Strauss maintains that "inspiration by a poetical idea, whether or not it be introduced as a program" is vital to the creation of "a work of art that is unified in its mood and consistent in its structure." The musical-poetic content he wished to convey was incompatible with "ternary sonata form," whose ubiquity in symphonic composition he challenged, noting that even Beethoven had departed from it "where for a new content he had to devise a new form." Instead of slavishly adhering to this outworn formula, Strauss claimed that it was "a legitimate artistic method to create a correspondingly new form for every new subject, to shape which neatly and perfectly is a very difficult task, but for that reason the more attractive." In consequence, there could be no more "purely formalistic, Hanslickian music-making," and "no symphonies."<sup>13</sup> To other correspondents he was less restrained, inveighing against the irredeemable aridity of the symphony: "Away with the barren four-movement formulaic entity, which has sprouted no new content since [Beethoven's Ninth Symphony]."<sup>14</sup> His vehement condemnation of absolute music ("art fabrication," "possible for anyone only moderately musical") ran parallel with his veneration of program music ("real music!," "true art").<sup>15</sup> Such outspoken, radical views merely confirm the new direction

of Strauss's thought, which had by that time already found more practical expression in his first symphonic poems.

### ***Macbeth*: Strauss's vaulting ambition**

If *Aus Italien* was still a "bridge," then with *Macbeth* and *Don Juan* Strauss felt he had entered onto his own "totally individual path."<sup>16</sup> The symphonic poem, which had been associated with "advanced" composition ever since its invention at the hands of Liszt, was an obvious choice of genre for one who claimed to be "a young musical progressive (of the most extreme left)."<sup>17</sup> For publication, Strauss tended to give his works the label *Tondichtung* (tone poem) in preference to Liszt's title, but in his correspondence he uses both designations indiscriminately.<sup>18</sup> While the two terms are thus demonstrably cognate, that should not be taken to imply that Strauss's conception of the genre was identical to Liszt's: far from it, in fact. At one point in the gestation of *Macbeth*, Strauss claimed that he was working on a sort of symphonic poem, "but not in the manner of Liszt" (*nicht nach Liszt*).<sup>19</sup> This cryptic remark on one level signals Strauss's wish to distance himself from Liszt's homophonic textures in favour of a richer, more polyphonic approach.<sup>20</sup> Another important distinction between the two has been noted by John Williamson: where Liszt's works are mainly focussed on character depiction, Strauss's involve the representation of dramatic events.<sup>21</sup> The following excerpt from a letter to Ludwig Thuille shows how important this approach was for Strauss, one that he claimed was partly taken in Liszt's *Faust* Symphony:

The real dramatic action happens first in Mephisto, and this is really also the first "symphonic poem"; the two great figures of Faust and Gretchen are by contrast so complicated, that their *representation* as well as dramatic development in a single movement was not at all possible for him [Liszt]. Hence as exposition the two greatest mood pictures ever written (the Faust movement does admittedly also have some development) and the real dramatic complexity in Mephisto.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever its merits as an analysis of Liszt's oeuvre, the idea that the symphonic poem is of its nature imbued with dramatic development seems to have had regulative force for Strauss. As such, his tone poems can also be seen as sites of engagement with Wagner's ideas, a fusion of Liszt's invention with elements of music drama. The trajectory of Strauss's career, in which a period mainly given over to symphonic music was succeeded by one focussed on writing for the stage with relatively little overlap between the two, has further encouraged the identification of proto-operatic traits

in his tone poems. Writing after *Salome* and *Elektra* had appeared, Rudolf Louis had the benefit of hindsight when commenting upon the increased realism, even visuality, of Strauss's approach to program music in comparison to Liszt:

Strauss's unique and personal strength [is] that he has developed the ideal, elevated gestures of the tonal language of Liszt into a gestural language of great specificity, that undertakes quite seriously not only to interpret the events of an external plot in tone (by revealing the music that is latent in them), but to *draw* them until they are recognizable to the inner eye.<sup>23</sup>

While observations such as these are true for Strauss's orchestral oeuvre as a whole, matters are more equivocal in the case of his first tone poem, *Macbeth*. The question of how this piece relates to its Shakespearean source is still a subject of debate. Some interpret the work as no more than a character portrait of Macbeth himself: "the music tells us almost exclusively about the hero," wrote one reviewer after the premiere in 1890.<sup>24</sup> This was the approach taken by Liszt, who "invented musical equivalents of Hamlet and Faust as the archetypes which, half released from the poetic works themselves, they had in the meantime become in the general European consciousness."<sup>25</sup> Like his precursor, Strauss tended to choose characters with strong symbolic resonance – figures such as Macbeth, Don Juan, Till Eulenspiegel, Don Quixote – as the eponymous heroes of his tone poems. However, in the case of the latter two works at least, he went beyond finding musical analogues for the personalities involved and explicitly depicted a series of incidents involving those characters. By contrast, the scantiness of the paratextual clues in *Macbeth* would seem to indicate more modest ambitions. Strauss gave labels to two themes, "Macbeth" (m. 6) and "Lady Macbeth" (m. 64), the latter accompanied by a brief extract from her first soliloquy ("Hie thee hither ..." [I.v.12–17]).<sup>26</sup> Where later works are supplied with a more detailed poetic preface or section titles, Strauss's first tone poem does not give much overt encouragement to those who might wish to see it as a musical enactment of the plot of Shakespeare's play.

Recently, writers such as James Hepokoski have convincingly argued that establishing the extent of the relationship between a symphonic poem's music and its declared poetic subject is part of the remit of the listener-interpreter rather than an immanent property of the work itself.<sup>27</sup> Thus plausible scenarios can be devised that build on these minimal clues to construct an interpretation of the music alongside the events of Shakespeare's play. And for those who hold to the "play" theory, there is some empirical evidence on which to draw. In 1887, Strauss played the work through for Bülow, who strongly objected to its original conclusion, a D major march of Macduff: "It was all very well for an *Egmont* overture to conclude with a

Example 4.1a *Macbeth*, mm. 6–13

Example 4.1b *Macbeth*, mm. 324–30

triumphal march of Egmont, but a symphonic poem *Macbeth* could never finish with the triumph of Macduff.”<sup>28</sup> While Strauss did accept this argument and pruned the Macduff element down to a few off-stage fanfares (mm. 538–41), it nonetheless seems that he had attempted to encapsulate the broad course of the play into his tone poem. Scott Warfield has argued that after the revisions, the work was “refocused exclusively on the psychological states of Macbeth and his accomplice, Lady Macbeth, instead of the more specific events of Shakespeare’s drama.”<sup>29</sup> True, there is no Birnam Wood, no Banquo, nothing that unambiguously suggests the three witches.<sup>30</sup> However, Macbeth himself undergoes profound development across the course of the five acts, from pusillanimous Thane to paranoid tyrant and, as such, any character-based tone poem will of necessity follow the narrative trajectory. Such is the case here, with the music depicting a gradual descent into turmoil in the latter half of the tone poem. The unraveling of the hero can be heard in the distorted echoes of the “Macbeth” theme later on (Examples 4.1a and b). Lady Macbeth, initially portrayed as a manipulative inciter of her husband, is subsequently reduced to mere interjections (Examples 4.2a and b), while a subordinate idea, sometimes interpreted as her goading her husband to murder (mm. 83–4), becomes ever more prominent, in keeping with the increasing bloodiness of Macbeth’s actions and his independence from her direction.<sup>31</sup> Other musical signifiers that can easily be associated with elements of the plot include the fanfare-based march (mm. 260–1) as an emblem of royalty,<sup>32</sup> and the



Example 4.2a *Macbeth*, mm. 67–70

Example 4.2b *Macbeth*, mm. 387–8 (woodwind only)

irregular, jagged chords fading into silence as an unmistakable symbol of death (mm. 509–15). Not without cause did Strauss subtitle the work *nach Shakespeares drama*.

In many ways, *Macbeth* is a bold statement of intent on Strauss's part. The harmonic language he employs here is difficult, deliberately so: Strauss was proud of having written dissonances so corrosive that they could “devour each other.”<sup>33</sup> The abrupt harmonic changes in the “Macbeth” theme (Example 4.1a) evince a desire to shock, to break with convention, and are deliberately jagged in comparison with the effortless modulatory freedom he demonstrates in later works. Perhaps the ambitions of the composer, who wished with one stroke to assume the mantle of heir to Liszt and Wagner, were not so dissimilar to those of the eponymous character. And just like Macbeth, Strauss might be seen to have overreached himself somewhat, even if the consequences were less calamitous. The protracted series of revisions that delayed its publication until after the appearance of *Don Juan* testifies to the difficulties he had in acclimatizing himself to this new style.<sup>34</sup> Even when he was finally satisfied with the content and structure of the work, he continued to tinker with the instrumentation.<sup>35</sup>

The work as we know it today takes sonata form as its point of departure, and subjects it to a variety of what may be described as “deformation procedures.”<sup>36</sup> A short, testosterone-driven fanfare leads into the bi-partite expositional space with radically contrasted masculine (D minor) and feminine (F# minor) theme groups. This is followed by a double

episode in B $\flat$ , first (m. 123) a lyrical song that becomes increasingly agitated and leads to some form of catastrophe (m. 242), followed by the regal march idea (unusually, in triple time). Measure 324 clearly marks a restart of some kind, with the failed restatements of the “Macbeth” theme and subsequent deployment of the second-group “goading” idea (and the signal omission of Lady Macbeth herself). In Hepokoski’s reading, mm. 324–535 form a distorted “recapitulatory space,” with the preceding episodes (mm. 123–259 and 260–323) replacing the usual development section.<sup>37</sup> The practice of making a brief, recognizable recapitulatory allusion before deviating is also found in later tone poems, where it provides an important point of orientation for the listener, and thus synecdochically replaces a complete, dramatically redundant recapitulation.<sup>38</sup> Strauss’s approach here thus closely matches his description of the *Faust* Symphony (for him, essentially an expanded symphonic poem): once the personae have been introduced in the exposition, the real dramatic action takes over. After Macbeth’s “death,” a slow, sinuous section with disembodied recollections of earlier themes ensues (mm. 515–58); this is initially supported by a long dominant pedal and only resolves to the tonic at m. 536. The somber mood is hardly mitigated by the perfunctory final crescendo with which the work closes, itself a reference back to a similar gesture at the opening.

Of all Strauss’s tone poems, *Macbeth* was the least successful in the concert hall.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, the public’s affection was won not by the overt violence of this work, but by the unique blend of machismo and seductiveness in *Don Juan* and those that followed. Bülow commented that “for the time being the witches’ servant is still not of equal significance to the witchmaster.”<sup>40</sup> While Strauss’s later works are arguably more accomplished and certainly have aroused more affection, nonetheless with *Macbeth*, which was appropriately dedicated to Alexander Ritter, the essential elements of his future practice are already in place.

### ***Don Juan*: a bolt from the heavens**

“The idea of *élan* itself, music as curve, implies a fall from the heights; what was thrown by the composing hand must sink abruptly in a meteoric arc. This was the almost visual form of Strauss’s first authentic work, *Don Juan*; never again did he achieve the same unity of program, thematic content, and formal development.”<sup>41</sup> Although he is numbered among Strauss’s sharpest critics, Adorno’s essays on the composer are highly insightful, and never more so than in this penetrating description of *Don Juan*. Strauss’s second tone poem launches itself with apparently inexhaustible vim and

vigor, the stratospherically climbing violins in the opening bars emblematic of “the breakaway mood of the 1890s,” as Dahlhaus famously described it.<sup>42</sup> The sheer swagger of this über-masculine portrayal of the libidinous hero outdoes even the prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin*, surely an inspiration. And yet, this rocketing, boundless vitality ultimately consumes itself and plummets to earth. At the end of the work, after many vicissitudes, matters appear to be driving inexorably towards an emphatic peroration: yet at the very peak of dynamic intensity, Strauss brutally cuts away from the climactic dominant. After a tense *Generalpause* (m. 585) the music subsides in a series of quiet subdominant shudders onto the tonic minor. Explanations for this shocking reversal have naturally been sought in the subject matter. For his tone poem, Strauss drew on a version of the Don Juan story by Nikolaus Lenau, which ends with the death of the protagonist in a duel. In fact, Juan deliberately casts aside his rapier, having come to the realization that his imminent victory is worthless: “My deadly enemy is given into my power / But this too is tedious, as is life itself.”<sup>43</sup> This existential angst differentiates Don Juan from literary prototypes such as Goethe’s Werther or Byron’s Manfred, whose self-sought deaths are Romantic responses to unfulfilled love or unexpiated guilt rather than undertaken out of sheer disgust with life.

Although there would seem to be a satisfying marriage of musical and dramatic plots at this point, Strauss never indicated any such extensive parallels between his music and Lenau’s “dramatic scenes.” In fact, his sketches reveal that at one stage in the gestation of the work he envisaged a “big daring coda, stormy ending.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the three excerpts from the poem included in the Preface to the published score reveal aspects of Don Juan’s philosophy and mood rather than touching on specific events. In conjunction with the associations of the title, these verses would enable listeners to situate the changes in mood and emotion within an appropriate frame of reference, but Strauss refrained from pointing up any more detailed correspondence to extra-musical events. The questions of how much audiences need to be told and how best this information might be conveyed occupied Strauss throughout his career as a tone poet. Like other composers of program music, Strauss was caught between conflicting positions. On one side was his conviction that music was ineffable, that its central expressive poetic content transcended verbal explanation, as the following 1889 remarks attest:

[A] piece of music which has nothing truly poetic to convey to me – the sort of content which can be properly represented *only in music*, that words may be able to *suggest, but no more than suggest* – in my view a piece like that is anything you care to call it, but not that most poetic of arts, capable of the highest expression: music.<sup>45</sup>

Over fifty years later, Strauss's belief in the self-sufficiency of music was articulated still more strongly when he claimed that "[a] poetic program may well suggest new forms, but whenever music is not developed logically from within, it becomes *Literaturmusik*."<sup>46</sup> In other words, Strauss believed that the musical coherence of a work should not have to be shored up by appeals to the extra-musical, to verbal explications. And yet, this focus on poetic content was in Strauss's mind not incompatible with the illustration of specific dramatic events. The series of torrid love affairs in *Don Juan*, for instance, was irresistible to one aware of his talents for depicting the erotic.<sup>47</sup> He was pragmatic enough to recognize that greater success could be achieved if the connection between his music and the extra-musical element were spelled out unequivocally. In later years he would attempt to solve this dilemma by authorizing the production of an explanatory booklet by a third party. This ensured that audiences had a crutch on which to lean, while the arm's-length distance between artwork and explication allowed Strauss to preserve deniability in the face of hostile criticism. The widespread practice of relating *Don Juan* to the events of Lenau's poem ultimately stems from one such guide written by Wilhelm Mauke dating from 1897.<sup>48</sup>

Even before this appeared, Strauss was obliged to defend himself on the charge of excessive attention to events in this work. Cosima Wagner gently reproached her young protégé (whom she was grooming for future Bayreuth stardom) for allowing his intellect to rule his feelings. He was guilty, in effect, of failing to adhere to Wagner's dictum that a symphonic musician should "look away from the incidents of ordinary life ... and sublimate whatever lies within it to its quintessential emotional content."<sup>49</sup> In response, Strauss pleaded that naïve composition of the sort practiced by Mozart, Haydn, and Schubert was impossible in his day, given intervening developments, and so artists had to engage both intellect and emotion in the task of creation, with the latter quality predominating in all "true" musicians.<sup>50</sup> Wagner's widow was not alone in sensing a departure from Wagnerian orthodoxy in *Don Juan*: Engelbert Humperdinck called it a "breach with Romanticism," and contrasted it with *Tod und Verklärung*, which for him marked "a perceptible return to Liszt and Wagner."<sup>51</sup>

Like *Macbeth*, *Don Juan* poses its share of formal problems for the analyst. From a *Formenlehre* perspective, there are elements of rondo, sonata, and the multi-movement symphony to be found, brought together in an idiosyncratic fusion. In his celebrated article on the work, Hepokoski makes a case for an initial rondo-like structure, which mutates into a sonata offshoot after a pivotal central double-episode (mm. 197–307), and he provides convincing hermeneutic justification for this shift (the once-careless seducer cannot cast off his latest inamorata as before; he too has

been changed by the affair).<sup>52</sup> However, without denying the rondo (or ritornello) tendencies of the opening, it might still be read as a sonata exposition, with a masculine first theme in E major (mm. 1–40), transition, and lyrical second theme in B major (mm. 90–148, preceded by its dominant in m. 71).<sup>53</sup> Thus far, indeed, it could hardly adhere more blatantly to the common nineteenth-century expositional archetype, even though the second group avoids clear cadential demarcation and instead drifts towards E minor (m. 148) before dissolving. The reappearance of the Don Juan (first theme) music in m. 169, the element most strongly suggestive of rondo, might be interpreted as initiating the second rotation in sonata form, i.e. the development. It quickly gives way to the aforementioned double episode, in G minor (m. 197) and subsequently G major (m. 232). The latter section has something of the character of a lyrical slow movement, with the music becoming almost totally becalmed at this point. Suddenly, a new idea breaks through: a C major *Heldenthema* (m. 314) rings out in the horns. This crucial moment gives renewed momentum to the form, and also confirms the significance of the E–C tonal polarity in the work (this is present from the beginning, with the very first chord actually a C $\sharp$  sonority, quickly subsumed within an E major horizon). A jaunty and carnivalesque episode, commonly related to the masked ball in Lenau's poem, starts in m. 351, and assumes the function of a scherzo in the subcutaneous multi-movement design. The music becomes increasingly hectic and strenuous and (in anticipation of the ending) builds to a climax before collapsing into a ghostly pianissimo (m. 424). Against a mysterious, shimmering backdrop, distorted fragments of themes associated earlier with various female characters are heard. The pedal B underpinning these reminiscences is given new focus from m. 457, which initiates a retransition to the recapitulated first theme (m. 424, curtailed). In place of the lyrical second theme, Strauss then reprises the resplendent *Heldenthema* (m. 510). However, as it is spun out, the manly bravura of the latter is suffused with the impassioned sweep of the "original" second group. The music makes a strong perfect authentic cadence in E major at m. 466 (exactly equivalent to that which closed the first theme in m. 40), before the final crescendo and derailment.

The foregoing description will have given some idea of complexities of the dialogue between Strauss's music and various formal archetypes, but such an approach can only take us so far in understanding the music. The more dynamic aspects of this score, in particular the wave-like surging of the musical surface, have been explored by Walter Werbeck in his study of *Steigerung* (intensification) technique across the set of tone poems.<sup>54</sup> These propulsive gestures may either lead into, or (as in *Don Juan*) develop out of a thematic statement, a prime example being the overlapping extensions which emerge from the recapitulated *Heldenthema* (Example 4.3).

Example 4.3 *Don Juan*, mm. 536–43

This type of surging writing that whips the music into a frenzy is one of Strauss's most noticeable stylistic fingerprints, and is central to the élan that Adorno identified in the work. The hectic, intense emotionality also contributes to its enormous popularity. *Don Juan* marks a major breakthrough for Strauss as a composer, but historians such as Dahlhaus have accorded it greater significance still, seeing in its opening notes the dawn of “musical modernism.”<sup>55</sup>

### ***Tod und Verklärung*: striving for the ideal**

It was in the aftermath of the successful premiere of *Don Juan* that Strauss opened negotiations with his publisher for bringing out *Tod und Verklärung*, his “best and most mature work.” In the course of the letter, he announced, “I will probably shortly abandon absolute music in order to seek my salvation in music drama.”<sup>56</sup> This apparently sudden decision to move into stage composition was in fact not an impulsive one: Strauss had begun the libretto for what would be his first opera, *Guntram*, as early as August 26, 1887, which makes it coeval with *Macbeth*.<sup>57</sup> Strauss's initial focus on the tone poem may therefore be regarded as a sublimated opera-wish, a strategy allowing him to work in an appropriately “advanced” genre while he readied himself to take up Wagner's mantle. This intermediate focus on programmatic symphonic composition certainly had the benefit of equipping the fledgling dramatist with a musical language that could convey moods, images, and even events almost synaesthetically to an audience.

A few perceptive critics were able to deduce Strauss's nascent operatic ambitions from hearing *Tod und Verklärung*. Hanslick, for one, felt that “the nature of his talent really points the composer in the direction of music

drama.”<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, a writer in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* was moved to remark: “the idea frequently is suggested from Herr Strauss’s work, if it is to follow in the free and fanciful path taken in this instance, that opera is a field in which he would best devote his energies.”<sup>59</sup> These responses were partly elicited by the nature of the program. For the first time, Strauss moved away from the world of literature and invented his own scenario, which was turned into a prefatory poem by Ritter. Since his music was not based on a pre-existent literary work, Strauss could not rely on established associations to supplement whatever clues he gave his audiences. The title does indicate a well-marked archetype, but not content with this, the poem describes in close detail a series of events befalling the dying man. Strauss summarized the main thrust of the program in a letter some years later:

About six years ago [i.e. 1888] the idea occurred to me to represent in a tone poem the death of a person who had striven for the highest idealistic goals, therefore probably an artist. The sick man lies in bed asleep, breathing heavily and irregularly; agreeable dreams charm a smile onto his features in spite of his suffering; his sleep becomes lighter; he awakens; once again he is racked by terrible pain, his limbs shake with fear – as the attack draws to a close and the pain subsides he reflects on his past life, his childhood passes before him, his youth with its striving, its passions, and then, while the pain resumes, the fruit of his path through life appears to him, the idea, the Ideal which he has tried to realize to represent in his art, but which he has been unable to perfect, because it was not for any human being to perfect it. The hour of death approaches, the soul leaves the body, in order to find perfected in the most glorious form in the eternal cosmos that which he could not fulfil here on earth.<sup>60</sup>

The first version of the poem, written for the premiere, was revised and expanded shortly afterwards to mirror the tone poem still more closely, and in this second incarnation was published with the score.<sup>61</sup> From his study of the sketches, Werbeck dismisses the idea that there was anything as fixed as a libretto predating the composition. Many central concepts – among them struggle, death, and eventual transcendence – were present from the beginning, but their precise order and format only emerged during the compositional process.<sup>62</sup>

The virtuosic representation technique Strauss had honed in earlier tone poems was here put to the task of vividly realizing the content. Twenty-first-century listeners might hear in the non-linear unfolding of time in *Tod und Verklärung* and the use of flashbacks analogies to Tarantino-style filmic procedure rather than traditional opera, although it could be argued that Strauss was building on Wagner’s propensity for *narrating* past events in his music dramas. The absence of a stage realization allowed him to move seamlessly between present and past. The first brief foray into the mind and

Example 4.4 *Tod und Verklärung*, mm. 13–20

The musical score for Example 4.4, mm. 13–20, from Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung*, is presented in a standard orchestral format. The score includes parts for Flute, Horn in F, Timpani, Harp, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat major/D-flat minor). The flute and timpani play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents, while the strings play a heavy chordal tread. The harp plays arpeggios starting in measure 19. The horns play sustained notes with 'con sord' markings.

memories of the protagonist illustrates how cleverly these changes of perspective are accomplished (Example 4.4). Having initially painted a picture of the dying sleeper by means of the offbeat string palpitations and heavy chordal tread, Strauss freezes on a  $D\flat_2^4$  chord that is sustained across five bars by means of ethereal harp arpeggios. The warm woodwind melodies pitched against this backdrop emphasize the scene's separateness from the grim deathbed scene. When the opening music resumes, it takes up from where it left off as if there had been no interruption, surely implying that the parenthetical flashback took place outside the normal temporal frame.<sup>63</sup>

*Tod und Verklärung* thus marks an advance over *Don Juan* in its hyper-realism, but in other areas it is arguably less bold. Gustav Brecher went so



## Example 4.4 (cont.)

2

The musical score consists of six staves. The top staff is for the Flute (Fl.), marked *pp dolce*, with a melodic line featuring a trill and a triplet. The second staff is also for the Flute (Fl.), with a melodic line. The third staff is for the Oboe (Ob.), with a melodic line marked *pp dolce*. The fourth and fifth staves are for the Horns (Hn.), with a harmonic accompaniment. The sixth staff is for the Harp (Hp.), with a rhythmic accompaniment. The seventh and eighth staves are for the Violoncello (Vc.) and Double Bass (Db.), with a simple bass line.

far as to call it “the only ‘reactionary’ one of all Strauss’s works, both in the metaphysical nature of its program and in the fact that the music abides in the Lisztian-Wagnerian style.”<sup>64</sup> *Tod und Verklärung*, with its message of hope and redemption through suffering, is certainly sharply differentiated from *Don Juan*, with its physicalism and nihilistic ending. Such stark contrasts occur repeatedly in Strauss’s oeuvre and serve to refute the supposition that his own ideological stance can be straightforwardly decoded from his music. The *per ardua ad astra* plot of the later tone poem is certainly one with many precedents in the works of Liszt and Wagner. The idea of posthumous artistic vindication informs Liszt’s *Tasso: Lamento e trionfo*, a commemoration of the sufferings and eventual triumph of the poet. The parallels between *Tod und Verklärung* and *Tristan* are even more striking: like Isolde’s final scene, entitled “Verklärung” by Wagner, Strauss’s conception of “transfiguration” eschews the religious overtones associated with this concept in favor of a secularized version.<sup>65</sup> The final quatrain of the *Tod und Verklärung* poem includes the patently *Tristan*-esque final line, establishing a deliberate intertextual reference to the music drama Strauss worshiped above all others:

Aber mächtig tönet ihm  
 Aus dem Himmelsraum entgegen,  
 Was er sehndend hier gesucht:  
 Welterlösung, Weltverklärung!<sup>66</sup>

## Example 4.4 (cont.)

3

The musical score is for a symphony orchestra and includes the following parts: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horns (Hn.), Timpani (Timp.), Harp (Hp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The score is in a key signature of two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a common time signature. The flute part begins with a dynamic marking of *pp* and a fermata. The clarinet part features a *pp dolce* marking and a triplet of eighth notes. The harp part has a dynamic marking of *pp* and a fermata. The string parts (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass) all have a dynamic marking of *pp* and a fermata. The timpani part has a dynamic marking of *pp* and a triplet of eighth notes. The score is divided into three measures, with the first measure containing the flute, oboe, clarinet, and harp parts, and the second and third measures containing the string and timpani parts.

But mightily there sounds to him  
 Coming from the broad expanse of heaven  
 What he yearned and searched for here:  
 World-redemption, world-transfiguration!

Musical references to *Tristan* abound as well: the famous “gaze” motive is cited at one point (Example 4.5), in conjunction with that *echt-Tristan*

Example 4.5 *Tod und Verklärung*, mm. 268–70

Example 4.6 *Tod und Verklärung*, mm. 160–4

sonority, the half-diminished seventh chord. Another incidence of this sonority comes earlier in m. 161, as the climax chord before the first adumbration of the “Ideal” theme (Example 4.6). More generally, the musical language that Strauss adopts in his third tone poem has also been described as a return to “the more trodden paths of the truly chromatic style of Liszt and Wagner.”<sup>67</sup> It certainly is audibly contrasted with *Don Juan*, which sounds ebulliently diatonic despite the plethora of accidentals.<sup>68</sup>

Further intertextual possibilities are opened by the key scheme of *Tod und Verklärung*, which follows the C minor→major path familiar from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, Liszt’s *Faust* Symphony and *Tasso*, and many other works besides.<sup>69</sup> Strauss himself playfully speculated that it might have stemmed from “the musical need – after *Macbeth* (begins and ends in D minor), *Don Juan* (begins in E major and ends in E minor) to write a piece that begins in C minor and finishes in C major! Who can tell?”<sup>70</sup> The overall shape of the tone poem does in fact recall the end-weighted, struggle-to-victory trajectory of Beethoven’s Symphony and the aforementioned works of Liszt. One of the principal means of creating this sense of goal-directed progress here is the gradual unfolding of the “Ideal” theme, first presented in mm. 163–4 (Example 4.6), and in ever more complete

versions in mm. 320ff. (A $\flat$  major), 334 (A major), and 355 (D $\flat$  major), before it is stated in full harmonic plenitude in the transfiguration section proper (m. 430 in C major).<sup>71</sup> This same process of “becoming” is replicated throughout the work: what is usually identified as the main thematic idea in the Allegro section (m. 96) marks the culmination and end-point of the preceding music, rather than initiating a new section. In *Don Juan*, by comparison, the *Steigerung* develops out of, rather than leads to, a thematic idea. Thus the overall shape of each composition as a whole is in some way replicated by the shapes outlined locally on the musical surface.

This ongoing process of teleological genesis co-exists with a formal outline that has been read as a conflation of sonata and multi-movement elements. The final version of the poem is laid out in four discrete portions, each of which connects to major divisions in the score. Lines 1–14 describing the sleeping invalid and his dreams equate to mm. 1–66, an introductory Largo section in which various leitmotifs of crucial significance are first presented. Lines 15–22 describe the artist’s waking agonies and correspond to mm. 67–185, which initiate the main Allegro action. It acts as a sonata exposition and simultaneously functions as the first movement of the composition as cycle: Dahlhaus has identified on this micro-level an introduction (m. 67), thematic statement (m. 96), development-like area (m. 101), and reprise (m. 147).<sup>72</sup> Matters are whipped into a frenzy as the fever reaches a crisis at the musical climax signaled by the aforementioned *Tristan* chord and first appearance of the “Ideal” theme (mm. 161–4). The third and longest portion of the poem (lines 23–58) describes his delirious memories of childhood and youth, his vain struggles to achieve his Ideal, and then his final paroxysm and death. The music for this section conflates development and recapitulation portions of the form, the latter signaled by a very abbreviated recall of material from the introduction and exposition (mm. 364–94). Matters seem to be heading towards the same *Tristan*-chord climax as before, but instead it all dissolves onto an insubstantial diminished seventh as the artist dies to the sound of a tam-tam (m. 395). From this point onwards, there is an inexorable, incremental build-up over a tolling ostinato, leading to the complete statement of the Ideal theme. This expansive Moderato (mm. 395–499), related to the final quatrain of the poem (59–62), is at one and the same time a coda and a final movement that recapitulates two of the most significant themes from earlier in the work.

The valedictory tone of this final section might be interpreted as Strauss’s farewell to symphonic composition, now that his own Ideal – music drama – was within reach. To some extent, his first cycle of tone poems did serve as prolegomena to his operatic ventures: his fusion of the Lisztian symphonic poem with deeper psychological and dramatic elements anticipates his

approach to stage composition. However, whatever their role in Strauss's overall development, these three works are hugely significant artworks in their own right. By 1889, Strauss had established himself as an exciting new voice within the tradition of Liszt and Wagner, and had written at least two masterpieces that would ensure his undying fame.