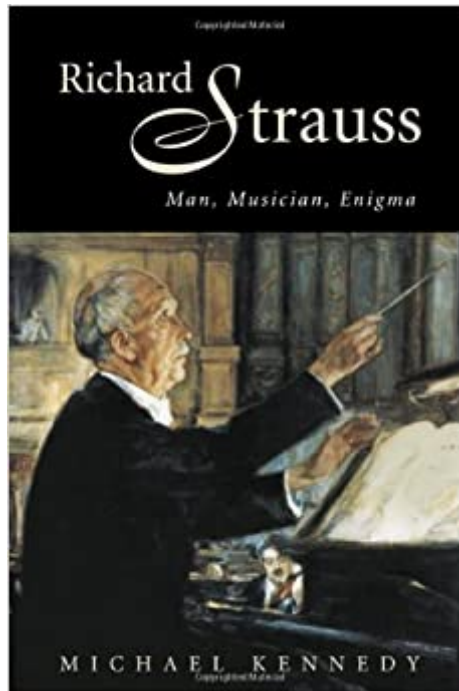




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# Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma



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## Customer Reviews

There are few composers whose critical stock has roller-coastered as dramatically as that of Richard Strauss, both during his lifetime and in the five decades since his death in 1949. Once considered a dangerous firebrand of the avant-garde--his early masterpiece *Salome* was given the equivalent of an X rating--Strauss remained an exceedingly prolific composer throughout his long career, yet lived to be "written off as an extinct volcano." The painful story of his involvement with the Third Reich further cast a pall over his final years. But in the past two decades, a gradual reassessment has been underway--along with a recuperation of his neglected later works--and the field is ripe for a critically insightful overview of Strauss's achievement. Such is the goal of Michael Kennedy, a longtime advocate of Strauss, in his new biography, *Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma*. Kennedy, the *Sunday Telegraph*'s music critic and author of several other musical biographies--including an earlier study of the composer as well as illuminating articles and CD booklets on his music--here undertakes to penetrate the contradictions and see the man whole. Through his impressive access to diaries, letters, and living relatives, he posits an underlying consistency of attitude that made "art the reality in [Strauss's] life." The central enigma about the composer that fascinates Kennedy is the "disparity between man and musician," the paradox that this fundamentally aloof and reserved person, dedicated to bourgeois stability, could produce music of such overpowering passion. While steering clear of Freudian reductionism, Kennedy reveals the crucial significance of Strauss's mother's nervous instability--she was eventually committed to

various sanatoriums--and the centrality of the work ethic inherited from his father. The result was to make music "Strauss's means of escape ... and in much of his music he wore a mask." Yet for all his aloofness, Strauss "let [the mask] slip"--another aspect of the enigma surrounding him--in such compositions as *Don Quixote* ("the most profound" of his orchestral works) or the pervasively autobiographical *Sinfonia Domestica*, *Intermezzo*, and *Capriccio*, which Kennedy counts as Strauss's greatest achievement for the lyrical stage. Kennedy is particularly persuasive in his high estimation of the post-Rosenkavalier output and the undiminished quest for artistic innovation that they continued to exemplify--above all in Strauss's development of a fluently conversational style in his operas. Although commentary on individual works involves generally concise summations, many observations sparkle with insight, and Kennedy continually sheds light on neglected gems among Strauss's output. The rapport with Hofmannsthal and his other librettists is admirably clarified, and the remarkably well-read Strauss emerges as a more imposingly intellectual figure, steeped in literature and philosophy, than he is usually depicted. We learn of his obsession with the card game skat and of his disdainful attitude toward the new medium of film. Kennedy similarly demystifies much of the received opinion that has developed around the composer, particularly in his level-headed portrait of his wife, Pauline. The fundamental happiness of their lifelong relationship emerges as a context indispensable to Strauss's creative focus. Kennedy devotes a significant portion of the book to the composer's position as president of the Reich Music Chamber and subsequent fall from grace both with the Nazis and in world opinion. Here the author aims to offer perspective by carefully detailing the facts and documentary evidence from the time. In his view, Strauss becomes a "tragic figure, symbolising the struggle to preserve beauty and style in Western European culture" against emerging barbarism. Yet, as throughout the book, Kennedy's abiding sympathy with Strauss at times veers close to a kind of special pleading that invites skepticism. For all that, his style is admirably lucid, and his biography largely succeeds in pointing to a greatness that "has not yet been fully understood and discovered." --Thomas May --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"The first large-scale biography of Strauss to be published in many years, this volume is beautifully written by one of the great writers on music in the English language." *Choice* "...this is a lively 'Life' that redresses some balances in previous biographical excursions." *The Times*, London "Kennedy has added fresh analyses and drawn on much unpublished material....Kennedy provides significant insights into the composer's personal life and complicated mindset throughout his career. While avoiding the clichés of so many of today's over-written psycho-biographies, Kennedy brings

Strauss vividly alive and places him firmly in the context of his times." Opera News "An excellent biography...." Booklist "An engaging, straightforward biography that largely eschews extended musical analysis." Gazette "...a coherent and convincing portrait of the composer that comes from years of study....a thoroughly engaging book that should prompt the reader to...return to the music..." James L. Zychowicz, Opera Quarterly "Biographer Michael Kennedy Demonstrates that the many varying shades of criticism that have painted Richard Strauss in the past half century resemble the similar understandings and misunderstandings held by his contemporaries. He builds his analysis around the few constants in Strauss's life: his admiration for German culture, his dependence on his own family for guidance, and his ^Nietzschean total absorption in art." Kennedy also deals with Strauss's problematic relationship with Nazi authorities." Shofar "Kennedy, in this well-written biography, offers many insights into the family and professional life of Strauss. Kennedy shows great interest in the intellect, the miracle that produced the sublime music of the composer's Lieder, tone poems and operas and implies the Lieder may well be the finest works, perhaps presenting yet another enigma for readers to consider." The Oper Jnl MARCH 2001

Having been a fan of Richard Strauss's music for years, I wanted to know more about him than the standard opinions out there. I got a glimpse of him in my reading of Henry de La Grange's epic biography of Gustav Mahler, who was contemporary to Strauss (having been born just 4 years before him in 1860). Both men, along with Wagner and Bruckner are considered the greatest Romantic symphonists and conductors, both in and since their own time. Kennedy's book brings a complex and paradoxical man to life in this book, yet a lot of what he writes is spent trying to explain, perhaps even absolve Strauss's apparent shortcomings in the parts of his life which are most discussed among historians and music lovers, namely the depth of his creativity and his seeming blindness to horrors committed by the Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945 in Germany. Certainly Strauss's body of work is varied and extensive and much of it has enjoyed enormous popularity over the years. But as Kennedy himself seems to imply, he wrote for the masses, looking with a keen eye for symphonic and operatic "hits." And score them he did with "Electra," "Salome," "Der Rosenkavalier," "Also Sprach Zarathustra," "Ein Heldenleben," "Till Eulenspiegel..," and scores of lieder and other works. For this reader I was left with the persistent question as to what constitutes "great" art. If staying power is a key ingredient, then Strauss's music is certainly great. Most of his output has great "legs" and will be heard in concert and opera halls for many years to come, just as will Puccini's and Verdi's works. On the other hand, it is not deep, in the sense of Beethoven, Bruckner, or in particular Mahler, who believed in asking the great philosophic

questions in his own art: What it means to be human, where we fit in the cosmos, etc. In a way, Strauss comes off in this book as someone along the lines of a Broadway composer. Detailing his relationship and work with librettist Hugo Hoffmanstall, we see the constant give and take between a poet who wants to confront the larger world and a musician who understands how to fill the seats. It was absolutely fascinating to read. As for Strauss's activities during the Third Reich, he has popularly lived with the tag of "collaborator" to the Hitler regime, and Kennedy points out that the post-war de-nazification commission ruled that Strauss was not a collaborationist, and I choose to accept its findings. But certainly, Strauss chose not to disturb the waters as Hitler silenced, imprisoned and murdered millions, including artists, as Strauss composed and conducted all over Germany, ever watchful of his royalties and income, and even enlisting the help of well known Nazis as Baldur von Shirach and Hans Frank ("the butcher of Poland") for favors. Kennedy quotes Klaus Mann (the son of Thomas Mann): "[Strauss's] naiveté, his wicked, completely amoral egoism could be, almost, disarming...Frightening is the word. An artist of such sensitivity yet silent when it comes to questions of conscience...A great man, yet without greatness. I cannot help but be frightened of such a phenomenon and find it somewhat distasteful." In the end, Strauss, who never apologized for a thing after the war was over, remains an enigma for this writer; a man who made incredibly wonderful music and who painted orchestral color with as broad a palette as anyone in musical history yet had personal flaws which will stand out in his story for as long as his music is heard. For me he will always be a "Yes, but..." Kennedy forces his reader to consider these things. For that, I am appreciative of his book. This is one which should be in the library of every lover of good music.

I have grown up reading Michael Kennedy's biographies of such composers as Vaughan Williams and Edward Elgar. So I eagerly picked-up his latest biography of Richard Strauss partly because of what I deemed to be Kennedy's objective approach to his subjects, and also because Strauss seemed to be a deeply held secret not meant to be shared with us ordinary listeners (in other words, there wasn't much else available). Kennedy seems to have slightly more passion for Strauss it turns out than for RVW or Elgar, or at least enough moxy to blow the cover off some well established sacred cows. I know that I was not expecting to read exactly what I read. If you are even vaguely interested in the music of Strauss or even if you are simply interested in the history of Germany from 1900 to 1950, then this is a very interesting read. Very well done!

It is an excellent biography of Richard Strauss, well written and employing up-to-date scholarship on

the great composer. It portrays not only Strauss' life and historical milieu, but also addresses inaccurate views of his political situation during Hitler's Third Reich, which have unfairly colored his reputation. The book would be an essential tool in fully understanding and appreciating this musical genius.

Michael Kennedy has written a very useful and insightful biography of a controversial composer, along with an intelligent analysis of his music. Strauss summarized his approach to "program music" (of which he was a foremost developer) by saying, "I am a musician first and last, for whom all 'programs' are merely the stimulus to the creation of new forms, and nothing more." Kennedy observes that "Religion played no part in his upbringing." By 1892, "he had read Nietzsche's works and had been particularly attracted by 'his polemic against Christianity.'" As Strauss's character Guntram said, "My God speaks to me through myself." It is not surprising, therefore, that Strauss would attempt to set Nietzsche's "Thus Sprach Zarathustra" to music. Controversial not only for writing operas such as "Salome," "(T)he German press denounced him for conducting two afternoon concerts in a New York department store (in 1904) ... Such conduct was 'a prostitution of art.' Strauss replied that the concerts had been given in artistic conditions and, anyway, it was no disgrace to earn money." Kennedy notes that "Strauss's output, large though it was, diminished between 1916 and about 1940 ... No wonder the world of music regarded him by then as almost a fossil." Of course, Strauss's most controversial actions concern with the Nazi Party came to power. For example, in 1933 Joseph Goebbels appointed Strauss to the post of President of the State Music Bureau. Kennedy explains this thusly: "It was not only that Strauss believed nothing was more important than art: he simply did not recognize the conflict, a symptom of a blinkered mentality as a court composer. He kept his nose in the score and ignored the raised voices in the next room." But Strauss was not by any stretch an anti-Semite: "He acknowledged the help and inspiration he had received from Jews, adding that his own most malicious enemies had been Aryans." Kennedy gives a summation: "If his music lacks mystical and spiritual depth---and it does, except for one late work---it has worldly, human rapture and insight, realism, and humor." Kennedy's fine biography is well-worth reading for anyone who wants to know more about the man or his music.

Richard Strauss was a German composer who wrote music. His music can still be heard today...

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