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J. STRAUSS

AN DER SCHÖNEN BLAUEN DONAU
THE BLUE DANUBE

Waltz for Orchestra
Op. 314



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CONTENTS

Preface	III
Vorwort	V
An der schönen blauen Donau	1

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PREFACE

Utility music or art music? The waltz compositions of the Strauss family constantly posed this question afresh. But does the one inevitably exclude the other? Well hardly, as demonstrated by such popular works as the waltz *An der schönen blauen Donau*. To be sure, both father as well as son let themselves be governed by the great demand as well as economic considerations. This might be suggested by the very large number of works as well as the targeted marketing – not the least by extended concert tours – but without necessarily detracting from their qualitative level. Sufficiently known for both composers are the high standards of extraordinary professionalism evident in concert-programme arrangement and preparation, whereby the shifting of the waltz into concert halls with rows of seats, thus preventing the dance and the attention of the public from being channelled exclusively in one direction, alone implies a new valuation. The occasional creation of compositions not absolutely oriented to the demands of pure dance music is also not to be associated with the frequently all-too-sweeping judgments. At the latest, with the emergence of Johann Strauss, Jr. from the overpowering shadow of his father, the waltz, by its artificial form, was finally placed on a new level that certainly can no longer legitimate its reduction to mere utility music, but also does not stand in the way of such a use.

If we look back on the triumphal march of the *Blue Danube Waltz* over more than 100 years, the question of the success of its première seems rather beside the point. And yet at the beginning, the waltz that is now counted amongst the most popular had difficulty gaining the acceptance of the dance-mad Viennese public. To rate the première on 13 February 1867 a flop would certainly be exaggerated. Opinions, though, were very mixed. Thus, on the one hand, the repetition of the waltz was interpreted by the listeners as a confirmation of the extremely

positive reception; other contemporary witnesses saw in the merely one encore not more than a *succès d'estime*. Even Johann Strauss, Jr. commented on the rather reserved response:

The waltz was perhaps not sensational enough for the people. But when one has a choral movement and vocal parts in mind, one cannot merely think of dancing! If the audience expected something else of me, then of course *the* waltz could not really have pleased it!¹

Even if in the end Strauss's remark did not also contain a criticism of his audience, he still voiced at the same time, if possibly also involuntarily, what was likely the greatest disadvantage of his composition: the text. Composed for the *Wiener Männergesangverein* [Viennese Men's Choral Society], the work was initially conceived as a choral waltz. The text written by Josef Weyl for Shrovetide carnival served as the model.

Viennese be glad / oh, how come / only just look
'round / and ask why so
a shimmer of lights / we still see none
Well! It's carnival / ah so, so what!
So defy the times / O God, the times
of great misery / ah, that'd be clever
what's the use of regrets, the mourning, so be happy
and cheerful.

In the verses kept extremely simple are mirrored the frustration, worry and poverty of the Viennese population after the Austrian defeat in the battle against the Prussians at Königgrätz. But they are also an invitation to mad celebration, in order to get over as quickly as possible the humiliation suffered. At the rehearsals, major reservations about the text already became apparent. A review of the première judged the newest waltz composition from the pen of Johann Strauss, Jr., as follows:

¹ Quoted from *Konzertbuch Orchestermusik*, ed. Hansjürgen Schaefer (Leipzig, 1976), 417

IV

In addition, with his waltz, 'To the beautiful, blue Danube', the court ball music director Strauss achieved [...] a great and deserved triumph; only the text by Weyl left much to be desired.²

When the work still did not get any reactions worth mentioning on later occasions, the Strauss orchestra took the 'Danube waltz' off the programme. The choral score of the *Wiener Männergesangsverein* was even banished from its own archives up to the year 1910.

The instrumental version, though, went on to an unexpected and outstanding success only a few months later. In the summer of 1867, the World Exposition took place in Paris, at which Johann Strauss was to become one of the sensations. In the *Cercle International* he directed the Benjamin Bilse Orchestra, which after its success at the World Exposition developed into one of the most important institutions of Berlin music life, and with its musicians, laid the foundation stone for the future Berlin Philharmonic. The conducting was shared by Strauss and Bilse, the latter being responsible for the classical items on the programme, Strauss, for the entertainment items. Its great triumph still initially had to wait until, with the help of the local press, a chain reaction was finally set in motion that ended in gigantic sales numbers and crowded audiences. After the publisher of *Le Figaro* – probably by mutual arrangement – had really beat the drum for Strauss, the latter decided in favour of a renewed attempt to impress his audience with the 'Danube waltz'. And what then occurred would have hardly been thought possible by anyone: the Parisian concertgoers were enthusiastic. Over a period of four months, the concert attendance now eagerly

demanded the waltz *An der schönen blauen Donau* unremittingly. All of this led finally also to attracting the attention of the Vienna press to focus now completely on Strauss. The Viennese public henceforth demanded to hear the 'Danube waltz' as well, which in the meantime the Strauss orchestra, having remained behind, had restored to its programme. Because of the fame attained through the innumerable concerts, editions from the Spina publishing house positively exploded into circulation. If heretofore one copper plate sufficed for producing ca. 10,000 exemplars, all of a sudden, more than 100 of them were needed in order to meet the demands for Strauss's compositions. Orders came from all over the world. In the end, the flaws remaining from its composition were eradicated; it was given a new text by Franz von Gernerth, which was to survive the times. Even today the waltz is interpreted in this version, by among others, the Vienna Boys' Choir. How great, in the meantime, had become the identification of an entire nation with this music, is impressively shown by the words of Eduard Hanslick:

The Danube waltzes by Strauss not only have an unprecedented popularity, they have acquired an entirely remarkable significance, the significance of a quotation, a catchword for everything that is beautiful, lovely, amusing in Vienna; they are to Austrians not merely beautiful waltzes like others, but a patriotic folksong without words. [...] Wherever in the distant climes Viennese congregate, there is this wordless peace marseillaise, their bonding song and sign of recognition.³

Sandra Borzikowski
Translation: Margit McCorkle

² Quoted from Mayer, Anton: *Johann Strauß. Ein Pop-Idol des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Vienna, e.g., 1998, 133

³ *ibid.*, 135.

VORWORT

Gebrauchs- oder Kunstmusik? Dieser Frage müssen sich die Walzerkompositionen der Familie Strauß stets aufs Neueste stellen. Aber muss das eine zwangsläufig das andere ausschließen? Wohl kaum, wie solch populäre Werke wie der Walzer *An der schönen blauen Donau* beweisen. Sicherlich haben sich sowohl Vater als auch Sohn von der großen Nachfrage sowie ökonomischen Überlegungen leiten lassen. Die sehr hohe Werkzahl sowie die gezielte Vermarktung – nicht zuletzt durch ausgedehnte Konzertreisen – mögen dafür sprechen, müssen aber nicht unbedingt mit einer Beeinträchtigung auf qualitativer Ebene einhergehen. Hohe, von außerordentlicher Professionalität zeugende Ansprüche an Konzertprogrammgestaltung und -vorbereitung sind für beide Komponisten ausreichend überliefert, wobei alleine die Verlegung des Walzers in Konzertsäle mit Stuhlreihen, die den Tanz unterbindet und die Aufmerksamkeit des Publikums ausschließlich in eine Richtung kanalisiert, eine neue Wertigkeit impliziert. Auch die zuweilen ganz und gar nicht an den Anforderungen reiner Tanzmusik orientierte Gestaltung der Kompositionen lässt sich nicht mit den häufig allzu pauschalen Urteilen in Einklang bringen. Spätestens mit dem Hervortreten von Johann Strauß Sohn aus dem übermächtigen Schatten des Vaters wurde der Walzer schließlich durch seine artifizielle Gestaltung auf eine neue Stufe gestellt, die dessen Reduzierung auf reine Gebrauchsmusik sicherlich nicht mehr legitimieren kann, aber einer Verwendung als solcher auch nicht entgegensteht.

Blickt man auf den mehr als 100 Jahre andauernden Siegeszug des „Donauwalzers“ zurück, scheint die Frage nach dem Erfolg der Uraufführung überflüssig zu sein. Und doch hatte es der Walzer, der heute zu den populärsten zählt, anfangs schwer, die Anerkennung des tanzbegeisterten Wiener Publikums zu gewinnen. Die Uraufführung vom 13. Februar 1867 als Misserfolg zu werten, wäre sicherlich über-

zogen. Die Meinungen gingen allerdings stark auseinander. So wurde die Wiederholung des Walzers einerseits als Bestätigung für die überaus positive Aufnahme bei den Zuhörern ausgelegt; andere Zeitzeugen sahen in der lediglich einmal ausgeführten Zugabe nicht mehr als einen Achtungserfolg. Auch Johann Strauß Sohn bemerkte die eher verhaltene Resonanz:

Der Walzer war vielleicht den Leuten nicht reißerisch genug. Aber wenn man Chorsatz und Singstimmen im Sinn hat, kann man nicht bloß ans Tanzen denken! Wenn das Publikum was anderes von mir erwartet hat, dann freilich hat ihm *der* Walzer nicht so gefallen können!¹

Obwohl Strauß' Bemerkung nicht zuletzt eine Kritik an seinem Publikum beinhaltet, so spricht er zugleich, wenn auch möglicherweise unbewusst, das wohl größte Defizit seiner Komposition aus: der Text. Für den Wiener Männergesangsverein komponiert, war das Stück zunächst als Chor-Walzer konzipiert. Als Vorlage diente ein für den Fasching verfasster Text von Josef Weyl.

Wiener seid froh / oho wieso / no so blickt nur um /
i bitt warum
ein Schimmer des Lichts / wir sehn noch nichts
Ei! Fasching ist da / ah so, na ja
drum trotzet der Zeit / o Gott, die Zeit
der Trübseligkeit / ah das wär g'scheidt
was nützt das Bedauern, das Trauern, drum froh und
heiter seid.

In den äußerst einfach gehaltenen Versen spiegeln sich Frustration, Sorgen und Nöte der Wiener Bevölkerung nach der gegen Preußen verlorenen Schlacht bei Königgrätz wider. Sie fordern aber auch zum ausgelassenen Feiern auf, um die erlittene Schmach möglichst schnell zu überwinden. Bereits bei den Proben zeichneten sich große Vorbehalte gegenüber dem Text ab. Eine Rezension der Uraufführung urteilt

¹ Zitiert nach *Konzertbuch Orchestermusik*, hrsg. v. Hans-Jürgen Schaefer, Leipzig, 1976, S. 417.