

Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration) Opus 24 • Richard Strauss

SCORED FOR: THREE FLUTES, THREE OBOES (ONE DOUBLING ENGLISH HORN), 3 CLARINETS, THREE BASSOONS, FOUR HORNS, THREE TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TUBA, TYMPANY, GONG, TWO HARPS AND STRINGS

Painting pictures with music – pretentious nonsense, proclaimed Richard Strauss. The idea that we should divide music into “pure” and “programmatic” seemed contrary to the fashionable notion that music expresses nothing but music. However, in the history of music, no composer is more closely associated with telling a story and painting aural pictures with musical sounds than Richard Strauss. His long career was launched with a series of these so-called “tone poems” including *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (source of the famous theme from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and *Tod und Verklärung*. Inspired by Wagner’s innovations in orchestral scoring and motivic manipulation, Strauss assigns melodic information to important aspects of the story he is trying to tell, and then carefully weaves those melodies and motives together to spin forth a coherent musical tale.

In a letter to his friend Friedrich von Hausegger in 1894 Strauss explained the idea behind his *Tod und Verklärung*:

It was six years ago when the idea came to me to write a tone poem describing the last hours of a man who had striven for the highest ideals. The sick man lies in bed breathing heavily and irregularly in his sleep. Friendly dreams bring a smile to the sufferer; his sleep grows lighter; he awakens. Fearful pains once more begin to torture him, fever shakes his body. When the attack is over and the pain recedes, he recalls his past life; his childhood passes before his eyes; his youth with its striving and passions and then, while the pains return, there appears to him the goal of his life’s journey, the idea, the ideal which he attempted to embody, but which he was unable to perfect because such perfection could be achieved by no man. The fatal hour arrives. The soul leaves his body, to discover in the eternal cosmos the magnificent realization of the ideal that could not be fulfilled here below.

When he completed the score, Strauss asked his friend and professional associate, Alexander von Ritter, to compose an explanatory poem expanding on the thumbnail sketch used by Strauss. This poem is published with the score, and is typically included in concert programs for the benefit of the listener. *Tod und Verklärung* is divided into four sections, played without pause, each corresponding to a particular section of the poem. The following is a breakdown of those sections and a translation of the descriptive text that accompanies each:

I. *Largo*. “In a small bare room, dimly lit by a candle stump, a sick man lies on his bed. Exhausted by a violent struggle with death, he lies asleep. In the stillness of the room, like a portent of impending death, only the quiet ticking of a clock is heard. A melancholy smile lights the invalid’s pale face: does he dream of golden childhood as he lingers on the border of life?” The mood is quiet and there is a steady, yet syncopated, pattern played by the violins and violas. This

is often thought to be the death motive, though it can also be associated with a ticking clock and a failing human heartbeat. Arching woodwind solos over horn and harp accompaniment signal a sad smile and thoughts of youth.

II. *Allegro molto agitato*. "But death grants him little sleep or time for dreams. He shakes his prey brutally to begin the battle afresh. The drive to live, the might of death! What a terrifying contest! Neither wins the victory and once more silence reigns." Harsh blows of the brasses and a faster tempo signify the struggle with death. Motives that describe this struggle, including a fast paced version of the death motive from the opening, are battered about the orchestra. Just as death is about to triumph we hear a glimpse of the transfiguration theme presented in the harp, trombones, cellos and violas, the ideal that can only be achieved after death. But death has not yet come. The music settles again as calm returns to the room.

III. *Meno mosso, ma sempre alla breve*. "Exhausted from the battle, sleepless, as in a delirium, the sick man now sees his life pass before him, step by step, scene by scene. First the rosy dawn of childhood, radiant, innocent; then the boy's aggressive games, testing, building his strength—and so maturing for the battles of manhood, to strive with burning passion for the highest goals of life: to transfigure all that seems to him most noble, giving it still more exalted form—this alone has been the high aim of his whole existence. Coldly, scornfully, the world set obstacle upon obstacle in his way. When he believed himself near his goal, a thunderous voice cried: 'Halt!' But a voice within him still urged him on, crying: 'Make each hindrance a new rung in your upward climb.' Undaunted he followed the exalted quest. Still in his death agony he seeks the unreached goal of his ceaseless striving, seeks it, but alas, still in vain. Though it grows closer, clearer, grander, it never can be grasped entire or perfected in his soul. The final iron hammer-blow of death rings out, breaks his earthy frame, and covers his eyes with eternal night." This section begins quietly with solos traded throughout the orchestra building to a more march-like section that describes the man's maturation to adulthood. The orchestra swells, and at the high points of phrases we hear the trombones and timpani proclaim the death motive. In the midst of the chaos the transfiguration motive is also heard, signaling that the end is near. Another outburst occurs, the final struggle with death, the storm and fury of the orchestra dying away and capped off with the sound of the gong, the death knell, announcing the soul's departure.

IV. *Moderato*. "But from the endless realms of heavenly space a mighty resonance returns to him bearing what he longed for here below and sought in vain: redemption, transfiguration." Beginning quietly, the transfiguration theme is presented and is, itself, transformed. The sound grows as instruments are added and the sound climbs higher and higher, with all of the symbolic imagery implied, to the upper most reaches of the brass, woodwinds and strings. The work ends peacefully and tranquilly, with death having won the battle but with the soul's

deliverance and transformation surpassing all.