



Straussmania: Popculture of the 19th century

The multimedia project Straussmania, beginning in December 2022, is dedicated to the places and protagonists of popular culture of the 19th century. In individual chapters, Straussmania tells of remarkable venues throughout the districts of Vienna such as the New World (Neue Welt) in Hietzing, Sperl in Leopoldstadt, and the Apollo Hall (Apollosaal) in Schottenfeld. All of the visited locations appropriately vibrate in three-quarter time because they are connected to the music of the Strauss family and their contemporaries. Straussmania is a joint project of ORF.at, the Vienna Institute for Cultural and Contemporary History (vicca.at) and the Library of Vienna.

Biography of Johann Strauss (father)

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If you hear the name ‘Johann Strauss’, then you usually think of the bearer of the name who nowadays is mostly referred to in English as Johann Strauss II, the composer of *Die Fledermaus*, the *Blue Danube* waltz and countless other extremely popular pieces of dance music. It is generally forgotten that it was his father, Johann Strauss I, who, during his own lifetime, was the ‘waltz king’, and absolutely as famous as his son later became.

Johann has his place at the beginning of a development that took dance music beyond its original purely functional role, giving it a new component, making it fit for the concert hall. It was his sons who completed the process, thereby having a decisive influence on the way we listen to this music. However, with his *Radetzky March* Johann I created a timeless worldwide hit, and his dashing galops can still fire up concertgoers. What is probably barely known is that as a musical entrepreneur he created business models whose basic elements are still valid today.

Johann Strauss I was by no means predestined for a worldwide career. He was born on 14 March 1804 in the Leopoldstadt suburb of Vienna, during the turbulent years of the Napoleonic Wars, growing up as the son of a publican in a poor family. His parents died at an early age, and, as an orphan, from then on he was taken care of by a guardian. Strauss completed an apprenticeship as a bookbinder, but also, following his fondness for music, took violin lessons. In 1823 his first documented engagement brought him together with Joseph Lanner and the Drahanek brothers, with Strauss enlarging their trio by playing the viola. In addition he, like Lanner, is said to have played in the orchestra of Michael Pamer, at that time one of the leading figures in the world of dance music in Vienna. In 1825, when Lanner was preparing to lead his own orchestra to follow in the footsteps of Pamer, meanwhile an invalid, Strauss joined up with him. If it performed as a small ensemble without wind and brass, Strauss played on the viola the parts that those instruments would have taken. He also began to compose, without having had any formal instruction in this field.

In the same year, in 1825, there were some significant developments in Strauss’s private life. He had a son with Anna Streim, whose father is in some cases recorded as a coachman, in others as a publican; in order to prevent an illegitimate birth, the couple married. Further children followed, but soon there were fractures in the marriage, with far-reaching consequences. Johann Strauss I’s rapid rise to fame also entered a decisive phase. In the spring of 1827, a few months before the birth of his second son Josef, he appeared in public with his own orchestra for the first time; from then on he and Lanner were rivals. The following year brought both of them advancement in their career: the sensational guest

performances given by Niccolò Paganini in Vienna prompted them to imitate him and so make themselves known to a wider public. While Lanner shone as the better violinist, Strauss showed himself to be the more skilful organiser, absolutely comparable with a successful event manager nowadays. This attracted the attention of the music publisher Tobias Haslinger, himself a clever businessman, who now joined up with Strauss.

Within a short time the *Zum Sperl* dance hall in the Leopoldstadt suburb, the most prestigious entertainment establishment in Vienna, became the flagship venue of the ambitious music director. All the owners and managers of such establishments in the city were now fiercely competing to engage Strauss, who could pull the audiences in. The innovations he introduced included charging fixed entrance prices instead of voluntary contributions, cooperation with the best dancing teachers as well as providing printed dance programmes, organising themed festivities with extravagant scenery, brilliant illuminations and fireworks, engaging military bands to provide a supporting programme, music puzzles with editions of his own compositions as prizes and having the public choose the title for a new piece of music. Thus it is not surprising that he also attracted the attention of the imperial court and was entrusted with providing the music for the balls it held. In addition he was appointed bandmaster of the First Vienna Citizens' Regiment.

But that was not all. Strauss now set about spreading his art outside his home city. It is remarkable that he did not appear as a guest conductor, but took a full orchestra with him on his tours, which meant that he had to pay the musicians and provide board and lodging for them. This was something completely new and involved difficulties that are hard to imagine nowadays. On the one hand there were no concert agencies, so that all organisation had to be done by the music director. Engagements were agreed at short notice, which involved considerable risks and was only possible because Strauss and his musicians had meanwhile become so famous. On the other hand the transport facilities available were relatively modest. There were hardly any railways in Continental Europe, and passenger ships on the major rivers were only just being introduced, so that most journeys had to be done by stagecoach.

In the autumn of 1833, their first tour took Strauss and his orchestra to Pest, then the administrative centre of Hungary, not yet united with Buda on the other bank of the Danube. A year later he made his first tour outside the Austrian Empire, with Berlin as the destination. Meanwhile at home in Vienna, after the birth of two daughters, the next child, Ferdinand, just ten months old, was on the brink of death, while his wife Anna was expecting another child. But she was not the only woman pregnant with a child by Johann Strauss: a milliner by the name of Emilie Trampusch was too. Was it these complications in his family life that ultimately made him leave home? What is certain is that his tours were extraordinarily successful from an artistic point of view. It was not only his compositions that were praised but also their performance by the outstandingly well trained and disciplined orchestra, which ranked as one of the best in Europe. Despite all the money coming in Strauss did not become rich; the expenses for transport and board and lodging were too high – as well as the fees for the musicians, who made sure that they were suitably remunerated for the stress and strain.

It was probably the prospect of fame together with the by now obvious domestic problems that prompted Strauss to undertake more tours. In 1836 he and his orchestra visited Prague, and from there went on to Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. At the beginning of October 1837, he set out on a lengthy tour of north-west Europe. This undertaking, unprecedented at the time, was not actually planned as such. The goal was Paris, and the intention was to be back in Vienna by the end of the year, but things were to turn out differently. In the French capital Strauss played before the local grandees of the musical world and celebrated one triumph after another. First and foremost, among his admirers was Hector Berlioz, who found words full of enthusiasm for the performances by the Strauss Orchestra. After that the invitations to perform piled up. The stay in Paris was extended, and then there were visits to towns

in northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands. After that he crossed the English Channel and pursued an adventurous zigzag route across England, and Scotland, also crossing to Ireland and back to France again for a fortnight. The longer the tour lasted the more resistance there was from the members of the orchestra, and Strauss himself had to struggle with health problems. At Christmas 1838 he finally arrived back home in Vienna, more dead than alive. Months passed before he was again able to appear before his public in his customary regular manner.

Strauss had brought with him from Paris the quadrille. It was a popular dance there and he had learned exactly how it should be performed firsthand from Philippe Musard. But there was another fashionable new dance which also attracted his attention: the polka from Bohemia. However, the most important genre of dance music remained the waltz, at least in Vienna, and this was crowned for the time being, in 1843, by Johann I's masterpiece in this field, *Loreley-Rhein-Klänge*. Lanner had died five months before its first performance, but now a new rival appeared for Strauss in the shape of his eldest son, who was getting ready to take Lanner's place in the musical life of Vienna. The father's attempts to prevent this not only failed but also aggravated the crisis in his marriage. Johann I left the family apartment in the so-called *Hirschenhaus* ('At the Sign of the Stag') and moved in permanently with Emilie Trampusch, who by this time had borne six children by him. Anna Strauss applied for a divorce, which was granted at the beginning of 1846. Her ex-husband responded by petitioning to be granted the title of *Hofballmusikdirektor* (Director of Music for Court Balls). Although his son, despite a successful debut, did not really represent any serious competition for him, Johann I was probably not pleased to be called 'Strauss Father' or 'Old Strauss'.

He was now again gripped on several occasions by the desire to travel, but none of these undertakings came anywhere near the scale of the great tour of 1837-38. In Vienna, and not only there, times had taken a turn for the worse. A series of failed harvests led to a crisis in food supplies and a steep increase in prices, and this in turn led to social unrest. Finally, in March 1848, a revolution broke out. Initially Johann I showed some sympathy for the rebels, but when they also turned against the imperial family he decided to side with the forces of reaction, mindful of his title of *Hofballmusikdirektor*. It was against this background that he composed his *Radetzky March* in honour of the military commander of that name, who had just prevented the secession of the Austrian provinces in northern Italy. On his last two tours to the Czech provinces as well as to Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands the loyalty he had demonstrated to the emperor meant that Strauss was no longer seen everywhere as welcome. Back in Vienna he died unexpectedly on 25 September 1849, after having caught scarlet fever.