



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 (son)

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Johann Strauss II is undoubtedly one of the most popular and most performed composers of our time. His *Blue Danube* waltz and his operetta *Die Fledermaus* are known all over the world and at the same time provide good publicity for Austria. He was composing at a time when there was a struggle over the direction music should take between the supporters of Richard Wagner and those of Johannes Brahms. As a specialist who occupied a relatively small niche of musical genres, he enjoyed recognition from both sides. Johann Strauss himself remained modest, saying he owed everything to his father and that his achievement was limited to what he called an ‘enlargement of the form’. By this he probably meant that, together with his brother Josef, he had freed the waltz from its original function and turned it into music that could be played in a concert, producing masterpieces in the process. He may also have been thinking of his works for the stage, which can be regarded as dance music turned into song to a far greater extent than those of his contemporaries. These enabled Johann II to achieve during the so-called golden age of operetta what his father had done for dance music, namely to turn round the direction of cultural transfer so that it went not only from France to Austria but also from Austria to France. He also significantly widened the scope of his tours compared with those of his father, going as far afield as the USA and Russia. In the case of the latter he unleashed, especially around St Petersburg, a veritable ‘Strauss mania’, which was based not only on the quality of his dance compositions but also on his brilliant skills as an orchestral conductor.

When Johann Strauss II was born on 25 October 1825 his father Johann was only just starting his career. His dazzling rise certainly provided a model for his three sons Johann, Josef and Eduard. It is claimed that Johann’s earliest attempts at composition date from 1831, when he was just five years old. Undoubtedly, he could learn some important things about the dance music business from his father, such as the way to rehearse with an orchestra, or the legendary Strauss pose when conducting. Johann I was, however, strictly against his sons taking up a musical career, especially after his marriage broke down and he moved out of the family apartment. At the same time the death of Joseph Lanner left a gap in the musical life of Vienna, which the young Johann now sought to fill, devoting all his energies to this with the support of his mother. Within a year and a half he had acquired the necessary skills so that he could appear before the public for the first time as the conductor of an orchestra, on 15 October 1844. at Dommayer’s establishment in Hietzing, then a village outside Vienna.

Even if his debut was a complete success, the competition from his father, who was still engaged by the most important venues, proved to be too great. When the music business for dancing and entertainment became increasingly difficult because of rising prices resulting from a crisis in food supplies, in the late autumn of 1847 the young conductor decided to undertake a lengthy tour of the Balkans, as he had enjoyed successes when performing for national minority communities living in Vienna. Strauss really

intended to reach Constantinople, but he overestimated the quality of the transport facilities on the route and got stuck in Bucharest, with no prospect of sufficient income. He was in massive financial difficulties when in 1848, with the revolution that began in France spreading throughout Europe, he saw that the time had come to be so bold as to take advantage of the Austrian envoy in Bucharest. He thus put himself at the mercy of the rebels.

And back in Vienna it was precisely that audience that the young Strauss catered for, even when there were signs that the old order would be restored. This was not without consequences for him. A new opportunity appeared when his father died unexpectedly, and he succeeded in bringing together the two Strauss Orchestras. Since the aftereffects of the failed revolution were still to be clearly felt in Vienna, Strauss set out again on tours, now with the united Strauss Orchestra. This time the destination was Warsaw, where Tsar Nicholas I of Russia was conferring with the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. The Tsarina, who was also there, now invited Strauss to perform at a banquet at which Franz Joseph was also present. The press reported that the emperor was favourably disposed towards Strauss, and so the path to performing at the prestigious balls held by the imperial court was opened up to him.

The contacts that Strauss had made in Warsaw eventually benefitted him with regard to another undertaking. In 1856 he appeared as a guest conductor with a specially assembled orchestra to perform during the summer season at a venue near St Petersburg, then the capital of Russia. His appearance created a sensation and in the end he performed there for a total of eleven seasons. In Vienna he now emerged definitively from the shadow of his father, whom many people there had still regarded as the only legitimate ‘waltz king’. While Johann was away brother Josef and later also Eduard held the fort at home, ensuring that the Strauss Orchestra did not lose the position it had achieved there. In Russia Johann, far away from the watchful eye of his mother, threw himself into an unhappy amorous adventure with Olga Smirnitskaya, an aristocrat and amateur composer.

In 1862 he married Jetty Treffz (her real name was Henriette Chalupetzky), a singer seven years older than him, a surprise even for the closest members of his family. It was only now that he was granted the title of *Hofballmusikdirektor* (Director of Music for Court Balls), which his father had held and for which he had longed. This led him to withdraw gradually from day-to-day business, most of which he left to his brothers. It was probably at the incentive of his wife that, prompted by the successes enjoyed by Jacques Offenbach, he strove for a second career as a composer of operettas. This undertaking turned out to be more difficult than expected, but meanwhile he succeeded in creating an impressive series of masterpieces of dance music, with the *Blue Danube* as its climax. One reviewer described this waltz – for the first time in connection with a piece of music – as a ‘hit’. Strauss had even greater successes in Paris and London, appearing as a conductor of his own compositions.

In 1870 Johann’s mother died, and then, five months later, brother Josef. In the following year Strauss made his debut as an operetta composer. That would have been impossible without the help of Richard Genée – not merely as a librettist, but also as a composer. This collaboration lasted for about ten years and was kept secret. But Strauss did not give up his concert activity completely. In 1872 he made a guest appearance at the gigantic World’s Peace Jubilee and International Music Festival in Boston. At the World Exhibition in Vienna in 1873 he competed with brother Eduard, who had taken on sole responsibility for the Strauss Orchestra, appearing with a German orchestra, with which he then made a tour of Italy the following year. A few months after he had returned from this he achieved his masterpiece as a composer of operetta: *Die Fledermaus*, a musical comedy with spoken dialogue in the French manner, and Genée had once more lent a helping hand.

After this Strauss and Genée devoted themselves to a form of operetta which was more in the manner of a 'German' comic opera with spoken dialogue. It was the actor Alexander Girardi whose talent made sure that the subsequent Strauss operettas were a success; today they are largely forgotten. Strauss's private life now went through a difficult period: Jetty died in 1878, and his second marriage, with the singer Angelika (Lili) Dittrich, broke up when she found a new partner for life in the director of the Theater an der Wien, the theatre where all of Strauss's operettas had had their first performances until then. As a result *Eine Nacht in Venedig* (*A Night in Venice*) had its premiere in Berlin and was a flop, although this was quickly made up for when it was performed in Vienna. The next operetta, *Der Zigeunerbaron* (*The Gypsy Baron*) was a triumph for Strauss, who had meanwhile separated from Genée. However, his consistently pursued path towards comic opera turned out in the end to be disastrous. It led to *Ritter Pásmán*, and the premiere at the Court Opera in Vienna was meant to be the climax of Strauss's career, but it was a dismal failure and the composer returned to operetta without much inner conviction. None of the operettas he wrote at the end of his career could maintain a permanent place in the repertoire. It was with his *Kaiserwalzer* (*Emperor Waltz*) that Strauss succeeded in producing one last masterpiece.

From 1883 there was a new woman at Johann's side: Adele Strauss, a young widow whose late husband was not related to the musical dynasty. In order to be able to marry her, he converted to Protestantism and became a citizen of the German duchy of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. After Johann's death on 3 June 1899 Adele became the trustee of his artistic legacy and was conscious of her mission. She initiated the production of new librettos for the less successful operettas that had disappeared from the stage and had unpublished fragments put together to form new waltzes, although none of these pieces achieved a permanent place in the repertoire. The operetta *Wiener Blut* (*Vienna Blood*), first performed posthumously in October 1899, was compiled from dance music compositions for which lyrics were provided, the project having already been proposed during Strauss's lifetime. With the 'Lex Strauss' Adele managed to have the copyright protection for musical works extended from thirty to thirty-two years after the composer's death – nowadays the period is seventy years. Adele, who came from a Jewish family, did not live to see the 'Aryanisation' of Strauss's estate, with restitution and compensation not being settled until the beginning of the new millennium.