



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 Josef Strauss

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If Johann Strauss had his way his second-born son Josef would have become a soldier. But Josef consistently pursued his career as an engineer. His innate musicality showed itself at an early age, just as with his elder brother Johann, although what his father was doing was no temptation for him. Josef let it be known that his love for music was not confined to the rhythms of the waltz. He was pressured into the dance music business when Johann II, as a result of overwork, had to rest for a while and the family council – or just mother Anna? – decided that only a Strauss could be in charge of the Strauss Orchestra. This provisional arrangement became a routine at the latest when Johann began to spend several months of the year as a guest conductor in Pavlovsk near St Petersburg.

Johann Strauss II is said to have remarked that Josef was the more talented, while he was only the more popular of the two. In fact, during his lifetime Josef could never emerge from his brother's shadow, for which there were several reasons: he was at best mediocre as a conductor and as a violinist standing in front of the orchestra, as well as being a decidedly poor organizer. He was, his brother said, 'too timid'. However, there is no timidity to be detected in Josef's compositions; on the contrary, these point to a self-assured creator who is fully aware of his abilities. Josef played a decisive role in the development of the concert waltz. The much-discussed question whether his contribution should be rated more highly than Johann's is pointless, as nowadays it is impossible to imagine concerts of Viennese music without the compositions of both brothers.

Josef was born in Mariahilf, a suburb of Vienna, on 20 August 1827, and, seen from outside, his development was unspectacular. The marriage crisis of his parents, which dragged on for many years, may well have made him, as the most sensitive of the three sons, think of the diametrically opposed world of a bourgeois existence in well-ordered circumstances as a dream for his life. Having grown up in a house where music was, as it were, omnipresent, and with his own outstanding musical talent, he was more or less compelled to be active in this field. His father, meanwhile, living away from the family, was astonished by the way that Josef played piano duets together with brother Johann. Josef's first attempts at composition, in the form of songs and pieces for piano, date from the late 1840s.

Nevertheless, at first music remained a sideline for Josef Strauss, a private leisure time activity. While at school he was hardworking and so got good marks, and also later when he was studying at the Imperial-Royal Polytechnicum, the forerunner of the Technical University in Vienna. His first employment was as a draughtsman for one of the city's master builders; later he supervised the construction of a weir on the river Triesting south of Vienna and submitted

plans for two street-sweeping machines to the city council, although these were never constructed. In addition, he published a collection of mathematical examples, formulas, exercises and tables.

His promising career as an engineer was rudely interrupted when, in the summer of 1853, Johann Strauss II, exhausted by his ceaseless activities, needed to recuperate in the spa town of Bad Neuhaus (nowadays Dobrna in Slovenia), and Josef was chosen to take charge of the orchestra in his place. While his colleagues in this role took over the lead violin part as the first among equals, Josef, who had had no lessons for this instrument, had to begin by conducting with the baton. At one of these appearances, he presented his first dance music composition, the waltz *Die Ersten und die Letzen* (The First and the Last).

That, however, was not the end of the story. In the following year Josef was again called on to lead the Strauss Orchestra. He now accepted his fate; the title of his new waltz, *Die Ersten nach den Letzten* (The First After the Last), awoke expectations that more would follow. In order to prepare himself in the best possible way for his coming appearances, he took violin lessons and perfected his knowledge of composition. His appearances did indeed become more frequent and when, from 1856 on, Johann went to Russia every year to perform as a guest for the summer season, Josef was fully integrated into the family business. In 1857 he married Caroline Pruckmayer, the love of his life. She was the daughter of a high-ranking post office official, and in the following year their only child, Karoline, was born.

Like his two brothers, Josef was a great admirer of Richard Wagner. In 1860 the first public performances worldwide of fragments from his opera *Tristan and Isolde* (apart from the prelude, which Wagner had conducted earlier that year in Paris) were given at one of Josef's concerts at the Volksgarten establishment in Vienna. When in 1862 Johann had to break off his guest season in Pavlovsk, apparently because of ill health, and then married his first wife, the singer Jetty Treffz (her real name was Henriette Chalupetzky), Josef was hurriedly dispatched to Russia to stand in for him and complete the season. He made use of the opportunity this provided to perform, alongside his dance music, several of his orchestral fantasies, for which Russian audiences were more receptive than those back home in Vienna.

In these fantasies may lie the roots of those symphonic introductions to his late waltzes which are so highly regarded nowadays. The titles of his best and most popular waltzes include *Dorfschwalben aus Österreich* (1864), *Dynamiden* (1865), *Delirien* (1867), *Herbstrosen* (1867), *Sphären-Klänge*, (1868), *Herbstrosen* (1867), *Aquarellen* (1869) and *Mein Lebenslauf ist Lieb' und Lust!* (1869). In contrast to Johann, who moved with his wife into their own apartment after their marriage, Josef never left the family home of the Strausses for any length of time. In the autumn of 1864, he did travel to Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland) to give a series of concerts in an attempt to emancipate himself, but this undertaking was poorly organised and made no financial profit.

Meanwhile Eduard, the youngest brother, had also been firmly integrated into the 'family business'. When Johann devoted himself definitively to composing operetta, he tried to have the Russian engagement transferred to Josef. To this end the two brothers travelled together to Pavlovsk in 1869, where they took it in turn to conduct concerts. There they jointly composed the *Pizzicato Polka*, probably the best-known musical product of this stay which is associated with Josef's name. However, the real purpose was not achieved, as it was Benjamin Bilse and his orchestra who were invited to Pavlovsk for the following season.

While he was still on the return journey to Vienna Josef Strauss committed himself, without really thinking about what he was doing, to taking over the engagement Bilse had for the summer season in Warsaw in 1870 – on conditions that were extremely unfavourable for him.

Then serious mistakes were again made during the preparations for this. Josef, who had been left to organise these guest appearances on his own, did not manage to get an orchestra together in time and had to postpone the beginning of the concerts. Moreover, the musicians were poorly rehearsed; there was a further delay because Josef fell ill, and then on one evening during a concert he collapsed unconscious on the rostrum. He had suffered from such fainting fits since childhood, and they had been particularly serious at the time of his mother's death several months before he began his journey to Warsaw. On this occasion he could not be saved. Arrangements were hastily made for him to be taken back to Vienna, but he died there on 22 July 1870 without having regained consciousness.

It was intended that after Johann had turned to composing operettas the Strauss Orchestra should be taken over jointly by Josef and Eduard. Now this role fell to Eduard alone. Many rumours surround – to this day – the unpublished musical material that Josef left, for example that it included a complete work for the stage. What is certain is that Johann took this into his custody and that when it was examined carefully many years later there was no trace of such a work, giving rise to much speculation. Eduard Strauss hinted that Johann could have used the material as a source for his own operettas. Later commentators saw a connection here to the success of *Die Fledermaus*. However, in the operetta there is a particularly close link between music and lyrics, which seems to indicate that there could have been no recourse to another composer's music drama as a source of 'building blocks'. Be that as it may, there is an operetta with music by Josef Strauss: this is *Frühlingsluft* (Spring Breeze), put together from his melodies by Ernst Reiterer. First performed in 1903, it is now more or less forgotten.