



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.

The Strauss Brothers and the Music Society

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After the city walls of Vienna were torn down and the surrounding moat filled in, a magnificent boulevard was to be built in its place. The Society of Friends of Music (Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde) then received a plot of land from Emperor Franz Joseph I for the construction of a new Music Society (Musikverein) building, since they had grown out of the previous one on Tuchlauben, one of the most distinguished streets of the inner city. The building site was set back from the Ring Road (Ringstraße), as expressly requested by the society, in order to avoid road noise. This site offset though meant a less-than-desirable traffic ingress, which was located in a side alley. However, the winning bidder of the tender, Theophil Hansen, ingeniously used this to his advantage: Instead of a carriage right-of-way, Hansen designed an entry way that allowed patrons to enter the building and avoid the elements. A requirement that the hall should be able to host concerts, as well as, ball events arose during the bidding process. This meant that all revised structural and construction conditions had to be met. Hansen subsequently envisaged a convenient way for patrons, especially ball guests, to traverse the building and be dropped-off or picked-up at either side of the building. The advent of automobiles made this requirement obsolete.

In accordance with the location's dual purpose of hosting concerts and balls, an inaugural concert was held on January 6, 1870. This was followed by an opening ball on January 15, at which the Strauss Orchestra, under the alternating direction of brothers Johann, Joseph and Eduard Strauss, provided the music. Each Strauss brother wrote a new dance composition for this event, dedicated to the Society of Friends of Music. All three pieces were then premiered: Johann Strauss Junior presented his waltz "Enjoy Life" ("Freuet Euch des Lebens") op. 340; from Josef Strauss one heard the polka française "Artist Greeting" ("Künstler-Gruß") op. 274; and, from the youngest of the brothers, Eduard, came the polka mazur "Frost Flowers" ("Eisblumen") op. 55.

The Music Society quickly became the Strauss Orchestra's homestead in Vienna given their constant engagements there as of February 17, 1870. Though they had performances throughout Vienna, the Strauss brothers recognized the Great Hall of the Music Society (Großer Musikvereinssaal) as the ideal setting for their concerts. The Strauss Orchestra not only enthralled ball goers with their dance music, they also cultivated their self-image when appearing in public concerts. This was seen as an essential task. The People's Garden (Volksgarten) restaurant provided all-weather indoor and outdoor entertainment spaces, but concerts were usually held in warmer weather and attracted limited audiences. They also gave concerts in other garden locales, which often enticed the audience to dance. Such events were

not the original intentions of the orchestra, nor the conductors. Winter months, without the possibility for regular performances in concert halls or similar venues, brought gigs in various multi-purpose halls. The repertoire for such concert performances was, however, very well received. An example here was the performance of Richard Wagner's prelude to "Tristan and Isolde," whose Viennese premiere was played by the Strauss Orchestra in the People's Garden.

Immediately following the success of the initial ball performances at the Music Society, the three "Strauss Brothers" made an offer to the Society of Friends of Music to rent the Great Hall. They sought to hold "promenade concerts" in the afternoon of every Sunday and public holiday during the winter music term. On June 9, 1870, arrangements were set. October 16 marked the first promenade concert of the Strauss Orchestra which took place in the Great Hall of the Music Society. In doing so, the Strauss Orchestra outmaneuvered the Vienna Philharmonic, which had only decided on June 4, 1870, to move subscriber member concerts to the Great Hall, whenever possible. Having signed a new lease themselves on September 18, the first Philharmonic concert was held in the Great Hall and on November 17. Given that daily doses of prime concerts were scheduled over eight Sundays during the traditional winter concert months meant that on such days the Philharmonic Orchestra played the Great Hall in the morning and the Strauss Orchestra in the afternoon. Between the two concerts, rows of seats had to be removed from the orchestra pit and tables set up to accommodate the promenade concerts.

Thanks to these promenade concerts, the Music Society became the location where the Strauss Orchestra was most regularly heard since 1870. They played with their full complement of 47 musicians. Promenade Concerts primarily opened with pieces from the current orchestral repertoire of contemporary composers from all over Europe, and surprisingly little older, non-contemporary orchestral music. This was followed by works of the Strauss family, often including Viennese premieres or world premieres. As a result, the list of works premiered in the Great Hall of the Music Society was headed by those of the Strauss brothers. Eduard Strauss delivered 90 world premieres at balls or promenade concerts; Johann Strauss Junior, 63; and, Josef Strauss, who died in July 1870, conducted five between January and April 1870.

Many outstanding promenade concerts of the Strauss Orchestra were memorable for various reasons, such as Viennese premieres of German, Italian, French or British composers. A quite unique concert was that of October 15, 1894, when Johann Strauss Jr. celebrated his fiftieth anniversary as an artist and fiftieth anniversary premiering as a conductor. Anyone who was anyone in Vienna was in the hall, including Johannes Brahms, who normally avoided such official celebrations. Giuseppe Verdi and Ambroise Thomas sent musical congratulatory notes...

When it was time to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the new Music Society building in 1895, Johann and Eduard Strauss again joined in with dedicatory compositions: Johann Strauss with the vocal waltz "Clever Gretel" ("Klug, Gretelein, klug") op. 462 and Eduard Strauß with the waltz op. 295, "The Jubilarians" ("Die Jubilanten"). However, this ball was canceled due to the passing of Archduke Albrecht, a benefactor who purportedly contributed significantly to the construction of the Music Society building. After the customary mourning period, Lent and the ball season were unimaginable. Instead, the Strauss Orchestra put on a festive concert on April 18 in which these two memorial works fit better anyway. (One could not have danced to Johann Strauss' op. 462, which is a concert waltz).

There is still much to remember about the Strauss family and the Music Society. In October 1925, two concerts for the "Johann Strauss Centenary Celebration" were held in the Music

Society's Great Hall commemorating the centenary birthdate of Johann Strauss Junior. It was the first Strauss Festival in history. This festive concert, performed by the Vienna Philharmonic, was the first time they played works exclusively by Johann Strauss.