

Richard Strauss (1864 -1949)

Strauss's music amounts to a huge body of symphonic and operatic work written over 60 years. Full of vitality, endlessly melodic, brilliantly orchestrated, it begins and ends in the romantic tradition, but for the most part expresses something more modern and individualistic, not without controversy in its time. Variation of style and structure is drawn from the descriptive (literary) nature of compositions, and an extraordinary inventiveness enlivens the scenes, moods and situations. Strauss said once that he produced music the way cows give milk, and indeed his music rarely seems contrived.

The opera

Strauss wrote 15 operas on a variety of subjects and across the whole spectrum of drama. He acknowledged being enchanted by the soprano voice, and his writing for it highlights many of the works, including *Adriane auf Naxos* (composed in 1912). The opera has been described as 'sparkling', which sums it up well, and passages influenced by Bach, Mozart, Puccini, and Wagner add to the interest. The storyline is a play within a play, the second part being the mythological *Opera* staged in the story. The four pieces transcribed* are from this *Opera*.

The guitar arrangements

Nearly all classical guitar arrangements are compromises. The instrument has only six strings, the left hand four fingers able to be used, and with the right hand it's uncommon to use more than three fingers and the thumb. So, despite the amount of noise possible, it's inevitable that passages occur where either harmony, bass or fragments of counterpoint that would be beneficial are left out. In particular, the higher up the neck music is played the simpler it tends to be, if harder to play, and unless the low bass is an open string there won't be any.

So I think the main part of attaining a fair transcription (better to be called an arrangement if the original musical structure is not strictly followed, as in this case) is determining how a good compromise can be reached. Melody, counterpoint, bass and main harmonies demand inclusion, and register is important. One may generally assume the original score can't be improved on. However, if the music may sound well on guitar, and the above elements can be incorporated without the playing becoming very difficult, something enjoyable to play and worthwhile listening to should be able to be achieved.

Overture; 'A golden time ...'

Here the Mozart influence, better, inspiration, is wonderfully evident. A gentle waltz time (only the first section of the overture is transcribed) carries the colourful harmonies, strong melodic threads and connecting flourishes that stamp both pieces. The aria ('A golden time...') is alluded to in the *Overture* several times, which as you would expect is intricately woven with hints of themes later to be established in the *Opera*. It has a kind of 'jazzy' freedom, and it's always miraculous to me that composition so involved can retain its musical line, here done in Strauss's inimitable way. The aria, sung not far into the *Opera*, has the perfect inevitability of Mozart, but again it is Strauss. As explained, keys have been changed to suit the guitar.

Chorus and Aria

This selection from the finale has features well worth trying to translate. The device of having a strong chorus, in the style of a Bach chorale, stated and then counterpointed by a solo voice in a restatement, is potent, and that in the opera the chorus (of the three nymphs) isn't immediately followed by the accompanying aria (of Ariadne) means the latter comes as a moment of surprising beauty. Neither parts are complicated, and lovely arpeggios, a feature Strauss's music, often impart the assured progressions.

The score is in Db, so by raising the key a semitone I have been able to utilise the guitar's D tuning as a full sounding foundation on which to arrange the piece, taking advantage of the open strings.

Excerpt from the final part ...

This shows a Mozart like facility for the integration of recitative and harmonic tension. As fits with the dramatic situation and characters (here Ariadne and Bacchus) the line of the music is constantly stretched. Tension is created with controlled and beguiling dissonance, and then relaxed, the music reverting to the theme it emanated from or another, new or previously introduced.

Rod Whittle

* *Overture; 'A golden time...'; Chorus and Aria; Excerpt from the final part...*