HISTORICAL AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF RICHARD STRAUSS’ Suite in Bb, Op. 4

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTERS OF MUSIC

BY

DONALD P. LINN

DR. THOMAS CANEVA, ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA

APRIL 2009
Historical and Musical Analysis of Richard Strauss’ Suite in Bb, Op. 4

Introduction

Richard Strauss’ Suite in Bb, Op. 4 for thirteen wind instruments was written in 1884. This is an important work in the wind literature yet tends to be eclipsed by the earlier and more frequently performed Serenade in Eb, Op. 7. It is argued that both pieces were pivotal in establishing the career of a young Richard Strauss. The popularity and frequent performances of the Serenade in Eb spawned the creation of the Suite in Bb. It was this commission and premier of the work that started both the conducting career of Strauss as well as his compositional career on a larger stage. Examined in this paper will be the historical significance of the Suite in Bb as well as its musical elements, structural elements and form, thematic material and transformation, and motivic unity. Conducting considerations relating to the work’s musical and thematic elements will also be explored.

Biographical Overview

Richard Strauss was a German composer of the late Romantic era who was best known for his programmatic tone poems and operas. Strauss was gifted from a young age, demonstrating musical aptitude on piano, violin, and composing his first piece at age six. The first composition was the Schneiderpolka which his father notated from Richard’s piano playing. The first piece that Richard Strauss wrote down himself was a Christmas carol in 1870. (Del Mar, 1962) Soon after, Strauss tried a variety of different kinds of compositions including short piano pieces, sonatas, and even orchestra overtures. (The Musical Times, 1903) His first courses in music theory came from local Munich musician, Fredrick Meyer. Meyer took Strauss through a five year study of harmony, counterpoint, and theory. (Trenner,
1964) It was from this advanced study that Richard Strauss began to expand his writing in length, instrumentation, and complexity.

Richard Strauss also received much of his early musical training from his father, Franz Strauss. Franz Strauss was a skilled horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra and a professor at the Royal School of Music. (Del Mar, 1962) Franz’s second wife, Richard’s mother Josephine, was the daughter of a prominent and wealthy family of brewers named Pschorr. (Del Mar, 1962) This was a connection to wealth and influence what would help the young Strauss establish his career. It would be his uncle, George Pschorr, who would help Richard Strauss get his first work published. At age 12, Richard Strauss completed his Festmarsch in E major and in 1881 George Pschorr helped subsidize its publication from Breitkopf and Härtel; offering to pay for the printing costs. (Del Mar, 1962) Richard Strauss’s early years were marked by a need to learn and create within a supportive environment that granted him many early successes.

Serenade for Winds in Eb, Op. 7

In order to fully understand the Suite in Bb, Op. 4 the events surrounding the popularity of his previous 1881 wind composition, Serenade for Winds in Eb, Op. 7, must be examined. Strauss’ first composition that brought him respect and notoriety from the music world was his Serenade for Winds in Eb, Op. 7 which was written in 1881. (Rhodes, 2007) The work was written for thirteen wind instruments including two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, one contrabassoon, and four horns. The work was dedicated to his first counterpoint teacher, Fredrick Meyer. (The Musical Times, 1903)
The Serenade in Eb was premiered in Dresden in a matinee performance under the baton of Franz Wüllner on the 27th of November in 1882. (Schuh, 1982) Franz Wüllner was the conductor who would also later give the premier performances of Till Eulenspiegel and Don Quixote. (Del Mar, 1962) In the months following the premier, the work grew in popularity and received many other performances. Later in Berlin it was performed by the orchestra of the Konzerthaus under the direction of Benjamin Bilse. The work was later performed by Hans von Bülow’s Meiningen court orchestra with Franz Mannstädt conducting. This Berlin performance by the Meiningen orchestra was given on the 27th of February in 1883. (Schuh, 1982) It was the performance of the Serenade and later examination of the score which caught the attention and admiration of the head conductor of the Meiningen court orchestra, Hans von Bülow. Bülow took a liking to the Serenade, giving several more performances of the work with himself as the conductor and made the work a standard in the orchestra’s repertoire. (The Musical Times, 1903)

Hans von Bülow’s commission

Eugen Spitzweg was a publisher who offered Strauss encouragement and was willing to promote the young Strauss. Spitzweg was also a friend of Bulow who consulted with him on whether or not to publish Richard’s work. (Shuh, 1982) It was Spitzweg who initially suggested that Hans von Bülow take a closer look at the score of the Serenade in Eb. It was from the closer examination and consequent performances that Bülow became thoroughly impressed with the Serenade in Eb and suggested to Strauss that he write a more expansive work for the same instrumentation. Strauss was thrilled with the commission and had already quickly completed work on the Praeludium and Romanze movements of a larger
work for chamber winds. Later, through correspondence with both Spitzweg and Bülow, Bülow expressed that he wanted the new work to be more of a Suite with forms matching up with the Baroque style. (Rhodes, 2007) Bülow also desired that the piece be finished to announce the arrival of the Meiningen orchestra in Munich on their 1884 summer tour. (Trenner, 1964) Upon learning of these new parameters, Strauss wrote back to Bulow:

“As a result of the suggestion you were kind enough to make, I have recently been working on a suite for thirteen wind instruments. Unfortunately the scheme you drew up for it came too late for me to be able to follow it in its entirety. I did not receive it from Herr Spitzweg until after I had already sketched the first movement (Prelude) and the second (Romance), and now only the last two movements (Gavotte and Introduction and Fugue) are in conformity with your kind advice.” (9 August 1884) (Shuh, 1982)

_The Stress-Filled Premier_

Strauss was well aware that the Meiningen orchestra was to premier his Suite in his home city of Munich while on tour but it was on October 22, 1884 that Strauss learned through Spitzweg that Bulow desired that Strauss would conduct the work himself at the matinee premier at the Munich Odeonsaal. (Shuh, 1982) Bülow also informed Richard Strauss that the players had spent some time on the work before the tour and that Strauss would be able to adjust the players to his own interpretation on the morning of the performance. It was also made clear that Strauss would get absolutely no time to rehearse or even run through the Suite with the performers prior to the actual performance. Bülow
stated in his correspondence: ‘There won’t be any rehearsals. The orchestra has no time for that on tour.’ (Shuh, 1982) It must have been an interesting scenario for Strauss to be informed that a very important premier of his work would get no rehearsal and that he would also be expected to make his public conducting debut on the same performance. It was not an ideal scenario but it was still an opportunity to great to ignore or turn down. Here is Strauss’ own account of the premier:

“I went to fetch Bülow from his hotel: he was in an abominably bad mood. As we were going up the stairs in the Odeon he was fulminating against Munich, which had cast Wagner and him out, against old Perfall, called the Odeon a cross between a church and a stock exchange, in short, he was as delightfully unbearable as only he could be, when he was furious about something. The matinee ran its course. I conducted my piece through something of a haze; all I can remember now is that I didn’t make a complete mess of it, but I simply couldn’t say what it was actually like otherwise. Bülow didn’t listen to my debut at all, he was storming round and round the instrument room, chain-smoking. Just as I got back in there, my father came in by another door, deeply moved, to express his thanks to Bülow. That was what Bülow had been waiting for. He pounced on my father like a ravening lion. ‘You have nothing to thank me for,’ he yelled, ‘I haven’t forgotten the way you treated me, here in this god-forsaken city. I did what I did today because your son has talent, not for your sweet sake.’ Without another word my father left the room, whence all others had fled as soon as they saw Bülow erupt. Of course the effect of this scene was to completely ruin my debut for me, but all of a sudden Bülow was in the best of
tempers. He later made amends for the affront he gave my father on that occasion, and my father did not harbour resentment against his son’s benefactor.” (Shuh, 1982)

The Start of a Career

Strauss’ conducting debut must have been somewhat successful because von Bülow decided to make Strauss the assistant conductor of the Meiningen Court Orchestra the following year at age 21. The job given to Strauss at this point would also imply that he was to be Bulow’s successor. This was a tremendous honor for someone so young. In 1885, Bülow resigned his post as conductor at Meiningen, thus officially making Strauss the head conductor. (The Musical Times, 1903) It was later that Strauss was offered the position as Musikdirektor at the Munich Hof-und Nationaltheater, giving him the opportunity to return home to Munich in 1886. (Trenner, 1964) The commissioning by Hans von Bülow and performance of the Suite in Bb Op. 4 ended up establishing Richard Strauss’ compositional and conducting career.

Opus number confusion

It is a bit confusing that the Suite in Bb is listed at opus 4 while the Serenade in Eb written almost three years earlier is opus 7. This is because the Suite was in manuscript form for a while and was not published until 1911 by Fürstner. Due to this later publishing, the Suite was given an opus number originally intended for a concert overture that was never published. (Del Mar, 1962)
Overview of the Work

The Suite in Bb, Op. 4 is in four movements; the Praeludium, the Romanze, the Gavotte, and the Introduction und Fuge. The first two movements were composed first before learning of Bülow’s intentions to make it more like a Suite. (Del Mar, 1962) The first two movements are both in a shortened sonata form, lacking extensive and fully realized developments. The third movement, composed at Bülow’s request, features a 19th century interpretation of a dance like gavotte played off a B section featuring a musette in a minor mode. The final movement features an introduction taken from material in the Romanze in a transformed key transitioning to an exciting, though academic, five voice fugue featuring motivic material.

Overall, the work is very romantic and expressive. Strauss’ writing features not only solo instrument timbres but different combinations and blends of the instruments for changing textures and colors. Young Strauss demonstrates his ability to use motives and then transform and connect them throughout each movement. Motivic transformation is a quality that will be developed throughout the rest of his career and featured prominently in his famous tone poems. Usually these motives center around three falling notes with a rising leap or an inverted three rising notes with a fall in interval. In each movement there is some sort of theme that will feature this motive, giving all the movements a sense of connectivity.

Movement I – Praeludium

The Prelude movement is in a shortened sonata form. The sonata form is shortened due to a lack of an extended development. The development section of the work starts at rehearsal E featuring plays on previous themes in a sparse texture. The development section
as analyzed is only seventeen measures long. An excerpt reduction of the opening bars of the first theme reveal the main motivic gesture of the work featured first in the lowest line played by the contrabassoon and second bassoon. That motivic gesture is characterized by a three note fall to a leap. The leap featured in m.1 is not as dramatic as found later in the work or movement, but features a more neutral return to the tonic with the explicit purpose of establishing the Bb tonic.

*Figure 1. Opening Theme*

This movement begins in a similar way the *Serenade in Eb* does with respect to and eighth note ‘four’ feel. Also featured in the opening is a feeling of direction building toward a more contrasting and sparse section starting in m. 11.

*The Suite’s relation to Till Eulenspiegel*

A new theme begins at m.11 and a dramatic fall in interval is featured in the first clarinet. An echo of the new theme introduced by the clarinet is echoed by the first horn in m.13. This falling theme featured in both these instruments sounds very similar to a familiar
Strauss motive found in a tone poem ten years later.

*Figure 2. Falling theme*

*Figure 3. Till Eulenspiegel*
This second theme at m.11 has the same pivotal pitches as the “once upon a time” motive from *Till Eulenspiegel*. (Del Mar, 1962) It may just be coincidence, but it would seem that Strauss is foreshadowing a motive that occurs in a tone poem he will write ten years later in 1894. It may also be a coincidence that the second theme is performed in the same primary instruments, clarinet and horn, that are featured in *Till Eulenspiegel*. It is the responsibility of the conductor to make sure these themes are heard prominently and played properly against the main motivic theme used as an accompaniment figure. This accompaniment figure is featured first in the bassoons in m.12 and the clarinets in m.14. The accompaniment figure needs to be featured not only in volume, but also in direction toward the leaping resolution note.

*The relationship between rehearsal D and rehearsal I*

The closing theme of the exposition occurs at Rehearsal letter D and is a transformed version of the opening theme. The theme is a call and response variation which has been transposed to D minor. This transformation and transposition provides a dramatic ending to the exposition. The closing theme of the exposition returns at the end of the recapitulation in the coda section. The material from exposition’s closing theme is transformed to the pitch center on Bb, as expected in a sonata form. The closing theme at the coda is further transformed and stretched into augmentation. A sense of closure is achieved in the coda by the previously mentioned elements to give a Bb tonal and rhythmic finality. The coda also features the falling ‘once upon a time’ motive sounded in the clarinet, climbing upwards to introduce the Bb coda and augmentation section. The *Praeludium* finishes with horn and oboe fanfares over the resolution of the closing theme augmentation in the bassoons and
The Romanze movement of the Suite is a slow and expressive break from the power of the first movement. Some would interpret this second movement as an abbreviated sonata form with almost a complete absence of a development. It would be more accurate to interpret this movement as more of a free form with an introduction stated at the beginning, a first theme starting at m.9 in G minor, a second theme transition at m.25, a strong Bb major third theme beginning at m.39, and a closing theme variation of the third theme starting at m.47. This large form repeats starting at m. 54. The movement culminates in a gorgeous and passionate coda on the dominant pedal point of G minor and features the three note rise motive, as an inversion of the first movement main motive, with a dramatic fall for the leap note. This appassionato coda section closes with a recapitulation of the first theme in G minor. Fanfares are heard in a similar fashion to the first movement, sounded in bassoon and horn voices leading to a picardy third G major final chord.
In relation to conducting considerations for the *Romanze*, the main concern would be the protection and support of the solo lines. Players will need to support the solo lines in exact time and matching expression. In m.9, for example, it would be a general rehearsal consideration to let the lead voices ‘conduct’ during this section. The flute and oboe lead this section and the rest of the ensemble should match what the top voices are doing to help support the main solo lines with exact time and precision.

*Figure 5. First Theme, Romanze*

The Bb major third theme features the solo clarinet and is another moment where the conductor has the opportunity to trust the musical ability of the soloist. It is important that the conductor and the ensemble give the soloist freedom of expression. It is the responsibility of the conductor and the ensemble to support that expression and phrasing with the long tones in the accompanying figure. A more musical and expressive performance will be achieved if the ensemble shapes the musical line with the soloist.
Figure 6. Solo Theme

The Bb major third theme contains the important three note rise motive in the second measure of the section. This rise motive will be heard in the passionate coda of the movement and is also featured later in the final movement. It is important to note that this motive consists of a rise of the F, G, and A flat – or a major second to a minor second. This same three note rise can also be found before rehearsal letter C, the restatement of the opening theme. Also featured in the clarinet solo is the interval of a perfect fourth. This same interval is heard in the final horn and bassoon calls at the end of the movement.
Movement III – Gavotte

The third movement is a late nineteenth century interpretation of a gavotte. A gavotte is dance-like, in cut time and typically begins with two quarter pick ups that lead to the main melody. However, Strauss places the two quarter notes on the down beat in a very strong manner. The movement begins heavier and more comical compared to a traditional gavotte and contains playful interaction and imitation among the different instrument groups. Strauss uses this movement to demonstrate his command of orchestration by contrasting different groups of instruments against solo voices. The B section of this gavotte features a musette dance form with a drone in the bassoons to imitate the drone of a musette bagpipe. The musette section strays from a typical pastoral quality due to the fact it is sounded in a tragic minor. The gavotte section comes back again at m. 130 in a familiar Bb major.

The third movement is motivic and contains a new chromatic motive as well as the traditional three note rise motive. In the beginning of the movement the new chromatic motive is stated by the first and second bassoons. This chromatic motive in the first macro gavotte section gets passed around among different instrument groupings. The new chromatic theme starts on a G with the eventual destination being the B flat. The G is stated again to start the diminished motivic rhythm by the bassoons. The new chromatic motive is extended by transferring the falling chromatic line to the second oboe. It is important that the conductor brings out the second oboe voice in this section for the purpose of chromatic motivic clarity. Toward the end of this opening section, the motivic intervals open up in the upper voices. This interval expansion occurs first the oboe, then the flute; expanding the motive from minor second to major second. The flutes expand this motive further with descending thirds with a final expansion occurring right before rehearsal letter A. The final
expansion in the lead voices is the ascending interval of a perfect fourth in a sudden *forte* dynamic. It is recalled from the second movement that the interval of the perfect fourth also gave a sense of finality in both the clarinet line and the closing fanfare figures.

*Figure 7. Chromatic motive*

Additionally, there is an important theme sounded in the musette section that has ties to all of the movements, in particular the fugue theme in the final movement. This musette theme features the three note rise with a leap down, bringing back the unifying motive.

*Figure 8. Musette theme*
Movement IV – Introduction und Fuge

The final movement of the *Suite in Bb* features two large, contrasting sections. The *Introduction*, which begins in a parallel Bb minor, is a transformation of the two main themes from the second movement *Romanze*. In the first section of the *Introduction* there is a transformed first theme of the *Romanze*. The *Romanze’s* third theme is also featured in this final movement and sounded in solo oboe. The first theme of the *Introduction* is restated at rehearsal letter B and is used as a transition theme. Forward accelerating motion and thickening of the texture propel the transition theme of the *Introduction* into the fugue section. The first theme of the *Romanze* stated at the end of the *Introduction* is gradually transformed into a three note rising motive. This three note motive is compressed to minor second motion to prepare us for the fugue section. The compression of the motive generates a rising energy through the transition theme. After the transition theme, the fugue subject begins in the first horn and is followed by a tonal answer at the fourth in the first clarinet. The first oboe sounds the next entrance of the fugue subject followed by an answer sounded in the first flute. A fifth voice in the bassoons is the final statement of the fugue subject of the fugue’s opening section. Before the *tempo primo* there is a transition section which features a version of the same three note rising motive used to signal the transition into the fugue. The recapitulation of the fugue theme, while less academic, is still impressive in its counterpoint. The recapitulation maintains a five voice fugue, but the tonal answers are altered in an inversion of the fugue theme.

In the final movement of the *Suite in Bb*, many of our motives and themes return. Motivic material found in the previous movements return in this movement in various ways. Thematic material from the *Romanze* is used at the beginning of the *Introduction* to bring a
sense of connectivity to the earlier movement.

*Figure 9. Romanze material in the final movement*

In the *Fuge* there are three different rise motives that will be heard throughout. These motives are used somewhere previously in the Suite. The main fugue subject consists of a major second rise followed by a rise of a minor third.

*Figure 10. Fugue Subject*

The next rise motive occurs in the clarinet’s tonal answer of the subject and features the interval of the ascending arpeggio; major third to minor third. The final motive heard throughout the fugue is familiar major second to minor second rise motive. These rise motives can also be heard in inversion, diminution, and augmentation. It is usually the horns and bassoons that are used to stretch and compress the motive.

At letter K, the texture becomes very dense and it is the conductor’s responsibility to bring out the motivic rises that were mentioned previously. All motivic notes are indicated
with accents and should be featured above the other non accented quarter note counterpoint. The rise motive enters on both down beats and weaker beats in the section at letter K. Each entrance should be distinct. The first horn part starting in the second measure of K features the main rise motive in augmentation. Special emphasis should be placed on this first horn entrance in order to bring out the line against the thick texture.

The work ends with a dramatic coda featuring the main rise motive sounded in a tutti texture. This rise motive is altered in the coda through offsetting entrances, diminution and augmentation. The first and second horns should perform the final statement of the fugue subject theme powerfully to end the coda. This final statement played the by horns is offset by a beat and contains a slight augmentation of the rhythm. These elements work together to emphasize the final statement of the Fugue theme and its powerful fall of a minor 7th interval.

Conclusion

The Suite in Bb is a powerful and expressive work that should not be overlooked in the wind ensemble literature. Strauss was able to take ideas of orchestration and thematic writing learned from his Serenade in Eb and create a more expansive and complex work for the same combination of wind instruments. Strauss exhibited further growth in the treatment of wind instrument orchestration and also exhibited growth in his development of theme and motive. The story of the Suite’s commission and premier are interesting, with Strauss owing much of the success, as well as stress, of the premier to Hans von Bülow. The Suite in Bb, Op. 4 is arguably one of the most pivotal works in Strauss’ career; the work that helped establish his career as a conductor and composer.
References


*Richard Strauss*. (1903) The Musical Times, 44 (719)


Appendix

DONALD P. LINN
conductor
GRADUATE LECTURE RECITAL
with
Chamber Winds

“Historical and Musical Analysis of Richard Strauss’
Suite in Bb, Op.4”


Wednesday, March 25, 2009
12:00 p.m. MIB 152

Tune the Chamber Winds

Excerpt: Serenade in Eb, Op.7 ( 1881)

I. A Young Strauss and the Suite in Bb, Op. 4

A. Biographical Overview

B. Serenade for Winds in Eb, Op. 7

C. Hans von Bülow commission
   - request for the same instrumentation
   - request for Baroque forms

D. The stress-filled premier
   - first time conductor
   - no rehearsals?
   - reflection

E. The start of a career

F. Opus number confusion

II. Overview of the Work
A. Four movements
B. Romantic, expressive, colorful
C. Motivic

Movement I - Opening Theme

**III. Movement I – Praeludium**

A. The Suite’s relation to Till Eulenspiegel

**Es war einmal theme - opening of Till Eulenspiegel**

Gemächlich.
B. The relationship between rehearsal D and rehearsal I

C. Performance of the Praeludium

IV. Movement II – Romanze

A. Let the lead players “conduct”
B. Protecting and Trusting the soloist

C. Performance of the Romanze
V. Movement III – Gavotte

A. Chromatic motive at the beginning

B. Expanding interval in the theme
C. An oboe theme with ties to the Fugue

D. Performance of the Gavotte

VI. Movement IV – Introduction und Fuge

A. Romanze material
B. Fugue Theme

C. Bringing out the motive at K – Making the implicit explicit
D. Performance of the Introduction und Fuge

VII. Closing Remarks