

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

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Richard Strauss's reputation is happily not in any need of the fillip of a centenary. A remarkably large part of his output is in the regular repertory throughout the world. In his 'Centenary Reflections' on another page—a trial run for an 'assessment' to be included in the final volume of his monumental study of Strauss now in progress—Norman Del Mar mentions how in the 1940s "with every opera house destroyed he had switched his hours of morning composition to the spinning of instrumental tapestries". The opera houses are all up again now, and most of Strauss's fifteen operas may be heard in them year after year, still meeting a public demand that shows no sign of waning.

Undoubtedly Strauss was favoured by fortune in some respects. For any composer of more than mediocre talent it is always an advantage to live long, for his works will not only go on being performed as long as he does live, but will thereby also have that much better chance—other things being equal—than those of a comparably talented but shorter-lived composer of taking root in the repertory. But a long life has its dangers for the future, in that it is often followed by a sudden and cruel fall from public favour, as though the public (and perhaps even more the musical profession, whose loyalty and interest matter just as much), having been polite to the old man for so long, breathe a sigh of relief, as if to say: "Thank goodness we don't need to consider his feelings any longer. He has had a good innings, now we can give his music a rest for a while"—which may turn out to be for ever. The ageing Strauss also had to contend, even in his lifetime, with a period of neglect at the time of the total eclipse of German music during World War II, and if his music had not met some great popular need, internationally, it could well have gone under for good then. In fact not only did he re-emerge from this as a triumphant and still active old master, but his reputation survived his death without a tremor and fifteen years after is still as high as ever.

He has his detractors of course, and it is probably true to say that the recent cult of Mahler in England has been slightly at Strauss's expense. We should not lose sight of their relative proportions. Allowing them equal innate originality and mastercraftsmanship, the sheer immensity of Strauss's output, its vastly greater range of feeling and subject-matter, musical and extra-musical, give him the greater stature. The superb compactness and concentration of substance, not to mention the graphic power, of the finest of the tone-poems (*Don Juan, Death and Transfiguration*) are something that Mahler might with advantage have learned from. Perhaps he never again quite matched the genius of these early works and some of his critics are only too ready to note the falling off. Mr. Del Mar is not blind to it, which gives all the greater weight to his placing of Strauss's best works "among the finest artistic creations of our western civilization". It is a carefully worded claim, and although some will admit fewer works to that category than others, few will wish to quarrel with it.