



RENÉE FLEMING  
FOUR LAST SONGS

RICHARD STRAUSS:  
SONGS & ARIAS

MÜNCHNER PHILHARMONIKER

CHRISTIAN THIELEMANN

## RAPTURE: Renée Fleming sings Strauss in Munich

In April 2008 the Münchner Philharmoniker and its music director, Christian Thielemann, welcomed Renée Fleming for concerts recorded as Fleming's second all-Strauss disc for Decca. The centrepiece, the *Vier letzte Lieder*, presents the composer's final homage to the soprano voice.

Fleming, pre-eminent internationally in *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Arabella* and *Capriccio*, recently added *Daphne* to her tally of Strauss operas. She has also consistently earned acclaim performing Strauss's Lieder and orchestral songs. Thielemann, too, has made the Strauss repertoire his own, including his debuts at the Metropolitan Opera (*Der Rosenkavalier*) and with the Wiener Philharmoniker (*Eine Alpensinfonie* and the *Rosenkavalier* suite). Previously conductor and soprano had collaborated only on a Covent Garden revival of *Rosenkavalier* in 2000, hailed by critics as definitive.

Fleming first recorded the *Vier letzte Lieder* in 1995. Since then she has performed them more frequently than anything else in her repertoire. For her, they depend above all on collaboration: "When I started learning the epic *Vier letzte Lieder*, it soon became clear to me that, no matter how well the songs were sung, it was the overall pacing of the piece, combined with the quality of the orchestral playing, that really shaped it. If all three elements weren't equal, the singing made little effect. It's rare to have the luxury of

recording anything twice, let alone such a legendary work. It's a joy to work with Christian Thielemann and the Münchner Philharmoniker — and in Munich, no less, the Strauss capital of the world."

Strauss created much of his vocal music for specific singers, but no particular voice preoccupied him while composing the *Vier letzte Lieder* at the end of his life — unless (and most likely) it was that of Pauline de Ahna, his wife. Pauline, who had retired forty years earlier, in 1906, had been successful in opera but had made a greater contribution as her husband's concert and recital partner for more than a decade. Although imperfect as a vocalist, she had possessed exceptional musicality, premiering many Strauss Lieder with the composer accompanying her.

Having left Germany in self-imposed exile after World War II, Strauss was adrift in Switzerland when he was drawn to a poem by Joseph von Eichendorff, "Im Abendrot". He later copied several Hermann Hesse poems into his sketchbook, intending to set more than just the three included in the *Vier letzte Lieder*. (A fifth song, *Malven* — his last completed work — was sent by Strauss to the soprano Maria Jeritza, remaining unperformed until 1985, three years after her death.) We cannot confirm that Strauss, who died in 1949, envisioned the songs as a cycle; the title *Vier letzte Lieder* came from Ernst Roth of Boosey & Hawkes, who published

the songs after the 1950 premiere. One can conjecture, however, as to what compelled Strauss to set these Hesse and Eichendorff poems. The war had produced overwhelming personal difficulties for him, and he felt devastated seeing in ruins the culture to which he had contributed so significantly. Surely the *Vier letzte Lieder* gave him a certain solace that his own surroundings and circumstances denied him.

Strauss met Hesse once, in Switzerland (apparently the writer, viewing the composer as a Nazi sympathiser, refused to shake his hand). Winner of the 1946 Nobel Prize for Literature, Hesse created poetry and novels profoundly exploring his protagonists' inner spiritual life. As for Eichendorff, the greatest of the German Romantic poets, his innately lyrical language is permeated by nature — its changeability, its potential to offer human beings their greatest happiness.

"Im Abendrot" is Fleming's favourite of the *Vier letzte Lieder*. She imagines the old couple of Eichendorff's poem "hiking, halfway between the valley and the summit of a hill at sunset. If 'September' is melancholy, it still has movement in it, whereas 'Im Abendrot' feels completely suspended. Peace is the overwhelming feeling communicated in this song." Surely the song created a premonition in Strauss, who underscored the phrase "Ist dies etwa der Tod?" ("Can this be death?") with an echo of his tone poem *Tod und Verkahrung* (Death and Transfiguration),

written some sixty years earlier.

Under Wilhelm Furtwangler's baton, Kirsten Flagstad gave the posthumous premiere of the *Vier letzte Lieder* in London on 22 May 1950. Strauss admired the peerless Norwegian soprano, whose accompanist, Edwin McArthur, later wrote that she had premiered the songs at the composer's request. The order she sang them in — "Beim Schlafengehen", "September", "Fruhling", "Im Abendrot" — may have been her suggestion, more likely Furtwangler's or Roth's. Fleming and Thielemann here follow the "standard" published order.

These songs demand stamina, formidable breath control, but not extremes of power, consequently they have been performed by sopranos of virtually every *Fach*. The music perhaps best suits a pristine timbre, floating yet "full lyric". Historically important singers of that type — Lisa della Casa, for example — have greatly inspired Renee Fleming. In her ongoing exploration of the *Vier letzte Lieder*, she invariably feels enriched by the songs: "People come to hear this music because it's comforting, and because it's so beautiful. Every time I sing it, my breathing slows down. I feel as if I'm in an altered state at the end. I never tire of it — ever."

For the Munich concerts Fleming also chose four orchestral songs, only one of which (*Zueignung*) she had previously performed. "I went through all the Strauss Lieder," she recalls, "eliminating the ones I'd

already recorded, and finally put this group together. I have to have something grab my attention and my imagination in both the music and the vocal writing. The poetry is also very important to me."

Strauss's Op.10, which initiated his maturity in Lieder in 1885, includes *Zueignung*, the first Strauss song ever recorded (an 1898 cylinder by Wagnerian bass-baritone Anton van Rooy). Hermann von Gilm's poem, originally entitled "Habe Dank!", betrays the writer's typical sentimentality, but Strauss ennobled it in a soaring melody that amply justifies its universal popularity. Fleming and Thielemann use Strauss's own 1940 orchestration, written for the *spinto* soprano Viorica Ursuleac, creator of leading roles in four Strauss operas. In dedicating the orchestration to her, Strauss added to the song the words "Du wunderbare Helena" in tribute to Ursuleac's portrayal of his "Egyptian Helen".

A famous Isolde, Rosa Sucher premiered *Verfahrung* in 1896. Written originally with orchestral rather than piano accompaniment, it is described by Norman Del Mar, in his three-volume Strauss survey, as an "enormous canvas carried out symphonically with a multiplicity of themes and teeming with imaginative orchestral details recalling [*Also sprach*] *Zarathustra*, which was gestating at this time". Most probably the poem's object of passion was meant to be a young man; the writer, radical socialist John Henry Mackay, was also one of Germany's first gay activists.

In 1900 Pauline premiered both *Freundliche Vision* and *Winterweihe* (the latter, like *Verfahrung*, unaccountably neglected today); Elisabeth Schumann's sparkling voice inspired Strauss's orchestrations eighteen years later. The *Winterweihe* text greatly attracts Renee Fleming: "It relates very much to 'Im Abendrot', which also reminds me of Strauss's *Morgen*. Strauss loved his wife and I imagine that he loved being part of a couple; having that shared experience." Like Mackay, Karl Henckell, author of *Winterweihe*, figured prominently in a group of Berlin-based modern poets alienated by the sentimentality of the German Romantics. Del Mar notes, however, that with all the modern writers "Strauss was setting poems that were the least radical, and were characterised by the very romanticism which the group believed they'd rejected."

In *Freundliche Vision*, a masterpiece of Straussian legato, the poem is atypically restrained for its author, Otto Julius Bierbaum (his writing would be instrumental in creating Berlin's *Überbrettl*, Germany's first cabaret). With this song, Fleming finds most interesting that "the recorded history puts forth tempi that vary to an extreme I've rarely heard before. Few songs are so enigmatic that they will take such vastly different interpretations. The text supports this, since the imagery is beautiful, but not conclusive."

A soprano who revels in Strauss's most expansive orchestral songs will also shine in his *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Fortunately, when

reworking the original 1912 version for the Vienna premiere four years later, Strauss retained the two magnificent monologues of the nobly suffering heroine. Both versions were created by Jeritza, whom Strauss and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal also wanted as leading lady of *Die ägyptische Helena* (1928). When Dresden balked at her fee, the *Helena* premiere went instead to Elisabeth Rethberg, vocally luminous but visually and dramatically unalluring. (Jeritza introduced the opera to Vienna and — at the Met — to America.) It was another legendary Strauss

interpreter, Leonie Rysanek, whose singing of Helena's "Zweite Brautnacht!" initially attracted Renée Fleming to this music, so overflowing with unmistakably Straussian rapture.

Roger Pines

*Special thanks to Dr Jürgen May of the Richard-Strauss-Institut, Prof. Bryan Gilliam of Duke University, Prof. Timothy Jackson of the University of North Texas and Prof. Harry E. Seelig of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.*

## EXTASE : Renée Fleming chante Strauss à Munich

En avril 2008, le Münchner Philharmoniker et son directeur musical, Christian Thielemann, ont accueilli Renée Fleming à l'occasion de concerts enregistrés afin de composer le second disque Decca de la cantatrice entièrement consacré à Strauss. La pièce de résistance de ce programme, les *Vier letzte Lieder*, constituent l'ultime hommage rendu par le compositeur à la voix de soprano.

Renée Fleming, qui se distingue sur les scènes internationales dans *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Arabella* et *Capriccio*, a récemment ajouté *Daphne* à son répertoire d'opéras straussiens. Ses interprétations des lieder et des mélodies orchestrales de Strauss lui ont également valu des éloges unanimes. Thielemann a lui aussi fait sien l'univers du compositeur, notamment lors de ses débuts au Metropolitan Opera (*Der Rosenkavalier*) et avec le Wiener Philharmoniker (*Eine Alpensinfonie* et la Suite du *Rosenkavalier*). Par le passé, le chef et la soprano n'avaient travaillé ensemble que pour une reprise du *Rosenkavalier* à Covent Garden en 2000, événement qualifié d'historique par la critique.

Renée Fleming a enregistré les *Vier letzte Lieder* pour la première fois en 1995 et depuis, c'est l'ouvrage du répertoire qu'elle a le plus souvent interprété. Selon elle, ces mélodies dépendent surtout d'un effort commun : "Quand j'ai commencé à apprendre ce monument que sont les *Vier letzte Lieder*, j'ai

vite compris qu'en fait, aussi bien qu'on puisse les chanter, ce qui les façonne est le rythme général qu'on leur imprime, allié à la qualité du jeu de l'orchestre. Si ces trois éléments ne s'équilibrent pas, le chant ne fait guère d'effet. Le fait de pouvoir enregistrer quelque chose deux fois est un luxe rare, notamment pour une œuvre aussi légendaire. C'est une joie de travailler avec Christian Thielemann et le Münchner Philharmoniker — et qui plus est à Munich, la capitale straussienne de la planète."

Strauss écrivit une bonne partie de sa musique vocale pour des chanteurs bien spécifiques, mais lorsqu'il composa les *Vier letzte Lieder* à la fin de sa vie, il n'avait aucune voix particulière en tête, à moins (et c'est le plus probable) que ce ne fût celle de Pauline de Ahna, sa femme. Pauline, qui avait mit fin à ses activités de cantatrice quarante ans auparavant, en 1906, avait rencontré le succès à l'opéra mais on se souvient surtout d'elle en qualité de partenaire de son mari au concert et en récital, partenariat qui se poursuit durant plus d'une décennie. Si sa maîtrise vocale n'était pas parfaite, Pauline était douée d'une musicalité exceptionnelle et créa de nombreux lieder de Strauss accompagnée par le compositeur.

S'étant volontairement exilé d'Allemagne après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Strauss se trouvait désœuvré en Suisse lorsqu'il fut frappé par un poème de Joseph von