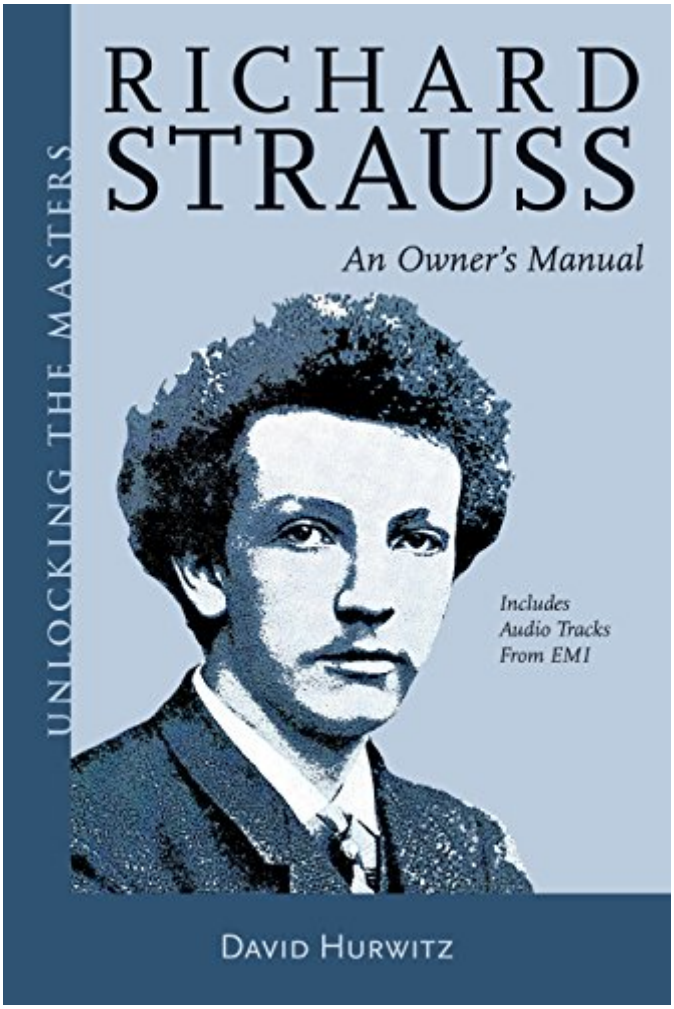
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Richard Strauss - An Owner's Manual: Unlocking The Masters Series



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Synopsis

(Unlocking the Masters). The life and music of Richard Strauss (1864-1949) span what was arguably the most turbulent period in human history, encompassing the Franco-Prussian War, the unification of Germany, and two world wars. He was one of the very last composers to have started his career in service to the old European aristocracy, but near the end of his life, the continent lay in shambles, and he faced financial ruin even as he remained Germany’s greatest living composer. Virtually from the day they were written, Strauss’s tone poems from the late nineteenth century works such as Don Juan , Till Eulenspiegel , Also Sprach Zarathustra , and Death and Transfiguration have been repertory standards. So have the operas Salome , Elektra , and Der Rosenkavalier . And yet a tremendous quantity of very good music, both early and late, has only recently come to the attention of musicians and music lovers alike. This "owner’s manual," accompanied by full-length audio tracks, surveys all the major works with orchestra: symphonies, concertos, tone poems, operas, ballets, suites, and songs. Many of them will be new even to listeners familiar with the popular pieces, part of a vast legacy of immaculately crafted, beautiful music that deserves to be rediscovered and treasured.

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Criticism

Customer Reviews

This is a very useful survey of the music of the German composer Richard Strauss, whose 150th anniversary of his birth year (1864) is celebrated in 2014. I stress that it is a survey of the music: most of the books about Strauss focus on his biography, or specifics of his output (e.g., Mann's book on the operas). The only book I think you can compare this one to is Norman Del Mar's combination biography and exhaustive discussion of the music: That book will probably never be supplanted for what it does. But I compare that three volume work to this one on purpose, because this one makes some good additions and challenges to Del Mar's central theses.Hurwitz' argument is that, basically, Strauss was a classical era oriented composer throughout; that there is a marked continuity in his career, and that his music composition did not suffer a series of interlocking curves of rise and fall (central premise to Del Mar). Another point he makes is that Strauss, as an operatic composer, was primarily a composer of comic operas, something which, knowing all of Strauss and having listened to him for 50 years, I must confess I never really gave much thought about. I think Hurwitz goes a long way to proving both of his points, and it reminds of me Strauss' long ago and somewhat tongue in cheek remark that Salome and Elektra (his two most advanced operatic works) should be conducted like "fairy music."There are three other good things about the book. First, Hurwitz discusses all of the orchestral and concertante works, as well as all of the operas, in brief summaries that eschew the typical "and here Strauss launches into one of the most sublime / unforgettable / brilliant passages, etc." type of analysis. Second, he brings his own playing experience into the picture, pointing out the difficulties in both the instrumental and orchestral works. Third, he likes all of Strauss, "gets it", and understands that Strauss was a composer who just wrote good music: not much of it terribly profound (there are a few pieces that are, and a handful of composers for that), but virtually all of it very entertaining, memorable, and deserving of careful listening / study. (I should add parenthetically that one of the fun things about Strauss is that he constantly festoons his scores with variations, slow downs, and accelerations of the fragmentary melodic material he works with; and this kind of counterpoint can be an endless source of interest and amusement: never mind what it "means" if it means anything.)The downsides of the book are few. There are a few asides that suggest a desire to get on with it, as per the characterization of Nietzsche's writings, and sometimes Hurwitz slips into colloquial speech, as per his enthusiastic discussion of Die Frau ohne Schatten.On the other hand, if you like Strauss, it's nice to find an author for once who doesn't acquiesce in dismissing large parts of Strauss' output, who recognizes

that neglected works like Schlagobers, the two early symphonies, the Panathenaenzug, and all of the post-Ariadne operas have their sustainable and listenable qualities. There may not be a lot of profound insight on this level of music appreciation, but it's terrific to have someone at least talk about them.But the book is also recommendable for beginners, with a caveat that Hurwitz himself recognizes: you have to set aside time to know this material. Not that he puts it like this, but I would say to figure it this way: you can probably get all of Strauss' operas and standard musical pieces on about 40 CD's. Another 10 for the minor pieces and chamber music. Another 10 for all of the songs. So we are looking at 60-70 hours for a complete traversal. You'd have to listen to Strauss for an hour a day for a year to really know him. But it can be done: and this book would be a good guide in the beginning stages. Then, the aspiring Straussian can dig up the Del Mar set for a more detailed discussion.

Christmas present for my mother...can't review yet!

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