



# RICHARD STRAUSS

## *Tod und Verklärung, Op. 24*

**Richard Georg Strauss** (11 June 1864 – 8 September 1949) was a leading German composer of the late Romantic and early modern eras. He is known for his operas, lieder, and tone poems. Along with Gustav Mahler, Strauss represents the late German Romanticism after Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt, in which pioneering subtleties of orchestration are combined with an advanced harmonic style. Strauss was born the son of Franz Strauss, a horn player in the Court Opera in Munich from whom Strauss received his first lessons. In 1874 Strauss heard his first Wagner operas. The influence of Wagner's music on Strauss's style was to be profound, but at first his musically conservative father forbade him to study it, and it was not until the age of 16 that Strauss was able to obtain a score of *Tristan und Isolde*. True to his father's teachings, Strauss' early compositions were more reflective of Schumann or Mendelssohn than Wagner or Liszt. It was not until 1888 that he began to reveal his own musical language, in the form of tone poems followed by controversial operas. When Strauss was 68 he was appointed president of the *Reichsmusikkammer*, Nazi Germany's State Music Bureau. He nevertheless used the position to champion music banned by the Nazis, an attempt that resulted in his removal just two years after his appointment. From his death in 1949 to the 1980s, Strauss was regarded by some as a conservative, backward-looking composer, but re-examination has re-evaluated his place as that of a modernist, albeit one who still utilized and sometimes revered tonality and lush orchestration. Strauss is noted for his pioneering subtleties of orchestration, combined with an advanced harmonic style, advances which influenced the composers who followed him.

Strauss wrote **Death and Transfiguration (Tod und Verklärung), Op. 24**, as a tone poem for large orchestra in the late summer of 1888 and completed the work on 18 November 1889. The music depicts the death of an artist, described in a poem by Strauss' friend Alexander Ritter as an interpretation of Death and Transfiguration. In Ritter's poem, as the artist lies dying, thoughts of his life pass through his head: his childhood innocence, the struggles of his manhood, the attainment of his worldly goals; and at the end, he receives the longed-for transfiguration "from the infinite reaches of heaven". English music critic Ernest Newman described this as music to which one would not want to die or awaken, saying that "it is too spectacular, too brilliantly lit, too full of pageantry of a crowd; whereas this is a journey one must make very quietly, and alone". Deeply influential to Strauss himself, Strauss would return to it by quoting it in one of his last compositions, "Im Abendrot" from the *Four Last Songs*, where he poignantly quotes the "transfiguration theme" during and after the soprano's final line, "Ist dies etwa der Tod?" (Is this perhaps death?). Just before his own death, he remarked that his music was absolutely correct; his feelings mirrored those of the artist depicted within; Strauss said to his daughter-in-law as he lay on his deathbed in 1949: "It's a funny thing, Alice, dying is just the way I composed it in *Tod und Verklärung*."