

Johann Strauss, Sr. — “A Musician by the Grace of God”?

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“My father was a musician by the grace of God.” Thus Johann Strauss II spoke enthusiastically in the fall of 1887, while writing the foreword to a collected-works edition of piano arrangements of the compositions of his father, which was published in Leipzig by Breitkopf & Härtel. A mere two sentences later, he continued with the made-up story of his father’s escape from everyday life: “At age fourteen, he ran away from his master (his education had been as a bookbinder), who would not tolerate his secret violin lessons.” Back then, glorification and escapism were part of the biography of an artist, just as thunder and lightning accompanied his death. The audience wanted it that way—sometimes it still does today.

Johann Strauss, whose name would receive the suffix “Father” or “Senior” only after his death, so as to distinguish it from that of his oldest son by the same name, was born on March 14, 1804 in Vienna’s Leopoldstadt district. He was the son of pub owner Franz Borgias Strauss and his wife Barbara (maiden name Dollmann), who in 1803 had leased the inn “At St. Florian” in the Floßgasse 7 (then Leopoldstadt No. 53, Kleine Schiffgasse).

Johann Strauss’ early years fell during an eventful period in history. Napoleon advanced deep into Austrian territory. Then came the Congress of Vienna, which brought with it a previously unheard of intra-European cultural exchange. What was life like for the Strauss family? There is sufficient historical documentation to indicate a

childhood and youth overshadowed by poverty and oppressive circumstances that were all too normal for the lower social strata of Vienna.



Johann Strauss, Sr.

The Strauss family also suffered from a lack of cohesion. In 1800, 86-year-old Michael Strauss died poor at Vienna’s General Hospital. Two years later, 26-year-old Maria Anna Strauss experienced the same fate. Waiter and later pub owner Franz Borgias Strauss, son of Michael and brother of Maria Anna, lived not far from them, yet did not care much about them.

Franz Strauss’ financial circumstances were probably overwhelming, and the family lived in abject poverty. Although he paid five guilders in business tax each year, apparently he did not do well economically. Of his six children, four

died in their first year of life. Only daughter Ernestine and son Johann survived. One daughter even had to be given to a foster parent in Erdberg, where she died.

In 1811, Johann's mother passed away from typhoid. In 1816, father Franz Strauss was found "drowned in the Danube", as the autopsy determined concisely. The probate pointed to a high debt of almost 3,500 guilders. The two surviving children, 18-year old Ernestine and 12-year old Johann, were left behind in extreme poverty. The civil tailor Anton Müller was appointed guardian of the lad.

In 1822, Johann Strauss completed a five-year training as bookbinder with Johann Lichtscheidl. He was then able to take violin lessons from a private teacher named Polyschansky. After Strauss fulfilled his military service duties as a reservist in the High- and Deutschmeister Regiment in September 1824, he set out to earn his living as a musician. In March 1825, he applied for a one-year travel pass to Graz and other regions of Austria as a "musician" and "without a particular stay", knowing full well that his girlfriend Anna Streim, daughter of a pub owner in the suburb of Thury (in what is today Alsergrund, Vienna's ninth district), was pregnant with his child. The trip never happened. Instead, in early April his guardian applied with the city council for a marriage license for the then still underage Johann Strauss. He performed with "the brothers Scholl, who were gloriously famous with the high and mighty". Together with earnings as a music teacher, this brought him a guaranteed annual income of approximately 400 guilders. In May 1825, he was able to present an attestation from music director Joseph Lanner as "performing music teacher, and a member of Lanner's music organisation", which confirmed his annual salary of approximately 400 guilders. Around the same time, Joseph Weigl—the old conductor of the court theater—was earning no more than 600

guilders. Finally, in June, a character reference from a landlord in Josephstadt, Lange-Gasse 67, could be filed. Documents related to Strauss' marriage also warrant attention with respect to Strauss' musical career. Except for a few surviving music manuscripts, they constitute the only evidence of his musical activities at this time.

Johann Strauss and Anna were married on July 11, 1825 in the parish church of Lichtental. On October 25, 1825, their eldest son Johann was born.

During his association with Joseph Lanner, Strauss played the viola. This is interesting because the third violin that typically functioned as an accompanying instrument during Lanner's era came to be replaced by a viola only around 1830. In the Vienna City Library, however, there are older viola parts to Lanner's compositions, which date from the two years when Strauss was a member of Lanner's band, from April/May 1825 to Easter 1827. Some of these parts have even been preserved in Strauss' handwriting. These older viola parts were by no means designed to replace the third violin or to be another back-up part. Instead, they contain counter-melodies to the main melody that go beyond the accompaniment function to be solo passages, as the cello would subsequently play these. The individual parts of the flute, clarinet and bassoon were combined in these viola parts, which suggests that they were used in performances in the quartet or quintet formation that Strauss led for Lanner during 1826–27. If one assumes that Strauss arranged these viola parts himself, they are an indication of his use of Lanner's instrumentation. Strauss' first dance music compositions date from as early as 1825—in part as entirely customary collaborations with experienced orchestra musicians. Initially insufficient knowledge of composition and instrumentation was offset by experimentation and trial and

error. Systematically applied melody compilations helped when composing under deadline.

In the spring of 1827, on a Wednesday or Saturday after Easter, Johann Strauss performed for the first time with his own 12-piece orchestra, at the inn “At the Two Doves” in the Landstrasser glaxis. His first compositions are scored for three violins, bass, one flute, two clarinets, two horns, one trumpet, and timpani—that is, he needed eleven musicians. Strauss no longer played the viola but the violin. Innkeeper Michael Deiss announced 12 musicians in the *Wiener Zeitung* of May 7, 1827. As was customary at the time, the two horn players also played the trumpet when more than one was needed; the flute player would, of course, switch to piccolo. Strauss therefore performed in the same formation that had proven itself in Lanner’s orchestra since 1825.

Pubs immortalized in titles of early compositions document the initial performance venues. They were small inns in the suburbs and popular tourist attractions in the vicinity of Vienna. Happy and thankful for every opportunity to perform, Strauss and his publisher promoted these places, the names of which they would include in the titles of the latest dances. In addition to other promotional activities, interested persons and buyers thus also learned from sheet music where they could hear Strauss and his orchestra: he composed the *Little Doves Waltz*, op. 1, for the inn “At the Two Doves”, the *Chain Bridge Waltz*, op. 4, for the “Hall at the Chain Bridge” on Vienna’s Danube Canal, the *Döblinger Reunion Waltz*, op. 2, for charitable functions at the inn “At the Finger” in Oberdöbling, *Krapfenwaldel Waltz*, op. 12, for the popular destination in the Vienna Woods, etc.

An impressive number of musical productions in the carnival of 1828 and that of 1829 helped improve the financial situation of the young family, which after the birth of a second son,

Josef, in August 1827, consisted of four persons. On October 4, 1829, Strauss made his debut with *Sperl Festival Waltz*, which was then already his op. 30, in the renowned entertainment venue “At the Sperl” in Leopoldstadt. “Sperl” operator Johann George Scherzer immediately entered into a three-year contract with Strauss, a practice that was then entirely new for the industry. Strauss played almost daily with his band, composed numerous dance works, and was busy with putting the programs together.

Always ready to offer his audience attractions, Strauss soon developed an intense collaboration with the best dance instructors and lighting and decorative artists of Vienna. Dance instructors Adam Rabel, Franz Rabensteiner and Gorski accompanied most balls. They guaranteed that the audience was offered more than just wild galops or waltz dances. Lighting specialist Carl F. Hirsch, nick-named “Lamp Hirsch”, whose main profession was as a civil servant who kept war records, helped make many events a success with his decorations.

Musically speaking, Strauss also went with the times. Viennese guest performances by famous artists were reflected not only in the titles of works but also in melody lines: the Rondo with bell accompaniment from Violin Concerto No. 1 by Niccolò Paganini in *Waltz à la Paganini*, op. 11, the *Grand galop chromatique* by Franz Liszt in *Furioso Galop*, op. 114, *The Carnival in Venice* by violin virtuoso Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst in *Reminiscence of Ernst or The Carnival in Venice*, op. 126. The same went for many quadrilles arranged after successful motives from new operas, where above all the objective was to stay ahead of the competition. Founded in current events, some 1,000 borrowed melodies can be found in nearly 100 works, almost a third of Strauss’ total output.

Strauss’ popularity as a conductor, often described as possessing an intoxicating charisma both on

musicians and audience, grew as steadily as his reputation as a composer and a performer. Taking advantage of the genius worship of the time, advertising for his organisation was focused solely on Strauss. As a person, he vouched for quality, and his name became a trade mark. At the time, Frédéric Chopin was staying in Vienna, and wanted to publish his first waltz, op. 18, but “Haslinger has rolled back the publication of all manuscripts, and prints only Strauss. All barrel organs now only play Strauss.”

There was another innovation. Donations from the audience were no longer sufficient to cover the ever increasing cost of events, which is why entrance fees were charged at performances of Strauss as well as those of Lanner since the beginning of the 1830s. Admission prices to balls or afternoon entertainment ranged from 20 kreutzer to one guilder and 36 kreutzer (in Viennese currency)—then a noteworthy amount—so that juicy earnings could be booked even after all expenses had been deducted, especially considering that some venues held up to 3,000 people, and that 4,000 visitors was not an unusual attendance figure at outdoor events.

The successes in the “Sperl” soon brought Strauss invitations from other ballroom owners. These were followed by additional contractual agreements, which guaranteed regular performances and income, for example in March 1832 with the owners of the Tivoli in Meidling. This entirely performance-based contract contained fixed agreed-upon remunerations, the magnitude of which depended on the prescribed size of the orchestra, the day of the week (the fee was set higher on Sundays and holidays than on work days), and even the weather, because revenues were less in bad weather. In September 1832, Strauss signed on for a lucrative one-year contract with the “Sperl”, which for him personally provided for a lump sum of 600 guilders (in Assimilated Currency), and for the orchestra for

each ball 42 guilders, ranging from 30 guilders for the Fortuna Ball to 58 guilders each for the balls on carnival Sunday and Monday. Each week during Lent, and on two days during the summer, which Strauss could choose himself, evening entertainment was to be provided, etc.

Strauss also recognized very early on that an increase in attendance figures could be achieved not just through consistently high musical caliber but also through deliberately chosen charitable events and a shrewd methodology of dedicating compositions.

The orchestra formation also grew steadily. The instrumentation of *Viennese Carnival Waltzes*, from 1828, required the use of a cello, because otherwise the distance from the melody in the bass in the sixth waltz to the higher parts was about an octave too great. In 1828, the trombone was also already being used. So Strauss needed at least 13 musicians, plus probably even a second percussionist. Thus, the orchestra soon grew to 14 musicians, which is a number that is also recorded by Ludwig Scheyrer, Johann Strauss, Sr.’s first biographer. As early as 1829, Strauss had expanded the formation with an oboe, a bassoon, and a second trumpet; the third violin had been replaced by a viola, although it would be listed for some time as a third violin. In the 1832 contract with the Tivoli, Strauss obligated himself to conduct an “orchestra of 21 persons”, that is, the strings already had multiple players of the same part. However, in bad weather they continued to play in quintet line-up or with eleven musicians. So it was relatively early that Strauss reached the “classical” orchestra formation in which the Strauss band became famous. This required a second flute and a second bassoon, and later also a third and fourth horn were added.

During carnival of 1831, Strauss and his orchestra were engaged for two chamber balls by Archduke Franz Karl. Further engagements to events at the

imperial court followed. In 1843, a special service uniform was created: white pants and red jackets. From Lanner's death in April 1843 until his own in September 1849, Strauss was the exclusive provider of entertainment music at the court. In 1846, Strauss was awarded the title of Director of Music for the Imperial-Royal Court Balls for his well-received musical activities at events at the imperial court. It was explicitly noted, however, that no content and no exclusive claim to the ownership and management of music at the court and at chamber balls was associated with this title.

Since 1832, Strauss led not just his own orchestra but also the military band of the First Viennese Citizens Regiment, which was a position that brought both prestige and revenue: "To Herr conductor Johann Strauss, for the festivities on the occasion of Corpus Christi, 72 guilders" could be debited as the proud sum for payment to the regiment in 1832.

With career advancement followed an improvement in housing conditions. From St. Ulrich, the Strauss family moved south to the neighboring suburb of Mariahilf, where in 1827 a second son, Josef, was born. Then followed a move to Leopoldstadt. In house number 31, "At the White Wolf", Anna was born in 1829, and in the Kleine Sperlgasse 9, in the house "At the Unicorn", Theresa was born in 1831. With the move into the so-called "Deer House" (Taborstrasse 17) in 1833, Strauss was able to afford a much larger residence. In 1834, Ferdinand was born, who would die ten months later. In 1835, Eduard was born.

Only two months after Eduard's birth, Strauss became a father yet again, with the birth of his first child with the milliner Emilie Trambusch, with whom he was having an affair. Seven more children would follow from this relationship, which took place while his marriage continued. In 1844, Anna Strauss finally filed for divorce, her hope for meeting family responsibilities

vested in the career of her oldest son Johann.

The repeal in 1833 of a ban on foreign travel that had been imposed in 1830 after the French revolution in July must have been quite welcome to Strauss in the late autumn of 1834. His wife was pregnant; his girlfriend was pregnant; the death of his eleven-month-old son, Ferdinand, who suffered from hydrocephalus, was becoming apparent; and a lawsuit was pending over illegal gambling. Supported by his Viennese music publisher Tobias Haslinger, on 30 October 1834 Strauss and 17 musicians from his orchestra were issued travel passes for a six-week concert tour to Prague, Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin. This was Strauss' first concert tour outside Austrian territory. It achieved great success, and would in following years lead to numerous other concert tours to Hungary, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, England—in 1838 he played on the occasion of the coronation festivities for Queen Victoria—and even to Ireland and Scotland. Strauss was the first person to go on tour with dance music. While he was on the road with part of his orchestra, the remaining musicians held down the fort in Vienna under the direction of either concertmaster Georg Jegg or Franz Amon. Lauded by music critics as "Mozart of the waltzes" or "Beethoven of the cotillions", Strauss contributed to the spreading of the Viennese waltz throughout Europe. So Johann Strauss, Sr., unintentionally created a basis for his sons in terms of both composition and performance practice.

Hinting towards the future, Johann Strauss' orchestra was in the 1830s professionally already organized as that of his sons Johann, Josef and Eduard would later be. The musicians were bound by contract. They belonged to different age groups, not all were from Vienna, some came from Bohemia and Moravia, some were single, some married, and they were not all professional musicians, with some

pursuing other occupations. Some of them helped with copying musical notes or even with the instrumentation of new compositions, for which of course they received an additional honorarium. They rehearsed, composed, arranged, and copied in Strauss' residence. Naturally, the Strauss band had at its disposal a well-stocked musical archive, which was continually expanded not just with Strauss' own works but also with new ones by other composers. Musical instruments also belonged to the band's inventory.

At the beginning of his career, Strauss received important support from Viennese music publisher Tobias Haslinger, with whom he entered into a binding contract. Haslinger thus became the exclusive publisher of Strauss, who sold him his compositions for a one-time fee. Previously, Strauss had only published a few works with Anton Diabelli, to whom he even returned a fee he had already received for the waltz *Off After One Another!* in order to be able to switch to Haslinger.

From the beginning, Haslinger printed arrangements of Strauss' works in accordance with the rule set by the publisher: piano for two, four, and (occasionally) six hands, violin and piano, two (or three) violins and bass, guitar, solo flute, solo csakan, etc. The *Krapfenwalder Waltz*, op. 12, was even available in arrangements for six- and nine-part brass band. It is worth noting that orchestral parts to Strauss' waltzes were published at a much earlier date than those to, for example, Joseph Lanner's compositions by the Viennese publisher Pietro Mechetti.

With the death of Lanner in 1843, Strauss lost one of his fiercest competitors in Vienna. He now became the first "star" of popular music not only in Vienna but also elsewhere in Europe. The debut of Johann Strauss II in October 1844, which his father tried to prevent through intervention with the Vienna city council, and the meteoric rise of the son, made possible for Anna Strauss a divorce from her husband.

But while the "elder" Strauss reigned in all the more upmarket pubs and dance venues, the son had to turn to marginalized groups, ethnic minorities, or students. The latest dance palaces were dominated by Johann Strauss, Sr. On January 8, 1845, he opened at the Odeon, which quickly became one of the premier dance halls of Vienna. He was the sole performer in the Sofien Hall from its opening in 1846 until he died in 1849. To the son remained—in part because of the economic recession in the fall and carnival season of 1847–48—no other option than to make a diversion to the Balkans and to Bucharest, where good earnings were to be had.

In 1848, Johann Strauss, Sr., distanced himself from the revolution as soon as it turned against the imperial house. After the victories of the Austrian army in Upper Italy, Strauss composed the *Radetzky March*, op. 228, for a "victory feast in honor of our brave army in Italy and in support of the wounded warriors", held on August 31, 1848 at the Wasserglaci. The march is his most famous composition, followed by the *Beloved Annen Polka*, op. 137, and the waltz *Lorelei Rhine Sounds*, op. 154.

Johann Strauss probably moved out of the "Deer House" in the summer of 1843, in order to live together with Emilie Trambusch, who would bear him eight children. He died on September 25, 1849 from scarlet fever. Johann Strauss II was able to combine his father's band with his own.