

Strauss:
Till Eulenspiegel's
Merry Pranks



Prankster, fool, hooligan, imp: these words only begin to describe the legendary Till Eulenspiegel. A collection of tales about the fictional character were first published anonymously in a *Schwankbuch*, a form of joke book, in 1511 in Strassburg, Germany. The 95 stories describe a fellow who gets into and out of scrapes as regularly as the rest of us eat or sleep. The humor is broad, slapstick, and frequently scatological, as the simultaneously hapless and wily Eulenspiegel tricks kings, priests, landlords, shopkeepers, and any other form of authority, generally by taking their statements literally. A typical tale: informed by an innkeeper that guests eat at the gentlemen's table for twenty four pennies, the destitute Eulenspiegel eats his fill and then demands to be paid the pennies for which he's chosen to eat at that table.

The name "Eulenspiegel" literally means "owl mirror," and may refer to the proverb: "Man sees his own faults as little as a monkey or an owl recognizes his ugliness in looking into a mirror." Till is a comic anti-hero, holding up the mirror to man's foolishness.

By the time Richard Strauss began composing his work about the scoundrel in 1894, he had endured a less-than-happy tenure as third conductor at the Munich Hofoper from 1886-89, where the director didn't care for his conducting or his compositions. At his next post in Weimar, Strauss's opera *Guntram*, produced in 1894, was a critical failure. Strauss certainly might have enjoyed deriding his critics the way Eulenspiegel does.

But *Till Eulenspiegel* is also part of a larger group of works, a remarkable set of tone poems Strauss composed in the late 1880s and 90s. Starting with the orchestral fantasy *Aus Italien* in 1886, the young composer (then only 22) had begun to experiment with the idea of 'program music,' works intended to express musically an image, story, or experience. From 1886 to 1898 he composed seven tone poems, single-handedly bringing the form to its peak. And the subject matter for most of these works may reflect how Strauss felt as a composer and member of the musical avant-garde. For *Macbeth* and *Don Juan* (1888-89), *Till Eulenspiegel* (1894-95), *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1895-96), and *Ein Heldenleben* (1897-98) all deal with a hero or anti-hero: an outsider, a figure of singular spirit or ability who possesses a greater force, for good or evil, than those surrounding him.

Till Eulenspiegel continued Strauss's reputation as a musical "bad boy." A critic for *Musical Record* of Boston wrote in 1900: "No gentleman would have written that thing. It is positively scurrilous. There are places for such music, but surely not before miscellaneous assemblages of ladies and gentlemen." Even Claude Debussy, himself no stranger to criticism, wrote in the *Revue Blanche*, 1903, that the work resembled "an hour of music in an asylum ... You do not know whether to roar with laughter or with pain and you wonder at finding things in their customary places." Yet Debussy found value in the work as well, adding "But in spite of all this, there is genius in certain

aspects of the work, notably in the amazing sureness of the orchestration and in that frenzied movement which sweeps us on from beginning to end, making us live through all the hero's adventures."

Strauss keeps the piece moving by casting it as an extended rondo in which a pair of repeating themes is contrasted against separate motifs meant to represent Till's various adventures. Strauss did not claim the music represented any particular chapters in the Eulenspiegel tales, though when pressed he conceded that the musical episodes include Till riding through a marketplace and upsetting the goods, then poking fun at the clergy, flirting with girls, mocking university academics, and finally being hanged for blasphemy. (In the original stories Till neither flirts with girls nor is hanged, escaping the noose by means of trickery, but Strauss's liberties with the story allow room for more drama in his musical retelling.)

The stately opening theme has been referred to as the "once upon a time" phrase of a classic story. Then the first of the two Eulenspiegel motifs appears, a jaunty melody presented by the horns. This develops to a grand conclusion with two repeated notes sounded by the entire orchestra – rather like a child declaring "Ta da!" – followed by Till's second theme, on clarinet, a comical syncopation sounding like musical laughter.

The rhythms are complex, with emphasis and entrances frequently on the off beat, and the orchestration colorful, often shifting abruptly from one instrumental group to another. One can hear the galloping rhythm as Till upsets the market carts (complete with drum beats, ratchet, and slapstick), the slow, haughty theme of the clergy, and even a romantic interlude between solo woodwinds as Till pursues the girls. But Till's own themes always return, the first generally sounded by brass and then taken up by full orchestra, followed by his musical nose-thumbing.

The piece grows toward a grand climax when suddenly a drum roll announces the gallows. A dialogue ensues between the somber fanfare of the hangman and Till's second joking theme, desperately trying to talk him out of execution. The E-flat clarinet rises shrilly for Till's final moments, then the "once upon a time" theme reappears. But, Strauss seems to say, a spirit like Till's cannot be destroyed – and the composer shares a last, triumphant joke with his hero in the work's final bars.

– Barbara Heninger