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## Reconsidering Strauss's *Metamorphosen* (TrV 290)

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

While much of Richard Strauss's post-1942 output has been consigned the status of 'pure escapism', *Metamorphosen* (TrV 290), whose musical disposition seems more readily connected to its historical context, has afforded greater critical attention as the subject of several analytical and historical studies. These include, most influentially, Timothy L. Jackson's chapter in *New Perspectives on Richard Strauss* (Jackson 1992) which takes a Schenkerian approach to the work's musical structure. Jackson's 'new perspectives' are now over two decades old and, in light of recent advances in the study of musical modernism and in structural analysis, I return to *Metamorphosen* with a different set of tools.

#### Aims and Repertoire Studied

Strauss completed *Metamorphosen* during the final months of the Second World War. The work was commissioned in the summer of 1944 by Paul Sacher for the Zurich-based Collegium Musicum and is scored for twenty-three solo strings. The beginning of the manuscript is dated 13 March 1945 — the day after the Vienna State Opera was obliterated by Allied forces. This symbolic dating, together with numerous letters expressing the composer's devastation at the state of Germany's cultural monuments, and the score's famous annotation 'IN MEMORIAM!' (which accompanies a quotation from the slow movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony), have since bolstered biographical interpretations of the work as Strauss's personal elegy for the decline of western culture.

This paper aims to challenge the received view that *Metamorphosen* is a work of excessive pessimism, nostalgia, and mourning. I argue that the work generates meaning through the negotiation and ultimate rejection of sonata form's 'utopian promise', and attempt to demonstrate how *Metamorphosen* can be viewed not as a nihilist indulgence, but as an expression of radical, perhaps even modernist hope.

#### Methods

With a lyrical second theme in a different tonal area from the work's opening, a tonally migratory middle section, and a return of earlier themes at its conclusion, *Metamorphosen* clearly engages sonata-form principles. Other aspects of the work including the tonally unstable eighty-one bars of its opening, the lack of a full recapitulation in the tonic key, and a grossly extended coda obstruct a simplistic sonata form reading. Rather than lessening the value of a sonata-based analysis I suggest that much of the work's meaning resides in its tense relationship with this paradigmatic tonal form of the past two centuries.

Following James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy I conceive of sonata form less as a fixed structure into which music is placed

than as a system of compositional choices made in dialogue with generic norms (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006). Their theory of sonata form deals particularly well with 'deformations' and places where a sonata form defies generic expectations. *Metamorphosen*, which resists a conventional sonata structure while signalling its relationship with sonata-form ideas, is therefore well served by their simultaneously flexible and exacting approach to structural analysis. Furthermore, as the archetype of tonal form, sonata structures in the twentieth century — where tonality can no longer be taken for granted — bear the historical weight of tonal ideology even more keenly than their predecessors. *Metamorphosen*'s interaction with sonata form may then be read itself as a point of historical and hermeneutic interest.

By convention, the arrival of the secondary subject is the moment when large-scale tonal antagonism is introduced to a sonata form, but in *Metamorphosen* this structural articulation is actually the work's much delayed first moment of formal clarity, and also the first extended period of tonal stability. *Metamorphosen* thus self-consciously evokes the sonata paradigm at the onset of the work's second subject, and sets up a 'structure of promise' that undertakes to redeem the tonal insecurity of the (retrospectively cast) primary thematic area, reconfiguring an undetermined set of wandering musical possibilities into a totality of form and content. Sonata form is thus presented as a transformative device through which the tonal and structural failings of the work's opening can be resolved.

A reversed recapitulation engineers the failure of the major-key triumph implied by the expositional secondary subject. This is not so much a failure of the structure of promise (which is achieved insofar as the recapitulation of the primary theme gains the tonal authority it lacked at the outset of the work) but of the structure of promise to sustain the aesthetic utopia that is projected in the recapitulation of the secondary subject (and for which the sonata form itself has come to stand). In rejecting the vision of utopia provided in the viscerally charged tonal language of late romanticism *Metamorphosen* recognises the inability of sonata form to provide a source of aesthetic redemption for the modern era.

#### Implications

Rather than being a nihilist gesture, *Metamorphosen*'s negation of sonata form proposes a new form of hope: not the structure of promise — the optimism of assured triumph — but a hope that is sustained without a scientific grasp of future redemption. In surrendering the optimistic trajectory of the sonata structure, *Metamorphosen* accepts the deficiency of sonata form's idea of totality for the modern era and rejects its ideological promise. Strauss offers no method of overcoming sonata form, tonality, and the contemporary historical condition of the musical work, but in *Metamorphosen* he recognises the need for a renewed musical language. I suggest that the pessimism *Metamorphosen* displays in relation to its own mu-

sical form creates a space, through a nihilist attitude towards the failed ideological structure, for a renewed conception of the subject.

For over twenty years a small number of interpretative ideas about Strauss's *Metamorphosen* have gone unchallenged in popular and scholarly discourse. This paper offers a radically new interpretation of Strauss's late masterpiece suggesting that *Metamorphosen* is not the work of personal mourning it has long been considered. While *Metamorphosen* certainly expresses melancholia in the face of cultural decline I suggest that close analysis of Strauss's musical form can bring the analyst to a more discerning view of the composer's reactive musical language in the historical and musical context of the modern era.

### Keywords

Sonata Theory, Modernism, Richard Strauss, Ideology.

### REFERENCES

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