Johann Strauss II was greatly admired by many “serious” musicians of his time. Richard Strauss (no relation) remarked that in an era “when everything surrounding him had already evolved toward the complex and the premeditated, [he] was one of the last to have primary inspiration.” Gustav Mahler complimented Strauss’s waltzes for “their uniqueness and delightful inventiveness.” Jules Massenet observed that “Brahms is the spirit of Vienna, but Strauss is the perfume.”

Strauss began achieving success as an orchestra leader at the age of 19 and quickly gained such popularity that he emerged as something of a rival to his more established father. Initial uneasiness over this situation was overcome, and when Johann, Sr., died in 1849, Johann II merged his late father’s orchestra into his own. From 1863 to 1871 he served as director of the Viennese court balls, just as his father had. When he relinquished the position, he handed the reins off to his brother Eduard.

Johann II published almost 500 pieces of dance music, and many of his waltzes have now been classics for nearly a century and a half. None can rival the popularity of An der schönen blauen Donau (On the Beautiful Blue Danube), which has come to stand as a nearly universal anthem of carefree elegance. Its intent was strikingly different at its origin. Its genealogy can be traced to early July 1865, when the prestigious Wiener Männergesangverein (Viennese Men’s Choral Society) asked the composer to write a waltz for a concert it would give a couple of weeks later. Other obligations and personal concerns prevented Strauss from participating, but in a letter to the group’s management committee he pledged,

I hereby commit myself next summer, if I am still alive, to make up for what I am now hindered from doing, and with pleasure I offer the esteemed Committee a new composition — written especially for the purpose, as well as my personal participation.

This promise remained unfulfilled in 1866, and in the course of that year the Austrian army suffered a defeat by Prussia, and the mood of the formerly buoyant Habsburg Empire turned grim. The social balance became so unstable that the Wiener Männergesangverein decided to tone down its traditionally rowdy Carnival concert for February 1867, offering a more sedate program than usual.

Strauss pulled together ideas for a waltz-suite during the final months of 1866. By the time of the concert, he had expanded his

In Short

Born: October 25, 1825, in Vienna, Austria
Died: June 3, 1899, in Vienna
Work composed: 1866–67
World premiere: February 18, 1867, in its version with chorus and orchestra (to a text by Josef Weyl) in the Dianabadsaale in Vienna, on a concert of the Wiener Männergesangverein (to which the piece is dedicated), with the “George V, King of Hannover” Forty-Second Infantry Regiment, Rudolf Weinwurm, conductor
New York Philharmonic premiere: December 22, 1912, Josef Stransky, conductor
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 31, 2018, Jaap van Zweden, conductor
Estimated duration: ca. 9 minutes
waltz from four sections to five, which he surrounded with an introduction and a coda. A text was provided by Josef Weyl, a police official who served as a sort of “special material” poet for the Society. His words have often been dismissed as cliché-ridden doggerel — “Wiener seid froh! / Oho, wie so?”; “Rejoice, Viennese! / Oh, yeah? How so?” — but a closer reading suggests that their frolicsome inanities are rich in ironic content that would not have been lost on Viennese listeners in the throes of societal and economic upheaval.

Weyl’s text nowhere makes mention of the Danube — which, in any case, no Viennese of that time, and few today, would likely describe as being at all blue. The phrase apparently was lifted from a poem by Carl Isidor Beck, and when Strauss appropriated it as his title he may have intended it to announce the sense of unlikely parody that inhabits Weyl’s poem.

An der schönen blauen Donau is only occasionally heard in its choral setting — it is more likely to be encountered as an orchestral piece. Both are entirely authentic readings: Strauss basically wrote this as a string of orchestral waltzes and seems to have had no particular involvement in selecting the text (which, in fact, had to be adapted to the music, since Strauss effected some changes to his waltz shortly before the premiere).

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, harp, and strings.

— J.M.K.

**American Grandeur**

In the summer of 1872 Johann Strauss II and his entourage set out for a visit to the United States, where he performed in Boston and New York. Audience enthusiasm bordered on the maniacal, stirred up not only by Strauss’s celebrity but also by the grand scale of the events. Strauss would recall of his opening concert at the World’s Peace Jubilee in Boston:

On the musicians’ platform there were 20,000 singers; in front of them the members of the orchestra — and these were the people I was to conduct. A hundred assistants had been placed at my disposal to control these gigantic masses, but I was only able to recognize those nearest to me and, although we had had rehearsals, there was no possibility of giving an artistic performance, a proper production. But if I had declined to conduct, it would have cost me my life.

Now just imagine my position, face to face with a public of 100,000 Americans. There I stood at the raised platform, high above all the others. … Suddenly a cannon shot rang out; a gentle hint for us 20,000 to begin to perform The Blue Danube.

I gave the signal; my 100 assistant conductors followed me as quickly and as best they could and then there broke out an unholy row such as I shall never forget. As we had begun more or less together, I concentrated my entire attention on seeing that we should also finish together! — Thank Heaven, I managed even that. … The 100,000 mouths in the audience roared their applause and I breathed a sigh of relief when I found myself in fresh air again and felt firm ground beneath my feet.

*A contemporary depiction of Strauss’s concert at the World’s Peace Jubilee Festival Hall in Boston, Massachusetts*