

Nocturno, Op.7

Franz Strauss

(b. Parkstein, Bavaria, 1822 / d. Munich, 1905)

It is well known that Hans von Bülow, the celebrated pianist and conductor of the late 19th century, was an early advocate and champion for young Richard Strauss. In fact, the assistance he provided the emerging genius led to a friendship between Bülow and Richard's father, Franz. But had things gone slightly differently at a rehearsal at the Munich Opera one day, that may never have happened.

Franz Strauss was regarded as one of the finest horn players in the German musical world. So remarkable was his playing that his many disagreeable personality traits were overlooked to a great degree. Franz Strauss was opinionated and not afraid to be so – and he was a conservative, musically speaking. So the fact that his position as Principal Horn for the Munich Opera meant that he was a participant in the world premieres of several operas by the radical Richard Wagner – operas conducted by Wagner acolyte Bülow – caused a great deal of friction. Wagner was anything but conservative, and wrote crucial horn parts in most of his operas. And Franz Strauss did not care for them, and was not afraid to make his views known to both Bülow and Wagner himself. But he played them so well, his unwelcome comments were tolerated.

But one day, apparently, Strauss the elder went too far, and Bülow icily told him that if he didn't like it, he could apply for his pension. Strauss called the bluff, and began to pack up – but a ceasefire was negotiated and, as mentioned, the two would eventually become friends, united in their belief in the talent of Franz' son.

But Franz Strauss himself composed as well, for the instrument at which he was an acknowledged master. His *Horn Concerto* premiered in 1865. His *Nocturno*, for horn and piano, dates from the year before, and has become a popular work among horn players. *Nocturno* translates as "night song," and indeed, the gentle melody that dominates the work is tender, belying the horn's origins as an outdoor, heralding instrument.

The tender horn melody is lush and richly romantic, ushered in by a gently undulating piano accompaniment. It repeats with slight variation, then allows the piano to join more fully. A dramatic mood swing changes the mood to passionate, ebbing away gradually as the original mood returns. The piano provides a brief introduction to the main theme's next appearance. The final section is an almost tender farewell.