

Richard Strauss (1864-1949): *Four Last Songs* (1948)

“It’s a funny thing, Alice, dying is just the way I composed it...” These were Strauss’s sardonic words to his daughter-in-law as he lay on his deathbed, referencing his symphonic poem, *Death and Transfiguration*, a work he had written nearly sixty years earlier. In fact, Strauss quotes a melody from that composition in one of his *Four Last Songs*. Among his final compositions, these songs are a stunning apotheosis of an exceptionally long-lived career in music. Strauss wrote his very first composition when he was just six, in 1870, and nearly eight decades later, in 1948, he was still composing. At the time, however, he found himself in a considerable depression and writing was difficult. His finances, after the war, were in awful shape, and he had resorted to selling some of his original manuscript scores just to make ends meet. In a flurry of correspondence with friends, he lamented the new trends toward atonality in music and also the loss of cultural life across Europe as a result of the war. His family was concerned, too. His son Franz intervened, encouraging Strauss to stop brooding and to return to composition, particularly to songs, which had always given the composer great comfort. Fortunately, Strauss listened, deciding first to turn to the orchestration of a song he had set aside a couple of years prior, “*Im Abendrot*” “At sunset.” With a text by the Romantic poet Joseph von Eichendorff, the song portrays an older couple, in nature, contemplating the peace and stillness that their eventual deaths will bring. Strauss also set to work on three additional songs, these with texts by Herman Hesse, a contemporary of Strauss, who had recently won a Nobel Prize for Literature. These texts also explored seasons of life and of romantic love: “*Frühling*” “Spring”; “September”; and “*Beim Schlafengehen*” “Upon Going to Sleep.” In many ways, the four songs together were intimately biographical, a celebration of Strauss’s enduring marriage to and love for Pauline Strauss. Strauss’s biographer, Michael Kennedy, notes that “the *Four Last Songs* are really a final homage to Pauline, his marital and artistic partner for over fifty years... They are the music of old age and wisdom and serenity, of death and transfiguration.” Pauline was a famous operatic soprano and the muse for so many of his works. He had gifted Pauline with four songs on their wedding day in 1894, and these *Four Last Songs*, coming at the end of life, could serve as no better memorial of their life together. In the final song, “*Im Abendrot*” “At sunset,” we hear the lines, “How weary are we of wandering—is this perhaps death?” Strauss provides a musical answer that promises an existence beyond the couple’s own mortality. He interrupts that final question with the “transfiguration theme” from his earlier work *Death and Transfiguration*. It’s a transcendent passage of music, and we can only hope that death might be just a little bit the way Strauss composed it.