# RICHARD STRAUSS

Born 11 June 1864 in Munich; died 8 September 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

## *Also sprach Zarathustra* ("*Thus spake Zarathustra*"), Opus 30 (1896)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Frankfurt, 27 November, 1896; Orchestra of the Museum Concerts; Richard Strauss, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 10 February 1939; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 32 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: two piccolos, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, two bass tubas, timpani, percussion, organ, two harps and strings.

Back in the days when Richard Strauss was considered The World's Greatest Composer, a popular literary sport grew up around his works to fit them with plots or stories or programs. Strauss was always chary with verbal information about the "meaning" of his tone poems, and, since he did not discourage others from having a go at it, a whole barrage of possible "explanations" greeted each new work. *Also sprach Zarathustra*, deriving in some manner, at least, from the universal vision of Friedrich Nietzsche's poem (left incomplete at his removal to a mental hospital), was an especially inviting target for the hurlers of literary tracts. The composer approved almost all of the efforts that came along (they were, after all, good publicity, and Strauss — and his very large income — thrived on publicity), so the latter-day reader is left with a bundle of occasionally contradictory evidence. The truth of the matter seems to be that Strauss' music and Nietzsche's poem share little more than a title and a few pretentious ideas. Virtually every attempt to equate a section of the tone poem with a specific passage from the poem has been unconvincing.

Though its philosophical intentions are correctly questioned, there has never been any doubt about the expressive powers of this music. (It was the Budapest premiere of *Also sprach Zarathustra* that inspired the young Béla Bartók to devote his life to composition.) The sections of Strauss' tone poem mirror several strong emotional states, as indicated by the following program note that appeared at the work's premiere, conducted by the composer in Frankfurt on November 27, 1896. "First movement: *Sunrise, Man feels the power of God. Andante religioso*. But still man longs. He plunges into passion (second movement) and finds no peace. He turns toward science, and tries in vain to solve life's problems in a fugue (third movement). Then agreeable dance tunes sound and he becomes an individual, and his soul soars upward while the world sinks far below him." There is a progression inherent in the work, a sort of a-religious Pilgrim's Progress, toward some transcendent state. One German writer, Rudolf Kloiber, viewed *Also sprach Zarathustra* as "a colorfully formed music-drama without words.... Strauss chose from the poem the speeches of Zarathustra to create a kind of scenario for the content and form of the work." There are three overtly programmatic elements that unify the work. The first is heard immediately at the outset. It is the theme of Nature, the unison call by four trumpets based on the most fundamental acoustical pitches in the musical spectrum: C-G-C (inextricably wedged in the public consciousness by Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*). The second is a sinister theme, perhaps depicting Fate, introduced by the trombones in the section, "Of joys and passions." The third is the conflict between the C tonality — representing Nature — and that of B, the latter standing for Man's aspirations. The unsettled struggle between these two (the technical term is bi-tonality) is most clearly discerned at the very end of the work, but it occurs many times throughout the piece.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda