

## Musical Treasure Chest #51

With the weather so wonderfully warm and spring-like, there is a buzz of excitement in the air. The sun sets much later and the sounds of night are starting to be vernal ones and not the silence of winter. The older I get, the more I appreciate the return of spring. The inexorable adornment of the trees gracefully unveiling their vibrant leaves. I love this time of year. I have been thinking about fun, exciting music to pair with this anticipatory exhilaration, and the piece that popped into my head is the wonderful chamber ensemble arrangement of *Till Eulenspiegel* by Richard Strauss.

The Strauss tone poems are simply the pinnacle of this programmatic repertory. *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Ein Heldenleben*, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the list goes on....are fantastic compositions, brilliantly orchestrated, journeying through a musical landscape that is thrilling and descriptive and glorious. And, of course, as an orchestral musician, these works are virtuosic, with "licks" from the pieces showing up on audition lists for virtually all instruments (for violin the opening page to *Don Juan* is notoriously difficult). And each tone poem features extended solos for first chair players.

I first heard the transcription of *Till Eulenspiegel* during my years at WMHT-FM; it was featured on a broadcast from a European chamber music festival. I was fascinated. First, that it worked. The original version is huge, with string sections divided into multiple parts, gigantic woodwind and brass sections and a large percussion force. It is a distinctive and incredibly effective orchestration, which captures the blustery character of Till so well. How could this humongous contingent of instrumentation be reduced to five players and still work, retaining "the essence" of the original?

Richard Strauss composed *Till Eulenspiegel* in 1894-95. The full title is *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* and follows the medieval German peasant folk hero through his adventures and confrontations with the German clergy and Holy Roman Empire authoritarian figures. Based on a real person who lived in the

fourteenth century, the tales became legendary (much like America's Paul Bunyan) and the story would serve Strauss's larger-than-life tone poem settings well. Strauss invented his own narrative for the poem, and various instruments carry the themes. Till is represented by the horn and E-flat clarinet. *Till Eulenspiegel* is a fun romp, lasting about eighteen minutes.

In 1954 Vienna's University of Music composition professor Franz Hasenöhr published *Till Eulenspiegel einmal anders!* (which translates to "another way" or "for once", differently). He later added to the title the words *grotesque musicale*. His version is scored for violin, bass, clarinet, bassoon and horn. How clever and brilliant this transcription is. Hasenöhr (whose name unfortunately translates to "rabbit ears") distills the main themes from the original, while cutting the music down to about eight minutes. But it completely works. Strauss, himself, never had a chance to hear the transcription; he died in 1949. But I would like to believe that he would have enjoyed this version immensely.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm0fdZmUvhEt>