

NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT / POST CHRISTMAS SEASON

Neujahrstag (der 1. Januar): New Years Day

Neujahrstagsitte: New Years Day custom

At the epicenter of the waltz: the Strauss dynasty of composers founded by Johann Strauss Senior, whom none other than Richard Wagner described as "the most musical head in Europe." Strauss Junior, arguably the first pop star in music history, toured the continent with his dance orchestra and created indelible tunes like the "Blue Danube Waltz." "Unfortunately, not by me," lamented his contemporary Johannes Brahms.

Blurring the distinction between light and serious music, the Strauss brand originated in Vienna. Itself based in what has been called "the capital city of classical music," the Vienna Philharmonic is associated with Strauss waltzes, polkas and operettas like none other, although it would be a mistake to pigeonhole it there.

Opera tradition

The orchestra's origins are to be found in the Vienna Court Opera, whose musicians were commissioned on occasion by Mozart and Beethoven in "academy" concerts. Eventually a need for a full-fledged orchestra was perceived to perform repertory separate from the operatic repertoire. In 1841, composer and conductor Otto Nicolai founded what was to become the Vienna Philharmonic, yet to this day it is stipulated that its members must also be engaged at the Vienna State Opera and perform both in opera and in concert.

Some seven thousand concerts were to follow in the Philharmonic's over 170 year history, earning accolades from composers who worked with it: Richard Wagner dubbed this orchestra "one of the world's very finest," Anton Bruckner called it "the supreme artistic association in music," Johannes Brahms called himself the Vienna Philharmonic's "friend and venerator," Gustav Mahler felt bound to it "through artistic ties." Richard Strauss, however, is the source of the most quotable quote: "Praising the Philharmonic would be like carrying violins to Vienna."

Secret of success

From the outset, the Vienna Philharmonic has been a self-governed group. "The gateway to the orchestra is the Vienna State Opera," explained oboist Wolfgang Plank in a DW interview. "That's where the young musicians start, and if they pass the three-year probationary period, they're gradually engaged in concert performance. How much opera and how much concert activity one has depends on the repertory chosen. We tend to serve mostly in the opera pit, but for most orchestra members, it's about fifty-fifty."

Describing an orchestral sound as unique is difficult nowadays, but when it comes to this group, "unique" is in fact the word most often used. "The oboe, for example, is a different instrument here than in other orchestras: an earlier model, richer in overtones," said Wolfgang Plank. "The horns, the timpani, even the triangle are all specially constructed for the Vienna Philharmonic."

Described as particularly homogenous, the Vienna sound has been shaped by classical music's seminal personalities, beginning with Hans Richter, the legendary conductor of the first "Ring" cycle in Bayreuth, who led the Vienna Philharmonic from 1875 until 1898 in what is called its "golden era." Gustav Mahler worked closely with the orchestra from 1898 until 1901 and took it on its first tour abroad, to the Paris Exhibition in 1900. The nineteen-year era of Felix von Weingartner began in 1908 and saw the orchestra on its first tour outside Europe, in South America. In 1933, the Vienna Philharmonic began to work only with guest conductors, a tradition it continues to this day.



Orchestra founder Otto Nicolai composed "The Merry Wives of Windsor"