

## ***Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche (Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks), Op. 28***

### **Richard Strauss**

**A** traveler passing through Brunswick (a.k.a. Braunschweig), in north-central Germany, midway between Hannover and Magdeburg, will likely stumble across the statue in that city's Bäckerklint Square commemorating Till Eulenspiegel, a presumably historical figure whose escapades — greatly exaggerated, no doubt — made him a staple of German folklore. He was more or less a native son, since he is supposed to have been born some 14 miles to the southeast, in the town of Schöppenstadt (some say Kneitlingen), which maintains a small museum in his honor. To the north, in the village of Mölln, in the northernmost German state of Schleswig-Holstein, the other end of his life is memorialized by a plaque. As my ragged 1927 *Baedeker* puts it,

The popular German jester, Till Eulenspiegel or "Master Tyll Owlglass," is said to have died here in 1350, in proof of which his tombstone (really of the 16th cent.), with an owl ("Eule") and mirror ("Spiegel") upon it, and various personal relics are shown in the tower of the interesting old church (Nikolai-Kirche).

The oldest version of the Till Eulenspiegel stories dates from 1510–11, after which the tall tales proliferated with amazing vigor: more than 1,100 separate Till Eulenspiegel titles have been recorded in library collections through the years. No matter what the specifics of a particular story, Till invariably was shown to play practical jokes — often cruel ones — on unsuspecting victims. Frequently the stories delight in the subtext of a wily peasant getting the best of more privileged citizens, such as clergymen or bourgeois businessmen.

Richard Strauss, who would have known some of the Till Eulenspiegel tales from his childhood, certainly was familiar with the printed version published in 1866 by the Belgian

novelist Charles de Coster, and it is thought that in 1889 he also saw an opera on the Till Eulenspiegel theme by the once famous but now forgotten post-Wagnerian composer Cyrill Kistler. Strauss was so struck by the operatic possibilities inherent in the stories that he sketched his own scenario for an opera on the subject, and, a bit later, he commissioned another version from Kistler's librettist. In the end, he stopped short of developing Till into a full-fledged operatic character. But the subject had lodged itself in his mind, and before long Strauss channeled his efforts toward a sort of unstaged dramatic exercise of the imagination — a symphonic poem.

Franz Wüllner, who conducted the premiere of *Till Eulenspiegel*, asked Strauss to provide a program that might guide his interpretation. Strauss refused, insisting instead that they "leave it to the audience to crack the nut that the rogue has prepared for them." Later, the Strauss disciple Wilhelm Mauke did prepare

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### **IN SHORT**

**Born:** June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria

**Died:** September 8, 1949, in Garmisch, Germany

**Work composed:** 1894–95, completed on May 6 of the latter year

**World premiere:** November 5, 1895, in Cologne, Franz Wüllner, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 9, 1903, Walter Damrosch, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 20, 2014, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 15 minutes

exactly such a document, and the composer apparently considered it to some extent authoritative since he penciled several phrases from it into appropriate places in his score: Till racing on horseback through the market, Till the cavalier exchanging courtesies with beautiful girls, and so on to his inevitable arrest, trial, conviction, and hanging.

But what audiences love about the piece is not the story, which ultimately adds up to very little, but rather the music, which is at once charming and sophisticated. What's more, it's lighthearted — not a characteristic overwhelmingly associated with the mainstream of 19th-century German music, at least not since the time of Mendelssohn. Strauss underscores the insouciant spirit by casting his piece in the most carefree of classical forms, the rondo, with its regularly recurring refrains. (In fact, the

work's complete title is *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, After the Old Rogue's Tale, Set in Rondo Form for Large Orchestra*. Within this structure Strauss offers a stream of astonishing metamorphoses of what boils down to very few themes. The famously optimistic "Till" motif articulated by the horn near the beginning, for example, is transformed into something sarcastic and insolent when the E-flat clarinet gets hold of it, and then into a yearning love song when the flute and violins get their turn.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, tenor drum, cymbals, triangle, ratchet, and strings.

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## Views and Reviews

Early critics were not in agreement about the merits of Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*. Gustav Schoenaich waxed ecstatic in the *Neue Musikalische Presse* on December 1, 1896:

Richard Strauss's musical education is profoundly thorough. ... We do not know, if the piece had been sent out into the world without the title, whether the name Eulenspiegel would have been attached to it by someone from among the circle of listeners; but [its] fundamental character, oscillating between humor, sarcasm, and irony, radiates from every measure, here and there perhaps even too garishly. The piece is dazzlingly clever, does not break down into its individual parts, captivates the intellect of the listener perhaps more than his sensibility — but with its convincing logic and skillfully measured length it never for a moment leaves him without stimulation. It is eminently amusing.



In contrast, O.L. Capen, in the *Boston Journal* of February 22, 1896, offered a less enthusiastic assessment:

From first to last, *Till Eulenspiegel* was musical obscenity of the most unique and remarkable description; in form of a crazy-quilt, in orchestral color much the same. ... It is a most inexplicable hodgepodge. Eulenspiegel's daily beverage was doubtless beer, and the music is unmistakably beerish. The tone-picture, with all its abnormal and hideously grotesque proportions, is that of a heavy, dull, and witless Teuton. The orchestration of the work is sound and fury, signifying nothing, and the instruments are made to indulge in a shrieking, piercing, noisy breakdown most of the time.

*A statue of Till Eulenspiegel in Braunschweig, Germany*