Johann Strauss II first made his mark as an orchestra leader at the age of 19, and he quickly emerged as a rival to his more established father, Johann Strauss, Sr. Initial uneasiness over this situation was overcome, and when the elder Strauss died, in 1848, the son merged his late father’s orchestra into his own. From 1863 to 1871 he served as director of Viennese court balls, just as his father had, and when he relinquished the position he merely handed the reins off to his brother Eduard. This set of his works — and one by his brother Josef — evoke the sophisticated frivolity of those events.

In addition to the almost 500 pieces of dance music he published, Johann Strauss II scored important successes as a composer of operetta and light opera. Die Fledermaus has proved the most enduring, but Der Zigeunerbaron (The Gypsy Baron) and Eine Nacht in Venedig (A Night in Venice) remain in the active repertoire even outside German-speaking lands. The three-act operetta Der Zigeunerbaron sports a complicated plot that involves the love affair of a Hungarian lad and a Gypsy lass set against a background of international intrigue. The Overture to Der Zigeunerbaron is infused with an exotic flavor, employing evocative rhythms, unusual harmonic references, and colorful touches of orchestration — including jingling spurs — to summon up the Hungarian-Danube world in which the action unrolls. But this being Johann Strauss II the music cannot resist touching down on an ingratiating waltz before galloping off in its high-stepping conclusion.

The second child of the family, Josef Strauss disappointed his father by not entering the military. But at least he did not seem pointed toward music, which his father discouraged, earning degrees in technical draftsmanship.

Overture to Der Zigeunerbaron (The Gypsy Baron)

**Johann Strauss II**

- **Born:** October 25, 1825, in Vienna, Austria
- **Died:** June 3, 1899, in Vienna
- **Work composed:** 1885
- **World premiere:** October 24, 1885, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, with the composer conducting
- **New York Philharmonic premiere:** August 6, 1933, Willem van Hoogstraten, conductor
- **Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 26, 2009, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor
- **Estimated duration:** ca. 8 minutes

Silhouette of Johann Strauss II by Otto Böhler, 1913
and mathematics at Vienna’s Polytechnic Institute. He became an accomplished visual artist and landscape architect, studying for six years at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts; he completed an apprenticeship in stonemasonry and bricklaying; he published poems and a drama, in addition to books on mathematics; and he co-invented a street-cleaning machine with rotary brushes that was initially rejected but eventually adopted for use by the City of Vienna.

In 1853 his brother Johann II, in his duties as conductor of the Strauss dance orchestras, was overtaxed to the point of suffering a nervous breakdown. Josef filled in as conductor, and he also wrote a waltz to unveil at one of the orchestra’s engagements. At its premiere, the waltz had to be encored six times, and an enthusiastic journalist expressed “the agreeable hope that this composition will not be the last, but that Josef Strauss … will soon produce a sequel.” Thus encouraged, Josef began his professional career in music. Ever the student, he polished his expertise by taking lessons in thorough-bass, composition, and violin. A bit of sibling rivalry flared up once Johann II returned to health, but soon enough the two sorted things out and shared the orchestra’s conducting duties. However, Josef would not enjoy a long career. He suffered from increasingly troublesome headaches and vision problems. In the summer of 1870 he collapsed on the podium while on tour in Warsaw, likely the effect of a ruptured brain tumor, and was taken back to Vienna, where he died. He left a legacy of some 300 original dance compositions in addition to about 500 orchestral transcriptions of pieces by other composers.

As a dance composer, Josef Strauss was particularly adept with waltzes and polkas. *Die Libelle (The Dragonfly)* belongs to the category of polka known as the *polka mazur* (or polka mazurka), which was extremely popular in the 1850s and ’60s. To listeners today, a polka mazur very much resembles a relaxed waltz, with which it shares a triple meter. The two genres are nonetheless distinct, with the polka mazur laying a heavier stress on the downbeat of each measure.

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**Die Libelle (The Dragonfly), Polka-Mazurka, Op. 204**

**Josef Strauss**

*Born:* August 20, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

* Died:* July 20, 1870, in Vienna

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**Work composed:** summer 1866

**World premiere:** October 21, 1866, at the Volksgarten in Vienna, with the composer conducting the Strauss Orchestra

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** October 25, 1896, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:**
January 5, 1929, Walter Damrosch, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 5 minutes

*The Strauss brothers: Johann II and Josef*
Also, they were danced differently, with the steps for the polka mazur resembling those of the standard polka, though translated into 3/4 time. The opening phrases of *Die Libelle* do suggest the flight of a dragonfly hovering above and skimming along the surface of a pond. It was a great hit at its premiere. The next day, the *Neue Fremden-Blatt* reported:

Last evening in the Hall of the Volksgarten, Mr. Josef Strauss drew great applause with the new polka mazurka *Die Libelle*. The delightful polka had to be played four times in succession.

During the 1860’s, when several of the pieces in this Strauss set were composed, Austria experienced much political turmoil. As the decade began, the hodge-podge of German-speaking kingdoms, principalities, duchies, electorates, and free cities were moving by fits and starts toward national unity, a goal that would be realized in 1871. One of the painful missteps along the way was the 1866 Austro-Prussian War, which pitted the Kingdom of Austria against the Kingdom of Prussia, with allies lined up on either side. Prussia dominated and became the center for a unification of German-speaking lands that did not include Austria. Following the conflict, Austria strengthened its political power by entering into the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, an arrangement in which Austria and Hungary maintained separate statehoods with equal political power but were jointly ruled by a single monarch from the House of Habsburg. This made Austria-Hungary the second largest European nation in terms of

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**Éljen A Magyar! (Hail to Hungary!), Schnell-Polka, Op. 332**

*An der schönen blauen Donau (On the Beautiful Blue Danube), Op. 314*

**Johann Strauss II**

**Works composed and premiered:** *Éljen A Magyar!* composed 1869; premiered March 16, 1869, at the Redoutensaal in Pest, Hungary, with the composer leading the Strauss Orchestra. *An der schönen blauen Donau* composed 1866–67; dedicated to the Vienna Men’s Choral Society; premiered, in its original version with chorus and orchestra on February 18, 1867, in Vienna, by the orchestra and singers of the “George V, King of Hanover” 42nd Infantry Regiment, Rudolf Weinwurm, conductor.

**New York Philharmonic premières and most recent performances:** These performances mark the New York Philharmonic premiere of *Éljen A Magyar! An der schönen blauen Donau* premiered June 29, 1901, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); most recently played September 15, 2018, as part of an Art of the Score screening of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, André de Ridder, conductor.

**Estimated durations:** *Éljen A Magyar!,* ca. 3 minutes; *An der schönen blauen Donau,* ca. 9 minutes;

Cover art for the 1867 score for *An der schönen blauen Donau*
geography (after the Russian Empire) and the third largest in terms of population (after the Russian and German Empires).

So Johann Strauss II wrote his up-tempo schnell (fast) polka Éljen a Magyart! (Hail to Hungary!) in 1869, it was more than just an appreciation of the Hungarian folk ensembles that were a fixture of Viennese cafés; it was a politically appropriate salute to Austro-Hungarian solidarity. Indeed, the piece bears the dedication “To the noble Hungarian Nation” and was premiered during a brief visit Johann and his brother Josef paid to the city of Pest (not yet unified into Budapest) to lead a concert at the Hungarian National Festival. Filled with contours of immediately recognizable Hungarian character, it includes at its end a fleeting quotation of the Rakóczi March, at that time the unofficial state song of Hungary and famous today through settings by Berlioz and Liszt.

None of Johann II’s waltzes can rival the popularity of An der schönen blauen Donau (On the Beautiful Blue Danube), which has been embraced as a universal anthem of carefree elegance. Its intent was strikingly different. Its genealogy can be traced to early July 1865, when the prestigious Wiener Männergesangverein (Vienna Men’s Choral Society) asked him to write a waltz for a concert the group would give a couple of weeks later. Other obligations and personal concerns prevented Strauss from participating, but in a letter to the management committee he pledged:

I hereby commit myself next summer, if I am still alive, to make up for what I am now hindered from doing, and with pleasure I offer the esteemed Committee a new composition — written especially for the purpose, as well as my personal participation.

Good intentions notwithstanding, his promise remained unfulfilled as 1866 came and went. In the course of that year the Austrian army suffered its Prussian defeat and the mood turned grim. The choir decided to tone down its traditionally rowdy Carnival concert for February 1867, substituting a more sedate program than usual. Finally Strauss was able to make good on his commitment, pulling together ideas for a waltz-suite during the final months of 1866 and delivering most of his new piece to the Society in January. By the time of the concert, a month later, he expanded it from four waltz-sections to five, which were surrounded by an introduction and a coda. A text was provided by Josef Weyl, a police official who doubled as “special-material” poet for the Society. His words have often been dismissed as cliché-ridden doggerel — “Wiener seid froh! / Oho, wie so?” (“Rejoice, Viennese! / Oh, yeah? How so?”) — but a closer reading suggests that their frolicsome inanities are rich in ironic content that would not have been lost on Viennese listeners in the throes of societal and economic upheaval.

Filled as it is with barbs aimed at Vienna’s politicians, landlords, and dancing citizenry, Weyl’s text nowhere makes mention of the Danube — which no Viennese of that time, and few today, would likely describe as a color resembling blue. An der schönen blauen Donau is very occasionally heard in its choral setting, but it is more often encountered in the composer’s strictly orchestral version.

Auf der Jagd (At the Hunt) returns, to some degree, to Johann Strauss II’s stage output, with music drawn from the three-act operetta Cagliostro in Wien (Cagliostro in Vienna). The operetta is based on a true story, the exploits of Count Alessandro Cagliostro, an occultist, alchemist, and all-around charlatan who rose from impoverished Sicilian origins to entrance the highest social circles of 18th-century Europe. He was immortalized in numerous works of literature and the stage, by such figures as Goethe, Schiller, Dumas père,
George Sand, and Tolstoy. The stage-work makes no reference to hunting, but it furnished musical themes that Strauss drew from three disparate spots in the operetta and recycled into this schnell-polka, adding brass fanfares and a “gunshot” for the sake of realism.

In Pavlovsk Park, not many miles outside of St. Petersburg, Russia, stood a music hall and entertainment complex curiously named the Vauxhall Pavilion. It was a summertime destination for Russia’s smart set, and the center’s first impresario had tried to engage Johann Strauss I to appear there as early as 1839, to no avail. After Johann II ascended to fame, the Russians sent a delegation to Austria and contracted him to appear with his orchestra in the summer of 1856. He selected a group of his regular Viennese musicians and rounded out the ensemble with players from Berlin, the whole adding up to a crackerjack group. “My orchestra is causing a sensation,” he wrote at the beginning of the 1857 season, “and they deserve it, too, for would to God I had such a band in Vienna.” Further contracts ensued for every season through 1865, and he returned again in 1869 and 1886. Among the pieces unveiled during the summer of 1869 was *Im Pawlowsk-Walde* (In the Pavlovsk Woods), a cheerful polka française — a polka of restrained, graceful character. It met with a triumphant reception in Russia,

**Auf der Jagd (At the Hunt), Schnell-Polka, Op. 373**

*Im Krapfenwaldl* (In Krapfen’s Woods), Polka française, Op. 336

**Unter Donner und Blitz (Thunder and Lightning), Schnell-Polka, Op. 324**

**Johann Strauss II**

**Works composed and premiered:** *Auf der Jagd* composed 1875; premiered in autumn 1875 — possibly at the Vienna Volksgarten on October 5 — probably with Eduard Strauss leading the Strauss Orchestra. *Im Krapfenwaldl* composed 1869; premiered as *Im Pawlowsk-Walde* on September 6, 1869, in Pavlosk, Russia, with the composer leading his orchestra; premiered under the title *Im Krapfenwaldl*, on June 24, 1870, at the Vienna Volksgarten, with Eduard Strauss conducting the Strauss Orchestra. *Unter Donner und Blitz* composed 1868; premiered: February 16, 1868, at the Hesperus Ball of the Viennese Artists’ Association, under the title Sternschnupp.

**New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances:** *Auf Der Jagd* premiered August 5, 1962, Josef Krips, conductor; most recently performed December 31, 1992, Leonard Slatkin, conductor. The only previous performances of *Im Krapfenwaldl* took place on August 5, 1962, Josef Krips, conductor. *Unter Donner und Blitz* premiered July 7, 1901, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); most recent performance, July 30, 2010, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor.

**Estimated durations:** *Auf Der Jagd*, ca. 3 minutes; *Im Krapfenwaldl*, ca. 5 minutes; *Unter Donner und Blitz*, ca. 3 minutes.
and he accordingly introduced it the next year back home in Austria, with a new title — *Im Krapfenwald'l (In Krapfen’s Woods)* — alluding to the Krapfenwald, a section of the Vienna Woods. The parkland, whether in Russia or Austria, would have been a-twitter with cuckoos and other birds, the calls of which get their moments in this charming composition.

On February 6, 1868, the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* shared word of some of the delights that were expected at that year’s installment of the Hesperus Ball, an annual event sponsored by the Vienna Artists’ Association:

For the Hesperus Ball, which takes place on Sunday the 16th of this month in the Dianasaal, Messrs. Johann, Josef, and Eduard Strauss have promised three novelties with the titles *Sternschnuppe*, *Extempore*, and *Freie Gedanken*.

At first glance, *Sternschnuppe (Shooting Stars)* seemed to have evaporated, but musicological detective work revealed that the piece did not disappear — it was just retitled. It was programmed a month later with the title *Unter Donner und Blitz* (always called just *Thunder and Lightning* in English, skipping the “under” part), and a press account clarifies that this was the piece played previously at the Hesperus Ball. Atmospheric sparkle was on Strauss’s mind in this schnell-polka, but what inspired him to sacrifice shooting stars in favor of thunder and lightning may never be known. Possibly he wanted to avoid confusion with a *Sternschnuppen* waltz brother Josef had composed in 1860. In any case, the rumbling drums and crashing cymbals are pertinent to either subject.

**Instrumentation:** Overture to *Der Zigeunerbaron* calls for two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, orchestra bells, spurs, harp, and strings. *Die Liebelle* uses two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, harp, and strings. *An der schönen blauen Donau* employs two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, and strings. *Éljen A Magyár, Auf Der Jagd, Im Krapfenwald'l* and *Unter Donner und Blitz* call for flute and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, and strings. *Unter Donner und Blitz* also employs tuba.