Richard Georg Strauss was born in Munich, Bavaria, on June 11, 1864, and died at his home in Garmisch, Germany, on September 8, 1949. His Opus 28 tone poem enjoys the full title Till Eulen-spiegel's Merry Pranks, After the Old Rogue's Tale, Set in Rondo Form for Large Orchestra, Opus 28.

The fact this musical-culinary mir-a-ble is lav-ish-ed on the fig-ure of Till Eulen-spiegel, one of the great trick-ster fig-u-res of West-ern Civ-i-liza-tion, only adds another layer of enjoy-ment to the results. As Paul Oppen-heimer puts it in the fas-ci-nat-ing intro-duc-tion to his trans-la-tion of the 95 tales that make up Till Eulen-spiegel, His Adven-tures, (orig-i-nally writ-ten, or com-piled by a fig-ure iden-ti-fied only as "N."): "Strauss' com-po-si-tion cap-tures accu-rately, and even deli-cious-ly, the accents of Eulenspiegel's fool-ish-ness, mis-chief, courage, and scorn. The composer's choice of the rondo form is also entirely appro-pri-ate to N.'s essen-tially picara-que demi-novel, which con-tains many minor cli-max-es and many un-con-nect-ed episodes, but no main cli-max and no main plot. The scam-per-ing twists and turns of the music mimic well N.'s style, with its mix of infor-mal-ity, rough-ness, slang, light-ness, and, here and there, for-mal speech."

Till Eulen-spiegel, the man, is some-thing of a mys-ter-y. Did he ever, in fact, live? The last of the tales says he died in 1350, and leg-end has attrib-u-ted his death to the plague. But some "pro-vable" ref-er-ences through-out the tales remain impos-si-ble to ver-i-fy, and at this point, the scan-dalous, though often lov-able, char-ac-ter he has become in our West-ern col-lec-tive psy-chic, would prob-a-bly bear lit-tle rela-tion-ship to any flesh and blood man who might have lived cen-turies ago.

In fact, his very name points us — as the hero of the tales often did — in var-i-ous direc-tions, all equally plau-si-ble. "Eulen-spiegel" in mod-ern Ger-man means "owl glass," "owl mir-ror," or pos-si-bly "wise mir-ror." From which it's a short jump to "wise reflec-tion," as would befit a col-lec-tion of tales meant to edify the reader. But in the six-teenth cen-tury (when the tales were first col-lec-ted, or pos-si-ble even when they were..."
written/created) the name had sin-is-ter mean-ings, as well. In the mid-dle ages, the owl was some-times regarded as the Devil’s bird, an apt sym-bol for a dia-bol-i-cal guy who seems intent on upend-ing and pok-ing fun at con-ven-tional moral-ity. Oppen-heimer gives yet another pos-si-bil-ity: an early form of the name was “Ulen-spiegel,” which can eas-ily be under-stood as “Uln speghel” (in hunter’s jar-gon of the time “a com-mand or invi-ta-tion to ‘wipe one’s arse.’”) Since many of the 95 tales are quite scat-o-log-i-cal, it would be fool-ish to rule out that deriva-tion of the name, espe-cially in a book which often seems to invite mul-ti-ple lev-els of under-stand-ing, or that mir-rors life in a num-ber of ways at the same time.

Obvi-ously Till Eulen-spiegel is more than a charm-ing rogue, and his 95 tales are more than an enter-tain-ing col-lec-tion of pranks. Tho-roughly there’s almost no overt mor-al-iz-ing in the book (unusual in a book of its nature at the time), the fact that time after time Till Eulen-spiegel takes peo-ple at their word, and acts on what they actu-ally say, rather than what they mean, points up the absurd-ity of much of con-ven-tional life. As Goethe famously said, “Eulen-spiegel: All the chief jests of the book depend on this: that every-body speaks fig-u-ra-tively and Eulen-spiegel takes it lit-er-ally.” Or, as Oppen-heimer says of the orig-i-nal author, “He cer-tainly seems bent on suf-fus-ing his work with a mis-chie-voi-sus genius of indi-vid-u-al-ism and indepen-dence.” All of which is exactly why Richard Strauss was so drawn to him. Strauss already had a grow-ing rep-u-ta-tion as a com-poser of songs when his first major tone poem, Don Juan, estab-lished him as an enor-mously impor-tant com-poser for the orches-tra at the age of 24. This was con-firmed by the appear-ance of Tod und Verk-larung (Death and Trans-fig-u-ra-tion) the next year. Add to that his grow-ing rep-u-ta-tion as one of the top con-duc-tors of the time, and it seemed Richard Strauss had it all, musi-cally any-way. So when his first opera, Gun-trum, was a giant flop in his home-town of Munich, it was a rejec-tion that stung for the rest of his life. And the idea of writ-ing an opera on Till Eulen-spiegel — a wily inde-pen-dent rogue who fol-lows his own paths, tells unpal-ta-ble truths, takes jabs at con-ven-tional soci-ety and makes fools of pompous author-ity fig-u-dges, all while indulging in scat-o-log-i-cal humor — well, it seemed the per-fect sub-ject to Strauss at the time.

Wood-cut by Hans Bal-duin Grien for a 1515 edi-tion of the tales.

Even-tu-ally Strauss real-ized that the episod-ic nature of his hero did not lend itself to the oper-at-ic form. In a let-ter he explained, “The book of fairy-tales only out-lines a rogue with too super-fi-cial a dra-matic per-son-al-ity — the devel-op-ing of his char-ac-ter on more pro-found lines after his trait of con-tempt for human-ity also presents con-sid-er-able difficulty.”

But if Till Eulenspiegel’s char-ac-ter didn’t lend itself to the oper-at-ic stage, it was per-fect for an instru-men-tal work. And as a tone poem, using the rondo form, the episod-ic nature that wouldn’t work on stage, was per-fect for the con-cert hall. The result was Till Eulenspiegel’s lustige Streiche nach alter Schel-men-weise in Ron-deau-form für grosses Orches-ter gesetzt— Till Eulenspiegel’s merry pranks, after the old rogue’s tale, set for large orches-tra in rondo form.

When Strauss was an old man, his some-time libret-tist Josef Gre-gor asked him if he’d been aware that in Till he had reached meta-phys-i-cal bounds of great humor. Strauss snapped, “Oh no. I just wanted to give the peo-ple in the con-cert hall a good laugh for once.”
Perhaps that’s true. But Strauss, like Till, was good at hiding his true motives and thoughts, and using the outer surface of a subject to deflect what was actually going on in the depths. For instance, he spent most of his life playing the public role of a rather indolent, superfluous man who just happened to be a musician, rather than a banker, and who was mostly concerned with money and playing cards. In fact, he was extra-ordinary well read. As a young man he wrestled deeply with Schopenhauer’s work and he was enormously influenced by Nietzsche’s thought, as well. But, Till-like, he was adept at using a quip to deflect questions he would rather not answer, and the public bought the deception as the truth.

Till even got his own postage stamp.

Before the première of *Till Eulenspiegel* in Cologne in 1895, the conductor, Franz Wüllner, wrote to Strauss asking about a written pro-gram, like the poem printed in the score of *Don Juan*. This was a long time before “movie music” of course, but Strauss was leery of encouraging a lit-er-al is-tic view of his tone poem, even though it was pro-grammatic music. He replied: “It is impos-sible for me to give a pro-gram to ‘Eulenspiegel’: what I had in mind when writing the vari-ous sec-tions, if put into words, would often seem pecu-liar, and would pos-sibly even give offence. So let us, this time, leave it to the audi-ence to crack the nuts which the rogue has pre-pared for them. All that is nec-es-sary to the under-stand-ing of the work is to indi-cate the two Eulenspiegel themes which are run right through the work in all man-ner of dis-guises, moods and sit-u-a-tions until the cat-astro-phe, when Till is strung up after sen-tence has been passed on him. Apart from that let the gay Cologn-ers guess what the rogue has done to them by way of musi-cal tricks.”

The “two Eulenspiegel themes” are clearly stated in the begin-ning mea-sures of the piece: the first is the open-ing melody in the vio-lins (the first 13 notes); the sec-ond is the famous horn call that fol-lows imme-di-ately. In this open-ing the two themes are vastly dif-fer-ent in char-ac-ter, but later on Strauss some-times alters their char-ac-ter tremen-dously. The open-ing five mea-sures are about as gemütlich as you can get. It’s almost impos-sible to hear it with-out think-ing along the lines of “Once upon a time…” It’s almost too cozy, which is exactly the point. It’s an emo-tional sit-u-a-tion just beg-ging for the horn call that fol-lows — the trick-ster peek-ing around the door, ready to unset-tle the group of well-behaved chil-dren who are lis-ten-ing to a story. That horn call, which every French horn player in the world seems to be unable to resist play-ing while warm-ing up for a con-cert, is the per-fect depic-tion of Till. It ranges widely (almost four octaves), its jaunty rhythms lend them-selves to all sorts of dif-fer-ent syn-co-pa-tions, the melody is equally infec-tious and can be cheeky (as in this open-ing) or roman-tic-sweet (as it is later in the piece). When we first hear it, it’s marked to be played softly. The sec-ond time it’s a bit louder (Till is get-ting more con-fi-dent) and then, like one mischief-maker infect-ing a group of well-behaved chil-dren, it spreads to the oboes, then the clar-i-nets. The bas-oons, con-tra-bas-oons, vio-las and cel-llos get into the act, and sud-denly Till has the whole orches-tra in his grip.

After several mea-sures of quick for-tisimo eighth note chords for most of the orches-tra, Strauss brings this open-ing to a close by hav-ing Till metaphor-i-cally stick out his tongue at us: while the rest of the orches-tra is silent, the solo D clar-i-net has a saucy seven-note phrase (Strauss marked it to be played “lustig” or “mer-tily.”) The last note of the phrase is
played at the same time the oboes and Eng-lish horn hit a sforzando chord they hold for two mea-sures, then the rest of the orches-tra punc-tu-ates things with another for-tis-simo chord — and we’re off, watch-ing Till race away on his adven-tures. But Strauss, like the gourmet chef, has already served notice that there’s more going on here than is appar-ent at first glance. The chord played by the oboes and Eng-lish horn punc-tu-at-ing the D clarinet’s musi-cal rasp-berry is, in fact, the iconic “Tris-tan” chord — from Wagner’s mon-u-men-tal music drama Tris-tan und Isolde, and about as close to “sacred” for some Ger-man musi-cians of the day as it was pos-si-ble to get. Using it as Strauss does here is, well, about as Till-esque as you can get. It’s both an inside joke for the con-nois-seur, but at the same time, it’s also a mar-velously piquant sound even the most casual lis-tener will enjoy.

Young Strauss the conductor.

In Strauss’s own score, under-neath the open-ing four mea-sures when the vio-lins play the first theme, Strauss hand-wrote “Once upon a time there was a roughish jester…” And under-neath the first horn call he wrote, “…whose name was Till Eulen-spiegel.” Under-neath the D clarinet’s musi-cal rasp-berry he penned the words “That was a ras-cally scamp!” He added sev-eral other com-ments at var-i-ous places in the score — as did his wife Pauline. Unlike her husband’s, Pauline’s com-ments tended toward the caus-tic: words like “awful” and “mad.”

Pauline was wrong of course, and maybe she was jok-ing. (In any case, Strauss didn’t erase her addi-tions to his score.) With Till Eulen-spiegel Strauss broke new ground musi-cally. Never before had a com-po-ser cre-ated with such a vast instru-men-tal palette or used it with an insou-ciance that was as breath-tak-ing as it was appro-pri-ate to its sub-ject and tech-ni-cally well-neigh per-fectly. The sense of glee at Strauss’ audac-ity, and skill, runs through-out every mea-sure of the piece. But that, too, is a part of the char-ac-ter of Till Eulen-spiegel. And to think the sub-ject of his next tone poem would be about as far from the char-ac-ter of Till Eulen-spiegel as it is pos-si-ble to get: Friedrich Nietzsche’s philo-soph-i-cally auda-cious tome, Also Sprach Zarath-us-tra.

Per-haps the time has come to admit that as a com-po-ser, Richard Strauss is much more than an enter-tain-ing tech-ni-cian. In fact, he can be one of the most pro-found com-po-sers West-ern music has.