Richard Strauss (1864-1949) wrote the beloved “Four Last Songs” (1948) at the age of 84 near the end of a long career, and the title has helped the work take on the irresistible aura of a last will and testament. In the greater narrative of music history, Strauss’s late works are much less dissonant and more “romantic” than his earlier, notorious operas “Salome” (1905) and “Elektra” (1908) and were therefore dismissed by the postwar avant-garde and many critics as regressive, and, for the same reason, music history books rarely mention the “Four Last Songs.” Historians usually describe the final decades of Strauss’s career as a decline in the 1930s followed by an “Indian Summer” of creative and lyrical resurgence in the 1940s that included the opera “Capriccio” and a number of small-scale instrumental works (Second Horn Concerto, wind sonatinas, “Metamorphosen,” Oboe Concerto) which then culminated in the “Four Last Songs.”

The lightness and lyricism of many of these late works belie the darkness that enveloped Strauss’s life during those years, however. During the war years, his daughter-in-law Alice and his grandsons faced repeated threats to their lives due to their Jewish ancestry. Strauss had a fraught relationship with the Nazi authorities he served to some degree, and many monuments of German culture (such as the opera houses in Munich, Dresden, and Vienna that had performed his works) were destroyed in bombing raids. Near the end of war, Strauss wrote: “My life’s work is in ruins. I shall never again hear my works” and “There is no consolation and, at my age, no hope.” In addition, the financial situation of the once wealthy composer had turned dire due to the freezing of his accounts and royalties pending a de-Nazification process. As a result, he lived in exile in frequently changing locations in Switzerland and relied on the assistance of friends from 1945 until he finally returned to his home in Garmisch near Munich in 1949. When his son, Franz, suggested in 1947 that he return to song composition to soothe his depression, he resumed “Im Abendrot (In Twilight)” and continued with other works. When he had completed the ones we now know as the “Four Last Songs” the following year, he handed them to Alice and said with his typically laconic matter-of-factness: “Here are the songs your husband ordered.”
Although Strauss wrote Lieder throughout his life, his song output had become sporadic in the 1940s. In the order Strauss composed them between May and September of 1948, the four songs’s sources consist of “Im Abendrot” by Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff (1788-1857) and “Frühling” (Spring), “Beim Schlafengehen (Going to Sleep),” and “September” by Hermann Hesse (1877-1962). In that order, the poems are about two people nearing the end of long journey together (ending with “Is this perhaps death?”), the natural beauty of spring, the liberation of the soul during sleep (possibly death), and the demise of the garden as fall replaces summer (more on the songs as a unit below). Interestingly, both writers were new to Strauss’s song composition. Eichendorff’s style was strongly influenced by “Das Knaben Wunderhorn (The Boy’s Magic Horn)” of 1805-08, the song text collection composers (including Schubert, Schumann, Mahler, Berg, and Schoenberg) mined throughout the 19th century and beyond, and he is considered one of the foremost lyric poets of German Romanticism. Although Hesse was a younger contemporary of Strauss, his poems harken back to the Romantic era, and commentators have often compared him to Eichendorff. In fact, his first book of poetry of 1899 was titled “Romantische Lieder” (Romantic Songs). Becoming a Swiss citizen in 1924, Hesse was attacked as a Jew-loving traitor during the Nazi era but received a Nobel Prize in 1946 and suddenly became the dean of German letters at the age of 70. Curiously perhaps, the United States experienced a Hesse boom in the second half of the 1960s during which almost 15 million books were sold and even Snoopy from “Peanuts” was depicted as a fan. When Strauss received the complete 1942 edition of Hesse’s poems from an admirer in 1948, he marked 11 poems for potential musical setting but only completed the three that became part of the “Four Last Songs,” ones Hesse wrote during very different periods of his life between 1899 and 1927.

Strauss conceived the songs for a large (or a “late Romantic”) orchestra, something he had done with just 11 songs up to this point and not since 1921 (he more often wrote them for piano, then orchestrated some later as needed), but not the same instrumentation for each: “Frühling” uses only French horns for brass; “September” adds trumpets; “Beim Schlafengehen” adds piccolos, trombones, tuba, and celeste, and “Im Abendrot” employs the heaviest artillery by adding contrabassoon and timpani (but omitting the harp). Strauss had not written for an ensemble this size since “Capriccio” in 1941.

Although we are of course accustomed to hearing the songs as a unit or “cycle” of four in the order just discussed, Strauss never made his intentions clear. We know that he handed these four songs to Alice, but not whether he considered them a unit. We also know that he offered them to the Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad in a letter in May of 1949 (just under a month before his death), referring to them as “meine 4 letzten Lieder” (my four last songs). The German word “letzten” can also mean “latest,” however, and the way he wrote it implies neither a closed unit nor a title. Finally, we know that Strauss’s publisher at the British firm of Boosey & Hawkes, Ernst Roth, devised the now familiar ordering and published the songs posthumously as “Vier letzte Lieder (Four Last Songs)” in one continuous score in 1950. Revealingly, Roth later told Strauss scholar Alan Jefferson that he had created “a thoroughly marketable package” by changing the original performance order in order to fashion a miniature song cycle. Indeed, this means that the songs exist in three different sequences (composition, print, and world premiere), as illustrated here (a chart often reproduced):
To the uncertainty surrounding the ordering we must add the possibility that Strauss may have intended to write more than four songs. Strauss scholar Timothy Jackson, for example, has used musical and poetic analysis, biographical information, and other research to support his claim that Strauss intended the orchestrated version of the much earlier song “Ruhe, meine Seele! (Rest, My Soul!)” to be the fourth song (included among the bonus orchestral songs on Norman’s recording), to be interpolated before “Abendrot” in the published ordering to create a five-song cycle. Strauss orchestrated the 1894 song around the time he was composing “Im Abendrot,” two days after being cleared by the de-Nazification tribunal in June of 1948. Although some scholars find Jackson’s conclusion plausible, the claim lacks “smoking gun” evidence and has not gained general acceptance among experts and musicians (to my knowledge, no recording uses Jackson’s cycle, but a few use the order of the first performance). Among other scholars, Barbara Petersen has noted, based on evidence that Strauss intended to set at least two more Hesse texts as orchestral songs, that Strauss may have planned six or more “last songs.” Even if we cannot know if the composer intended the four songs to be a cycle and in what order, however, there is no denying that Roth’s published sequence makes eminent sense: two “seasonal” songs (spring, then fall), followed by two “night” songs (of which the second mentions death explicitly), increasing length from shortest to longest, and increasing orchestra size.

Another issue of debate is whether or not Strauss intended the songs to be his last will and testament as they have often been received--very logically, given the “last songs” title, the poetic subject matter, and the seeming acceptance of death through resigned, lyrical music. Technically, he had already written a musical testament and explicitly designated it as such: his last opera of 1941. He famously told his biographer Willi Schuh: “My life’s work it at an end with ‘Capriccio,’ and the music that I go on scribbling for the benefit of my heirs, wrist exercises, has no significance whatsoever from the standpoint of music history. I only do it to dispel the boredom of idle hours, since one can’t spend all day reading Wieland or playing Skat.” He wrote to his “Capriccio” collaborator Clemens Krauss (who had suggested working together again) that “one can, after all, only leave one last will and testament.” A few years earlier, in 1938, he had picked the final trio of his opera “Der Rosenkavalier” to be his funeral music. The fact that he stopped assigning opus numbers to his works after “Capriccio” reinforces his view of his works of the 1940s as “bonus” pieces not intended to make a serious contribution. The opera has nothing to do with death, however, so it is hardly surprising if we hear the “Four Last Songs” as a more fitting and intentional farewell, “wrist exercises” or not. Besides the poetry and musical style, commentators have found valedictory significance in Strauss’s quotation from his tone poem “Death and Transfiguration” during and after the soprano’s final line in “Im Abendrot” (“Is this perhaps death?”). A recent interpretation by Linda and Michael Hutcheon (in their 2015 book “Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, and...
“Britten”) argues that the work represents the culmination of Strauss’s “life review” begun in “Capriccio,” an evaluation of his life as a whole rather than a nostalgic look back: “In those final “Four Last Songs,” however, he turned from the past to his present, affirming his art in the face of death.”

The reception of these songs as an intentional swan song is both powerful and popular, but they were not in fact Strauss’s last songs. After completing “September” in, well, September of 1948, he wrote the song “Malven” (“Mallows”), a description of a certain flower in the summer garden, with piano accompaniment two months later and sent it as a gift (“one last rose”) to the soprano Maria Jeritza, who had sung lead roles in four of his operas and was now living in New Jersey. Franz and Alice Strauss knew about the manuscript all along, and Jeritza’s thank you letter has been in print since 1967. She tried to sell it in the 1970s with no luck, so following her death in 1982 it was auctioned off by Sotheby’s in New York two years later for $55,000. Luckily, the buyer was philanthropist Frederick R. Koch, who placed it on deposit at New York’s J. P. Pierpont Morgan library. Kiri Te Kanawa gave the world premiere of the work in January of 1985, and it was recorded and published that same year. Some have looked for links to the “Four Last Songs,” but since Strauss wrote “Malven” for just voice and piano in a very different musical style, it appears to be a separate “bonus” work, a personal gift not necessarily intended for public performance or publication. Although its existence does of course cause a slight problem for the title and testamentary aura of the “last songs,” no one has seen a reason to retitle the work or make a big deal of the issue. The power and sentimental symbolism of the “Four Last Songs” remain intact.

Given the numerous accolades achieved by American soprano Jessye Norman (1945-2019), it is no surprise that the Library of Congress selected her celebrated 1983 recording of Richard Strauss’s “Four Last Songs” for preservation. She made her Metropolitan Opera debut the same year as this recording, and her storied career includes honorary doctorates, five Grammy Awards (including one for lifetime achievement), performing at two presidential inaugurations, a Kennedy Center Honor in 1987, and the National Medal of Arts in 2009, just to mention a few highlights. A dramatic soprano who stood more than six feet tall, her unusually rich lower range enabled her to sing mezzo repertoire as well. Rosalyn Story penned this assessment in 1990: “Norman’s big voice does not conquer simply by virtue of its opulence; rather it does so with its voluptuous shape, timbre, vast melodic and dynamic range. It is a voice of contradictions, combining liquid warmth and molten steel with the agility to soar from reverential mezzo-voces to fiery, passionate fortes and back.” When she passed away on 30 September 2019 at 74, tributes from critics and colleagues poured in. Roger Pines noted that “one could recognize Norman’s voice even in a single note,” Harolyn Blackwell that “it was Jessye Norman who made me decide to pursue a career as an opera singer,” and Lawrence Brownlee that she was “one of the last of the true, great divas!” Renée Fleming reflected: “Jessye Norman’s voice is unique in history. I can’t think of anyone else who possessed such richness and power, with distinctive beauty, and at the service of a keen musical intelligence.”

Her 1983 recording of the “Four Last Songs” is without a doubt the most highly acclaimed in a crowded field, the one most often described in ecstatic terms. It was Norman’s first Strauss recording, but she followed it with “20 Lieder” accompanied by Geoffrey Parsons in 1986 (including “Malven”); “Ariadne auf Naxos” with Kurt Masur and the Gewandhaus Orchestra in
1988, and “Salome” with Seiji Ozawa and the Dresden Staatskapelle in 1990. The last songs became a sort of musical signature for her, however, and she singled them out for special treatment in “Stand Up Straight and Sing!,” her 2014 memoir: “I am ever grateful to Richard Strauss for having produced so much beautiful music that is particularly suited to the female voice. From the moment I heard Strauss’s ‘Vier letzte Lieder (Four Last Songs’), I wished to sing them. They remain such an integral part of my repertoire that I cannot imagine my singing life without them.” She continues: “Even in the last years of his bountiful life, Strauss was evolving, creating, and learning--and composing what I feel to be some of his most enduring works. The poems he employed in ‘Four Last Songs’ are quite simply magnificent.” After offering her thoughts on each poem, she asks: “Who would not feel blessed to be able to share the experience of these songs with an audience?” It is worth noting that each chapter of her book closes with a song text, and that as further evidence of her affinity for Strauss she chose his well-known “Zueignung (Dedication or Devotion)” from 1885 to finish the autobiography, the song that also concludes the sequence of six orchestral songs she added to the “Four Last Songs” on the 1983 recording.

And the magical quality of that recording, seemingly by universal agreement, is what would make it a top contender for “the greatest ‘Four Last Songs’” if such an award existed. Even an opera publication felt the need to single it out after Norman’s death: “While her astoundingly varied discography of orchestral and song literature isn’t ‘Opera’s’ province, mention should be made of the sublime ‘Vier letzte Lieder’ under Masur.” Elsewhere, Fred Cohn wrote as the final sentence of his tribute: “No better memento of Norman’s art exists than her recording of the ‘Vier letzte Lieder,’ conducted by Kurt Masur. I have no doubt that when the news of her death broke, many of her fans took solace in her legendary interpretation of Strauss’s valedictory statement. The beauty, sensitivity, and profundity of Norman’s performance suggest that she had looked mortality in the face and accepted it with transcendent grace.” Besides her magnificent singing and interpretation, one feature that distinguishes this recording from all others is its extremely slow tempo (one reviewer quipped that “Masur seems to be conducting this on Valium”). Clocking in at 25:03, it is the slowest recording I was able to find. One scholar noted that recordings (not just of this work) have slowed down over the years, and when we consider that the earliest recordings in the 1950s were all under 20 minutes, that trend is quite clear: Kirsten Flagstad’s world premiere broadcast was 19:46; subsequent recordings by Sena Jurinac in 1951 (18:41); Lisa Della Casa in 1953 (18:25), and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf in 1954 (19:18) even faster. Among other notable recordings we might mention Gundula Janowitz in 1974 (22:08), Kiri Te Kanawa in 1978 (20:47), and Lucia Popp in 1982 (23:46). The final song “Im Abendrot” in particular is what makes Norman’s cycle so long: her version is 9:54 compared to Della Casa’s at 6:03! Although conductors develop personal preferences for standard tempo designations, it is difficult to defend Strauss’s chosen “Andante” (walking) being played like a funeral dirge. Exceptionally slow or not, Norman’s recording has earned its legendary status and fully deserves being selected for preservation by the Library of Congress.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.