

McCalmont's List 1:**Johann Strauss II — *The Blue Danube* (1867)**

by Neil McCalmont



Genre: Waltz

Scoring: Orchestra

Era: High Romantic

Duration: c. 10 minutes

Will you recognize it? You'll probably start whistling along.

Recommended Recordings: the Vienna Philharmonic, either with Carlos Kleiber or Willi Boskovsky

Composer: Johann Strauss II (1825-1899): Strauss explicitly disobeyed his father's orders never to be a musician. In fact, dear

old dad unintentionally founded a dynasty of musicians, as all three of his sons went against his wishes and became composers. Strauss the father was a composer of Viennese waltzes like his sons, but wanted his children to find more stable careers. The family also wrote numerous polkas, marches, and other popular tunes for the Viennese public, and their works were particularly admired by Emperor Franz Josef I. Strauss II went on to become by far the most successful and well-known composer of the family, with such big hits as the *Blue Danube* and *Emperor* waltzes. He also composed the music to *Die Fledermaus*, possibly the most popular operetta (comic opera) ever. The music of the Strauss family is beloved for its catchy melodies, light textures, and copious amounts of fun.

The Piece: Written in 1866 and premiered the following year, *The Blue Danube* was only a moderate success at first, but its popularity soon came into full swing at the Paris World's Fair in 1867. The waltz was quickly adapted into versions both with words and without, and has become one of the most enduringly popular classical pieces of all time.

The popularity of the 19th-century waltz in Vienna can't be overstated; it was a staple of aristocratic society and the closest thing to a pop song genre back then. During this era, the waltz was quite a sensuous dance, since it called for men and women to

dance face to face, arm in arm, sometimes staring into each other's eyes, or even allowing chests to touch. (Gasp!) It was an excuse for an overly stuffy society to enjoy a sliver of excitement, and the easily danceable, swaying motion of *The Blue Danube* allowed for an especially fun time on the dance floor.

An der schönen blauen Donau
Walzer

Johann Strauß, op. 314

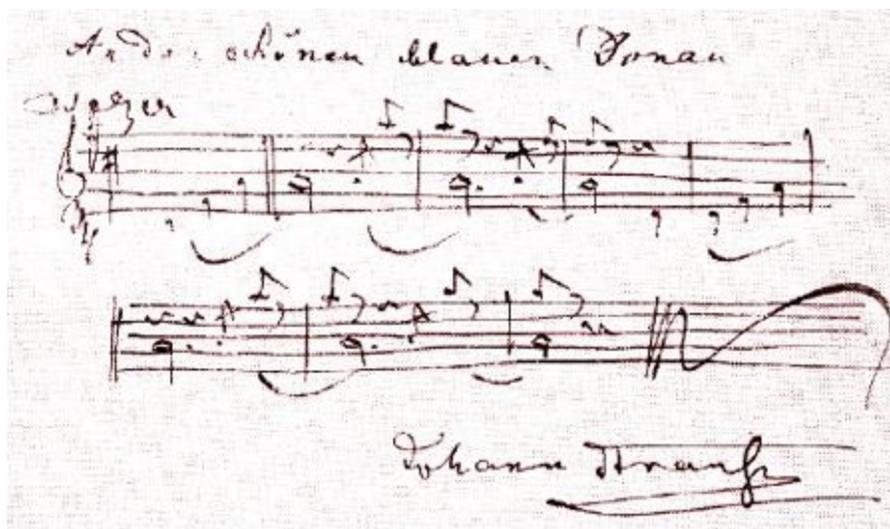
Introduktion
Andantino

The image shows a page of a musical score for the introduction of the waltz 'An der schönen blauen Donau'. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flöte I, Flöte II, Kleine Flöte, Oboen, Klarinetten in C (I and II), Fagotte, Hörner in F (I, II, III, IV), Trompeten in F (I and II), Baß-Posaune, Tuba, Pauken, Kleine Trommel, Triangel u. große Trommel, Harfe, Violine I, Violine II, Viola, Violoncello, and Kontrabaß. The tempo is marked 'Andantino' and the key signature has two sharps (D major). The score begins with a 'Solo' marking for the Horns in F. The introduction is in 3/4 time and features a shimmering texture with violins and woodwinds.

The waltz begins with a slow introduction that hints at the main theme over shimmering violins. The music then picks up as if to say, “Here we really begin,” and we are given our first theme to dance to. A waltz is always in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, so you will hear three beats, the first of which will get the most oomph, producing a “boom-chick-chick” beat. The lilting rhythms make it easy to listen to — just let your mind ebb and flow like the Danube. Since waltzes are commonly made up of different sections, contrasting vistas

emerge on this riverside journey; each usually has a discernible melody to hum along to, so you don't get lost.

Eventually, during the coda (closing section), we are led back to that oh-so-catchy melody from the beginning. We end our brief but joyous Danube cruise with the kind of smile on our face that only a Viennese waltz can provide.



Personal Notes: The opening, which foreshadows the catchy main melody, sounds like a misty sunrise over a river. Each of the shorter following sections is made up of its own melody, which will usually be repeated once. Between sections, there are short transitions, as if the composer says, “Now on to something different.” I find it helpful to listen for these sections and transitions to guide me through the piece, as it makes the music easier to follow. The constant $\frac{3}{4}$ beat makes good foot-tapping music, too!

Fun Facts:

- *The Blue Danube* was used in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.
- The Vienna Philharmonic always plays *The Blue Danube* during its New Year's Concert.
- The piece is so popular it is known as Austria's unofficial national anthem.
- Johann Strauss II and Johannes Brahms were good friends. Once, when Strauss's stepdaughter asked Brahms to sign her fan, Brahms wrote out the opening bars of *The Blue Danube*, adding the words, “Alas — not by Brahms.”

Further Listening:

- *Kaiser* (“Emperor”) *Waltz*, *Artist's Life Waltz*, *Tales from the Vienna Woods* — all by Strauss II
- *La Valse* by Maurice Ravel

- *Swan Lake Suite* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

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