

***Don Juan, Op. 20***

**Richard Strauss (1864–1949)**

Written: 1888-89

Movements: One

Style: Romantic Tone poem

Duration: Seventeen minutes

Franz Joseph Strauss desperately tried to shield his precocious son, Richard, from improper musical influences. To our benefit, he failed. The father was a professional horn player with hyper-conservative musical tastes. When Richard first heard the “music of the future”—operas by Wagner—he didn’t know what to make of it. “Against my father’s orders, I studied the score of *Tristan*,” he wrote in his memoirs. “I can well remember how, at the age of seventeen, I positively wolfed [it down]. . . . The basic principle . . . in which the poetic idea was really the formative element, became henceforward the guiding principle for my own symphonic work.” The fruit of this conversion was a series of “tone poems”—brilliantly written (and fantastically difficult to perform) symphonic works that try to depict a narrative or poetic idea with music.

Strauss based one of his first tone poems on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. His greatest early work, which he wrote when he was barely 24, is *Don Juan*. He premiered it in the nerve center of Wagner’s domain, Weimer. From then on, the public regarded Strauss as the most significant and progressive German composer since Wagner.

There are several versions of Don Juan, that mythic Spanish nobleman known for his rakish ways. Strauss chose a poetic version by the nineteenth century poet, Nicolaus Lenau. Here are the opening and ending stanzas found at the beginning of the score:

O magic realm, unlimited, eternal

Of gloried woman, – loveliness supernal!

Fain would I, in the storm of stressful bliss,  
Expire upon the last one's lingering kiss!  
Through every realm, O friend, would wing my flight,  
Wherever Beauty blooms, kneel down to each,  
And, if for one brief moment, win delight!

...

'Twas perhaps a flash from heaven that so descended,  
Whose deadly stoke left me with powers ended,  
And all the world, so bright before, o'erclouded;  
And yet perhaps not! Exhausted is the fuel;  
And on the hearth the cold is fiercely cruel.

Strauss's tone poem begins with Don Juan impetuously rushing from one love to the next.

Between these mad dashes, Strauss depicts the various loves as passionate, rapturous, sensuous, noble, tender, and timid. Finally, the "flash from heaven" descends and, after a dramatic pause, the music, and the Don, collapse in exhaustion.

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***Symphonic Dances from “West Side Story”***

**Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)**

Written: 1949-57

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 22 minutes

In today’s world of popular music, a stable of virtually nameless composers churn out hit songs that are then recorded by megastar singers. However, before the advent of recording, television, and movies, opera was the machinery for the production of popular hits. After all, it was *the* predominant form of entertainment. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people on the streets would whistle and sing the songs from the latest smash hit opera. Composers were quick to capitalize on the popularity of their melodies. Mozart hurriedly produced an arrangement for woodwinds of his *Marriage of Figaro*, fearing that if he didn’t do it first, somebody else would, and get all the money! Copyright laws were not as strong back then and other composers and performers were happy to “borrow” popular opera melodies. The virtuoso violinist Pablo Sarasate compiled a bunch of tunes from George Bizet’s *Carmen* into a violin fantasy—which somebody else then transcribed for the flute. If there was a popular opera with a bunch of good melodies, those tunes were being sung and played *everywhere*.

These days Broadway—the American version of light opera—generates a lot of popular tunes. Songs from musicals by Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Stephen Sondheim, Andrew Lloyd Weber and a host of others are part of our cultural fabric. Leonard Bernstein is part of that pantheon of Broadway composers, with one important difference. The fame of the others comes

almost exclusively from their Broadway productions. Bernstein was writing serious symphonies, conducting the New York Philharmonic, and hosting a television series explaining music to young audiences at the same time that he was writing for the Broadway stage. He was at home in many musical styles.

Bernstein began writing *West Side Story* in 1949, although it didn't open until 1957. The choreographer was the great Jerome Robbins and the lyrics were by Stephen Sondheim, who would later become a major Broadway composer himself. *West Side Story* is the tale of Romeo and Juliet set amongst the rough-and-tumble neighborhoods on New York's upper west side. Like the other great Broadway shows of the last century, its melodies and songs have become a part of our national identity. Like the opera suites of the past, the *Symphonic Dances* have found a permanent place in concert halls. No mere collection of melodies, it is a virtuoso *tour de force* for any orchestra.

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***Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in E Minor, Op. 64***

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

Written: 1844

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 26 minutes

Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* ranks as one of the most-often performed pieces in any orchestra's repertoire. It is easy to understand why. The concerto combines technical brilliance with romantic lyricism into a compact musical frame. There is virtually nothing in this work that a newcomer to classical music wouldn't understand,

even when it comes to knowing when to applaud!

Mendelssohn was one of those child prodigies, who Schumann called "the Mozart of the nineteenth century." He composed at least twelve symphonies before the age of fifteen, the ebullient *Octet for Strings* when he was sixteen, and the justifiably famous *Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream* when he was seventeen. In 1838, he announced to his friend, the virtuoso violinist Ferdinand David, that he was writing a concerto for him. When David asked him about it a year later, Mendelssohn replied, "If I have a few propitious days, I'll bring you something. But the task is not an easy one. You ask that it should be brilliant, and how can anyone like me do this?" Five years later, he settled down and wrote it.

Mendelssohn's concertos follow a plan that differs markedly from the template created by Mozart and Beethoven. He dispensed with the long orchestral introductions and interludes. There are no pauses in between the movements (and no guessing when to clap!). What results is 25 minutes of some of the most sparkling writing for the violin.

After just one short measure of orchestral introduction, the violin states the broad and singing first theme of the concerto. The second theme is quieter and more longing in mood. After working through both themes in a development section, the soloist plays a cadenza and then there is a restatement of both themes. The ending of the first movement is somewhat tempestuous in character and then a short orchestral section acts as a bridge to the slower second movement. Here the first theme is broad and simple, while the second theme is more heated and restless. Again, the orchestra provides a brief connection to the third movement. The orchestra will always have to

hurry to keep up with the speed of the solo violin. In spite of the unrestrained tempo, the character of this last movement is light and airy, so typical of the elf-like Mendelssohn.

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***Rumanian Rhapsody No. 1 in A Major, Op. 11, No. 1***

**George Enescu (1881—1955)**

Written: 1901

Movements: One

Style: Late Romantic

Duration: Twelve minutes

The towering giant of Rumanian music, George Enescu never attained the international reputation that he fully deserved. If there had not been composers like Béla Bartók dominating the international stage, perhaps Enescu would have received his due.

His father was a farmer. George got his first violin when he was four, and soon he was imitating the local gypsies. By the time he was seven he had written several works for violin and piano. His father took him to Vienna with the preposterous notion that the Vienna Conservatory would accept a seven-year-old violinist. They did. By the time he was eleven, he received top marks—essentially graduating—in violin and harmony. That same year he gave his first performance in Vienna as a violin virtuoso. Next, he enrolled at the Paris Conservatory where he studied composition with Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré. He presented a concert in Paris made up entirely of his own music when he was sixteen and by the time he was twenty, he was performing

throughout Europe.

Enescu took up residence in Bucharest, became the conductor of the Philharmonic there, and was the court violinist for the Queen of Rumania. Still a young man himself, he established the Enescu prize for young composers. After World War I, Enescu settled in Paris, carrying on an international career as violinist, composer, and conductor. World War II found him back on his farm in Rumania. After the war, he resumed his international career, even taking a teaching post in New York City at the Mannes College of Music. He died in Paris.

Enescu's music runs the gamut from romanticism through neoclassicism all the way to experimental music employing quartertones. Enescu explained it by "the fact that my musical education was not confined to one locality."

In spite of three symphonies, an opera, and a good deal of chamber music, the *Rumanian Rhapsodies* remain Enescu's most popular works, and the *First Rumanian Rhapsody* is the most familiar of the two. It is a charming compilation of Rumanian folk tunes, starting simply and then winding up as a brilliant orchestral showpiece—always fun to listen to.

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