

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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