



Richard Strauss / June 11, 1864 – September 8, 1949

DON JUAN

Richard Strauss was the late 19th Century king of a distinctive form of music, the “tone poem.” A tone poem is a one-movement work in which form and structure are determined entirely by the literary story being told by the music, the whole being held together by constant thematic transformation and metamorphosis. His dramatic tone poems were as wildly popular with audiences as they were controversial. Although mainstream by today’s standards, he was regarded during his day as a radical, the last word in shocking modernism.

Some critics were savage. Here is an example of their acerbic reviews. London 1898 – “The music of Strauss is full of diabolically clever effects. His is indeed the music of the future, when man has lost all his healthy instincts, his faculty of divine emotion, his sense of beauty, his brains, and his common sense. If ever this kind of music becomes acceptable to the people at large, I hope I’m not here to see and hear it.”

Strauss’s inspiration for Don Juan was an unusual poem by Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau. Strauss printed parts of the poem in his score. The excerpts do not tell a story, but they reveal the arc of Strauss’s music. “Fain would I run the magic circle, immeasurably wide, of beautiful women’s manifold charms, in full tempest of enjoyment, to die of a kiss at the mouth of the last one. O my friend, would that I could fly through every place where beauty blossoms, fall on my knees before each one, and, were it but for a moment, to conquer.

“O shun anxiety and the exhaustion of pleasure; I keep myself fresh in the service of beauty; and in offending the individual I rave for my devotion to her kind. The breath of a woman that is as the odor of spring today, may perhaps tomorrow oppress me like the air of a dungeon. Passion is always and only the new passion; it cannot be carried from this one to that; it must die here and spring anew there. As each beauty stands alone in the world, so stands the love which it prefers. Forth and away, then, to triumphs ever new, so long as youth’s fiery pulses race!”

The ending represents the Don’s disillusionment with his failed quest as he allows the brother of one of his conquests to kill him in a duel.

Don Juan is one of the most demanding compositions ever written, for both the musicians as well as the conductor. It requires the musicians to play effortlessly at the extremes of their instruments’ ranges, and it strains their stamina, and in the case of the brass, their breath control. The notes are hard enough to play, but turning them into the impassioned music Strauss calls for is even more so. It begins like molten rock exploding from a volcano, which is precisely the effect Strauss wanted: fiery passion. His love music is absolutely gorgeous.

The best way to absorb this marvelous masterpiece is not to try to follow Don Juan’s search for the ideal woman, but just to let Strauss’s stunning music wash over and envelope you with its dazzling orchestration and glorious melodies. Your imagination will do the rest.