

Richard STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Don Juan, Op.20 [1888]

Don Juan, Op.20 [1888] Beginning in the summer of 1886 with *Aus Italien*, the young Strauss had established a reputation as a vivid musical illustrator. Don Juan was the third of his works cast as a symphonic poem, a form recently conceived by Franz Liszt. Two days after its premiere in Weimar in 1889 Strauss wrote, "Well then - Don Juan had a great success, it sounded wonderful and went very well. It unleashed a storm of applause rather unusual for Weimar."

The stimulus for Strauss' symphonic poem was Nikolaus Lenau's play *Don Juan*, published posthumously in 1851. Rather than portraying the central character as a mere womaniser, Lenau depicts Don Juan as an idealist in search of the perfect woman. Lenau's play does not feature the usual ending of the legend (such as in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*), where Don Juan invites a statue of a victim to dinner and is subsequently dragged to hell by the stone guest after not repenting of his lechery. In Lenau's version, Don Juan drops his rapier and allows himself to be stabbed during a confrontation with the son of a man he had previously murdered.

Although this work is recognisably in sonata form, Strauss believed that his illustrative skills were such that he could aurally narrate this story. Don Juan's ardent energy is apparent from the very beginning of the work: a fury of notes leads us straight into Don Juan's instantaneously recognisable, passionate and virile theme, played by the violins and urged on by the woodwinds. Strauss creates a vivid contrast between this and subsequent secondary themes that could be considered representations of Don Juan's lovers. Halfway into the piece another Don Juan theme is introduced by horns soaring over the orchestra, representing not only Don Juan's masculine impetuosity but also his heroism. With a dissonant wail, the trumpets herald the moment when Don Juan is stabbed. He dies with shimmering descending strings that come to rest on a unison E.

Since its premiere, the work has been acclaimed by audiences the world over and loved by players for Strauss' magnificent orchestration. The virtuosity that pervades every part is highlighted by the fact that many of the instrumental parts are frequently used as excerpts for professional auditions. Don Juan was the first of a succession of compositions of stylistic originality that helped raise Strauss' reputation to that of one of the most highly regarded composers of his day.

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