PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Richard Strauss
Born June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany.
Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch, Germany.

Don Juan, Op. 20

Strauss composed Don Juan in 1888 and conducted the first performance on November 11 of that year in Weimar. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately eighteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Strauss's Don Juan were given at the Auditorium Theatre on November 5 and 6, 1897, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on March 6, 7, and 8, 2003, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. Our most recent performance at Orchestra Hall was given on a Marshall Field's Day of Music concert on October 4, 2003, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 16, 1936, with Willem van Hoogstraten conducting, and most recently on July 28, 2007, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

Although he would later say that he found himself as inspiring a subject as any, Richard Strauss began his career composing music indebted to some of literature's greatest characters. Strauss claimed that his inspiration to write music about Don Juan came from Nikolaus Lenau's German verse play (left unfinished at his death), but it's worth considering that Strauss conducted Mozart's Don Giovanni in Munich shortly before he began to compose Don Juan, his first important work. (Don Juan launched Strauss's career, but it took a few years for his name to replace that of another Strauss in audiences' affection—when the Chicago Symphony played Don Juan for the first time in 1897, it was still necessary to report that the twenty-four-year-old composer was no relation to the “dance Strauss family.”) In fact, the seeds for Strauss's Don Juan were planted as early as 1885, when he attended a performance of Paul Heyse's play, Don Juans Ende.

Strauss's Don Juan is not Heyse's, nor Mozart's, nor Lenau's—despite words on the title page to the contrary—but a character entirely and unforgettably his own, defined in a few sharp musical gestures. (Now that Strauss's tone poem—the term he preferred—has conquered the world's concert halls, the figure of Don Juan is unimaginable without the ardent horn theme which, in Strauss's hands, becomes his calling card.) Strauss once said his two favorite operas were Tristan and Isolde and Così fan tutte, and this work is informed by both the Wagnerian idea of undying love as well as Mozart's understanding of passion as a fragile, ever-changing state of mind. It's no small coincidence that, at the time he was composing this tone poem, Strauss himself fell madly in love with Pauline de Ahna, the soprano who would eventually become his wife.

Strauss worked on two tone poems during the summer of 1888. Macbeth, which gave him considerable trouble and wasn’t finished until 1891, doesn’t profit from comparison with Shakespeare’s play. But with Don Juan, composed in just four months, Strauss discovered the knack (which would rarely desert him thereafter) for depicting character, place, and action of cinematic complexity so vividly that words of explanation are unnecessary. Still, Strauss prefaced the score of Don Juan with three excerpts from Lenau's poem, and at the earliest performances he asked to have those lines printed in the program. Later, realizing that the public could follow his tone poems, in essence if not blow by blow, he disdained such self-help guides and trusted the music to speak for itself.
Strauss was always a master of the memorable first line—think of the glorious daybreak, now so often misquoted in television commercials, at the beginning of Thus Spake Zarathustra—but in all music, there are few openings as breathtaking as that of Don Juan—a rapid unfurling in which the hero leaps headlong in front of us. Throughout the work, Strauss doesn’t skimp on details, for even in his abridged biography of the great lover he depicts at least one flirtation, two torrid affairs, and a duel to the death.

There are many remarkable moments—the deeply felt love scene at the heart of the piece, beautifully launched by the oboe; the brazen new signature theme that follows, played by the four horns in unison; the hero’s precipitous fall from grace, when memories of his most recent loves pass quickly before him. Finally, after reliving the glory of past conquests, Don Juan recognizes that his victory is hollow—“the fuel is all consumed and the hearth is cold and dark,” Lenau writes—and he willingly dies at his adversary’s hand. With one piercing stab from the trumpets, he drops, trembling, to the ground. As swiftly as Don Juan’s life had ended, Strauss’s dazzling career was launched.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

For the Record
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Strauss’s Don Juan in 1954 and 1960 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, in 1972 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London, and in 1990 with Daniel Barenboim conducting for Erato. The Orchestra recorded a suite of waltzes from Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier in 1957 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA.

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