**Don Juan**

RICHARD STRAUSS  
* b. Munich, 11 June 1864  
* d. Garmish-Partenkirchen, West Germany, 8 September 1949  
* Premiered November 11, 1888 in Weimar, under the direction of the composer. (Approx. 17 minutes)

The literary tale of Don Juan, or Don Giovanni (in the version by Mozart and Da Ponte) is a tale of a man’s countless amorous conquests — in only his mind a great, swashbuckling adventure — that ends with the protagonist being dragged down to Hell for the choices he has made in his life. The inspiration originally comes from a German verse play by Nikolaus Lenau (unfinished), but Strauss first encountered the character after attending a performance of Paul Heyse’s play Don Juans Ende in 1885. Similar to his subject material, Strauss saw himself as rather larger than life, and so it is no wonder he was drawn to this story for his first major tone poem. He also conducted Mozart’s version, the opera Don Giovanni, in Munich just before composition began on Don Juan.

The piece launched Strauss’s career and is now famous for the bravura and virtuosity required to perform the work. The first page is on every orchestral audition for string players, and you’ll see the energy in the orchestra just before the first downbeat like the energy of a hundred fireworks about to explode all at once on the stage. And Strauss does not disappoint. The piece shatters to life after that first all important downbeat, and the adventure begins.

Being a tone poem, the music is designed to tell a story and in this case, the story is of Don Juan moving from one conquest to the next. The opening music depicts Juan himself, bursting forth in hopes of an amorous encounter. The virtuosic opening gives way to several scenes of flirtation, and finally of love. Wisps of melody for solo violin, sighs in the flute, passionate entreaties in the low strings and an achingly beautiful melody played by the oboe all represent various stages of the affair. In between all of these, Juan retains his bravura, and mid-way through a new proud and famous theme for the horns shows us Juan remains unchanged and adventurous. Finally, after traces of many of the earlier themes, the music comes to a tense silence. After a chilling A minor chord, the music slowly unravels, descending as the Don meets the ghost of a man he has killed earlier in life who takes his hand and leads him to his hellish fate.

Strauss went on to compose many other now famous tone poems, but this earliest one remains a favorite for audiences and orchestras alike. Full of bravura and panache, Strauss’s sense of drama and skill as a brilliant orchestrator are already fully developed as he leads us through the larger-than-life epic of Don Juan.

**Swan Lake: Suite**

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY  
* b. Votkinsk, Russian Empire, 7 May 1840  
* d. St. Petersburg, 6 November 1893  
* The full ballet was premiered in Moscow on March 4, 1877 at the Bolshoi Theatre, conducted by Stepan Ryabov. (Approx. 25 minutes)

In 1871 Tchaikovsky created a small domestic ballet by the name of Swan Lake to entertain his sister’s
children. Four years later he took some of the ideas he whipped together for his nieces and added considerable new music plus other earlier music from two failed operas to create what we know as Swan Lake, his first of several famous ballets. The premiere in 1877 was, as so often has been the case with now famous works, a minor disaster, mostly because of inadequacies in the production itself. The truly successful premiere unfortunately happened after Tchaikovsky died, when in 1895 the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg mounted a highly successful production which helped to launch the work into its prominent status today.

The story is unfortunately a sad love story. The tale begins with the 21st birthday celebration of Prince Siegfried, who is told that he must now marry and announce his chosen bride at a formal ball the next evening. That day he encounters the Swan Queen, Odette, to whom he professes his immediate love. She, however, is under a spell that can only be broken if a man marries her and remains forever faithful. Siegfried vows to do just that, but an elaborate deception is staged during which Siegfried is tricked into asking another woman’s hand in marriage, thinking she is Odette. The deception is unveiled but it is too late. Odette plunges into the lake, for her life has been forfeited by his betrayal. Siegfried follows, and in so doing destroys the power of the one who betrayed them both, and he also dies.

Tchaikovsky apparently intended to organize some of the Swan Lake music into a suite but never did, and he probably would be surprised at how popular it is today given the reception it had in his lifetime. The suite being performed today includes the character dances which would have been performed at the Prince’s birthday ball and the dances of the swans from the scene where Siegfried and Odette first meet in the company of the flight of swans.

**Piano Concerto No. 3**

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF  
b. Semyonovo, Russia 1 April 1873  
d. Beverly Hills, CA, 28 March 1943  
Premiered November 28, 1909 with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony and the composer as soloist. (Approx. 39 minutes)

In October of 1906, Rachmaninoff, by then a successful composer of operas, chamber music, symphonies and two piano concertos, moved with his family from Moscow to Dresden in an effort to remove himself from the busy concert stage and give himself time to dedicate to composition. Like many composers who have varied careers which included not only composing but also performing or conducting (and Rachmaninoff did both), he found it difficult and frustrating that so much of his time was spent performing when he wanted more time to write. For Rachmaninoff, the pressure was especially great as he was in constant demand as a performer. To this day he is recognized as one of the greatest pianists of all time, and so in moving to the beautiful capital of Dresden he attempted to remove himself from a busy schedule to compose.

The idyll, of course, did not last. Offers to perform and conduct continued to pour in, and he simply couldn’t turn them all down. In 1909 he accepted an invitation to tour the United States, where he performed his American debut with a piano recital, conducted the US premiere of his Second Symphony in Philadelphia, and gave the premiere of this concerto, written especially for his US tour. After premiering it with Damrosch and the New York Symphony, he also played it with the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Gustav Mahler, another composer/performer who found it difficult to find time to write.
The piece opens with an incredibly simple melody played by the piano over a pulsating orchestral accompaniment — and that’s where the simplicity ends. It is a famously difficult concerto, requiring incredible stamina and skill from the pianist, and no less work for the conductor and the orchestra. Rachmaninoff talked about his experience working with Mahler for the second performance:

Mahler was the only conductor whom I considered worthy to be classed with [Arthur] Nikisch [the most celebrated conductor of the time]. He touched my composer’s heart straight away by devoting himself to my Concerto until the accompaniment, which is rather complicated, had been practiced to the point of perfection, although he had already gone through a long rehearsal. According to Mahler, every detail of the score was important—an attitude which is unfortunately rare among conductors.

To say that the accompaniment is “rather complicated” doesn’t do justice to how intricately this piece is written. The first movement features several cadenzas and moments of great contrast and inventiveness. This is followed by a soulful “intermezzo,” a series of variations which link directly into the explosive final movement, which music writer Michael Steinberg calls “a torrent of virtuosity and invention.” He’s right. Rachmaninoff delivers an incredibly exciting finale, bringing the epic work to a close with technical fireworks all the way to the last note.