

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2016-2017 Mellon Grand Classics Season

April 7 and 9, 2017

GUSTAVO DUDAMEL, CONDUCTOR

RICHARD STRAUSS *Don Juan*, Opus 20

RICHARD WAGNER Overture to *Tannhäuser*

Intermission

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67
I. Allegro con brio
II. Andante con moto
III. Allegro —
IV. Allegro

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

RICHARD STRAUSS

Don Juan, Tone Poem, Opus 20 (1888)

Richard Strauss was born in Munich on June 11, 1864, and died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen on September 9, 1949. He composed the tone poem *Don Juan* in 1888, and it was premiered by the Weimar Hoftheater Orchestra on November 11, 1889, with the composer conducting. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered *Don Juan* at Carnegie Music Hall on February 8, 1901, led by music director Victor Herbert. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed *Don Juan* with Manfred Honeck on June 13-15, 2014, which was later released by Reference Recordings on an acclaimed album with Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration* and *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Performance time: approximately 19 minutes

It was in the 1630 drama *El Burlador de Sevilla* ("The Seducer of Seville") by the Spanish playwright Tirso de Molina that the fantastic character of Don Juan first strutted upon the world's stages. Tirso based his play on folk legends that were at least a century old in his day, and whose roots undoubtedly extend deeply into some Jungian archetype of masculine virility shared, from complementary viewpoints, by men and women alike. Don Juan found frequent literary representations thereafter, notably in works by Molière, Dumas, Byron, Espronceda, de Musset, Zorrilla and Shaw. A story of such intense passion was bound to inspire composers as well as men of letters, and Gluck, Delibes, Alfano, Dargomyzhsky and half a dozen others wrote pieces based on the character and his exploits. The most famous treatment of the tale is, of course, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and it was through that opera that Richard Strauss first became acquainted with the Spanish Lothario. In June 1885, Strauss attended a production of Paul Heyse's play *Don Juans Ende* with his mentor, Hans von Bülow, and the drama and its subject, building on the influence of Mozart's masterpiece, made a powerful impression on the young composer.

Strauss started sketching his own *Don Juan* late in 1887, soon after he had met Pauline de Ahna in August. Pauline, a singer of considerable talent, got on splendidly with Strauss, and they were soon in love and married. The impassioned love themes of *Don Juan* were written under the spell of this romance. (The couple remained apparently happily married for the rest of their lives, though Pauline was a renowned nag. Gustav and Alma Mahler would cross the street to avoid meeting her. In 1904, his torch still glowing, Richard wrote his *Domestic Symphony* — that grandiloquent ode to life among the pots and pans — as a tribute to his familial bliss with Pauline.) For the program of his tone poem, Strauss went not to da Ponte or the Spanish authors, but to the 19th-century Hungarian poet Nikolaus Lenau. Lenau, born in 1802, was possessed by a blazing romantic spirit fueled in part by a hopeless love for the wife of a friend. In a fit of idealism in 1832, he came to America and settled on a homestead in Ohio for a few months. Disappointed with the New World, he returned to Europe, where he produced an epic on the Faust legend in 1836, and then undertook a poetic drama based on Don Juan. Lenau left this latter work unfinished in 1844 when he lost his mind and was admitted to an asylum, where he died six years later. Lenau's *Don Juan* was not a rakish extrovert but rather a vain, sensual idealist. In the author's words, "My Don Juan is no hot-blooded man, eternally pursuing women. It is the longing in him to find a woman who is to him womanhood incarnate, and to enjoy in the one all the women on earth whom he cannot as individuals possess. Because he does not find her, although he reels from one to another, at last Disgust seizes hold of him, and this Disgust is the Devil that fetches him." In Lenau's version, Don Juan meets his death in a sword duel with the father of one of the women he has seduced. Disillusioned and empty, ready for death, he drops his guard and welcomes his fate.

Strauss' tone poem captures the feverish emotion and charged sensuality of Lenau's drama, but other than three abstruse excerpts from Lenau's poem that appear in the score, the composer never gave a specific program for *Don Juan*. (He learned early that he could get far more publicity by letting critics and commentators contend over such details.) The body of the work comprises themes associated with the lover and his conquests. The vigorous opening strain and a stentorian melody majestically

proclaimed by the horns near the mid-point of the work belong to Don Juan. The music depicting the women in his life is variously coquettish, passionate and ravishing. (Norman Del Mar called the beautiful oboe melody “one of the greatest lovesongs in all music”). In the closing pages, an enormous crescendo is suddenly broken off by a long silence. A quivering chill comes over the music. A dissonant note on the trumpets marks the fatal thrust. Quietly, without hope of redemption, the libertine dies.

RICHARD WAGNER

Overture to *Tannhäuser* (1843-1845)

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig on May 22, 1813, and died in Venice on February 13, 1883. He composed his opera *Tannhäuser* from 1843-1845, and conducted the premiere in Dresden with the Dresden Royal Theater Orchestra on October 19, 1845. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed music from *Tannhäuser* at Carnegie Music Hall on November 6, 1896, with Frederic Archer conducting. Most recently, Manfred Honeck led the work during a gala performance on September 15, 2012. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Performance time: approximately 14 minutes

Though Richard Wagner is universally known as a composer, he also considered himself — as the author of the librettos for all of his operas, a huge autobiography and an avalanche of theoretical and philosophical tracts voluminous enough to literally fill a shelf — a poet and a man of letters. The sources of inspiration for his librettos were invariably the history and myths of Germany, and during a vacation in the early summer of 1842 at the northern Bohemian town of Teplitz, he devoured a wide variety of 19th-century retellings of the ancient tales of the legendary medieval singing contests in search of an operatic subject. The accounts, by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the Brothers Grimm, Heine, Ludwig Tieck and others, concerned a historical 13th-century Minnesinger (i.e., a German poet-musician of noble birth) named Heinrich von Ofterdingen, a contest of song held in 1208 at the Wartburg Castle, near Eisenach (Bach's birthplace), and a (perhaps) mythical character called Tannhäuser who succumbed to the seductions of Venus in her mountain enclave and sought forgiveness through a pilgrimage to Rome and the love of a pure woman. Before he left Teplitz, Wagner had sketched an operatic scenario from these sources, and the following spring worked it into a full libretto titled *Tannhäuser*. The three acts of the opera were composed in 1844, while he was conductor of the Royal Opera House in Dresden; the orchestration was completed on April 15, 1845. Wagner directed the work's premiere in Dresden on October 19, 1845.

The opera opens in a grotto in the Venusberg, a mountain where Venus, the goddess of love, is said by German legend to have taken refuge after the fall of ancient civilization. Tannhäuser has forsaken the world to enjoy her sensual pleasures, but after a year he longs to return home and find forgiveness. He invokes the name of the Virgin Mary, and the Venusberg is swallowed by darkness. Tannhäuser finds himself in a valley below Wartburg Castle, where he is passed by a band of pilgrims journeying to Rome. His friend Wolfram recognizes him, tells him how Elisabeth has grieved during his absence, and invites him to the Wartburg to see Elisabeth and to take part in a singing contest. Elisabeth is joyous at Tannhäuser's return, and they reassure each other of their love. At the contest, however, Tannhäuser sings a rhapsody to Venus and the pleasures of carnal love that so enrages the assembled knights and ladies that Elisabeth must protect him from their threats of violence. Tannhäuser agrees to join the pilgrims to atone for his sins. Several months later, he returns from Rome, alone, haggard and in rags. He tells Wolfram that the Pope has said it is as impossible for someone who has dwelled in the Venusberg to be forgiven as for the Papal staff to sprout leaves. He considers going again to Venus, but withstands that temptation when Wolfram mentions Elisabeth's name. Elisabeth, however, not knowing of Tannhäuser's return and despairing of ever seeing her lover again, has died of grief. Her bier is carried past Tannhäuser, who kneels next to it, and also dies. As morning dawns, pilgrims from Rome arrive bearing the Pope's staff, which has miraculously grown leaves.

The Overture to *Tannhäuser* encapsulates in musical terms the dramatic conflict between the sacred love of Elisabeth and the profane love of Venus. Wagner wrote of it, “At first the orchestra introduces us to the *Pilgrims' Chorus* alone. It approaches, swells to a mighty outpouring, and finally passes into the distance. As night falls, magic visions show themselves. A rosy mist swirls upward, and the blurred

motions of a fearsomely voluptuous dance are revealed.... This is the seductive magic of the Venusberg. Lured by the tempting vision, Tannhäuser draws near. It is Venus herself who appears to him.... In drunken joy the Bacchantes rush upon him and draw him into their wild dance.... The storm subsides. Only a soft, sensuous moan lingers in the air where the unholy ecstasy held sway. Yet already the morning dawns: from the far distance the *Pilgrim's Chorus* is heard again. As it draws ever nearer and day repulses night, those lingering moans are transfigured into a murmur of joy so that when the sun rises the pilgrims' chorus proclaims salvation to all the world."

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67 (1804-1808)

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed his Fifth Symphony from 1804 to 1808, and it was premiered in at the Theater an de Wien in Vienna on December 22, 1808, with the composer conducting. The Pittsburgh Symphony gave its first performance at Carnegie Music Hall on March 12, 1896, with Frederic Archer conducting. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed the Fifth Symphony on subscription with Manfred Honeck on December 5-7, 2014, which was released on an album with Beethoven's Seventh Symphony by Reference Recordings. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

Performance time: approximately 33 minutes

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, more than any work in the musical repertory, is the archetypal example of the technique and content of the form. Its overall structure is not one of four independent essays linked simply by tonality and style, as in the typical 18th-century example, but is rather a carefully devised whole in which each of the movements serves to carry the work inexorably toward its end. The progression from minor to major, from dark to light, from conflict to resolution is at the very heart of the "meaning" of this Symphony. The triumphant, victorious nature of the final movement as the logical outcome of all that preceded it established a model for the symphonies of the Romantic era. The psychological progression toward the finale — the relentless movement toward a life-affirming close — is one of the most important technical and emotional legacies Beethoven left to his successors. Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler — their symphonies are indebted to this one (and to the Ninth Symphony, as well) for the concept of how such a creation could be structured, and in what manner it should engage the listener.

The opening gesture is the most famous beginning in all of classical music. It establishes the stormy temper of the *Allegro* by presenting the germinal cell from which the entire movement grows. Though it is possible to trace this memorable four-note motive through most of the measures of the movement, the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey pointed out that the power of the music is not contained in this fragment, but rather in the "long sentences" that Beethoven built from it. The key to appreciating Beethoven's formal structures lies in being aware of the way in which the music moves constantly from one point of arrival to the next, from one sentence to the next. It is in the careful weighting of successive climaxes through harmonic, rhythmic and instrumental resources that Beethoven created the enormous energy and seeming inevitability of this monumental movement. The gentler second theme derives from the opening motive, and gives only a brief respite in the headlong rush that hurtles through the movement. It provides the necessary contrast while doing nothing to impede the music's flow. The development section is a paragon of cohesion, logic and concision. The recapitulation roars forth after a series of breathless chords that pass from woodwinds to strings and back. The stark hammer-blows of the closing chords bring the movement to its powerful end.

The form of the second movement is a set of variations on two contrasting themes. The first theme, presented by violas and cellos, is sweet and lyrical in nature; the second, heard in horns and trumpets, is heroic. The ensuing variations on the themes alternate to produce a movement by turns gentle and majestic.

The following Scherzo returns the tempestuous character of the opening movement, as the four-note motto from the first movement is heard again in a brazen setting led by the horns. The *fughetta*, the "little

fugue,” of the central trio is initiated by the cellos and basses. The Scherzo returns with the mysterious tread of the plucked strings, after which the music wanes until little more than a heartbeat from the timpani remains. Then begins another accumulation of intensity, first gradually, then more quickly, as a link to the finale, which arrives with a glorious proclamation, like brilliant sun bursting through ominous clouds.

The finale, set in the triumphant key of C major, is jubilant and martial. (Robert Schumann saw here the influence of Étienne-Nicolas Méhul, one of the prominent composers of the French Revolution.) The sonata form proceeds apace. At the apex of the development, however, the mysterious end of the Scherzo is invoked to serve as the link to the return of the main theme in the recapitulation. It also recalls and compresses the emotional journey of the entire Symphony. The closing pages repeat the cadence chords extensively to discharge the enormous accumulated energy of the work.

Concerning the effect of the “struggle to victory” that is symbolized by the structure of the Fifth Symphony, a quote that Beethoven scribbled in a notebook of the Archduke Rudolf, one of his aristocratic piano and composition students, is pertinent. The composer wrote, “Many assert that every minor [tonality] piece must end in the minor. Nego! On the contrary, I find that ... the major [tonality] has a glorious effect. Joy follows sorrow, sunshine — rain. It affects me as if I were looking up to the silvery glistening of the evening star.”

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