

PROGRAM NOTES

NOVEMBER 2023

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) ***Don Juan*, op. 20 (1888)**

“Strauss may be summarized in four words,” wrote the Russian composer Cesar Cui; “no talent, much impudence.” A review in the New York Sun compared him to “a boor who comes to a social reception unkempt, with hands unwashed, cigar in mouth, hat on, and who sits down and puts his feet on the table.” History has largely vindicated Strauss, whose music today is regarded as the culmination of late Romanticism.

Strauss was born to a musical family in Munich in 1864. His father, Franz Strauss, was one of the finest hornists in Germany, and an accomplished composer in his own right whose horn works are still performed. As a boy, Richard studied piano and violin, and began composing at age six. By the end of his teenage years, several of his compositions had been published. These early works show an affinity for Brahms and Mendelssohn, no doubt due to the influence of his father, a staunch conservative who despised the more progressive composers such as Wagner. At 21, Strauss began his conducting career as the music director of the Munich Symphony Orchestra. At about the same time, he met the violinist Alexander Ritter, who was married to Wagner’s niece Franziska. Under Ritter’s guidance, Strauss became familiar with Wagner’s concepts of harmony and musical vocabulary. Soon he began to put those ideas into practice in his own work, and, as one modern writer put it, “all hell broke loose.

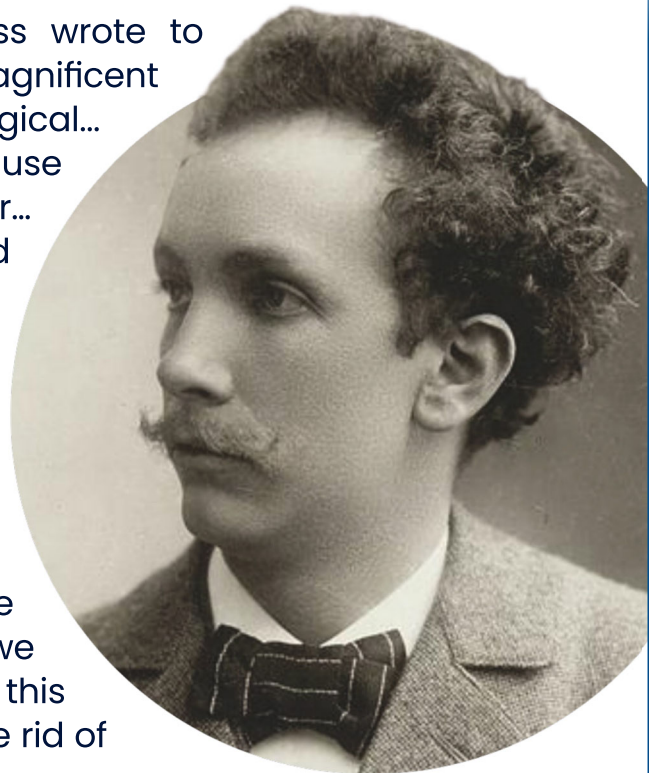
Strauss was only 23 when he wrote *Don Juan*, the work that put him on the map. In 1889, Strauss conducted the premiere in Weimar. As the work concluded, the audience rose to its feet—half cheering, half booing. Strauss wrote: “I now comfort myself with the knowledge that I am on the road I want to take, fully conscious that there never has been an artist not considered crazy by thousands of his fellow men.”

Strauss drew inspiration from a treatment of the Don Juan legend by Nikolaus Lenau. Ostensibly based on the same legend that inspired Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, Lenau’s version of Don Juan is quite

different from Mozart's amoral libertine, who is dragged down to Hell by the statue of the Commendatore, a man he had killed while attempting to abduct his daughter. Lenau's Don Juan is more of a frustrated idealist, obsessed with finding the "elusive ideal," the one woman who embodies all that is noblest and wisest, who would bring completeness to his own life. In the end, weary of a life without meaning, he challenges the Commendatore's son to a duel, then simply allows himself to be run through.

Strauss cast his tone poem in rondo form, more or less. This traditional form suited the story line admirably, with the recurring main theme (actually a group of themes) depicting the rakish Don as he runs from one amorous conquest to another, with intervening sections depicting the amorous episodes themselves. At the conclusion, we hear a massive buildup of tension, abruptly breaking off in a heart-stopping silence, followed by a cold, dark conclusion as Don Juan drops his sword and embraces death.

Following the premiere, Strauss wrote to his father, "*Don Juan* — a magnificent success, the piece sounded magical... and unleashed a storm of applause as never before heard in Weimar... It all sounds marvelous and comes off splendidly, even when it's fiendishly difficult." And difficult it was, requiring a high level of technique from all performers. Having been raised by a virtuoso hornist, Strauss was especially demanding of his horn players. "Dear God," one of them remarked, "What have we done that you should send us this rod for our backs? We'll never be rid of it now!"



Eric Ewazen (b. 1954)
Down a River of Time (1999)

Eric Ewazen is a composer celebrated for his extensive contributions

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to the modern classical repertoire. Drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources, including jazz and folk music, his many compositions are characterized by memorable melodies and intricate textures. His music resonates with performers and audiences alike, showcasing his mastery in capturing emotional depth through sound.

Ewazen studied composition at the Eastman School of Music and the Juilliard School of Music; his teachers included Samuel Adler, Milton Babbitt, Joseph Schwantner, Warren Benson, and others. He himself has become a devoted educator, teaching music theory and analysis at the Juilliard School since 1980. He was also the Guest Composer at Indiana State University's Contemporary Music Festival in 2011.

Concertos or concerto-like works have figured prominently in Ewazen's output. By now he has written at least one such work for nearly every standard instrument. *Down a River of Time*, for oboe and string orchestra, was his first oboe concerto, written in 1999 for oboist Linda Strommen.



The composer writes: "My father passed away on Christmas Day in 1997. On this day, the Cleveland Plain Dealer printed an article by Dick Fealger. It was a memory piece—looking back to youth, talking about loved ones and reminding the reader that time goes so quickly. In this article, Mr. Fealger described life as moving 'down a river of time.' These words captured my attention."

Ewazen further writes: "The piece, which is a contemplative journey through life, was composed as an aria

with string orchestra. The oboe emulates the voice as it expresses intense emotional and personal feelings, orchestrating the importance of life's dreams."

Each movement, with their individual titles, are descriptive of various stages down the journey of the river of life. The first movement, "... Past Hopes and Dreams," is described by the composer "a young person's journey—representing activity, relaxations, peace, hard work and excitement."

The second movement, "...and Sorrows," describes a profound sadness; Ewazen describes it as "a valley of tears." The strings are less active in this movement, with the lower instruments prominent. While minor modes predominate here, "major tonalities interrupt sporadically, offering glimmers of hope and comfort."

The final movement, "...and Memories of Tomorrow," runs through a gamut of moods and emotions, but celebration and joy emerge to the foreground. It is a nostalgic movement, describing "how one looks back at life and relishes the joyful memories, sometimes even forgetting the pain." The movement soars to a brilliant and optimistic conclusion in a clear, shining C major.

Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

***Tod Und Verklärung* (Death and Transfiguration), op. 24 (1889)**

As Strauss conducted the premiere of *Don Juan*, his next work, *Tod und Verklärung*, ("Death and Transfiguration") was only three pages from completion. In contrast to the earlier tone poem, which depicts the character and experiences of a single individual, the new work confronts a more universal experience, being a vivid depiction of the moment of death.

In 1894 Strauss explained the work: "It was six years ago that it occurred to me to present in the form of a tone poem the dying hours of a man who had striven towards the highest idealistic aims, maybe indeed those of an artist. The sick man lies in bed, asleep, with heavy irregular breathing; friendly dreams conjure a smile on the features of the deeply suffering man; he wakes up; he is once more racked with horrible agonies; his limbs shake with fever."

"As the attack passes and the pain leaves off, his thoughts wander

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through his past life; his childhood passes before him, the time of his youth with its strivings and passions and then, as the pains already begin to return, there appears to him the fruits of his life's path, the conception, the ideal which he has sought to realize, to present artistically, but which he has never been able to complete, since it is not for man to be able to accomplish such things. The hour of death approaches, the soul leaves the body in order to find gloriously achieved in everlasting space those things which could not be fulfilled here below."

Nearly four decades later, in 1931, Strauss virtually disavowed this entire scenario. "*Tod und Verklärung* is purely a product of the imagination – it is not based on any kind of personal experience. It was an idea just like any other, probably a musical need to write a piece that begins in C minor and ends in C major! Who knows?" On the other hand, on his deathbed in 1949, Strauss reportedly remarked, "Funny - it is just as I imagined it in *Tod und Verklärung*."

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

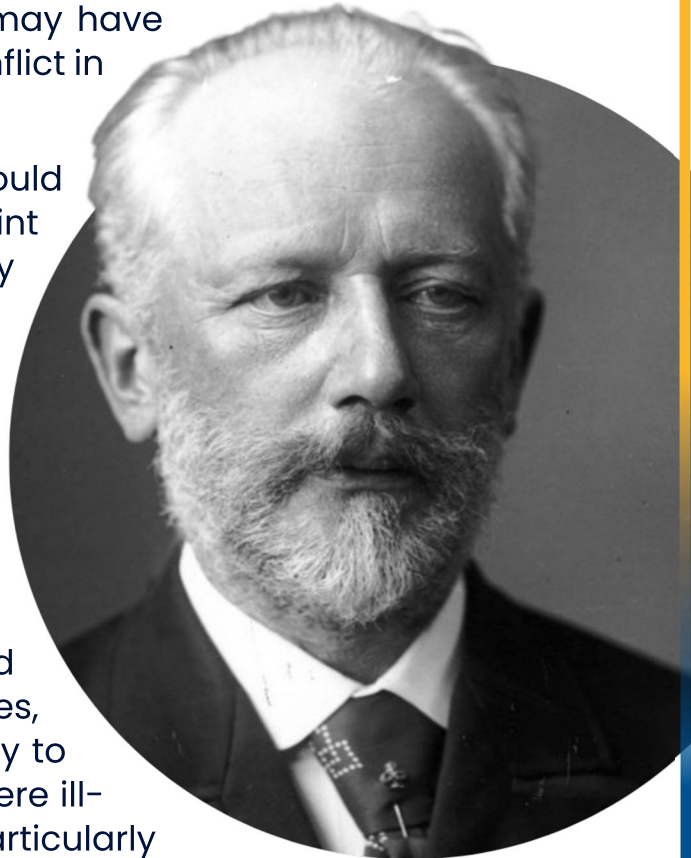
The Year 1812, Festival Overture ("*1812 Overture*"), op. 49 (1880)

In the years following the French Revolution in 1791, Europe was torn apart by a series of wars that eventually pitted France against every major European nation. Led by Napoleon, France, through a long series of land victories, established an empire covering much of the western continent. In 1812, Napoleon received intelligence reports that his onetime ally, Russia, was raising troops for a planned invasion of Poland. To prevent this, Napoleon assembled an army of some 450,000 men, armed with state-of-the-art artillery. On June 23, his army set off.

The Russian campaign began well for France but would ultimately prove to be a complete disaster. The two armies met for the first time at the village of Borodino in September. The French, more numerous and better equipped than the Russians, tactically won the battle, but both armies paid a staggering cost. It is estimated

that the Battle of Borodino may have been the single bloodiest conflict in history up to that time.

In the long term, however, it would prove to be the turning point in Napoleon's campaign. By retreating, the Russians were able to preserve and rebuild their fighting force, while the French found themselves pushing further into hostile territory and dealing with an overextended supply line. In addition, the retreating Russian armies destroyed crops and storehouses, denying the French the ability to forage; as well, the French were ill-equipped to deal with a particularly harsh Russian winter. The defeated army that finally returned to France was less than a tenth of the size of the army that had left it only a few months earlier. It was the beginning of the end of France's military dominance.



The Russians, too, paid a terrible price for victory; 150,000 soldiers and unknown hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, many of starvation. The Battle of Borodino was permanently seared into the Russian consciousness, a symbol of the Russian's courage and sacrifice in defense of the Motherland. As such, it has served as the inspiration for many works of art; Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, and Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*.

The conductor Nicolas Rubenstein approached Tchaikovsky in 1880 with a proposal to compose a work for an upcoming festival. Rubenstein was in charge of organizing a grand Exhibition in Moscow, to take place in 1882, which coincided with Tsar Alexander II's silver jubilee, the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Borodino, and the opening of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which was being built to commemorate the events of 1812. Tchaikovsky felt he could not decline, but he disliked working on commission, disliked "festival pieces," and completed the project without enthusiasm.

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“The Overture will be very loud and noisy,” he wrote, “but I wrote it without any feelings of love and so it will probably be of no artistic worth.” Whatever its artistic worth may be, it was an immediate and enduring success, and remains one of the most beloved works in the orchestral repertoire.

Rubenstein’s vision for the festival included a grand spectacular outdoor performance, and Tchaikovsky obliged by including military bands, pealing church bells, and cannons, in addition to an expanded orchestra. The premiere, however, took place indoors without all the “extras.” The assassination of Alexander II earlier that year had put a damper on the festivities; moreover, there were financial and logistical barriers preventing the piece from being performed as written (for one thing, it was almost impossible to “play” a cannon with any kind of rhythmic precision). It is doubtful that Tchaikovsky ever heard the overture performed as he intended it.

Though called an “overture,” 1812 is really a symphonic poem depicting historical events. The advancing armies are depicted by the national anthems of both countries; *La Marseillaise* for France and *God Save the Tsar* for Russia. Both songs are used anachronistically; they were current when Tchaikovsky wrote the score, but *La Marseillaise* had been banned by Napoleon in 1805 (it was reinstated in 1879), and *God Save the Tsar* would not be written until 1833.

The overture begins with cellos and violas playing the hymn *God Preserve Thy People*, as the Russian people pray for deliverance. Fragments of *La Marseillaise* and Russian folk songs are heard as the two armies advance, skirmish, and retreat. The music builds to a—literally!—explosive climax as the cannons are heard for the first time and *La Marseillaise* blares out in apparent triumph. But the Russians are able to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat as *God Preserve Thy People* is heard again by the full orchestra and brass band, and church bells peal. As the overture comes to an end, *God Save the Tsar* is heard while cannons are fired again, now in celebration.

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