

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY

February 27, 2010

STRAUSS *Don Juan, Op. 20*

MOZART **Concerto in C Major for Flute and Harp, K.299**
Allegro
Andantino
Rondo: Allegro

INTERMISSION

DEBUSSY *La Mer*
De l'aube à midi sur la mer (From Dawn til Noon on the Sea)
Jeux de vagues (Play of the Waves)
Dialogue du vent et de la mer (Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea)

Don Juan, Op. 20

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born June 11, 1864, Munich

Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

The summer of 1888 found the 24-year-old Strauss at something of an impasse. There was no question of his prodigious talent. Already he was the composer of some magnificent songs, and his First Symphony—completed when he was 20—had been premiered in New York City. But as a composer, he was still searching for an authentic voice. His career as a conductor was also stalled. He had succeeded Hans von Bülow as conductor of the superb Meiningen Orchestra at just the moment that orchestra was being downsized, and he ended up as third conductor of the Munich Court Opera, where he was stuck conducting the operas that did not interest the other conductors (and often did not interest Strauss). In these years Strauss found himself drawn toward descriptive music, particularly to the conception of the “symphonic poem” as that had been shaped by Franz Liszt. Strauss’ own movement in the direction of representational music was tentative: first, in 1886, came *Aus Italien*, written in response to an Italian holiday, more travelogue than drama. It was followed by Strauss’ first true symphonic poem, *Macbeth*, but this proved a failure—even his mentor von Bülow referred to it as a “Macbethian soup from the witches’ kitchen.”

But his imagination—and his art—caught fire when he took up the Don Juan story. Strauss, however, chose not the legendary figure of Molina, Moliere, Gluck, and Mozart, but instead a different Don Juan, one created by the German poet Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850). Lenau’s Don is a much darker figure, a philosopher who seeks the Ideal Woman through his conquest of individual women, and his fate is to find not the ideal but only disillusion, destruction, and self-disgust. Finally confronted by Don Pedro, a relative of one of his conquests, Lenau’s Don Juan recognizes the emptiness of his life, purposely lowers his sword during their duel, and takes a fatal thrust through his heart. Strauss had three brief excerpts from Lenau’s *Don Juan* printed in the published score, and the last of these might serve as an epitaph for his doomed hero: “. . . suddenly my world became a desert and darkened . . . the fuel is all consumed and the hearth is cold and dark.”

Liszt’s symphonic poems had been loosely inspired by legends, paintings, and plays, but Strauss aimed for a much more exact musical representation (Strauss once bragged that he could

set a glass of beer to music), and *Don Juan* is striking in its instant creation of character, the sheer sweep of its writing, and the detail of its incidents. He worked on the score to *Don Juan* across the summer of 1888 and took it with him that fall when he became the assistant conductor of the Weimar Opera. When the management of the opera learned of this music, they insisted that he give the premiere with the local orchestra. That opera orchestra was modestly-talented, and Strauss—who had hoped for a more “visible” premiere—had doubts about its ability to handle this ferociously-difficult music. It took many, many rehearsals to get the orchestra ready, and in a letter to his parents Strauss caught the spirit of those sessions, telling of a sweaty horn-player who confronted the composer and demanded: “Good God, in what way have we sinned that you have sent us this scourge!” Strauss went on: “We laughed till we cried! Certainly the horns blew without fear of death . . . I was really sorry for the wretched horns and trumpets. They were quite blue in the face, the whole affair was so strenuous.”

But their work paid off. The premiere on November 11, 1889, was a sensation, Strauss’ name swept across Europe, and *Don Juan* may be said to have launched its young creator’s career. Strauss biographer Michael Kennedy has called this music “the appearance of the real Strauss,” and a succession of increasingly detailed and brilliant tone-poems followed over the next decade. (In passing, it should be noted that the premiere of *Don Juan* came from a fortuitous moment in music—nine days later, Strauss’ friend Gustav Mahler led the premiere of his own First Symphony in Budapest.)

Don Juan has one of the most famous beginnings in music. That volcanic opening rush (Strauss stresses that it must be *Allegro molto con brio*) begins off-the-beat, and from out of that empty beat it streaks upward across three octaves in the first instants. This fiery flourish leads immediately to Don Juan’s own music, which seems always to be in frantic motion, surging and striving ever higher. In fact, one of the most impressive things about *Don Juan* is its energy: this music boils over, presses forward, erupts—it seems to be in motion even when it is still. Quick figures from violins and solo oboe suggest an early flirtation, but soon a lush chord for full orchestra (marked *tranquillo*) introduces the sweeping violin solo that signals the Don’s first real passion. Strauss was particularly adept at writing voluptuous love-music, and this interlude goes on for some time before the Don tries to escape. On the surging music from the very beginning he breaks free and sets off on new adventures. His second passion brings another notable love-

scene, this one built on a gorgeous cantilena for solo oboe, but—his conquest made—the Don rushes off on a mighty horn call. An animated scene follows, perhaps a depiction of Lenau's carnival sequence, but suddenly matters plunge into gloomy near-silence. Fragmentary reminiscences of earlier love-themes reappear as the Don confronts the meaning of his life, and the music, driven once again by Don Juan's own themes, rushes into the final confrontation with Don Pedro. Their sword-fight is suitably violent, but its climax breaks off in silence as Don Juan abandons the struggle and lowers his sword. Out of the eerie chord that follows, dissonant trumpets mark the thrust of Don Pedro's blade through Don Juan's heart, and descending trills lead to the close on grim pizzicato strokes. Don Juan's quest, once so full of fire, has ended in complete spiritual darkness.

Concerto in C Major for Flute and Harp, K.299

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg

Died December 5, 1791, Vienna

Mozart made an extended visit to Paris in 1778, when he was 22, and quickly found himself embroiled in the musical intrigues of that city. Long in the past was the time when he dazzled audiences as a child prodigy, and Parisians now were not much interested in his music. His hopes of finding a worthy position in Paris soon evaporated and—worse—his mother died there after a brief illness; the young composer returned to Salzburg the following January with little to show for his long absence.

Soon after arriving in Paris, however, Mozart became acquainted with two musical aristocrats, the Count de Guines, who Mozart said “plays the flute extremely well,” and his harpist daughter, whose name has not come down to us; Mozart noted that she “plays the harp magnifique.” They asked the composer for a concerto they might play together, and he composed this Concerto for Flute and Harp in April 1778, scoring it for the soloists and small orchestra (pairs of oboes and horns, plus strings). Apparently Mozart's relations with the de Guines were not entirely happy: he waited some time before he was paid for this concerto and in the meantime had the dismal task of trying to teach composition to the unwilling daughter. Mozart wrote a telling letter to his father: “She is . . . extremely doubtful as to whether she has any talent for composition, especially as regards invention or ideas . . . Well, we shall see. If she

gets no inspirations or ideas (for at present she really has none whatever), then it is to no purpose, for—God knows—I can’t give her any.”

The concerto for this young woman and her father has proven a much more successful enterprise, though it unites two instruments that were somewhat alien to Mozart: his dislike for the sound of the flute is well-known, and this was the only occasion he wrote for harp. Faced with these conditions—and the limitations of two amateur performers—Mozart sensibly composed straightforward and uncomplicated music. The concerto is in an “easy” key (C major), Mozart keeps orchestral textures light and clear, and this agreeable music calls for able musicianship from its soloists rather than dazzling brilliance. Referring to its gracious manner, Mozart’s biographer Alfred Einstein speaks of this concerto as “an example of the finest French salon music.”

The orchestral introduction to the *Allegro* sounds the movement's main theme—made up of the notes of a C-major chord—and the soloists enter on this same subject. There are opportunities for cadenzas in all three movements; Mozart wrote out cadenzas for the count and his daughter, but these have unfortunately been lost. The *Andantino* is particularly impressive: Mozart leaves the orchestral winds out and accompanies the soloists only with strings; further, he divides the violas, creating a richer orchestral sound. The unusually expressive sweep of this movement has made it an audience favorite: fans of the movie *Amadeus* will remember that this was one of the scores that burst to radiant life when Salieri opened the stack of music Mozart’s wife had brought for his perusal. The finale is a nod to Parisian taste: it is a rondo in the form of a gavotte, a dance much in fashion in France at that time.

La Mer

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Died March 25, 1918, Paris

In the summer of 1903, the 41-year-old Debussy took a cottage in the French wine country, where he set to work on a new orchestral piece inspired by his feelings about the sea. To André Messager he wrote, “I expect you will say that the hills of Burgundy aren’t washed by the sea and that what I’m doing is like painting a landscape in a studio, but my memories are endless and are in my opinion worth more than the real thing which tends to pull down one’s

ideas too much.”

That last phrase is a key to this music. While each of its three movements has a descriptive heading, *La Mer* is not an attempt to describe the ocean in sound. Had Richard Strauss written *La Mer* (he would have called it “*Das Meer*”), he would have made us hear the thump of waves along the shoreline, the cries of wheeling sea-birds, the hiss of foam across the sand. Debussy’s aims were far different. He was interested not in musical scene-painting but in writing music that makes us feel the way we feel in the presence of the ocean—what mattered for Debussy was not the thing itself but his *idea* of that thing. At the premiere in 1905 the critic Pierre Lalo, misunderstanding Debussy’s intentions in this music, complained: “I neither hear, nor see, nor feel the sea.” *La Mer* sets out not to make us see white-caps but to awaken in us our own sense of the sea’s elemental power and beauty.

Debussy subtitled *La Mer* “Three Symphonic Sketches,” and it consists of two moderately-paced movements surrounding a scherzo. But these movements are not in the forms of German symphonic music, nor does Debussy write melodic themes capable of symphonic development. Rather, he creates what seem fragments of musical materials—hints of themes, rhythmic shapes, flashes of color—that will reappear throughout, like kaleidoscopic bits in an evolving mosaic of color and rhythm.

From Dawn til Noon on the Sea begins with a quiet murmur, a quiet nevertheless full of elemental strength. Out of this darkness glints of color and motion emerge, and solo trumpet and English horn share a fragmentary tune that will return—both thematically and rhythmically—here and in the final movement. As the morning brightens, the music becomes more animated, and a wealth of ideas follows: swirling rhythmic shapes, a noble chorale for horns, a dancing figure for the cello section divided into four parts. From these fragments, Debussy builds his first movement, and at its close the horn chorale builds to an unexpectedly powerful climax. Out of this splendid sound, a solitary brass chord winds the music into silence.

Play of the Waves opens with shimmering swirls of color, and this movement is brilliant, dancing and surging throughout—it has a nice sense of fun and play, as a scherzo should. One moment it can be sparkling and light, the next it will surge up darkly. The movement draws to a delicate close in which a few solo instruments seem to evaporate into the shining mist.

The mood changes sharply at the beginning of the final movement—Debussy specifies that

he wants *Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea* to sound “animated and tumultuous.” The ominous growl of lower strings prefaces a restatement of the trumpet tune from the very beginning, and soon the horn chorale returns as well. Debussy’s transformation of his material is particularly impressive here. A gentle chorale for woodwinds (marked “expressive and sustained”) sings wistfully at first, but the music builds to a huge explosion. Moments later that chorale tune returns in a touch of pure instrumental magic: against rippling harps and the violins’ high harmonics, solo flute brings back this tune with the greatest delicacy, and the effect is extraordinary—suddenly we feel a sense of enormous space and calm. Yet within seconds this same shape roars out with all the power of the full orchestra. As the movement proceeds, Debussy recalls themes from earlier movements, and the opening trumpet figure, the horn chorale, and the flute tune from this movement are all whipped into the vortex as the music hurtles to a tremendous climax.

Debussy may be popularly identified as the composer of “impressionistic” moods, full of muted color and subtle understatement, but the conclusion of *La Mer* roars with savage power as dissonant brass shriek out the final chord. This is not the music of water lilies but music driven by a force beyond human imagination, and the normally-understated Debussy makes us feel that wild strength in the most violent ending he ever wrote.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

WHY THIS PROGRAM?

By Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist

Feb. 25th-27th, 2010:-

Our enthusiastic assistant conductor expressed considerable enthusiasm for the program he has chosen. “It was my idea,” he said, “to celebrate Julie and Demarre. We have so many wonderful principal players here that they should all be highlighted as often as possible as concert soloists. I was really happy to choose them as my soloists. The whole program then automatically became a virtuosic showpiece for the orchestra, just like the Mozart is for the two soloists...” Continuing, he noted that Mozart wrote for the harp at a time that the instrument had not yet become the glamorous one it has become, with all sorts of glissandi and other flourishes.

Also, the flute was never a favored instrument of the composer, but because the harp was such an unusual soloist at the time, the un-favored flute became favored in the concerto.

“I decided on *la Mer* first when I was given this concert. I wanted something that would allow me (and the audience) to examine the full talents and colors of this fine orchestra. *Don Juan* became a natural opener here.” Describing this further, Philip Mann commented, “The whole concert centers around the concept of dialogue, in a large sense. The Strauss has a repetitive dialogue between the sensual and the dynamic in its music and its orchestration. So does the Debussy, but on a much more subtle level. In both pieces, colors and textures form another dialogue.” He laughed as he related that, historically, the fact that Debussy left his wife and ran off to the seacoast with his soprano lover seems to fit the passionate motifs of Don Juan - the real one and the Strauss one.

The first time the San Diego Symphony Orchestra played *Don Juan* was during the 1966-67 season, when Zoltan Rozsnyai conducted. Yoav Talmi led its most recent outing here during the 2001-02 season. Earl Bernard Murray led the orchestra in its first performance of *la Mer* during the 1965-66 season. The most recent of its seven seasonal selections by the orchestra was during the 2001-02 season, when David Lockington directed it. These performances mark the orchestra’s first performances of the Mozart Concerto for Flute and Harp.