Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Don Juan, Tone poem after Lenau, Opus 20

It is altogether fitting that Strauss’s Don Juan, an evocation of the greatest erotic subject of all time, should be composed under the influence of his own first passion for Pauline de Ahna, the soprano who was eventually to become his wife. Strauss met her in August 1887 while on a visit to his uncle Georg Peschke in a village an hour’s ride from Munich. Pauline was the daughter of a prominent musical villager, General de Ahna, and she had at that time already completed vocal studies at the Munich Conservatory, though she had made no progress in a career. Strauss, completely smitten by the girl, decided to supervise her further instruction, so that by the time he took over the opera in Weimar two years later, he was able to introduce her as one of the leading sopranos.

The story of Don Juan has appeared over and over again in European literature and music. Strauss knew Mozart’s Don Giovanni, of course, but his version owes no allegiance to the plot or characterization of the Mozart work. Nor did Byron’s extended narrative poem Don Juan play a direct role in Strauss’s plans. He found inspiration rather in the work of Nikolaus Lenau, an Austrian romantic poet of Hungarian birth who had died in a mental asylum in 1850 leaving unfinished a poetic drama on Don Juan partly inspired by Byron; the surviving fragments were published in 1851. Lenau’s version of the legend was a psychological treatment of a man devoted to an idealistic search for the perfect woman. He glories in the experience of the individual moment above all else, but learns that each successful exploit has led to some great harm, a fact that makes his existence increasingly burdensome. In the end, challenged by the brother of one of the women he has seduced, he throws his sword away at the moment when he has all but conquered because he finds victory “as boring as the whole of life.” His opponent puts an end to his career with a single sword stroke.

Strauss prefixed three excerpts from Lenau’s work to his score. The first two, drawn from early in the play, show Don Juan discussing his philosophy with his brother Don Diego, who has been sent by their father to bring him home. The last comes from shortly before the final confrontation; Don Juan hopes that his enemy will soon put an end to his futile life. The poetic excerpts convey nothing of the action of the play, provide no details of the women who succumb to the Don’s amorous powers. But they convey something of the psychology of the leading character who acts throughout this composition.

Regarding these excerpts, Donald Francis Tovey wryly remarked, “The philosophy of these sentiments is not good citizenship, but it is neither insincere nor weak. It is selfish, but not parasitic.” It is also clearly not a “plot” for a musical score; there is no emphasis on action or any series of incidents. It tells us all Strauss wants us to know about his Don Juan. The various women with whom he is involved serve merely as a foil for musical ideas, not as individuals.

For a composer whose father consciously restricted his studies to the classics, particularly Mozart and Mendelssohn, and whose earliest compositions followed clearly in the same vein, Don Juan is an astonishing achievement, a rocket exploding in a quiet countryside. With one stroke Strauss conquered the most advanced style of composition and orchestral treatment—and he was himself only twenty-four. Having earlier composed music that carefully followed the “rules” of classical procedure, however irksome they may have become to him, Strauss was converted to the “music of the future” by Alexander Ritter, a violinist in his orchestra at Meiningen. Ritter was a devout follower of Liszt and Wagner and had married Wagner’s niece. He persuaded Strauss that “new ideas must search for new forms,” and Liszt’s procedures in his symphonic poems of allowing the poetic element to become the guiding principle for the symphonic work dominated Strauss’s output for nearly two decades.

The first result of the conversion was his four-movement symphony Aus Italien (From Italy), which fused conventional structures with new ideas. He followed it with the first version of Macbeth, which, after a private reading with his orchestra, he withheld for revisions, completed only after the astounding premiere of Don Juan.

In the fall of 1889, at the recommendation of Hans von Bülow, Strauss became assistant conductor at the Weimar Opera. His employers there, forward-looking Wagnerians, were enormously impressed when he played Don Juan to them on the piano, and they insisted that he give the premiere at a concert of the Weimar orchestra. Though Strauss had his doubts about the ensemble’s ability to cope with the extraordinary demands of the new score, he agreed, rather than wait for an uncertain future performance in a larger musical center. The orchestra took the piece well after the initial shock of the first rehearsals. One
of the horn players remarked, “Good God, in what way have we sinned that you should have sent us this scourge!” But Strauss was in good humor throughout the difficult rehearsals, and he wrote after the premiere, “We laughed till we cried! Certainly the horns blew without fear of death...I was really quite sorry for the wretched horns and trumpets. They were quite blue in the face, the whole affair was so strenuous.”

From the day of that first tumultuous performance in November 1889, Strauss was instantly recognized as the most important German composer to appear since Wagner. He was launched on his string of brilliant and innovative orchestral works, and he was to continue in that line until his attention gradually was directed almost totally to the operatic stage. Even as he conducted Don Juan, Death and Transfiguration, the next in his series of “tone poems” (the descriptive term he preferred), lay all but finished on his desk.

—Steven Ledbetter