

## **RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)** **Don Juan, Op.20**

Strauss' *Don Juan* boldly announced the composer as *the* emerging figure in German music. Composed in 1888, and first performed in November 1889, it had received no fewer than 600 performances by June 1902. Inspired by his love affair with Dora Wihan, the estranged wife of a renowned cellist, it is loosely based on Nikolaus Lenau's 1851 verse-drama about the legendary fictional libertine. However, there is no detailed plot as such; instead Strauss presents us with a series of colourful episodes, each representing the Don's seductions and triumphs, and finally his pathetic demise when, world weary, he allows himself to be slain in a duel.

*Don Juan* is an orchestral *tour de force* that places huge technical demands on every instrument (and is thus a staple of orchestral auditions). During rehearsals of the work Strauss wrote the following to his father:

"The sound was wonderful, immensely glowing and exuberant. It will make a tremendous stir here ... The orchestra huffed and puffed but did its job famously. One of the horn players sat there out of breath, sweat pouring from his brow, asking 'Good God, in what way have we sinned that you should have sent us this scourge?' We laughed till we cried."

The work opens with a flamboyant upward flourish suggesting Don Juan's (and perhaps the young Strauss's) supreme self-confidence. After a series of virtuoso antics, the mood is transformed by a sensual violin solo – the first of two themes representing feminine beauty. The anti-hero continues his insatiable quest before a solo oboe sings out an ecstatic melody, the second of the themes signifying idealised femininity. The mood of tenderness is rudely shattered by rushing scales and four French horns announce a new, heroic Don Juan theme. An intricate passage follows depicting the Don at a masked ball but signs appear of his world-weariness. The opening flourishes return and the horns restate their heroic refrain. Finally the duel begins and Juan is willingly run through. In the words from Lenau's drama that Strauss here wrote in the score: 'The fuel is all consumed and the hearth is cold and dark.'

## **ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-56)** **Cello Concerto in A minor, Op.129**

*Nicht zu schnell*  
*Langsam*  
*Sehr lebhaft*

In September 1850 Schumann left Dresden to become Municipal Music Director in the Rhineland town of Düsseldorf. At the end of the month the composer and his wife visited Cologne where they were struck by the beauty of the surrounding countryside and the awe-inspiring splendour of the city's Gothic cathedral. Inspired by the visit, Schumann immediately set about composing three instrumental works: the 'Rhenish' Symphony, the overture *The Bride of Messina* and the Cello Concerto, most of which was written in a mere six days.

Schumann had no cellist in mind for the work (it was first performed by Ludwig Ebert in Leipzig four years after the composer's death); nor was there an established tradition of concertos for cello, as there was with the violin and the piano. His choice came about because he adored the instrument and had played it as a younger man. A misunderstood work for many years, it is now rightly regarded as the first great Romantic cello concerto and one of a few examples of the genre that bridge the hundred-year gap between those of Haydn and Dvořák.

Schumann may have titled the work a concerto, but he also described it as a 'Concert Piece for cello with orchestral accompaniment'. Thus, rather than any sense of dramatic conflict between soloist and orchestra (as, for instance, in Brahms' Violin Concerto), the cellist retains the limelight throughout, with the orchestra cast in a largely passive, accompanying role. The result is to showcase

the lyrical and poetic qualities of the cello which, almost uninterruptedly, sings out against a soft cushion of orchestral sound.

The work consists of three linked movements. The first is an almost continuous flow of melody, although its so-called development section is a more animated affair. The slow movement is a meditative intermezzo in which the soloist blends exquisitely with the orchestral cellos and violas. After a melodramatic recitative that could have come straight out of an opera, the vigorous finale, with its ceaseless energy, gets underway. The momentum hardly flags, even in the cello cadenza that appears just before the end and which restates and elaborates the first movement's opening theme.

## **HECTOR BERLIOZ (1803-1869)**

### **Waverley Overture, Op.1**

Berlioz's first published work takes its title from Walter Scott's historical novel *Waverley*, a tale of love, mutiny and treason set during Scotland's Jacobite War in the late 17th century. The book established Scott's literary reputation and a series of novels followed, all billed as the work of 'the author of *Waverley*'. Like many of his contemporaries, Berlioz was an avid reader of Scott and he had read all of the *Waverley* novels in French translation during his student days. Yet the work in no way attempts to illustrate Scott's narrative. Instead, it sets out to reflect two of its central themes: chivalric love and war.

Berlioz did so with great imagination and creativity and, in its harmonies, rhythms and orchestration, there are more than hints of the mature Berlioz to come. Nevertheless, after its premiere at the Paris Conservatoire in May 1828, Berlioz came to dislike the work. He did sanction its publication in 1839 but never conducted it. When he heard of a planned performance of the overture some years later, he wrote:

"It is over 15 years since I last heard it and I do not think it worthy of inclusion in your programme. It would make no impact and could be damaging for me, especially at a time when I am barely beginning to make myself known in London. Please therefore replace it at the next concert with a piece that the orchestra already knows."

The overture's slow introduction originally bore an epigraph from Scott speaking of 'Dreams of love and lady's charms'. The opening section is at first dreamlike and somewhat tentative; after a number of melodramatic outbursts however, the cellos sing out a lyrical theme somewhat reminiscent of a Scottish folk-ballad, other instruments punctuating and answering its broad and graceful phrases. A dashing *allegro vivace* then follows as, in Scott's words, 'Dreams of love and lady's charms / Give place to honour and to arms'. The sheer energy and exuberance of this music – and the fact that it so obviously bears Berlioz's strikingly original signature – make the composer's aversion to it quite baffling.

## **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**

### **Symphony No.8 in F major, Op.93**

*Allegro vivace con brio*  
*Allegretto scherzando*  
*Tempo di Minuetto*  
*Allegro vivace*

In 1812, for the second successive summer, Beethoven holidayed in the Bohemian spa town of Teplitz. He had enjoyed the experience the previous year, but this time suffered from boredom and loneliness. The composer hardly understated this when he confided to a friend that "There is not much to be said about Teplitz, few people and among the few nothing extraordinary, wherefore I live alone! alone! alone!" Two days later, however, things changed for the better with the arrival in Teplitz of the great German poet Goethe. When the two cultural colossi met, Goethe formed mixed views of Beethoven. "His talent amazed me," he recalled. "Unfortunately he is an utterly untamed personality who is not altogether in the wrong in holding the world to be detestable, but surely does not make it any the more enjoyable either for himself or others by his attitude."

Sketched out at this time, Beethoven's Eighth Symphony (or 'little symphony' as he called it) gives hints of the composer's wilder side; overall, however, it is an optimistic, ebullient work that, while lacking the enormous power of the Seventh and Ninth Symphonies, more than makes up for this with its great delicacy and charm. It has even been described as Beethoven's 'hymn to humour'. That audiences did not take to the work was for the composer evidence enough of its undoubted greatness.

### **First movement**

With infectious gusto – and without the formality of a slow introduction – the first movement springs into life. A broad and virile linking theme then leads to the movement's graceful second subject which is passed decorously from strings to woodwind. Beethoven introduces the central, development section with a series of weighty gestures. The stormy episode that ensues reaches a ferocious climax with the bass instruments of the orchestra thundering out the opening theme. The coda begins softly but there is a great upsurge of sound, hushed chords and a humorous farewell gesture, an echo of the work's first bar.

### **Second movement**

Beethoven's one-time secretary, Anton Schindler, created a myth that this movement was based on a piece by Beethoven dedicated to Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, the inventor of the metronome. The piece in question was almost certainly composed by Schindler himself, but the 'tick-tock' accompaniment to this, one of Beethoven's most delicate creations, gave much credence to the anecdote. Tightly knit in structure, it nevertheless has the feel of an improvisation as it trips towards the gruff humour of its close.

### **Third movement**

No doubt because of the scherzo-like nature of the previous movement, here Beethoven reverts to the practice of his great predecessors, Haydn and Mozart, with this very classical minuet. Its central, 'trio' section is serenade-like and features gentle dialogue between two horns and a clarinet over an elaborate cello accompaniment.

### **Fourth movement**

The finale begins with quiet 'chatting' sounds in the strings before the intrusion of a blatant 'wrong note' rudely demands attention. It is one of many Beethovenian jokes that permeate the movement as it makes its breathless way, including strange silences, unexpected key changes and violent dynamic contrasts. The second main theme, however, is a more serene and proper affair. After the most extensive coda Beethoven ever wrote, the final chords are hammered out time and time again, making this one of the most emphatic of symphonic conclusions. The only question is: when to start applauding?

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