



Strauss & Dvořák

Tonight's concert includes early works by Strauss and Bartók — written in their mid-20s. Ravel's exotic *Tzigane* and Dvořák's pastoral Symphony No. 6 round out the program.

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born 11 June 1864; Munich, Germany

Died 8 September 1949; Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Don Juan, Opus 20

Composed: 1888

First performance: 11 November 1889; Weimar, Germany

Last MSO performance: September 2005; Andreas Delfs, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbals, glockenspiel, suspended cymbals, triangle), harp, strings

Approximate duration: 17 minutes

Richard Strauss was only 24-years-old when he composed the tone poem *Don Juan*, his first important work. He cited Nikolaus Lenau's (1802-1850) German verse play as his source of inspiration, but we should also duly note that Strauss had conducted Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Munich not long before he set to work on *Don Juan*. Strauss prefaced the published score with excerpts from Lenau's poem; they include such intriguing lines as "The charmed circle of many kinds of beautiful, stimulating femininity... I should like to traverse them in a storm of pleasure, and die of a kiss upon the lips of the last woman." Lenau's verses are more like reflections on amorous pursuits than lists of the titular character's womanizing conquests.

The swirling, energetic opening theme is meant to portray Don Juan himself. This motif soon yields to a romantic melody, first introduced by a solo violin. A gentle oboe suggests a nighttime assignation. Insistent horns then break the mood as they intone a bold, self-assured theme. Melodies are restated and mingled together, always borne along by the composer's matchless orchestration.

In Lenau's poem, Don Juan, tired of chasing women, allows himself to be defeated in a duel. Strauss's tone poem depicts this with a piercing stab from the trumpets. He drops, trembling, to the ground. The mood becomes quiet and forlorn, signifying the protagonist's imminent demise; it's a disconsolate ending rather than a fortissimo finale. The music's final phrases grow ever softer, concluding with what sounds like the last breaths of a dying man. Don Juan's life was over, but Strauss's magnificent career had just begun.

Recommended recording: Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (RCA Red Seal) 

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born 25 March 1881; Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania)

Died 26 September 1945, New York, New York

Deux Portraits, Opus 5 [Two Portraits]

Composed: 1907-1911

First performance: 12 February 1911; Budapest, Hungary (No. 1)
20 April 1916; Budapest (both)

Last MSO performance: September 1985: Lukas Foss, conductor; Shlomo Mintz, violin

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (1st doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets (1st doubling E flat clarinet, 2nd doubling E flat clarinet and bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, tam tam), 2 harps, strings

Approximate duration: 12 minutes

Béla Bartók met Stefi Geyer in the spring of 1907. She was 19, beautiful, and an exceptionally gifted violinist. Bartók was 26 and a promising composer. They immediately became friends, and soon fell in love. On 1 July 1907, spending time in the Hungarian countryside with the Geyer family, Bartók jotted down the first eleven measures of what he intended as his first violin concerto. While traveling through Transylvania collecting folksongs later that summer, the young composer was flush with the discovery of a new world of music and with the prospect of a life together with Stefi. He set to work earnestly on the violin concerto, with her as its intended soloist.

"This is your leitmotif," Bartók wrote to Stefi in mid-September 1907, notating the rising chain of thirds that opens the concerto (D-F#-A-C#). He also detailed the two movements he was working on, as well as his planned Finale. Fast-forward to 14 February 1908. Bartók received a missive from Geyer breaking off the relationship. No third movement was ever written, and Stefi never played "her" concerto. (Bartók withdrew the work before its premiere, and it was not published until 1959.)

The same day he received Stefi's heartbreaking letter, Bartók began the 13th in a new set of piano bagatelles. He called it *Lento funèbre* and gave it the subtitle "Elle est morte" (She is dead). The 14th bagatelle, written the following month, is an eerie, impassioned waltz.

From these two Geyer-inspired works, Bartók fashioned the *Two Portraits*, Op. 5. The first, "Une ideale," is the opening movement of the aborted Concerto, virtually unchanged. It is a supple, delicate picture of Stefi that opens with a solo statement of her leitmotif. As the piece moves forward, other instruments join in one by one; this characteristic has prompted some commentators to liken the sound to that of swelling waves. Bartók called it "the most direct music" he had yet composed, "written exclusively from the heart." It is, he said, the "idealized Stefi Geyer, celestial and inward."

The second Portrait, "Une grotesque," offers a stark contrast to the first. As noted earlier, it is an acerbic waltz. Though some of the pianistic effects are necessarily lost in orchestrating the Bagatelle, it too is essentially the same piece, differing little from its original source. Stefi's motif is present, but is recast as a dance tune.

Bartók scholar Malcolm Gilles has opined that the marked differentiation between the Portraits suggests they might depict two sides of Stefi's personality, or — just as probably — Geyer as imagined by the composer "in two different states of mind." For many years after the completion of his *Two Portraits*, Bartók was not eager to talk about their inspiration, and was hesitant to have them performed. Perhaps the emotions they evoked were too direct and all too raw.

Recommended recording: Shlomo Mintz; Claudio Abbado, London Symphony Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon) 

MAURICE RAVEL

Born 7 March 1875; Ciboure, France
Died 28 December 1937; Paris, France

Tzigane for Violin and Orchestra

- Composed:** 1924
First performance: 26 April 1924; London, England (violin/luthéal),
 19 October 1924; Amsterdam, Netherlands (violin/orchestra)
Last MSO performance: June 2002; Andreas Delfs, conductor;
 Frank Almond, violin
Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets,
 2 bassoons, 2 horns, trumpet, percussion (glockenspiel,
 suspended cymbals, triangle), harp, celeste, strings
Approximate duration: 10 minutes

Tzigane takes its name from the French term for gypsy. It does not refer to the Roma people in any direct sense, nor does it contain any authentic “gypsy” melodies. Rather, it implies a sort of musical exoticism, much like the composer’s Spanish exoticism in “Alborada del gracioso” or, say, Mozart’s Turkish exoticism in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

Set in one movement, Ravel originally scored the work for violin and piano/luthéal. (The luthéal was, in Ravel’s day, a relatively new piano attachment that had several registrations which could be engaged by pulling stops above the keyboard. One of these had a cimbalon-like quality that produced the “gypsy” timbre Ravel wanted to evoke.) The work’s popularity led him to orchestrate it almost immediately.

A showpiece of the violin repertoire, *Tzigane* tests the musical and technical mettle of any violinist as it captures the spirit of gypsy improvisation. An extended rhapsodic solo is followed by a frenzied dance, in the form of a loose set of variations, and capped with a whirlwind finale.

Tzigane was commissioned by — and dedicated to — the Budapest-born violinist Jelly d’Arány (1893-1966), who gave its London premiere. (Bartók’s two violin sonatas are likewise dedicated to her, as is Vaughan Williams’s *Concerto Academico*.) The violin/orchestra version was first played by Samuel Dushkin and essayed by d’Arány six weeks later.

Recommended recording: Itzhak Perlman; Zubin Mehta, New York Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon) 

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born 8 September 1841; Nelahozeves,
Bohemia Died 1 May 1904; Prague

Symphony No. 6 in D Major, Op. 60

(formerly called Symphony No. 1, Op. 58)

- Composed:** 1880
First performance: 25 March 1881; Prague
Last MSO performance: April 2012; James Gaffigan, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets,
 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba,
 timpani, strings
Approximate duration: 41 minutes

Dvořák penned his Symphony No. 6 at the behest of the great conductor Hans Richter (1843-1916). Richter — who was the principal conductor of the Vienna Court Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic (and at the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876) — had led the Vienna Philharmonic in Dvořák’s *Slavonic Rhapsody No. 3* in November 1879. The following day, he’d asked the composer to write a symphony for the same ensemble. A year later, Dvořák handed Richter his D major symphony.

The premiere was set for December 1880, but Richter kept postponing the performance, citing family illness and overworked players. In truth, there were anti-Czech sentiments in the orchestra's ranks, so Dvořák turned to his friend Adolf Čech, who conducted the first performance with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in Prague. Richter, who remained the work's dedicatee, did eventually conduct it in London in 1882.

It's ironic that the Viennese musicians objected to Dvořák's symphony based on its ethnicity. The composer had deliberately striven to write a piece that related to their musical traditions. The influence of Beethoven, Schubert, and especially Brahms — Dvořák's mentor, friend, and ardent advocate — is palpable.

The sunny Allegro non tanto is set in 3/4 meter. Its opening theme is a question-and-answer melody that reaches its climax as the violins are answered by the full brass. Flutes begin the transition to the second subject, a jaunty oboe melody that, like the first, is taken up by the orchestra in exuberant counterpoint. The entire movement is cheerful and dauntless, full of joyous spontaneity.

The B-flat major Adagio is warm and lush, possessing "the quality of a softly yearning nocturne and of an ardently passionate intermezzo" (Dvořák scholar Otakar Šourek). Its form is that of a loose rondo enclosing variations within the sections. Listen: Both its introduction and conclusion seem to pay brief homage to the sublime Adagio from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9.

The D minor Scherzo is a *furiant* — a swirling Bohemian folk dance in 3/4 time — that calls to mind the composer's famous *Slavonic Dances*. The trio section features a gentle dialogue between the woodwinds and strings, with quiet birdcalls from the solo piccolo. Like the opening movement, the Finale is a sonata-allegro form set in D major. Equal parts heroic and joyful, here — as throughout his Symphony No. 6 — Dvořák combines elements of his Austro-Germanic role models with his own idealization of Czech folk music. We hear, writes Šourek, "the humor and pride, the optimism and passion of the Czech people come to life. In it breathes the sweet fragrance and unspoiled beauty of Czech woods and meadows."

Recommended recording: Jiří Bělohlávek, Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (Decca) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.