

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

*Richard Strauss created a new musical genre when he wrote Don Juan. He created the orchestral tone poem.*

It's music with swagger! Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* is a brilliant, swashbuckling and fervent score. It is some of the most daringly virtuosic music ever written. With this work, the composer created a new musical genre—the orchestral tone poem—turning music into narrative sans the rigid rules that come with a traditional symphony. Ever since Mozart's opera overtures, many have striven to write music that could tell a story. Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Liszt took steps in this direction, but their efforts were locked into the classical structure. Strauss broke through these constraints and nailed it!

Written in 1888 when Strauss was 24, *Don Juan* was his first big splash into the dramatic world of the tone poem. But the music really began to germinate a few years earlier, when in the summer of 1885, at age 21, Strauss really needed a vacation. As the third conductor of the Munich Hofoper, the director was making his life difficult. In search of escape, Strauss took off for Italy, where in the courtyard of the monastery of San Antonio in Padua he conceived the first themes for what would become *Don Juan*.

Strauss, who claimed it was impossible to compose without some kind of dramatic or literary inspiration, based his work on the play “Don Juans Ende,” which took inspiration from an unfinished 1844 work by the poet Nikolaus Lenau. Strauss had been in Munich conducting Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, shortly before beginning *Don Juan* (both are the same character), and he had fallen spectacularly in love with the soprano, Pauline de Ahna (whom he eventually married)—setting the mood for the romantic work. *Don Juan* is full of grand, heroic, and blustering themes, with the legendary lover/scoundrel in constant pursuit of his next target of seduction. (The poem called it a “storm of pleasure.”)

It's programmatic music that delights in orchestral color. With recurring themes representing people (each woman Don Juan pursues is distinctly portrayed), places, emotions, and actions, the result is some of the most sumptuous and vivid romantic writing in history. The score bursts open with one of the most dramatic flourishes ever heard as the dashing hero arrives on scene. Throughout the score, the audience is swept along by an epic exuberance that drifts into a dreamy, filmy, sensual world, and out again, as Don Juan madly pursues the ideal woman. In these passages, you'll hear a variety of woodwind instruments, especially the oboe. But Don Juan's restless nature bobs back to the surface, as if his life is as dependent on seduction as air, and with a heroic gesture by the horns, the listener is hurtled onto his next conquest. After each relationship (four “verses” of the main theme) leaves Don Juan discontented, his theme returns, as he resumes the chase.

In the final moments, the heroic adventures come to a crashing halt as a disillusioned Don Juan allows himself to be stabbed by a father avenging his daughter's honor—as the young paramour's life tragically ends. But it is not an

unwelcome death. Don Juan is tired of living an unfulfilled life: “Steintot ist alles Wünschen, alles Hoffen” (stone-dead is all wishing, all hoping). There’s a disturbing silence, followed by dramatic piercing by the trumpets. (“The fuel is all consumed and the hearth is cold and dark,” wrote Lenau.) A rushing sound is heard as Don Juan’s spirit departs.

All of this is brutal on an orchestra. It makes demands like nothing before it. The musicians give their instruments an extreme workout. The wind players are especially challenged. During rehearsal for the work’s premiere, a horn player asked if Beethoven’s *Sixth Symphony* was still next on the program. Strauss, the conductor, confirmed that it was, to which the horn player replied, “That remains to be seen.”

### **Violin Concerto No. 3, G major (1775) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

A highlight of any season, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s delightful and sprightly *Third Violin Concerto in G Major* is arguably his most beloved. Even Mozart thought so. In October 1777, he wrote his father: “In the evening at supper I played my Strassburg Concerto [his Third], which went like oil. Everyone praised my beautiful, pure tone.” (The nickname “*Strassburg Concerto*” came from a merry dance-like melody found in the final movement called “*The Strassburger*.”) Mozart had good reason for his hubris.

Born in Salzburg, Austria, on Jan. 27, 1756, Mozart was the son of a court musician and violin teacher, Leopold Mozart. At 4, Mozart’s father taught him a few minuets, which he easily learned. Quickly recognized as a prodigy, by the time Mozart reached 5, he could compose small pieces and made his first public appearance. Many associate Mozart with the piano and often overlook that he was also a brilliant violinist, who began studying the instrument at 6. He was performing a concerto just one year later for the birthday celebration of the Archbishop of Salzburg. At 8, Mozart wrote his first symphony.

His violin playing helped him secure a job as a musician in the court of the later Salzburg Archbishop, Count Hieronymus Colloredo. Unfortunately, his relationship with Colloredo was never particularly good. But the violin concerti Mozart wrote during that period fortunately didn’t suffer from the stress he felt.

It’s thought that the *Third* is one of five violin concertos Mozart wrote in the year 1775, four from Salzburg between June and September. However, it’s speculated that the *First* and maybe the *Second* are products from a few years earlier. (Even a composer given to major spurts of artistic expression such as Mozart would have been hard-pressed to pull off such a feat.) Mozart was 19 when the concerto premiered in Salzburg. Very little is known about this, although it seems likely that the composer appeared as soloist. His cadenzas from that concert have been unfortunately lost. As with many of the compositions Mozart wrote during this youthful period, ideas burst forth like seeds sprouting overnight.

*Despite many associating Mozart with the piano, Mozart was a talented violinist who began studying the instrument at age 6.*

Nothing else Mozart ever wrote seems to have surpassed his *Third*. With distinctly greater sophistication, it is a far more intimate work than either his enthusiastic fourth or his electric fifth. It is a cheery, clever, colorful, and dramatic work that brings his operas to mind. The first movement (of three), the *allegro*, glows with a bright character as a great deal of dialogue takes place between the soloist and the orchestra (with oboes prominent). In the middle, the harmonies turn darker to the minor mode, yet not detracting from the joyful themes. Toward the end of the movement there is a pause for a cadenza—the arrival of the violin's solo fantasy.

Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein described the concerto's second movement as “an Adagio that seems to have fallen straight from heaven.” This softer movement is indeed full of ethereal colors and textures; the violins are muted while the cellos and basses play pizzicato, as flutes replace the oboe and are heard throughout the rest of the concerto.

Typical of Mozart's concertos, the irresistibly joyful finale with lilting rhythms contains the rondo from the first movement, with this recurring main theme appearing in alternations with contrasting episodes (the merry “*Strassburger*” melody that Mozart wrote about to his father). Most masterful, perhaps, is when the traditional bombastic ending is replaced with the lighthearted cadence of oboes and horns. It is one of the concerto's highlights—a heroic, emotional outburst that ends in a peaceful accord.

In 1776, at 20, Mozart turned his efforts from violin to piano concertos. A prolific artist, throughout his remarkably short life, he created operas, concertos, symphonies and sonatas that profoundly shaped classical music. Mozart died on Dec. 5, 1791, at just 35, reportedly of a fever. His deep understanding of the violin's abilities is obvious, although he may have lost his affection for the instrument over the years. Records of his belongings at the time of his death do not include a violin.

### ***blue cathedral* (1999)**

#### **Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)**

*blue cathedral* is Higdon's musical tribute to her younger brother Andrew, who had passed away from melanoma at the age of 33.

*blue cathedral* is Jennifer Higdon's search for peace after loss. While short on length at about 11 minutes, it resonates with the listener much longer. Commissioned to compose an original piece for the Curtis Institute of Music's 75th anniversary, Higdon—one of the most highly regarded composers of her generation—chose to pay a musical tribute to her younger brother Andrew, who had passed away from melanoma at the age of 33. A work for large orchestra with an emphasis on percussion instruments, *blue cathedral* features fluid lyricism fused with stunning virtuosity from one of today's unique voices. Higdon's music is in such demand that she's able to compose exclusively on commission.

“This is a story that commemorates living and passing through places of knowledge and of sharing and of that song called life,” Higdon says of *blue cathedral*.

Her own story is not typical of a highly successful composer, especially one who

has been awarded a Pulitzer Prize (2010) and a Grammy Award (2010) and nomination (2017). Born in Brooklyn, Higdon's parents quickly moved to Atlanta, where her father worked as a visual artist. Her parents were hippies who did not expose their children to classical music, but rather to avant-garde film, art, and theater. They eventually moved to a farm in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee. She grew up on the music of The Beatles, Bob Marley, folk and bluegrass and describes herself as the black sheep of the family for going into classical music.

*Unlike many composers, Higdon grew up on the music of The Beatles, Bob Marley, folk and bluegrass.*

At 15, Higdon taught herself to play the flute, and at 18, she entered Bowling Green State University (Pennsylvania) as a flute major, where she would receive master's and doctoral degrees. Although she didn't begin composing until 21, she took a conducting class with Robert Spano (now music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra), who has described her music as "expressive and beautiful and communicative and fresh and inventive." She also studied with the avant-garde composer, George Crumb. She earned an artist diploma from the Curtis Institute.

The loss of her brother made Higdon reflect on life's journey. She says *blue cathedral* represents "our inner travels and the places our souls carry us, the lessons we learn, and the growth we experience." The work is not what some might expect from "contemporary music." There is nothing jarring about it. According to Higdon, it is a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky: "Blue...like the sky. Where all possibilities soar. Cathedrals...a place of thought, growth, spiritual expression...serving as a symbolic doorway in to and out of this world. Blue represents all potential and the progression of journeys. Cathedrals represent a place of beginnings, endings, solitude, fellowship, contemplation, knowledge and growth."

This very colorful yet serene and ethereal tone poem melds simplicity with complexity. It contains a lot of textures and considerable chiming sounds (33—for her brother's age at death), representing a clock gonging. Higdon's brother had played the clarinet, and she plays the flute, which is the inspiration for the considerable dialogue heard between the two instruments. The work features rapturous solos for both, with the flute appearing first because she is the older sibling. Higdon says she wanted to create "the sensation of contemplation and quiet peace at the beginning, moving towards the feeling of celebration and ecstatic expansion of the soul, all the while singing along with that heavenly music."

As the two instruments continue their dialogue, a climax builds slowly before the flute drops out and the clarinet continues on in the upward journey, capped by piercing trumpets. The end feels mystical as musicians softly roll Chinese reflex bells in their hands to produce a tinkling sound representing a musical spirit departing (a sound Higdon stumbled upon—literally—by bumping into a box of these balls). The composer says writing *blue cathedral* "was the most cathartic thing I could have done."

*blue cathedral* made its debut in 2000, becoming one of the most performed new works in the last 25 years.

### **Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*, Suites No. 1 & 2 (1935) Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**

Shakespeare's timeless tale of star-crossed lovers spurred numerous works in other genres—most not straying far from the original tale. But the Ukraine-born composer Sergei Prokofiev's ballet score dared to rewrite the ending with one that was more in alignment with his Christian Scientist beliefs (that there is no death), although he claimed it was more of a practical decision. Prokofiev's masterful, memorable ballet score, *Romeo and Juliet*, is magnificent music, with strings sobbing wrenchingly beneath Juliet's balcony, but what isn't heard in the two suites is the endless turmoil that was part of the metamorphosis of this spectacular work.

*Highlights from Prokofiev's complete ballet to capture the crucial crucial moments, such as Masks, Romeo and Juliet, Death of Tybalt, and more.*

During the time it was written, the Soviet Union frowned on art that was "avant-garde." Prokofiev's fear of the oppressive Russian Revolution had led him, in fact, to leave the country in 1918, certain his music was too experimental for the restrictive climate. He moved to the United States, then Europe. Around the end of 1934, Prokofiev was traveling between Moscow and Paris, when the Kirov Theater in Leningrad indicated they might like him to write a ballet score. He had an idea for a lyrical subject: *Romeo and Juliet*. But the Kirov, under political pressure to oust any "experimental" composers, changed its mind.

The next year, the Bolshoi Ballet picked up the contract—then vehemently disagreed with Prokofiev's desire for one of history's most tragic stories to have a happy ending (with the lovers dancing off into the sunset together). Prokofiev's version, alas, was banned by Joseph Stalin in favor of Shakespeare's tragic finale.

Prokofiev later reflected: "There was quite a fuss at the time about our attempts to give *Romeo and Juliet* a happy ending—in the last act *Romeo* arrives a minute earlier, finds *Juliet* alive and everything ends well. The reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot. But what really caused me to change my mind about the whole thing was a remark someone made to me about the ballet: 'Strictly speaking, your music does not express any real joy at the end.' That was quite true. After several conferences with the choreographers, it was found that the tragic ending could be expressed in the dance and in due time the music for that ending was written."

In the dictator-approved ballet, most commonly heard today, *Romeo* visits the Capulet family tomb and finds *Juliet*'s seemingly lifeless body (he thinks she's dead—but she isn't). In despair, he commits suicide.

Prokofiev's time in the U.S. and Europe was not all he had hoped, and the composer returned home in 1936, even though the political scene had not improved. This same year, Prokofiev created two orchestral suites and 10 piano works from *Romeo and Juliet*. (A third orchestral suite was added in 1946.) The music is comprised of scenes from the ballet, rife with gorgeous musical character sketches, but makes no effort to follow the story in its natural order. The movements sometimes include two or three different scenes from the ballet with newly composed transitions. And at times, Prokofiev made changes in the orchestration to enhance a movement.

Highlights from Suite No. 1 includes *Masks, Romeo and Juliet*, and *Death of Tybalt*. *Masks* features an infectious theme, with simple, astutely orchestrated rhythm and colorful writing. *Romeo and Juliet* relates to the dance between the lovers, but also offers music from the Balcony Scene. It's passionate and powerful, featuring the famous love theme, one of the most popular melodies in the ballet. *Death of Tybalt* depicts Romeo avenging the death of Mercutio with suspenseful, exhilarating music.

Suite No. 2: *Montagues and Capulets* portrays the two powerful, warring families of Verona in big, bold musical gestures and a march-like theme that is the ballet's second most popular melody. A short, quiet interlude envisions Juliet dancing with Romeo. *Romeo at Juliet's Grave* portrays his deeply affecting expression of grief at losing his great love.

Prokofiev's ballet finally opened in 1938, not in Russia, but in Czechoslovakia at Brno Opera. Its Russian premiere at the Kirov Theater waited until January 1940. Even then, the production remained plagued by problems. Prokofiev and the choreographer fought wildly and the dancers groused about the music. Despite all this, *Romeo and Juliet* turned out to be a big success. The Bolshoi finally programmed the work in 1946. It has remained one of the most popular ballets of all time and one of Prokofiev's greatest successes.

### **Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)**

Jennifer Higdon is a major figure in contemporary Classical music, receiving the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her *Violin Concerto* and a 2010 GRAMMY for her *Percussion Concerto*. Higdon enjoys several hundred performances a year of her works, and *blue cathedral* is one of America's most performed contemporary orchestral works, with more than 600 performances worldwide since its premiere in 2000. Her works have been recorded on nearly fifty CDs. Higdon's most current project was an opera based on the best-selling novel, *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. It was co-commissioned by Santa Fe Opera, Opera Philadelphia and Minnesota Opera in collaboration with North Carolina Opera. Higdon recently won the International Opera Award for Best Word Premiere. She holds the Rock Chair in Composition at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Her music is published exclusively by Lawdon Press.

### **Program Notes by Jayce Keane**

*Jayce Keane, who began her career as a journalist for The Rocky Mountain News, has been working in the orchestra industry and writing about music for the last 13 years. A longtime resident of California, she now lives in Colorado.*

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