

Notes on the Program

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Don Quixote (Introduction, Theme with Variations, and Finale), Fantastic Variations for Large Orchestra on a Theme of Knightly Character, Op. 35

Richard Strauss

D*on Quixote*, by Richard Strauss, stands as a classic example of the symphonic poem, a musical composition based on or derived from a pre-existing source, such as a literary work or a painting. The general idea of the symphonic poem may trace its ancestry to the depictive overtures of the early 19th century, such as Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*, but it was Franz Liszt who molded the concept into a clearly defined genre. This he did through a dozen single-movement orchestral pieces composed in the 1840s and '50s, all of which were linked to literary sources. The idea proved popular in Germany and elsewhere, and the repertoire grew quickly thanks to impressive contributions by such composers as Smetana, Dvořák, Franck, and — most impressively of all — Richard Strauss.

Many lesser figures jumped on the symphonic poem bandwagon. One was Alexander Ritter, a violinist and composer who fell in with the Liszt and Wagner circle and eventually acceded to the position of associate concertmaster of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, which was conducted by the eminent Hans von Bülow. In Meiningen he grew friendly with the young Strauss, whom von Bülow had brought in as an assistant music director in 1885. Strauss would later say that Ritter revealed to him the greatness of the music of Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz and, by extension, opened his eyes to the possibilities of the symphonic poem.

In 1886 Strauss produced what might be considered his first symphonic poem, *Aus Italien* (it is more precisely a sort of

descriptive symphony), and he continued with hardly a break through the series that many feel represent the genre at its height: *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* (*Death and Transfiguration* (1888–89), *Macbeth* (1888 / 91), *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (*Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, 1894–95), *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1896), *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero's Life*, 1897–98), and *Symphonia domestica* (*Domestic Symphony*, 1902–03). *Eine Alpensymphonie* (*An Alpine Symphony*, 1911–15) would follow as a late pendant to the catalogue. *Don Quixote* is distinc-

IN SHORT

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch, Germany

Work composed: 1897; dedicated “To my friend Joseph Dupont, conductor at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels”

World premiere: March 8, 1898, by the Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne, Franz Wüllner, conductor, Friedrich Grützmacher, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 8, 1912, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony [which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928], Paul Kefer, Hans Weissman, soloists

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 15, 2011, Bernard Haitink, conductor, Carter Brey, Cynthia Phelps, soloists

Estimated duration: ca. 43 minutes

The Work at a Glance

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* unrolls through an extended series of discrete episodes, nearly all of which, at least on the surface, turn out badly for the hero. Strauss selected 11 scenes for quite precise musical description, and, following an introduction that depicts Quixote's eccentric nature and Sancho Panza's bluntness, the "action scenes" proceed as a series of loosely derived variations on the Theme of Knightly Character. Strauss never issued an official written program to serve as a guide, but early commentators did, apparently with the composer's approbation. Here is the generally accepted scenario of what Strauss's variations depict, following the Introduction and exposé of the Theme of Knightly Character:

I. Easy-going: Don Quixote and Sancho ride off to achieve heroic acts of virtue on behalf of Dulcinea de Toboso (the object of the Don's affection). They battle with a field of windmills, which Quixote takes to be giant monsters.

II. Warlike: In this "victorious fight against the army of the great Emperor Alifanfarón" (as Strauss called it), Don Quixote's adversaries turn out to be a flock of sheep.

III. In Moderate Tempo: Don Quixote converses with Sancho about chivalric ideals.

IV. Somewhat Broader: Don Quixote attacks religious pilgrims carrying a statue of the Madonna, mistaking them for ruffians abducting a beautiful maiden.

V. Very Slow: The dozing Don Quixote dreams about Dulcinea.

VI. Fast: Sancho presents a homely peasant girl to his master, hoping to appease the Don's fantasies of Dulcinea, but Don Quixote manages to offend her.

VII. A Bit More Calm than the Preceding: Tricksters blindfold Don Quixote and Sancho, mount them on horses, and turn a bellows on them to convince them that they are flying through the air.



VIII. Easy-going: After a boating mishap (bereft of oars, the intrepid pair go over a waterfall), Don Quixote and Sancho drip and pray.

IX. Fast and Stormy: Don Quixote sets upon two Benedictine monks, whom he mistakes for robed sorcerers.

X. Much Broader: Hoping to save Don Quixote from his own madness, a well-intentioned neighbor from his hometown presents himself as a "white knight," defeats Don Quixote in a jousting match, and, as a condition of his victory, demands that he return home and desist from adventuring for a year.

Finale. Very Peaceful: Don Quixote's sanity is restored, which is to say that he forsakes his idealistic dreams, and dies peacefully in his own bed.

Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, as illustrated by Gustave Doret in 1863

tive among this lineup for the extended solo use it makes of the cello and, to a lesser extent, the viola.

Some of Strauss's symphonic poems are more overtly derived from their sources than

are others. *Don Quixote* is among the most detailed and faithful in its depictions, rivaled only by the *Domestic Symphony* (which has weathered criticism for its sometimes cutesy portrayal of a day in the life of a happy family)

A Star Is Born

A November 12, 1943 review in *The New York Times* proclaimed that the previous evening's New York Philharmonic concert, with performances of Schumann's *Manfred* Symphony and Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony led by guest conductor Bruno Walter, "will long be remembered," even if "there might be differences of opinion about his reading of Strauss's *Don Quixote*." Two days later, any such predictions were upended by the star-making debut of Leonard Bernstein, the Orchestra's 25-year-old Assistant Conductor who stepped in for a Sunday matinee that just happened to be broadcast nationally.

Bernstein had gotten a call from Philharmonic Manager Bruno Zirato around 6:00 a.m. that day, summoning him to fill in for Walter, who had fallen ill. There was no time to rehearse with the orchestra or the soloists in *Don Quixote*, Principal Cello Joseph Schuster and Principal Viola William Lincer. Still, in a story that warranted front-page treatment, the *Times* reported that the young unknown conductor "went through the ordeal with no signs of strain or nervousness." Bernstein experienced things a little differently, as he recalled to his brother, Burton (who, at age 12, was in the audience along with their parents, Jennie and Samuel), in a 1989 interview for *Town and Country*:

When it came to the time — that very day — all I can remember is standing there in the wings shaking and being so scared . . . I had just come from seeing Bruno Walter, who very sweetly and very quickly — wrapped up in blankets because he had the flu — went over the score of *Don Quixote* with me. He showed me a few tricky spots where he cut off here but didn't cut off there; here you give it an extra upbeat, and so on. . . . The time seemed to hang heavy till 3:00 p.m., even though I had to go over some of the tricky spots in *Don Quixote* with the cello and viola soloists and the concertmaster. . . . Then I finally went and talked with the guys and they said, "Good luck." Bruno Zirato said, "Hey, Lenny. Good luck baby." . . . I strode out and I don't remember a thing from that moment — I don't even remember intermission — until the sound of people standing and cheering and clapping.

— The Editors

Leonard Bernstein receiving congratulations from Philharmonic musicians following his last-minute conducting debut in 1943



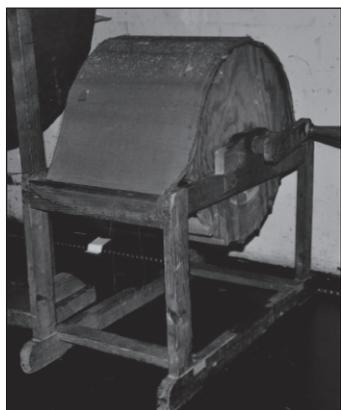
and *An Alpine Symphony* (which details a day hiking up a mountain and back down again). The source for *Don Quixote* is the summit achievement of Spanish literature, the novel *El Ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, published in two parts (1605 / 1615) by Miguel de Cervantes. The tale was penned as a send-up of the chivalric romances that were then in vogue, and readers appreciated his alternative approach from the outset. Unlike other knights of literature, the creaky Don Quixote is a most unlikely hero, obviously doomed in his enterprise. Adventures lurk in his imagination but he is constantly foiled when he tries to play them out in the less romantic world of quotidian reality, to the perpetual frustration of his earthy sidekick, Sancho Panza.

Cervantes's novel is more than fluff, to be sure, and ensuing centuries of enthralled readers have found that its hilarious misadventures reveal deep truths about human aspirations. Strauss was certainly one of them, and he viewed his *Don Quixote* as a compan-

ion to his next symphonic poem, the explicitly autobiographical *Ein Heldenleben*. For a while he hoped that the two might be premiered together. Although this did not come to pass, he insisted until the end of his life that "*Don Quixote* and *Heldenleben* are so much conceived as tied to one another that *Don Quixote* is fully and entirely comprehensible only at the side of *Heldenleben*." Surely Strauss recognized at least a bit of Quixote in himself, as, indeed, all creative people must.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tenor and bass tubas, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, snare drum, triangle, small bell, tambourine, wind machine, harp, and strings. A solo cello is spotlighted "in the role of" Don Quixote, and the character of Sancho Panza is portrayed principally by solo viola, with help from the tenor tuba and bass clarinet.

Listen for ... the Sound of the Wind



Strauss was one of music's masters of orchestration; his updated revision of Berlioz's *Treatise on Instrumentation* has introduced many composers to the possibilities of orchestral sound. In *Don Quixote*, he employed an instrument not mentioned in that book: the wind machine. It makes an appearance in Variation VII, when Don Quixote and Sancho Panza imagine themselves flying across the sky. It's a relatively low-tech instrument, essentially a barrel suspended horizontally on a frame, covered (not too tightly) with some sort of fabric, often canvas or silk. The barrel is rotated by turning a handle, causing the fabric to skid against some wooden slats and give off a whooshing sound. The faster the turn, the windier it gets. Variation VII gets quite breezy indeed.

German-made wind machine, ca. 1903