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Monterey Symphony
Program Notes
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Richard Strauss (1864-1949)
Don Juan, Op. 20 (1888-1889)

The two composers on the May program not only knew each other well, but also lived in the same city (Vienna), where they both worked as opera conductors, were involved in the intellectual circles of their time, and were both known more as conductors than composers during their lifetimes. However, even though both were heavily influenced by Wagner, Brahms, and the important composers of the Western Canon, Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss's personalities, and their resulting compositions, were quite different. Strauss, known for his happy, confident demeanor is known today for his tone poems (among them, *Don Juan*), and his numerous operas, whereas Mahler, the tortured artist, who struggled to compose and promote his work, is famous today mostly for his symphonic works and *Lieder*. Mahler borrowed from Schopenhauer when he described himself and Strauss as two miners who dig tunnels from opposite sides of the mountain and eventually meet. Mahler, in a letter to his wife Alma, wrote about Strauss, "his nature will always remain foreign to me. His manner of thinking and feeling is worlds apart from mine. I wonder if we two will ever meet on the same planet." And yet, despite their personal and compositional differences, one can hear the influence of the Viennese musical *Umwelt* on the two works performed on this concert, both begun in the same year, 1888.

Richard Strauss, the conductor, held positions in opera houses across Europe, including Munich, Weimar, Berlin, and Vienna, and traveled as far as Egypt to conduct. As a composer, most of his tone poems were written before 1900. Strauss was heavily influenced by composers like Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner, who were part of the "program music" cadre, unlike Brahms, who was a composer who favored absolute music, or, music which did not tell an explicit story. Despite writing several programmatic tone poems, Strauss had an early fascination with Brahms (which he called his *Brahmsschwärmerei*, or "Brahms ecstasy"), and was influenced by his use of contrapuntal textures and adherence to historical musical forms. Even though Strauss's tone poems are focused on the narrative of the program, they often roughly follow conventional structural forms. For example, *Don Juan* contains elements of sonata and rondo form, manipulated to fit the story.

Don Juan is Richard Strauss's first mature symphonic work, written when he was in his mid-twenties. Don Juan, a wealthy libidinous seducer who takes pride in seducing as many women as possible, whose story is often punctuated by duels, gambling, and other lascivious endeavors, was rich fodder for the young Richard Strauss. The piece launches out of the gate from the very first notes, where the strings race up three octaves, then tumble back down, all within the span of seven measures. This is Don Juan in all of his virility, traversing the land in search of his next conquest.

As far as composers writing about one of the most famous fictional libertines, Richard Strauss was not the first. One of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's most beloved operas, *Don Giovanni*, utilizes the same story, with some of his most beloved arias contained therein. Whereas Mozart used his collaborator Lorenzo Da Ponte's libretto, Strauss drew from the verses of Nikolaus Lenau's (1802-1850) uncompleted version. In the latter edition, Don Juan has grown so "bored" with his sexual excesses and dueling by the end of his life, that rather than truly fight his challenger, he

commits suicide by his opponent's blade. Don Juan becomes, therefore, the anti-hero, who abandons all striving and resigns himself to death, which Strauss expertly paints through the music. The tone poem opens in the key of E Major, and while a conventional sonata form would end in the same key, Strauss paints a musical picture of the futility of Don Juan finding his way back a moral life. Instead of returning to E major, the piece ends with a somber coda, thereby abandoning all hope of a return. It is Strauss's metacommentary on the repercussions Don Juan had to suffer as a result of his actions. Rather than being dragged to hell, as in Mozart's opera, Don Juan fades into obscurity, forgotten into nothingness.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) **Symphony No. 1 (1888)**

Gustav Mahler gave several names, programs, and titles to his first symphony, which indicates his evolving attitudes toward his symphonic works. At the premiere in Budapest in 1889, he called the work a "symphonic poem in two parts." Four years later, in 1893, Mahler gave it the title *Titan*, "a tone poem in the form of a symphony," with a descriptive title for each movement. In the published score in 1899, a decade after the work was premiered, it was called simply Symphony 1 in D Major. When asked by music critic Max Marschall about why the composer took out the program and descriptions for the symphony, Mahler replied that he had seen how audiences had "been set on the wrong track by them." Like Beethoven's symphonies, which Mahler argued often have an inner program, Mahler believed that the same would be true with his own works, and that this would eventually become clearer to most audiences.

Mahler famously thought of the symphony as a world unto itself, and a work that could evoke the world. Mahler evokes several quasi-autobiographical elements from his life in the first symphony. He writes of love of the pastoral and being in nature in the cuckoo sounds and alhorn-like melody in the horns during the first movement, and the *Ländler*, or German country dance in the second movement. Mahler was not a man of easy laughter and smiles, which becomes clear in the third movement, a funeral-like procession based on the children's tune *Frère Jacques*, but warped from major to minor. Mahler also utilizes Klezmer-like melodies in the third movement, perhaps alluding to his Jewish roots. The finale is an alluring evocation of a hero's journey from darkness to light.

In addition to his use of program-like elements in his symphony, Mahler was not one to shy away from borrowing from himself, and utilized a few of his earlier works in the first symphony. The most prominently featured work was his *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer), composed for voice and piano in 1883-1885. The first theme in the first movement is drawn from the first song of the cycle, and Mahler also draws elements from the second song into his symphony in the third movement, with the direction to be played "like a folk tune." That melody is the one glimpse of light near the end of the funeral march of the third movement, but instead of remaining in a major key, Mahler abruptly returns to the macabre version of *Frère Jacques*. Instead of utilizing the large orchestra in the lush manner of Richard Strauss, Mahler judiciously highlights individual instruments throughout the symphony, saving the massive power available to him for the grand finale.

Beethoven famously created a harmonic narrative in his fifth and ninth symphonies by moving from minor to major keys, moving, in a sense, from darkness to light. Mahler does the same in the finale of his first symphony, moving from F minor, to Db Major. But what sets the symphony apart from a harmonic perspective is the fact that the symphony actually ends in D Major, the key of the first movement. A prominent Mahler scholar, Paul Bekker, calls this the "breakthrough" (or

Durchbruch), as if the key of D major is coming from outside of the music, almost to rescue the music and bring about its salvation. This tracks nicely with Mahler's original title for the finale, "From the Inferno to Paradise," and also signals a sense of the heroic, an ecstatic completion of the work.