

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Beethoven's Eroica Symphony

Oct 11 - 13, 2019

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)

DON QUIXOTE, OP. 35

Duration: ca: 42 minutes

Had Richard Strauss written an autobiography, he might have called it *My Brilliant Career*. He was, after all, an enormous talent (with an ego to match) whose sensuous – and often bombastic – storytelling symphonies and operatic shockers commanded the stages of Europe for three decades. He continued the legacy of Franz Liszt by taking the tone poem to new heights, and made quite a racket along the way. You don't need to be inside a concert hall to enjoy Strauss; his music can be heard a mile away.

After the success of *Don Juan* in 1889, Strauss was crowned the heir to Wagner, and from then on was more or less unstoppable, giving us *Death and Transfiguration*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *A Hero's Life*, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, *Salome*, *Symphonia Domestica*, *Elektra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – the opening theme immortalized in the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. By the 1920s, Strauss was not only the most famous composer alive, but the wealthiest.

Don Quixote is based on the famed novel by Miguel de Cervantes and subtitled *Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character*, and features extensive solos for cello, viola and clarinet. It's also an ambiguous form in being a musical narrative of Cervantes' tale, a theme and variations, and a concerto. Here, Strauss breaks from traditional sonata form and casts his music as a set of 10 parts that depict the adventures of the two main characters, Quixote and Sancho Panza. (Note that this work and Beethoven's *Eroica*, also on tonight's program, both contain 10 variations on a theme).

Here's a summary of each episode – which range from comic to symbolic – following the introduction and *Knightly Character* theme:

- I. Inspired by Dulcinea, the object of Don Quixote's affection, the main character and his sidekick, Panza, set off on a journey of heroic virtue. They battle a field of windmills, which Quixote believes are evil giants.
- II. Quixote faces another adversary, this time a flock of sheep, descriptively portrayed by bleating brass.
- III. Quixote and Panza discuss the merits of being chivalrous.
- IV. The two draw swords against a group pilgrims carrying a statue of the Madonna, which Quixote believes are thugs kidnapping a maiden.
- V. Quixote dreams of Dulcinea.
- VI. Panza presents a peasant girl to Quixote as his own version of Dulcinea, but Quixote offends her.
- VII. The duo flies through the air on their spirited horses, complete with the sound of a wind machine.
- VIII. Both nearly drown when their boat goes over a waterfall.
- IX. Quixote, again confused, mistakes a pair of priests for sorcerers.
- X. A compassionate friend challenges Quixote to a jousting match under the condition he give up his folly and return home.

Epilogue. Exhausted from his journey, Quixote dies, ending his madness in exchange for peace, with a solo cello echoing his last breath.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

SYMPHONY NO. 3, EROICA (arr. Mahler)

Duration: ca: 50 minutes

Why would anyone tamper with the score of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3* and expect a better result? Somebody did, and what you're about to hear is a rare performance of this famous symphony in, well, Gustav Mahler's clothes.

Mahler – the brilliant conductor and composer who died in 1911 in Vienna – believed Beethoven could use a little help from a friend, so he “retouched” the *Third, Fifth, Seven* and *Ninth symphonies* and the *Coriolan Overture*. But for what reason? Haven't these magnificent creations stood the test of time?

That's part of Mahler's logic – time. From the early 19th century when Beethoven composed these works to the dawn of the 20th century, lots had changed: Instruments improved, orchestras grew, and concert halls expanded to accommodate more people. Beethoven's music, Mahler believed, needed to catch up with the times. So the performance you will hear tonight “doubles” on some of the instrumental ranks, creating a bigger, more vibrant sound than what listeners heard in Beethoven's time, said TFO Music Director Michael Francis.

“Does it need it? That's debatable,” he said. “Is it interesting? Yes. It's a case of doubling up. More musicians will be involved, that's all.”

The evolution of instruments, orchestras, and halls prompted Mahler to modernize Beethoven, notes Egon Gartenberg in his book *Mahler: The Man and His Music*. “Such developments, coupled with concert halls possessing a size and acoustics undreamt of by Beethoven, forced a sensitive musical poet of the stature of Mahler to redress the imbalance which he heard and felt.”

After conducting his retouched version of the *Ninth Symphony* in 1900 in Vienna – a city that revered Beethoven as a favorite child – many people were outraged, accusing Mahler of waging war against authenticity. The composer Albert Bertelin said touching up a Beethoven symphony was like painting over a Rembrandt canvas. “What was offered yesterday as Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is a deplorable example of this aberration, this barbarism,” wrote the critic Richard Heuberger of the *New Free Press*.

In his own defense, Mahler explained that “this is in no way a case of re-instrumentation or alteration, let alone improvement of the work of Beethoven.” He said his views were less about arbitrary change than playing the music as Beethoven would have wanted had he lived 75 or 100 years later – with the formidable Vienna Philharmonic at his disposal.

The *Symphony No. 3*, the famous *Eroica*, is a watershed work in the history of music, one that changed the nature of the symphony. Mahler wanted listeners of his day to fully appreciate the impact it had at its premiere in April 1805, when it struck with the force of a boxer's jab to the jaw. Breathtaking in its technical assurance, originality and size, the *Third Symphony* was epic, and changed our view of the form.

The *Eroica* is the longest and most emotionally charged symphony up to its time. The opening movement alone is gigantic – nearly 700 measures – and Beethoven pushed the boundaries of classical form further by inserting a funeral march and a finale of 10 variations based on a theme from his own *Creatures of Prometheus*. It is the slow movement, a searing adagio in C minor, that has had the greatest impact over the centuries, taking listeners into a ghostly realm that was entirely original.

The *Eroica* was something new, far removed from Haydn and Mozart, a massive coagulation of themes, counter themes and convolutions that Beethoven forged as his symphonic ideal, one that would inspire his masterpieces through the *Ninth Symphony* as well as a nascent Romantic age. No longer a past-time for wealthy patrons, the symphony now had become a psychological agent, stretching sonata form to its limit with an expression – and ferocity – unrealized until that first performance nearly 215 years ago. It demanded a lot from performances and listeners back then, and still does today, notes Lewis Lockwood in his 2003 book *Beethoven: The Music and The Life*.

“The work expanded the time-space of the symphony as never before,” he writes, “demanding an unprecedented degree of patience and concentration from concert audiences.”

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.