

## Listening Guide: Richard Strauss' Symphonic Poem *Don Juan*

1. Strauss' *Don Juan* is a hugely exciting piece with which to open a program. It is approximately 17 min. long, and can be enjoyed simply for its energy, its recurring dominant melodies, its ever-shifting moods and its remarkable orchestration. If you have only a little time to preview this piece, just keep these qualities in mind and listen to one of the more popular performances that have been uploaded to YouTube.
2. Of course, I urge you to take the next step in preview listening by remembering Deb Shuster's definitions of "program music" and of "symphonic poem."

- Program music: A musical composition that aims to portray in musical terms the events, characters &/or scenes that usually originate in a poem or a story. In this case, Strauss drew upon the story of Don Juan, which is a tale of a fictitious character, whose amorous adventures, his larger than life energy, and his indifference to societal norms made him the hero-villain of numerous plays, novels, and poems from the 1660's to the 1900's.

Strauss draws on a version of Don Juan by Hungarian /Austrian/German author Nikolaus Lenau, written in 1844. Lenau's Don Juan is more of a philosopher living a disillusioned, aimless, and unsatisfying life. He has many amorous adventures in a search for meaning and perfect beauty, but he finally realizes that he has harmed many and that his searching may be futile. In a duel with the brother or father of one his former lovers, he drops his sword and embraces death.

The question is, does Strauss accept Lenau's portrayal or use the musical motifs and orchestral color to create a character more defiant than word-weary, more engaged with life rather than empty--someone who even chooses the circumstances of his own death. Listen to the piece and decide.

3. The other crucial definition that Deb shared was for the symphonic poem:
  - Tone/Symphonic poem: Usually, a type of program music for orchestra that uses musical themes to portray characters and events.

I hope you notice an overlap with the "program music" definition? But let's add some other important features to this definition:

- Looser musical structures: Composers of the Romantic era turned to the symphonic or tone poem format because it offered a freer way to explore musical themes than through the restrictive musical structures of the classical era (Haydn's sonata form, for example). Instead of having to set out and repeat certain themes or motives in a predetermined pattern, composers could use melody, harmony and texture to suggest a plot line, a character, a mood or a scene. Remember the sunset and sunrise in Ravel's *Daphne & Chloe*. Of course, composers of tone poems could alter the stories and characters, too, as Strauss seems to be doing in this symphonic poem.
- A symphony without movements: Tone poems are often big orchestral pieces (although they could be for smaller groups, too). Romantic and post-Romantic composers like

Strauss seemed to enjoy using the large format, instrumentation and sound of the orchestra, but giving us the story without a break, in one swoop.

- Leit motif: Strauss learned a lot from the music of Richard Wagner, especially the use of chromaticism, delayed melodic resolution to show passion, and the use of *leitmotifs*. Leitmotifs are musical phrases or ‘labels’ that the composer uses to identify specific characters, locales, and plot elements in the musical narrative. For example, you may be familiar with Prokofiev’s *Peter and The Wolf*, wherein the bassoon’s melody is the grandfather, the oboe’s melody is the duck, the flute’s os the bird, etc. This is the use of leitmotifs in its simplest form.
- Strauss uses leitmotifs in *Don Juan*, but not in a static, simplistic manner. His motifs evolve harmonically and their orchestration becomes denser. The motifs interweave and evolve, and the changes drive the drama and express the psychology of the characters .
  - Don Juan motif: Stated in the opening notes by the French horns in a short but clear melody. Listen for it. Then listen to how this melody expands *three times*. First, it expands after each of two amorous encounters, when the melody become more and more bold. Then in the last 9 min. (approx.) of the piece—during Don Juan’s own summation of his life and his confrontation with the vengeful father. Listen for how this motif broadens into its most exciting statement. Is this Lenau’s regretful wanderer or Strauss’ defiant hero?
  - Love motifs: In this tone poem, Strauss portrays two of Don Juan’s amorous liaisons—two encounters with beautiful women. These women are portrayed with the same flowing love motif, the first time presented by a solo violin, and the second time presented by the oboe. Listen for these fragile, flowing, lovely solos. Notice how Don Juan’s motif fades during these encounters, then returns, and then seems to dissolve into a chromatic dissonance— a sign of dissolution, or disillusion, perhaps, within Don Juan? But in Strauss’ version of *Don Juan*, such dissonance does not dominate the direction of the music. Instead, listen for when the love motifs make a final appearance, and then how they seem (to me) to be absorbed into Don Juan’s life motif (or life force?).
- 4. Another approach: Penney reminded us that Strauss was initially trained in the classical forms and styles, and although he took a deliberate step away from that style for much of his career, music historians note that his *Don Juan* tone poem follows the ternary sonata allegro form. The classicists among us can choose to enjoy this piece from that point of view:
  - Statement/exposition with A & B melodies, played through twice
  - Development of A & B melodies with chromatic elements
  - Recapitulation of major themes.