

MasterWorks 3: Command Performance Program Notes

Suite from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21 and Op. 61

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

Written: 1826 and 1842

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 28 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn was one of those child prodigies, whom Robert Schumann called “the Mozart of the 19th Century” and whom Franz Liszt called “Bach reborn.” He composed at least twelve symphonies and six operas before the age of fifteen, the ebullient *Octet for Strings* when he was sixteen, and dozens of other chamber, piano and solo vocal pieces, all before reaching “maturity.” It will come as no surprise, then, that at the ripe old age of seventeen Mendelssohn wrote a piece that has been at the heart of the symphonic repertory for more than 150 years.

Felix composed the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he and his sister Fanny were first discovering the works of Shakespeare. In July 1826, he wrote to Fanny, “I have grown accustomed to composing in our garden; there I completed two piano pieces. Today or tomorrow I am going there to dream the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is, I know, an enormous audacity.” He finished the overture in less than one month!

Mendelssohn wrote the Overture as a stand-alone work. In many respects, it is a musical synopsis of the play but, rather than describing the events of the story, Mendelssohn picks out the main characters and gives them a musical voice. The whispering violins, for example, represent the sprightly woodland fairies, and at one point, you can hear the unfortunate Bottom, who has been turned into an ass, braying and stamping out his rustic dance. Of course, there is a beautiful and lyrical theme that portrays the love element of the story.

Years after writing the piece, Mendelssohn attempted to recall the ideas that inspired him: “It is impossible for me to outline the sequence of ideas that gave rise to the composition ... I think it should be enough to point out that the fairy rulers, Oberon and Titania, appear throughout the play with their people ... At the end, after everything has been satisfactorily settled and the principal

MasterWorks 3: Command Performance Program Notes

players have joyfully left the stage, the elves follow them, bless the house, and disappear with the dawn. So the play ends, and my Overture too.”

Mendelssohn may have finished his Overture in less than a month but he wasn't finished with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Years later, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the new king of Prussia asked him to write some music to accompany an actual performance of the play. He wrote four *entr'actes* (played between the various acts), a couple of marches, a dance, some background music, and a setting of the song “You Spotted Snakes.” Tonight you will hear the *Scherzo*, which introduces the action of the fairies – specifically Oberon and Titania – in Act II, and the beautiful *Nocturne*, which comes at the end of Act III as the four lovers fall asleep in the forest. The *Wedding March* comes between Acts IV and V depicting the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, and looking forward to the marriages of Lysander and Hermia and Demetrius and Helena. It has also served as the wedding march for countless other non-fictional weddings.

Don Juan, Op. 20

Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949)

Written: 1888 – 1889

Movements: One

Style: Romantic Tone Poem

Duration: 17 minutes

Franz Joseph Strauss desperately tried to shield his precocious son, Richard, from improper musical influences. To our benefit, he failed. The father was a professional horn player with hyper-conservative musical tastes. When Richard first heard the “music of the future” – operas by Wagner – he didn't know what to make of it. “Against my father's orders, I studied the score of *Tristan*,” he wrote in his memoirs. “I can well remember how, at the age of seventeen, I positively wolfed [it down].” When he was only 21, Richard became an assistant to the great conductor, and Wagner champion, Hans von Bülow. A violinist in von Bülow's orchestra, Alexander Ritter – who was married to Wagner's niece – completed Strauss's conversion to Wagner's style. “The basic principle

MasterWorks 3: Command Performance Program Notes

..., in which the poetic idea was really the formative element, became henceforward the guiding principle for my own symphonic work,” he wrote. The fruit of this conversion was a series of “tone poems” – brilliantly written (and fantastically difficult to perform) symphonic works that try to depict a narrative or poetic idea with music.

Strauss based one of his first tone poems on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Later tone poems dealt with Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. *Death and Transfiguration* is a musical depiction of a dying man as he reflects back on his life and *Ein Heldenleben (A Hero’s Life)* is a musical autobiography. Strauss’s greatest early work, which he wrote when he was barely 24, is *Don Juan*. He premiered it in the nerve center of Wagner’s domain, Weimer. From then on, the public regarded Strauss as the most significant and progressive German composer since Wagner.

Don Juan was that mythic Spanish nobleman known for his rakish ways and the countless women he left in the lurch. There are many versions of the story, but Strauss chose the poetic account by the 19th century poet, Nicolaus Lenau:

O magic realm, unlimited, eternal
Of gloried woman, – loveliness supernal!
Fain would I, in the storm of stressful bliss,
Expire upon the last one’s lingering kiss!
Through every realm, O friend, would wing my flight,
Wherever Beauty blooms, kneel down to each,
And, if for one brief moment, win delight!
I flee from surfeit and from rapture’s cloy,
Keep fresh for Beauty service and employ,
Grieving the One, that ALL I may enjoy . . .

In Strauss’s tone poem, you’ll hear the Don as he rushes impetuously from one love to the

MasterWorks 3: Command Performance Program Notes

next. Between these mad dashes, Strauss portrays the various loves as passionate, rapturous, sensuous, noble, tender, and timid. Finally, there is a sudden “flash from heaven” and, after a dramatic pause, the music, and the Don, collapse in exhaustion.

Double Concerto in A Minor, Op. 102 **Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)**

Written: 1887

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 32 minutes

In the summer of 1887, Johannes Brahms wrote a letter to the great violinist Josef Joachim. “ ... Be prepared for a little shock. The idea of writing a Concerto for Violin and Violoncello has been too strong for me, much as I have tried to resist it. But I am quite indifferent on the subject until I hear what is your attitude towards it. In all friendliness of spirit however, I beg you to be quite frank. If you send me a card which simply says: ‘I disown it,’ that will be quite sufficient for me, and I shall know what to do.”

Brahms was being circumspect for a reason. A lifelong friendship had ended, and Brahms was trying to patch things up. The two men met in 1853. Joachim was twenty-two and was already one of the most celebrated violinists in the world. Brahms was two years younger and an unknown composer, but when Joachim heard his music, he was astounded. Fifty years later he remembered that first hearing: “Never in the course of my artist’s life have I been more completely overwhelmed.” That was the beginning of a thirty-year friendship and partnership. The two frequently performed together and Joachim was a constant help to Brahms, offering copious advice on writing for stringed instruments. Brahms wrote his great Violin Concerto for Joachim.

Nevertheless, Brahms made the mistake of taking sides in Joachim’s messy divorce. He had written a letter of comfort to Joachim’s wife claiming “ ... with no thought have I ever acknowledged that your husband might be in the right ... “ She used the letter as evidence in court and won her

MasterWorks 3: Command Performance Program Notes

case. However, Brahms lost his friend. Now, with his Double Concerto, Brahms was taking hesitant steps towards reconciliation. Joachim responded favorably to Brahms's invitation, and Brahms leapt into action: "Your friendly message has had its effect; I have put the thing together as fast as I could and will send it off to-day." When Brahms read the work with Joachim and the cellist Robert Hausmann at the home of Clara Schumann, she observed that "Joachim and Brahms have spoken to one another again after years of silence." At the premiere, Brahms remarked, "Now I know what it is that's been missing in my life for the past few years ... it was the sound of Joachim's violin."

An unusual aspect of the first movement of the Double Concerto is the way it begins. The orchestra begins with a forceful statement, and then the cello immediately plays an extended solo. The woodwinds play a short quiet interlude, and then the violin enters alone, soon to be joined by the cello. It's as if the cadenza is at the *beginning* of the movement rather than at the end. What follows then is the standard concerto with a full orchestra exposition of the main themes, the soloists' exposition of those themes, a development area, and a recapitulation. The second movement is a beautiful ballade, and the third a fiery rondo full of gypsy themes that were so dear to both Joachim and Brahms.

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