

George Szell (born June 7, 1897, Budapest, Hung., Austria-Hungary died July 30, 1970, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.) Hungarian-born U.S. conductor. He made his debut as a pianist at age 11, and before his 20th birthday he had appeared with the Berlin Philharmonic as pianist, conductor, and composer. He established himself as an opera conductor in various German cities, including Berlin and Prague. When World War II broke out, he settled in the U.S., conducting at the Metropolitan Opera and then serving as musical director of the Cleveland Orchestra. There he imposed stern discipline but won his players' devotion by his own fierce dedication. Under his direction the orchestra became known for its precision in playing and was considered one of the world's finest.



Richard Strauss

Don Juan

Till Eulenspiegel

Death And Transfiguration

George Szell

Cleveland Orchestra



Don Juan, Op. 20, tone poem for orchestra by German composer Richard Strauss, first performed in Weimar on November 11, 1889. One of the earliest tone poems by Strauss, Don Juan tells of the legendary Spanish libertine Don Juan, who by then already had appeared in works by Mozart and other composers. For his tone poem, Strauss drew upon a version of the Don Juan story by the Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau, published posthumously in 1851.

As the work opens, Strauss offers a theme that is forceful and energetic with bold interjections from the brass section. This theme soon gives way to one of romance, carried by a solo violin. A tranquil oboe suggests an evening liaison. Then the tender mood is broken by strident horns, presenting a confident and heroic theme. These themes are repeated and intermingled, always buoyed by Strauss's magnificent orchestration. The mood suddenly becomes soft and mournful as the piece nears its conclusion, the transition signifying the approaching end of Don Juan's life. Strauss seems to have followed his source, the poet Lenau, in opting for a wistful ending rather than a grand finale. Lenau's protagonist, having tired of the unending chase, allows his life to be taken in a duel. Similarly, the tone poem's final phrases taper away, ending in quiet tones evocative of dying breaths.

Don Juan was an immediate success, the first for Strauss, who was only 25 years old at the time. He conducted it in dozens of concerts throughout his career and included it in his first recordings, made in 1917.

One of Strauss' most popular symphonic poems is Till Eulenspiegel, a single-movement work for orchestra. It was composed between 1894 and 1895, shortly after the premiere and critical debacle of his first opera Guntram. In choosing the popular tale of Till Eulenspiegel as the basis for the tone poem, Strauss found an effective vehicle for responding to his critics, who treated his first opera unfavorably. The character of Till Eulenspiegel is a chronic prankster, whose unrelenting sense of the sardonic continually challenges his peers and lands him in trouble. Till would never learn from his mistakes and constantly thumbed his nose at convention and any criticism. The tone poem is based on a German folktale that has appeared in various versions since its first appearance in the fourteenth century. Some have found a historical basis for the character, but he is best understood as a kind of folk hero who challenges the establishment. While no single source contains all the adventures of Till Eulenspiegel, the character is recognizable in various adaptations, just as Strauss' musical depiction in the rondo theme is apparent throughout the musical compositions.

The musical form of Till Eulenspiegel is a large-scale rondo. By identifying the character of Till with the rondo theme, Strauss found a way to demonstrate the recalcitrant nature of the protagonist and also to unify the work. After a brief introduction, often interpreted as an expression of "once upon a time," Strauss states the theme at the very beginning in a bravura passage for horn. The theme recurs between episodes of the rondo, and it is in those episodes that Till Eulenspiegel has his adventures. In terms of musical structure, the rondo-episodes provide contrast and, as they depart further from the main idea, they also set the stage for the return of the familiar rondo theme. The subsequent episodes

show Till at odds with the peasants, railing at preachers, wooing a woman and being rejected by her, and making fun of the intelligentsia. Within these sections, Strauss allowed his theme for Till to return in various guises, yet still remain recognizable. Ultimately, Till finds himself brought before judges, who review his career and sentence him to death. Even then Till cannot depart without a mocking gesture, and the piece ends with his theme fully transformed with all its permutations exhausted.

Till Eulenspiegel contains some of Strauss' most brilliant orchestration and makes use of various instruments, including the clarinet in D. Strauss approached the orchestration of this work with a kaleidoscopic hand, often abruptly shifting between instrumental groups. This gives the work its appealing color and also makes it a virtuoso piece for orchestra. In writing program music, Strauss chose a still-new approach to composition and aligned himself with the avant-garde. His brilliantly orchestrated score with its virtuosic instrumentation and colorful dissonances showed Strauss as a modernist. It remains a popular concert piece and one of Strauss' best-known compositions.

Among Strauss' tone poems, *Tod und Verklärung* (Death and Transfiguration) stands out for its concise program of an unnamed artist's demise and the subsequent transformation of his spirit. Unlike *Ein Heldenleben*, which contained an autobiographical element, *Tod und Verklärung* is more universal in its expression of dying. Here Strauss does not present a triumphant narrative of individual accomplishment, but rather explores the fleeting images of past experience as they dissolve before a dying person's eyes. Composed in 1888–1889, just after *Don Juan*, *Tod und Verklärung* departs from the kind of tone poem Strauss had written up to that time. Instead of using a literary source as the basis, he imagined his own scenario. In fact the verses by Alexander Ritter appended to the score are an afterthought Strauss added after he had completed the work. He is reputed to have said, just before his own death, that dying was just as he had depicted it in *Tod und Verklärung*.

Strauss cast the work in the form of an extended sonata form, with a structure freer than he had yet attempted in his tone poems. Several evocative motives occur at the outset, including one suggesting an irregular heartbeat that is critical to the denouement of the work. Strauss uses various other motives to depict the protagonist's respiration and suffering; he also presents, early on, a short contrasting idea, depicting an ideal state, that re-emerges the extraordinarily lovely portrayal of transfiguration later in the work. Given the relatively unspecific nature of the program, this tone poem has an open-ended quality that involves the listener in the work. The vast and varied orchestration is typical of the mature Strauss. The moment of transfiguration is brilliant: a C major chord builds from the basses up over a powerful tread that includes deep bells and gongs.

Richard Strauss

Don Juan / Till Eulenspiegel / Death And Transfiguration
George Szell Cleveland Orchestra

1. Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Op. 28 14:15
 2. Don Juan, Op. 20 15:50
 3. Death And Transfiguration, Op. 24 23:43
- Total Time: 53:48

Transferred from a two track 15ips tape
Recorded by CBS Records release March 3, 1958
Producer – Howard Scott



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