

Listen4 listening guides

A brief guide to listening to Richard Strauss's *Don Juan*

This outline serves as a listening guide, or "road map," through a work being performed today. The intention is to help you follow along and enjoy it in more depth. We welcome you to email us with your reactions at announcements@aspennmusic.org. Now ... let the music begin!

Richard Strauss composed what is considered his first major masterpiece, *Don Juan*, in 1888 when he was just 24—the age of many of the Aspen Music Festival and School's students. It is a "tone poem" for orchestra, meaning that the work is one continuous composition meant to convey a story, poem, or idea to the listener.

Orchestral musicians love to play Strauss's tone poems because every instrument has a chance to shine. It is hard to believe *Don Juan* lasts only about twenty minutes, so full is it with drama, passion, tenderness, and bravura parts for every member of the orchestra.

Fittingly, Strauss met the love of his life, Pauline de Ahna, shortly after starting work on this piece and completed it during their romance, which led to a life-long marriage.

1

First section: Listen as the opening flourish in the strings rushes through the wind section and back to the strings. This figure begins not on the first beat, but just slightly after, creating a sense of breathless forward motion. The fictional Spanish hero and lover, Don Juan, is literally leaping into action from the very first note of the piece in the hands of the string sections.

3

Third section:

Listen for the harp as it enters over quietly murmuring strings and the oboe begins to play a serene melody. The long and beautiful oboe solo was called "one of the greatest love songs in all music" by the British conductor and Strauss authority Norman del Mar.

2

Second section:

As the music quiets down, the woodwinds play along with a high violin solo, conveying Don Juan's great interest in all things feminine. Starting simply, the passion is ratcheted up with increasingly higher entrances by the horns. Listen to the back and forth interplay between higher (female) instruments and the urgent lower (male) instruments.

4

Fourth section:

One of the most famous horn calls in music, played by four horns in unison, introduces a new melody and brings Don Juan dashing back to the fore. This section is highlighted by sprightly melodies popping out throughout the orchestra, including brief sparkling celeste entrances. (A celesta, pronounced "chell-ESS-tah," is a small keyboard instrument with hammers that hit metal plates to produce bell-like tones.)

The strings return with entrances of the original rhythmic theme and musical chaos prevails as snippets of themes jump around. The chaos dissipates with a bang from the bass drum. Regretful violin and bassoon solos and a falling line passing through the winds dim the mood. Irrepressibly the cellos and violas reintroduce the original flourish quietly, everyone has a chance to repeat the figure, and Don Juan seems as if he will go out in a blaze of horn calls and orchestral glory. But wait—a duel ensues and our hero is brought right to the edge. After a long pause, a trumpet call makes the final thrust, and life, and the music, fades away.