

Rockford Symphony Orchestra
Steven Larsen, Music Director

ComEd Classics Series

“Twilight of Romanticism”

April 21, 2007
8:00 PM

Richard Strauss

Don Juan

Tone Poem (after Nicholas Lenau), op. 20

Max von Schillings

The Witch’s Song (*Das Hexenlied*)

Angela Iannone, narrator

INTERMISSION

Sergei Rachmaninov

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, op. 18

Moderato

Adagio sostenuto

Allegro scherzando

David Syme, piano

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The performance will be broadcast by WNIU/105.7 at a date to be announced.

Program Notes

By Steven Larsen

Don Juan, Tone Poem (after Nicholas Lenau), op. 20

Richard Strauss (b. Munich, 1864; d. Garmisch-Partenkirchen, 1949)

A joke in the orchestra world has it that every string player aspiring to a professional career knows Strauss’ *Don Juan* – or at least the first page, which is part of every audition list. There’s a reason for its ubiquity: Strauss wrote music that, even today, represents the pinnacle of technical perfection for the orchestra’s instruments, and the opening moments of his tone poem, *Don Juan*, are among the most thrilling in all

orchestral music. Along with Berlioz and Rimsky-Korsakov, Strauss is recognized as one of history's most brilliant orchestrators, unsurpassed in his use of instrumental color, and thoroughly understanding the idiomatic qualities of every instrument while at the same time demanding ever-increasing virtuosity from his players.

Anyone who reads program notes is familiar with the stories of great works that flopped miserably at their premieres. Richard Strauss' tone poem, *Don Juan*, on the other hand, so electrified its first audience that they shouted for an encore (Strauss, who conducted the premiere, coyly refused). It immediately rocketed to heights of popularity from which it has, even after 118 years, never descended. It also launched Strauss' career; he was only twenty-five, and with the death of Brahms in 1897, was universally proclaimed the greatest living composer.

Strauss's father was Franz Strauss, principal horn of the Munich Court Opera. The elder Strauss saw that his son had a thorough musical education, and Richard attended many opera performances at the theater. He was particularly smitten with Wagner's operas, but his father, who detested them despite being Wagner's favorite horn player, forbade his son from studying them.

In 1882 Richard enrolled in Munich University, not to study music, but philosophy and art history. A year later he went to Berlin, where he was hired as assistant conductor to Hans von Bülow (the most famous conductor of the day, who married Franz Liszt's daughter Cosima, only to have her stolen away by Wagner). When von Bülow left his post in 1885, the twenty-one year old Strauss was appointed his successor.

Conducting paid his bills, but his main interest was composition. His early works were conservative in style and in classical forms. This changed when he met Alexander Ritter, a composer and violinist. Ritter introduced him to the essays of Wagner and the writings of Schopenhauer. Strauss was persuaded to abandon the abstract, conservative style imbued in him by his father and embraced the ideal of the tone poem. *Aus Italien* (From Italy) in 1886 was his first effort, followed by *Macbeth* two years later, the first of a series of one-movement tone poems.

Don Juan was Strauss' first masterpiece. Several intriguing threads must be woven together to understand its inspiration. First, there is the Don Juan legend. Since *El Burlador de Sevilla* ("The Seducer of Seville") first appeared in a 1630 drama, dozens of writers and poets have assayed the character of Don Juan. The most famous version of the story, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was Strauss first encounter with the legend. But in 1885 (the year he met Ritter) he attended a performance of Paul Heyse's play *Don Juans Ende*, which made a deep impression on him.

The second thread began in 1887, when he met a singer named Pauline de Ahna. The spark of romance turned into flames of passion, and they were soon married. Shortly after meeting her, he began sketches for his own *Don Juan*, and there can be no doubt that its impassioned love music was inspired by Pauline.

The third thread is in many ways the most significant. Nicolaus Lenau was a Hungarian poet, born in 1802, a passionately idealistic romantic who sought peace and freedom for a time in Indiana and Ohio. When the New World turned out to be a disappointment, he returned to Europe where he wrote an epic poem on the Faust legend in 1836. He began another epic on Don Juan, left incomplete when he entered an insane asylum in 1844.

It was Lenau's Don Juan, not the macho seducer of the Spanish legends, who interested Strauss. Lenau wrote, "My Don Juan is no hot-blooded man, eternally pursuing women. It is the longing in him to find a woman who is to him incarnate womanhood, and to enjoy in the one all the women on earth whom he cannot as individuals possess. Because he does not find her, although he reels from one to another, at last Disgust seizes hold of him, and this Disgust is the Devil that fetches him." His Don Juan meets his death in a sword duel with the father of one of the women he has seduced. But unlike the eponymous hero of Mozart's opera, he drops his guard and welcomes his fate.

Strauss' tone poem neatly mirrors the *Zeitgeist* of the late 19th century Europe. Art and literature sought to present feverish emotions and repressed sensuality, exploring our subconscious and representing human passions in vivid colors. Its success came at a price, however. Strauss' orchestra strained under the burdens of both virtuosity and endurance, something they had never before borne. One horn player, quite exhausted, was reported to have said to the composer, "Good God, in what way have we sinned that you should send us this scourge! Indeed, this (and the rest of Strauss' compositions) set such a standard for instrumental technique that *Don Juan* is on virtually every professional orchestra's audition list.

Strauss included three rather cryptic excerpts from Lenau's poem as a preface to the score, but refused to supply a detailed program. However, three dramatic elements are quite easy to hear. The first is the astonishing virile and energetic opening; together with a stentorian blast by the horns in the middle of the work clearly portray the confident, vain and somewhat arrogant hero. The women in his life are maligned in music that is flirtatious, passionate, or ravishing – note particularly the extended oboe solo, one of the most beautiful in the literature. Finally, near the end a great crescendo is shattered by silence, preparing the moment when the disillusioned, broken libertine accepts his adversary's sword thrust, and dies quietly without hope.

The Witch's Song (*Das Hexenlied*) Max von Schillings (b. Düren, Germany, 1868; d. Berlin, 1933)

Less than seventy-five years after his death, Max von Schillings is virtually unknown in the musical world. This seems odd, since the famed conductor Wilhelm Fürtwängler described him as "Wagner's most important successor and continuator, next to Strauss and Pfitzner." In fact, in the first decades of the 20th century he was often mentioned as an equal of Richard Strauss, with whom he enjoyed a close friendship.

It was Strauss, in fact, who encouraged the young von Schillings to pursue a musical career. He soon became one of Munich's leading musicians, distinguishing himself as a

conductor, composer and teacher. As the director of the Stuttgart Hoftheater and the Berlin State Opera, he had many premieres to his credit, including the 1912 premiere of Strauss' opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Opera was the focus of most of von Schillings' compositional efforts. Even though only one, *Mona Lisa*, is ever performed today (rarely, and only in Germany), several of the others enjoyed moderate success.

The blame for his obscurity can be laid on two factors. One was a "mid-life crisis" he suffered around 1915, precipitated by the collapse of his marriage and disputes with his employers. This came to a head in 1918, when the disastrous outcomes of World War I lead the idealistic musician to give up composing in frustration and despair. The second was his ardent nationalism, a love for and belief in German heritage art and culture, all of which associated his music with Hitler's Third Reich.

One of his most successful works was the melodrama, *The Witch's Song*, based on a ballad by Ernst von Wildenbruch. Today, 'melodrama' commonly denotes (in somewhat negative terms) an extremely emotional scene or performance. Combining the Greek *melos* (melody) and *drama*, melodrama originated in the 18th century as a way of heightening spoken dialogue with musical accompaniment. This, of course, is standard practice today in television and movies.

By the end of the 19th century the genre was in some disrepute (Wagner called it "a genre of most unpleasant mixing), but around 1900 a revival of sorts blossomed in Europe. Schillings conducted the first performance of his work in 1902, which was such a success that it led to translations in English, French, Italian and Russian.

It tells the story of the last confession of an old monk, Medardus, who is near death. He tells his Prior the story of when as a young priest, he was sent to hear the confession of a young woman who was condemned as a witch. She pleadingly told him of her innocence, and nearly charmed him into escaping with her. He watched as she died at the stake, and for fifty years he has been tormented by his knowledge that she was innocent and regret that he did not succumb to her temptation. He now goes to his death, ecstatic at the knowledge that they will be together for eternity. Moved, the Prior tells the other monks, "What no eye can see, no lips explain, /Up yonder is one, He will make it plain. /'Tis He hath said, 'Judgment is mine', /Then judge not, brothers; go, pray at His shrine."

Schillings' influence in Germany began to increase in the early 1930s, when, as President of the Prussian Academy of Arts he showed a willingness to cleanse it of "alien" influence. The rising Nazi party applauded his example, and when Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933, he asked Schillings to be the all-powerful head of music in Germany. Schillings declined, and his death later that year prevented him from developing policy during the Nazi regime. However, his music received frequent performances until 1945, at which point it sank into obscurity.

(Please note: The complete text for *The Witch's Song* is available upon request at the RSO Information table, or on the RSO website, www.rockfordsymphony.com)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, op. 18

Sergei Rachmaninov (b. Novgorod, Russia, 1873; d. Beverly Hills, 1943)

Although he lived well into the 20th century, Sergei Rachmaninov must be counted among the Romantic composers of the 19th century. The siren songs of impressionism, expressionism, atonality, serialism, neo-classicism and neo-baroque seduced virtually everyone of his generation. Rachmaninov, the greatest pianist since Franz Liszt and the baton-carrier who kept alive the lyricism of Tchaikovsky, steadfastly resisted “modernism” in his compositions. For this, he paid a steep price in the withering scorn and disdain directed at him from more “progressive” composers and their critic apologists. The 1954 *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians* called his music “monotonous in texture ... consist[ing] mainly of artificial and gushing tunes” On the other hand, his works, and in particular his first three piano concertos and the Paganini Rhapsody have always been favorites of both audiences and performers.

Every commentary on his Second Piano Concerto recounts the story of Rachmaninov’s cure from the depression that preceded its composition. The twenty-two year-old composer’s First Symphony failed miserably at its 1896 premiere. Stingingly panned by one critic as “a programme symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt,” it more likely failed because the conductor, Glazunov, was drunk. Rachmaninov later wrote that “something within me snapped. All my self-confidence broke down.”

Thus began a three-year funk in which Rachmaninov wrote very little. But contrary to the assertions of many writers, he was not acutely depressed. True to his words, his confidence in his composition skills was shaken. But he continued to perform on the piano and even began a successful career as a conductor.

Still his family was so alarmed by this lapse of productivity that they sought out psychiatric help, turning to a Dr. Nicholas Dahl. With the help of Rachmaninov’s cousin, Natalie Satin (who later married the composer) and his friend, the writer Leo Tolstoy, Dr. Dahl effected a “cure”. Rachmaninov began composing again with renewed vigor, and the happy result was the Second Piano Concerto, one of the most inspired and best-loved of his larger works. It is dedicated to Dr. Dahl.

Its first performance took place October 14, 1901 with the Moscow Philharmonic and the composer playing the piano part. Few of Rachmaninoff’s works are so richly filled with intoxicating melodic ideas; few seem to have arisen in such a soaring flight of inspiration. The concerto falls into the customary three movements:

I. The first (*Moderato*, C minor, 2/2) begins with a majestic series of chords for the piano, quietly at first, then growing to an impressive cadence. The chief subject is announced by unison strings against an arpeggio figure in the solo instrument. After a brief orchestral interlude the piano gives out the second subject in E flat major.

II. The slow movement (*Adagio sostenuto*, E major, 4/4) is particularly poetic and songlike, both sentimental and nostalgic, and always deeply-felt and sensitively expressed. Sustained harmonies in the muted strings begin the movement, to which wind instruments soon are added. Over a figure for the piano a flute and then a clarinet intone the melody from which the movement is constructed. New thematic material is heard in the coda.

III. In the finale (*Allegro scherzando*, C minor, 4/4) prefatory measures are followed by the first theme, played with exciting verve by the piano. Oboe and cellos have the second theme, the piano taking it up later. The first theme is developed further in a section marked *Allegro scherzando, moto primo*. In a fugato the first violins are answered by the piano and the lower strings. After elaborate working out, the concerto ends with a brilliant coda, after once again grandly stating the theme that became a part of popular culture through its use in the song, "Full moon and empty arms."

Rachmaninoff died in Beverly Hills, California on March 28, 1943. He had become an American citizen a few weeks before his death.

The Witch's Song

(Ernst von Wildenbruch - English text by John Bernhoff)

Of Hersfeld Convent the Prior spake:
"Our brother Medardus grows old and weak;
Methinks he will hardly survive the day,
Up, Brother Confessor, haste thee away,
Go, bid him confess his sins to thee,
Though I know full well that few they be.
He served us 'tis fifty years today,
In these convent walls his hair grew grey;
He fasted, prayed, his limbs he scourged,
His mind of sinful thought he purged,
He is the holiest of us all,
Prepared to follow his Master's call."
The Confessor rapped at Medardus' door.
Within't remained silent as before,
He crossed the threshold with noiseless tread,
He entered the cell, approached the bed
And hour by hour crept on apace,
The monks gazed into each other's face:
"Whose words, whose deeds were aye the best,
What sins can Medardus have left unconfessed?"

And when the Convent bell was tolled,
Which the monks to benediction called,
They bent the knee, they bowed the head,
For brother Medardus a prayer they said.
Oh hark, in the distance, what sounds of grief,
Like a soul in distress calling out for relief.

The Prior up from the ground did rise,
The monks all listened in mute surprise:
And loud and clear, like bells set ringing,
Those tones swell forth, "'Tis Medardus singing."

They listened and questioned: "What may that be?
That is no hymn, no litany;
It sounds like a song of worldly conceit!"
Then in at the door, as white as a sheet,
The Confessor rushed, with fearful gest.
"It's the devil himself we have for a guest;
Medardus is of God forsaken,
Medardus writhes in the clutches of Satan!"

The Prior his holy candle lighted,
And a blessing from Heaven on all invited;
The monks lit their candles, and forming a choir,
They followed slowly behind the Prior;
From wall and ceiling re-echoing rang,
The hymn which the monks and the Prior song:
"From sinful lust, from Satan's power
Preserve us, Almighty, from hour to hour!"
The cell was open -- pale, haggard, half dead,
Lay brother Medardus on narrow bed;
His hands were folded in prayerful fashion,
His staring eyes glowed with longing passion;
To his stammering lips the words would throng,
Endless and restless in savage song.

That song it told of hopes forlorn,
Of languishing love, derision and scorn,
Mid odors as wafted from Eden Bowers,
Teeming with breath from the soul of flowers.
A song it was such as never was heard,
And the heart to its very depths it stirred,
As it told of sorrow, of wildest delight,
In a strain that seized on the soul with might.

The monks swayed their censers to and fro:
"Flee, Satan, the soul of this man of woe!"
But the more their censers they swayed and swung,
The louder and wilder Medardus sung,
And deeper and deeper his weird words sunk
Into the soul of each listening monk.

Oh whence did that song its magic borrow,
Recalling life's cherished hopes and sorrow!
It brought back thoughts of a happier lot,
Of the days of youth long since forgot.

And the monks ceased singing one by one,

To harken the song of the dying man.
The holy Prior, terror bound,
With pallid cheek, he gazed around,
Then on Medardus he turned his look,
And his voice with righteous anger shook:
“Wouldst seduce the brothers with magic spell?
Then curse on thee, wizard, then fare thee to hell!”

Medardus then slow from his bed gan rise,
And a wondrous light shone forth in his eyes;
His far-off gaze seemed fondly captured
By a vision that held his soul enraptured.
Asudden, the tears down his pale cheek ran,
To the brothers then turning, Medardus began:

“I, too, was a priest, as pious as ye,
And read with devotion my breviary,
I read it in awe, with heart aglow,
For hot thro' my young veins the blood did flow.
My head was crowned with locks as of gold,
That fell o'er my shoulders, fair to behold.
And when they first tonsured my curly hair,
'Twas like mowing Spring's early blossoms fair.
It was in those days when our suffering land
Writhed 'neath the power of Satan's band,
When Women were led on to bawdry and shame
And witches were tortured with fire and flame.
One night, as I sat reading alone,
The lamp burned dim, the winds did moan,
There came a rapping at my door:
"Come, priest" I heard a voice implore.
The night was dark, 'twas the midnight hour,
They led me forth to the storm-racked tower,
Deep into the earth we 'gan descend
Methought our way in hell would end.
By the torch-light dim that around us fell,
They showed me a hole in the stone-built wall.
'To the witch who tomorrow must burn at the stake,
Go in, young priest, in her heart awake
Holy thoughts of repentance, thy work do well,
And save her sinful soul from hell!’

I entered as into the vaults of death,
I clutched at my throat, I gasped for breath,
Low cowering I saw a shapeless heap;
A rattling of chains and sobbing deep

Struck with terror my listening ear:
Was't some wild beast caught in its hidden lair?
'Twas a woman, her face was sunk on her breast,
Her head to the damp dank wall was pressed.
I fastened the torch to a ring, that hung
On a chain which down from the ceiling swung.
I said: "Turn to me thy face, sister dear,
And tell me thy sorrow and have no fear!"
Her eager ear my kind words drank,
Dawn from her face her hands they sank.
She turned her head, our eyes they met,
On her knees she crept to my feet,
Her naked arms enfolded my knee,
She fixed her questioning eyes on me.
I gazed on these features so young and fair,
Lit up by the torch-light's ruddish glare;
Nor could I subdue the heart-born sigh,
As the tears of pity rose hot in mine eye,
My lips grew mute, grief o'er me creeping,
In silent sorrow we both were weeping.
And when she saw my tears falling fast,
Her arms around me she fondly cast,
A sobbing deep from her heart arose,
Her whispering lips on mine ear did close;
"And canst thou weep still, dost weep for me,
As I love our dear Savior, I love e'en thee!"

Horror seized me at the words she spake:
"Think on my mission, the hour, the stake
Where tomorrow thy sinful body must burn,
From earthly thought thy spirit turn!"

She started in terror; her cheek grew won:
"Why must I suffer, say, what have I done?
Nor father, nor mother I never have known,
Grandmother and I lived i'th' forest alone.
She gathered the herbs on hill and heath,
Saved many poor sufferers from pain and death.
Grandmother they burnt; heir words were fell:
They said she was a witch from hell.
A song she sang I was wont to repeat,
It sounded so weird, so sad and so sweet.
She told me it came from distant lands,
Where love's deep magic the heart commands.
I sang it, nor its meaning did ken,
And they seized and imprisoned me, heartless men;

They cast me into this dungeon cell;
They say I sing by the powers of hell,
That my song the heart to sin can inspire;
And tomorrow I'm doomed to die by fire."

Her trembling lips they touched mine ear,
Her pleading, dark eyes told of anguish and fear,
Her bosom 'gainst mine own grew warm,
"Oh save me," she cried, "save me from harm!
For life is so sweet, so bitter is death,
And cruel, oh cruel is fire's breath!
I never caused man nor beast a smart,
Nor soothed nor healed by witch's art.
The hearts of men are like stones, asleep;
But thou art good, thou still dost weep!

The gaoler sleeps, the door is free;
Come, let me flee, oh flee with me!
We'll walk so softly, on tiptoe light,
No torch shall betray our secret flight,
The turret door opens into the fields,
We'll fly 'neath the darkness of night concealed,
And when the cocks in the morning crow,
Whither we've fled there's none shall know;
The forest is dark, the forest is dense,
I know a place, come, let us hence!
I know a place, I know a spot,
There lies a treasure long hid and forgot;
We'll seek it and find it, thou'lt bear it away,
Oh come, oh come, no longer stay,
To some distant country let us flee,
Thou'lt live with me and I with thee!
Thou ne'er hast pressed a wife to thy heart;
Thou knowst not the bliss woman's love can impart,
Richer love on thee I'll bestow,
Than mortal ever yet did know.
The stars they pale, 'twill soon be day,
It is lime, it is time, come, let us away!"

Her panting breath on my cheek was warm,
Round my neck she threw her soft, white arm,
Her raven hair, like wings of night,
Half veiled her glorious limbs from sight
My reeling brain, my heart afire
Writhed in the throes of love's ardent desire;
I bent me down, would kiss the maid,

When shuddering, I felt a hand on me laid:
“Wouldst kiss the witch? Know sin's reward;
Hast forfeited the grace of the Lord!”
My lips grew mute beneath the smart,
I hurled her from my beating heart,
Dread terror drove me from out the cell
I heard her cry of despair, as she fell;
She fell to the ground, she lay on the stones,
Behind me I heard her sobs and her groans!

Onward I hastened, nor rested, nor slept,
On bended knee I prayed and I wept,
Till the terror began with the blush of dawn;
The heavens one flaming pyre resembled,
The eager crowd in swarms assembled;
In a far-off field rose a mighty pyre,
Sombre and dark, awaiting the fire,
The gazers e'en seemed to hold their breath
And there she stood waiting her awful death
Like storm-bound petrels tossed on the wind,
Her dark eyes roamed, but no rest could find;
Then I raised the Crucifix on high,
And her searching gaze met my tear-fed eye;
And gently, lest those around should see,
She bowed her head, she nodded to me,
And a smile lit up her features wan,
Like the fading light of the setting sun.

The hangman lifted his torch on high,
Her languishing eye drank into mine eye;
The flames leapt up as from burning sheaves,
Her lips they trembled like falling leaves,
A sudden, a sudden, like bells set ringing,
Mid the roaring pyre the maid 'gan singing!
Like night, pervaded by spring's soft shower,
My soul was seized by that song's sweet power;
As mid odors wafted from Eden Bowers,
Teeming with breath from the soul of flowers;
It seemed like a voice in vain endeavor
To tell me of joys I had lost forever.

The flames lapped her feet, her eye-lids fell,
She bowed her head in a last farewell;
The thick black smoke around did close,
Yet her pleading song through the smoke arose,
Roaring the flames darted up to heaven;

Like trembling bells, I still heard that steven
Though I covered mine eyes, I found no release:
“That singing, that singing, when will it cease?”
I turned me shuddering, I fled from the spot,
That voice fled with me, it left me not,
Where'er I wandered or sought to hide,
That voice was ever at my side.
And tho' I slumbered or knelt in prayer,
Those tones would haunt me everywhere;
And since that day, for fifty years,
That self-same song rings in mine ears!”

Medardus rose up; wild fear in his eye:
“I hear her again, she draweth nigh!
Up the steps, at the door, oh do ye not hear?
She stops on the threshold she's here, she's here!
Oh maiden pure, the world was the liar,
That called thee witch and branded with fire,
Ye rose-bud lips, soft eyes full of pity,
Ye playing limbs blossoming forth in beauty;
Sweet spirit of love, which 'twas mine once to cherish,
How could I forsake thee and leave thee to perish?
The path I had strayed from, once more I behold,
As the Gates of heaven at thy coming unfold;
After fifty years' penance, my suffering is o'er;
I come to be with thee evermore!”

He stretched his limbs, he bowed his head
“Medardus is dead!” the brothers said.
They knelt them down thro' the windows broke
The grey-eyed morn; the Prior spoke:
“What no eye can see, no lips explain,
Up yonder is One, He will make it plain;
'Tis He hath said: 'Judgment is mine'
Then judge not, brothers; go, pray at His shrine!”