

**PROGRAM NOTES FOR NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**2022-2023 Classical Subscription Concert 05: Trifonov Performs Brahms**

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**Brahms Second Piano Concerto:** Brahms was a conservative in the best sense: conserving quality, standards, and the nobility of purpose that characterizes great music without any extramusical association. We call such music absolute (as opposed to programme music). It exists for its own sake, free of any additional association with literature, art, or some other influence apart from the music itself. Brahms's mighty Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op.83 is such a work. Complete in itself, with sweeping, majestic themes and significant roles for both horn and cello as well as piano, this concerto ennobles all who interact with it, including pianist, conductor, orchestra, and audience.

A sublime French horn theme introduces this concerto, floating unsupported without the orchestra. A great musical drama ensues. The scherzo is a total change of pace: passionate, impetuous, and hefty. The slow movement showcases a gorgeous cello solo, while the finale is permeated by Brahms's sense of humor, sometimes subtle, sometimes uproarious, always delicious.

**Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* :** *Don Juan* was the symphonic poem that launched Strauss on his splendid career. Strauss took as his impetus Friedrich Lenau's poetic drama. Lenau's here is noble and dashing, hardly the reprehensible villain of da Ponte and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Strauss was fascinated by Lenau's more idealistic presentation of the incurable lover, constantly searching for female perfection. His Don Juan, represented by the horns' principal theme, is

ardent and tender, given to sensuality and passion with women and spirited combat in the more public world. The music balances heroism and swashbuckle with two ravishing love scenes.

Listen for violin and oboe solos, glorious horn writing, and a surprise ending.

**Strauss: Suite from *Der Rosenkavalier*:** Strauss's best loved opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, was conceived as a tribute to Mozart. The plot, a sly take on the classic love triangle, it is both poignant and raucously funny at different moments. Strauss uses a late romantic orchestra in an opulent 18<sup>th</sup>-century setting. His music is memorable for the unforgettable waltzes that course through the score. Ironically, the most famous of those waltzes is associated with the opera's least appealing character: the oafish Baron Ochs! The waltzes are stitched together with other music from the opera in this unforgettable suite, which is performed without pause. Ultimately, *Rosenkavalier* is a love story with comic and sentimental moments. The Concert Suite delivers it all, and will send you home from the hall with melodious waltzes coursing through your mind's ear.

### **Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op.83**

**Johannes Brahms**

**Born: May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany**

**Died: April 3, 1897 in Vienna, Austria**

Composed: 1878-1881

First performance: 9 November 1881 in Budapest. Brahms was the soloist; Alexander Erkel conducted the orchestra of the National Theater.

Duration: 46 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs plus four horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo piano and strings.

### **A paean to French horn and cello**

If anyone needed convincing that French horn was Brahms's favorite orchestral instrument, the opening to the Second Piano Concerto would clinch the argument persuasively. Dreamy and effortlessly beautiful, the unsupported horn melody sets the stage for one of the nineteenth century's greatest musical dramas, with simplicity and majesty. Much of this first movement is a paean to the horn, which returns with its transcendent theme at key points in this monumental first act of the drama. Its poetic interaction with the piano floats into our consciousness, providing us with faith that clear skies will ultimately prevail over the tempests that follow. Brahms's writing for the horn is both loving and knowledgeable. As Bernard Jacobson has written:

Brahms's use of a single instrument [horn] places all the emphasis on the intensely personal poetry of unsupported horn tone, and this is borne out by the continued association of the theme with the instrument later on at two of the most magical moments in the movement.

No less remarkable is the *obbligato* role that Brahms provided for principal cello in the third movement, *Andante*. Again, the idea of poetry in sound leaps to mind. For this intimate, private music Brahms features the most human-sounding and the warmest of the string instruments, endowing it with a part that is prized as one of the choicest cello solos in the entire orchestral literature.

### **Pianist as the dominant stripe in an orchestral fabric**

Where does the piano fit into this? Isn't this supposed to be a piano concerto, after all? What was Brahms up to? For one thing, he treasured his orchestra. By 1881, he was in his late forties, an experienced orchestral composer who fully understood his players and their potential. Second, he conceived of the piano as an integral and closely-woven component of the orchestral fabric. Third, he had a gift for capturing an unexpected chamber-like moment, a brief subplot, amid the complex larger drama of this very large, decidedly symphonic composition. Horn and cello are merely the most outstanding examples of his orchestral favoritism and glorious attention to detail in the Second Concerto; there is also, for example, a delicious chamber-like role for the two clarinets in the slow movement.

### **Majesty, struggle, and Olympian drama**

Brahms began sketches for the Concerto in 1878 after his first Italian journey. It grew to such enormous proportions that he did not complete it for another three years, until the summer of 1881 in Pressbaum, not far from Vienna. Although perhaps less dramatic and passionate than the earlier Piano Concerto in D minor (1854-58), and less transcendently tranquil than the Violin Concerto of 1878, the B-flat Concerto has a majesty and struggle that place it in a category all its own. Serenity reigns in this work, despite Olympian drama that rages fiercely through the first two movements.

The piece requires a major piano virtuoso with stamina, physical strength, and mature metaphysical insight. Its technical challenges are formidable, with huge chords, a variety of

demanding passage work in octaves, thirds and sixths, a complex musical texture and highly sophisticated rhythmic patterns, especially in the finale. Brahms draws upon all the formidable technical arsenal of his "Handel" Variations for solo piano, and then some. He combines the musical sophistication of his mature chamber music with the orchestral mastery of the symphonies and the virtuosic power display of the youthful piano compositions. It hardly comes as a surprise that Brahms -- himself the first soloist in 1881 at Meiningen -- referred rather wryly to this concerto as "the long terror."

### **“A tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo”**

The day he completed the manuscript, 7 July 1881, Brahms wrote to his friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg of his most recent accomplishment: "a tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo." The massive first movement -- so peaceably introduced by solo horn -- is followed by a tempestuous scherzo that breaks from tradition and emphasizes the symphonic character of this concerto. Where the opening movement expands sonata form to its very limits, the scherzo compresses it. Explosive fury propels this movement, whose tempo marking, *Allegro appassionato*, recalls the romantic passion of Brahms's youthful compositions. The central Trio, in D major, bursts through the thunderous stormclouds like a joyous ray of sunlight. Ultimately the storm returns.

### **Graciousness amid rhythmic games**

A lilting rondo tinged with Hungarian flavor closes the concerto. Brahms's witty and graceful finale is a maze of rhythmic games. He toys with cross-rhythms and phrases that regularly travel across bar-lines, resulting in an ongoing ambivalence between duple and triple

meter. Trumpets and drums have no place in this gracious movement. As Peter Latham has observed, "for the sustained lightness and brilliance of this music there is only one model -- Mozart."

## **TWO TREACHEROUS, GLORIOUS SOLOS**

The orchestra takes no back seat in this concerto. Brahms's writing is demanding and rewarding for the full ensemble, with particularly rich parts for horn and cello.

Brahms loved the horn and wrote great horn parts for all his symphonies and concertos. The beginning of the Second Piano Concerto is particularly treacherous, however, because the principal horn is completely unsupported: out there all alone. Horn players like to jest that if you can play the opening solo, you can sit back and enjoy 40 minutes of some of the greatest music ever written. That's the up side. The down side is that if one should stumble at the start, the next 40 minutes will seem like an eternity.

Brahms uses that glorious theme throughout his opening movement. Later on, he allocates a secondary solo – but still a substantial one – to third horn. This time, it is based on the same theme pitched a fifth higher. Because of special moments like those, the parts for the horns in the Second Piano Concerto are rewarding for the entire section.

In the slow movement, principal cello joins the piano for an eloquent duet - but not until after its own extended solo to introduces Brahms's gorgeous melodic material. The movement is

legendary among cellists, and is requirement on every audition for a principal position.

In performance, cellists take great pleasure in playing it. After the sprawling grandeur of the first movement and the storm of the second, the intimacy of this Andante is magical. The cello has this glorious interaction, first with principal oboe, then with the piano soloist. In an otherwise oversize work, this movement comes across as tender and personal. It is almost as if Brahms had inserted a piece of chamber music in the midst of his concerto.

The French horn and cello sections keep busy throughout the Second Concerto, but their special moments linger in the memory along with the majestic piano part.

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### ***Don Juan, Op.20***

**Richard Strauss**

**Born: June 11, 1864 in Munich, Germany**

**Died: September 8, 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany**

Composed: 1888

First performance: November 11, 1888 in Weimar, Germany. Strauss himself conducted the performance.

Duration: 17 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, harp, timpani, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel and strings

Between 1886 and 1915, Richard Strauss composed ten large symphonic tone poems that have become cornerstones of his remarkable hold on music lovers. All are relatively youthful pieces. Though not the first of them, *Don Juan* is a work of genius, and was recognized as such immediately. Effectively this piece launched Strauss on his long and meteoric career.

Strauss began with Nicolaus Lenau's poetic drama, which focuses on the libertine hero's psychological state rather than his amorous adventures. Three passages from Lenau head the score, setting forth Don Juan's philosophy: a quest for the supreme, isolated moment in life, without regard for the consequences. At the end, in the midst of a duel, he discards his sword intentionally, rendering himself vulnerable to the inevitable death thrust. Life has become meaningless to him.

Two love scenes, a carnival, and a battle are easily discernible in *Don Juan*, but Strauss's music rises above mere musical story-telling. In fact, Strauss was probably identifying with Lenau's hero. He was courting Pauline de Ahna, the soprano he eventually married. Their romance inspired some of his finest love music in *Don Juan*.

The structure of the tone poem is clearly related to sonata form, with the addition of the two love episodes. Strauss's hero is represented by the horns' principal theme. He is noble and dashing, hardly the reprehensible villain of da Ponte and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Strauss was fascinated by Lenau's more idealistic presentation of the incurable lover, constantly searching for female perfection. His Don Juan is ardent and tender, given to sensuality and passion with



women and spirited combat in the more public world.

Brilliantly orchestrated, *Don Juan* is particularly demanding for the French horns. There is more to *Don Juan* than big brass sound. However, Strauss's evocations of Don Juan's interaction with women leave an equally strong musical impression. Lenau's poem introduces five of the Don's mistresses, of whom Strauss presents two. Both are personified through orchestral episodes that feature solos, the first for the concertmaster, the second for principal oboe. As heartfelt and sensual as the violin passage is, the oboe's melody lifts the ecstasy to a higher plane.

Strauss asserts the strength of the Don's personality by introducing an entirely new theme for him – again on horns – at the conclusion of the love music. It is his most heroic motive, and works in concert with the opening theme through the development and recapitulation that follow the love episodes. The astonishing brilliance and skill of Strauss's orchestration and his handling of the large symphonic form combine with the implications of Lenau's poetic drama in this striking and exciting masterpiece.

### **Suite from *Der Rosenkavalier*, Op. 59**

**Richard Strauss**

**Born: June 11, 1864 in Munich, Germany**

**Died: September 8, 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany**

Composed: 1909-1910

First performance: The opera was first performed on 26 January 1811 in Dresden, Germany. The

Suite was first performed on 5 October 1944 in New York. Artur Rodzinski led the New York Philharmonic.

Duration: 22 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets, bass clarinet (doubling bassoon), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, glockenspiel, snare drum, military drum, bells, castanets, celesta, two harps and strings).

Is there any more joyous opening in all opera than the exuberant horn fanfare of *Der Rosenkavalier*? In those seven upward-swooping notes are compressed all the optimism of youth, the zany machinations of practical jokes, and the compassion and humanity inherent in the Marschallin (the opera's central character). Strauss was far too good a man of the theatre to forego such a pregnant and promising beginning. The fanfare begins the Suite, which takes much of its pacing and chronology from the operatic source.

*Der Rosenkavalier* was a surprise to almost everyone in 1911. Strauss had concentrated on orchestral tone poems for much of his youth. Works like *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Don Juan*, and *Ein Heldenleben* all predate 1900. After the turn of the century, however, Strauss focused almost exclusively on opera. The two stage works that preceded *Rosenkavalier*, *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), were both expressionist canvasses with deliberate and powerful shock elements. *Rosenkavalier*, which is set in Maria Theresa's Vienna and was actively planned as a kind of tribute to Mozart, could not be further from them in spirit. It is Strauss's masterpiece: a brilliant

combination of romance, farce, sentimentality, and human compassion.

After the beginning horn call, the music moves directly to that of the opening scene in the opera, which takes place at the end of a lovers' tryst between the Marschallin and Octavian in her private apartments. Next, we move to the ineffable sweetness of the "Presentation of the Rose" music from Strauss's Act II. Here, Octavian presents the silver rose to beautiful young Sophie on behalf of the Marschallin's country bumpkin cousin, Baron Ochs. Time stands still as the two young people fall instantly in love, and momentarily forget that there are others about them. It is one of the most enchanted moments in all opera, and translates magnificently to the orchestral idiom.

The Suite proceeds to an excerpt from Act III, when Octavian's henchman are booby-trapping an inn, preparing to publicly embarrass the oafish Baron Ochs. From here, Strauss makes a smooth transition to the Baron's waltz, the most famous melody from the opera. How ironic that the clumsy, conceited Ochs should have the music that best summarizes the spirit of Maria Theresa's eighteenth-century Viennese court society!

If the Baron's waltz is the most characteristically Viennese, the segment that follows is the most Straussian. In the final Trio, the Marschallin relinquishes Octavian, recognizing that her youth has passed and that the two young lovers Octavian and Sophie should have the opportunity to bring theirs to full fruition. Making her final exit from the stage, she drops a handkerchief. The opera closes with her blackamoor dashing back to the room to retrieve it.

**SIDEBAR: PERFORMING TRADITIONS FOR THE *ROSENKAVALIER* SUITE**

Over the years, different performing traditions have evolved concerning the Suite from Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. Its history has been somewhat complicated by the fact that Strauss revised the opera's unforgettable waltzes during World War II, expressing an objection that they had been "unjustly vulgarized." He favored the longer, brilliant conclusion that is familiar to listeners who know the Suite from recordings.

Tradition opts for a reprise of the Baron's Waltz. The late Josef Krips, who was also an experienced conductor of Strauss's operas, chose to close the Suite the way the opera ends, with the blackamoor's exit. Either way, Strauss's orchestration is so sparkling that the spirit of the horn's beginning fanfare bears delicious fruit.

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