

*Don Juan*, op. 20—Richard Strauss

It is difficult, indeed, to think of a composer more possessed of an overweening ego than that of Richard Strauss (other than that of Wagner, that is). Thankfully, his was not so malevolent, and was to some degree justified. Strauss is almost unique in that his long life (unlike that of, say, Verdi) spanned remarkable changes in musical style, not to speak of world history. He is known both as a master of late romantic symphonic style in his large tone poems for orchestra, composed mostly in the late 1880s and 90s, and also for his modern, often strikingly dissonant operas of the twentieth century. On the one hand his operas can still seem jarringly challenging--witness the sordidness of *Salome* (1905) with its lust, incest, decapitation, and necrophilia (including the controversial total nudity in the “Dance of the Seven Veils at the Metropolitan Opera, several years ago). On the other hand, few musical compositions are more beautifully romantic and serenely appealing than the *Four Last Songs* (all of which treat the graceful acceptance of death after a long and rich life) that he wrote in 1948, the year before his death.

*Don Juan* is a tone poem, a genre whose creation was largely spearheaded by Bedřich Smetana and Franz Liszt. The musical premise is simple--write a single movement composition for orchestra that tells a story about something in the “real” world. The “stories” of Strauss’s tone poems vary: *MacBeth*; the final moments of an old man dying in delirium and the transmigration of his soul; *Don Quixote*; the escapades of a medieval scamp; the life of an anonymous hero (read Strauss, himself, some would say); and a musical depiction of several of the subsections of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*.

Strauss was a master of writing for the orchestra. He knew exactly how to extract the most from its instrumental resources--so much so that generations of players complained of the “difficulty” of his works. He thought nothing of depicting the silverware on his breakfast table or the sheep in *Don Quixote*. All of his music is a challenge to perform, but players now love to do so. The story of *Don Juan* is familiar, and Strauss’s work, written in 1888, firmly established his reputation as a young composer to be reckoned with. Combining elements of both rondo and sonata structure, it evolves as a series of musical illustrations from episodes in the life of the seducer. At the time, the work seemed a bit explicit, even garnering criticism from his admirer, Cosima Wagner. Nevertheless, Strauss, as so with many of his musical characters, simply thumbed his nose at the world.

The opening is inimitable in the world of music, hitting you right in the face, and you know right away this is about the “heroic” arrogance of someone used to getting his own way. After a bit of scene setting, we hear the grandiloquent “Don Juan” theme, but the ensuing music teasingly turns back and forth on a dime between the loud, overweening Don and a soft depiction of his gentle victims. Soon, a pianississimo chord with harp arpeggios signals a love scene, introduced by a high, atmospheric solo violin, followed by the love theme in the winds, in Strauss’ best ultra-romantic style. But “love” doesn’t last long for this miscreant, and he’s off to more conquests in a surging, driving musical welter. Strauss goes on to develop and play with the ideas heard so far. A few (appropriately) dark movements ultimately yield to yet another scene of “romance,” led by a sensuous oboe solo.

The dreamy mood drifts on for a while, but apparently the Don awakes suddenly, and a soaring, bold new theme is heard in the unison horn section—one of Strauss’s signature utterances. The development of now-familiar ideas continues, with the relentless pace picking up in intensity, vividly paralleling Don Juan’s self-destructive mania. A sudden quietude interrupts, and ominous woodwind solos over string tremolos truncate the confident ideas heard earlier. The fatal message is clear. But the Don’s not defeated yet!—but in his mind only. A delirious recapitulation of the opening mad, confident arrogance ensues, trying desperately to defy fate. But that fails and destiny awaits in a sword fight with the son of an old nobleman callously slain by the Don. Our “hero” dies—but only because, sensing the waning of his life force, he puts up only a sham of defense. The end comes quickly—the music crashes to an abrupt stop. The eerie silence is broken by a soft chord in the strings, with a fatal dissonance added by the trumpets. Death triumphs, with a last flutter of the heart uttered by the violas.

*Superman March*—John Williams

*Raider’s March*—Williams

*March of the Resistance* from *The Force Awakens*—Williams

While Adams, Glass, Corigliano, and others vie for the mantle as Aaron Copland’s successor, in point of fact, the average American has probably heard more music for symphonic orchestra by John Williams than all of the others put together. He stands alone in his position as the most successful and most admired film composer of the last thirty years or so. His music is so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget just how much of it we know and experience. While there have been any number of film composers who have experimented in various styles of writing for films, he is the most responsible for the rebirth of the great symphonic film music style that had prevailed previously in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s. Symphony orchestras perform his music on the concert stage simply because it was written for symphony orchestras—on Hollywood sound stages.

He was classically trained as a pianist, even having studied at the Juilliard School with the formidable Rosina Lhévinne, mentor of generations of top concert pianists. He soon joined the New York commercial scene as arranger, pianist, and composer before moving to Los Angeles. There he continued his career, making an early appearance as a composer with contributions to television series like “Gilligan’s Island” and “Wagon Train” in the late 1950s. As his career developed, he began to write film scores by the dozens, it seems--movies you know, but perhaps have forgotten about. He is most renowned for the “Star Wars” films, “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” and such, but his work has encompassed much more, including such compositions as the theme to the NBC nightly news. His association with the film directors George Lucas and Steven Spielberg began in the 1970s, and has produced his most notable scores. He has received over thirty-five Oscar nominations (won five) and dozens of Grammy nominations.

His symphonic style owes much to the music of many great composers—he has singled out Edward Elgar among them. Other than a masterful technical prowess

in orchestration, his success as a composer is surely his remarkable talent to imagine just the right music for an infinitude of human emotions—from the terror in the simple, two-note, shark motive in “Jaws” to the soaring spaceship music of “Star Wars.” He scored almost every one of the “Harry Potter” films, and his adroit conjuration of the magic of those tales is just perfect in the minds of countless fans

Batman: *The Dark Knight Rises*—Zimmer/Ford

Concert Suite from *Dances with Wolves*—Barry/Rosenhaus

*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*—Shore/Whitney

*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*—Kamen/Rosenhaus

There are other talented composers in today’s Hollywood besides John Williams, of course, and a new generation of artists is contributing its own unique styles to the epic blockbusters that seem to dominate contemporary cinema. If there is a challenger to Williams’ incredible record, it is certainly Hans Zimmer. Composer of over 150 film scores, his major successes include the various *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, *Gladiator*, *Dunkirk*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Rain Man*, *The Lion King*, *The Thin Red Line* . . . well, you get the picture (sorry). He is known for his inventiveness, and often incorporates electronic synthesizers to enhance his material. But he has many tricks. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, he notably features a chant theme to a phrase, *deshi basara*—putatively Arabic dialect for “rise up.” But that remains obscure. The simple motive, in typical Zimmer style, is the basis of elaborate and extensive variation, and is associated with the character, Bane, and used in myriad contexts.

John Barry won an Oscar for his score to the 1990 film, *Dances with Wolves*, following a life time of successes familiar to us all, including eleven of the James Bond movies, *Born Free*, *Out of Africa*, *The Lion in Winter*, and *Midnight Cowboy*. He won five Academy Awards with his distinctive sound, owing much to his early career as a trumpet player in a British military band, and the leader of his own jazz band. The punchy James Bond music is perhaps his legacy, but the hauntingly beautiful score to *Dances with Wolves* is elegiac testimony to his romantic lyric side.

*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* was a spectacular success from 2001 (earning almost a billion dollars in world-wide distribution), and was nominated for thirteen Oscars, including Best Original Score. Composer Howard Shore is a native of Toronto, with ten Oscars, Golden Globes, and Grammys to his credit. In addition to film scores, he has written several concert works, including an opera and two concertos. A graduate of the Berklee College of Music, he has a background in jazz, and for a while was music director of Saturday Night Live, composing the theme for the show. A bit of trivia: apparently he suggested the title for the movie, *The Blues Brothers*. Of his eighty-something film scores, he is well known for *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Gangs of New York*, and *The Aviator*. But, his greatest success surely is that of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Finally, from 1991 we have *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, which, while a box office success, was panned by the critics, but which was praised for the musical score by Michael Kamen. The picture's theme song, "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You" did win an Oscar for Best Original Song, but was composed by someone else. A New York City native, he attended The Juilliard School, and after playing in a rock band for a while, concentrated his early compositional efforts on ballet scores (eleven in all). A talented oboe and English horn player, in his varied career he worked with folks as varied as Pink Floyd, Eric Clapton, David Bowie, Bon Jovi, Metallica, and Guns N' Roses. Somewhat surprisingly, he wrote the score for *Mr. Holland's Opus*, and as a result of the experience, created a foundation to support music education in the public schools. He died of a heart attack in London at the age of fifty-five.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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